



RESIDENT EVIL

A novelization by Brad Hazio
Based on the screenplay by George A. Romero
Based on Capcom's bestselling video games

A snarl reverberated through the trees. Jill felt a tingling sensation slither up her spine as she and her cohorts raised their weapons, trying to peer into the underbrush through the thick plumes of fog.

A maze of shadows surrounded them, but the sounds were clear as day – the fluttering of leaves and twigs snapping.

Dark shapes formed in the mist, circling the team. Jill tried to count them – four, five, six! Maybe more! She was quickly losing count.

Jill whipped out a transmitter, quickly typing in the access code as sweat formed on her brow. She spoke into the radio through deep breaths, “This is Valentine, Bravo Team. We, er... we might be in trouble here.”

Jill ducked as something leaped from the bush into a spray of automatic gunfire. It was nice to know her teammates were alert.

More shapes lunged from the surrounding brush, scattering the four troops, each struggling to fire at their agile attackers from all sides.

Jill dived for a nearby shrubbery, shouting into her transmitter over the sounds of gunfire and the cries of her teammates.

“We are in trouble!”

RESIDENT EVIL™ NOVELS BY S.D. PERRY

The Umbrella Conspiracy

Caliban Cove

City of the Dead

Underworld

Nemesis

Code: Veronica

Zero Hour

RESIDENT EVIL™ NOVELS BY P.E.

STRIDE

Los Illuminados

RESIDENT EVIL

A NOVELIZATION BY

BRAD HAZIO

BASED ON THE SCREENPLAY BY

GEORGE A. ROMERO

LRE

PROJECT LRE BOOKS

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This is fanfiction that has been made available for free. If you enjoy it, it is strongly recommended that you support the developers of the source material by purchasing their games.

Additionally, if you're interested in the legacy of George A. Romero, you can learn more at: georgearomerofoundation.org

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For George, who brought life to the dead...

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Ο Π Ε

“Stay away from here!”

Dr. John Marcus gripped the bulky video camera with an intensity that he would never have under any other circumstances. He had a penchant for delicacy regarding equipment that bordered on pedantry, which often brought the ire of his peers.

Not this time, though. John could feel the plastic casing bend and warp beneath his fingertips as he stared down the lens with dry, sleep-deprived eyes. Nothing else mattered as long as the image was

focused, and the camera's onboard mic picked up sound.

John could only suspect who would be on the other side of this warning. Whoever it was, he needed them to understand beyond a shadow of doubt. There was no room for interpretation — everything was beyond fucked.

“The lab must remain sealed!” He desperately wailed, hoping the message came across. This incident wasn't some minor spill. It wouldn't be enough to isolate the area and establish a quarantine. There was more at stake than some numbers on earnings reports and some staff needing sick leave.

Lives were on the line. Hell, the fate of the world was potentially on the line. They couldn't let it get out.

The harrowing footage played on a large CRT, lighting an otherwise dark conference room. The audience included several individuals with immense power — expert tacticians and strategists, seasoned soldiers, and influential figureheads; all men whose names were synonymous with control.

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They had seen everything throughout their decorated careers, and yet their collective experience couldn't reconcile the horror of what was taking place in front of them.

Through a sea of analog static was a sickening close-up of John's haggard face, tears streaming from his puffy, reddened eyes, getting caught in his unkempt facial hair.

The observers shifted in their seats as John backed away from the camera, his breathing slowly increasing in intensity. It wasn't hard to see why as shadows darted back and forth against the wall behind him. Whatever had John so afraid was starting to make its presence known.

"For God's sake, don't come in!" John cried amidst a rising of panicked voices that filled the soundscape, punctuated by footsteps that got closer and closer.

The conference room collectively jumped as a hand slammed against the lens, swatting the camera aside. The image went from a split-second whirlwind of pixels and artifacts to a nauseating canted side-view of the once-pristine laboratory, accommodated by the thud of the camera as it hit

the floor, its insides rattling. In a matter of seconds, something had wholly overturned the place.

Nervous tittering started to emanate from the audience, only to be immediately silenced by the clearing of a throat as one of the men leaned forward, procuring a laser pointer from their jacket pocket.

“Look. Here.”

With a click, a red dot began to circle the corner of the screen, where a figure hunched over a dark mass on the floor.

At first, relief permeated the room as the degraded medium hid the gruesome details of what was happening amidst distorted visuals and incomprehensible sound.

Then, everyone recoiled like a live grenade had landed at their feet. It became abundantly clear that the distortions they focused on had not resulted from damaged tape. Amidst the glitching and the bursts of static, the hunched-over figure was decaying before their eyes.

Those sounds — those audio peaks that they thought were a malfunctioning microphone were

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the sound of teeth tearing through gurgling flesh and chewing the muscle underneath.

The figure's luncheon was one of John's colleagues — now unrecognizable, with their meat forcibly stripped from their bones. Any entrails that weren't on the menu lay haphazardly around the floor in a macabre tapestry of gore.

As if to confirm their worst fears, the figure turned and lunged toward the camera, gnashing its jagged teeth and spraying blood and saliva at an unfortunate unseen prey.

That was where the tape ended, plunging the room into darkness. Nobody spoke, for what was there to say? This scenario was unprecedented. There was no simple protocol to fall back on.

There had been talks about what to do in a situation like this, but these were talks that occurred with the unspoken agreement that this situation was purely hypothetical. Why wouldn't it be? An immense number of safeguards were in place — the result of near-infinite money, countless resources, and decades of planning.

Yet, it was all apparently for naught. There had been a breach, and the dominoes were starting to fall.

The next twenty-four hours would be critical.

Two

While the residents of Raccoon City slept soundly, blissfully unaware of the horrors brewing on their doorstep, the surrounding mountains played host to the splendor of nature that only a country boy could genuinely appreciate.

Chris Redfield was intent on witnessing it all as he trudged through lush forestry, taking in the fresh air with long, drawn-out breaths. In his right hand was a metal pail, heavy with freshly caught freshwater trout.

This area was Chris' element. He had lived in these mountains his entire life and felt a kinship with them that rivaled his connection with most human beings. The city and its inhabitants were too impersonal. It was easy for Chris to feel lost amongst the bustling, self-absorbed populace and the drab gray buildings.

Not here, though. Chris knew the forests like the back of his hand, flora and fauna alike. They were calm, they were familiar, and they were safe.

It helped that they were picturesque, too. Chris didn't have the highest opinion of the Umbrella Corporation. But, he begrudgingly respected their commitment to protecting the bordering woodlands. Thanks to their efforts, the forest thrived in its natural state, free from the influence of the neighboring industrialized metropolis.

Of course, Chris wasn't so naive as to think they did this out of the goodness of their heart. They were a business, after all. They likely didn't want competitors buying parts of the land and muscling in on their turf.

Still, at least it meant that Chris could enjoy moments like these. He reached a clearing,

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emerging at a ridge that overlooked the city. Early signs of dawn were making their presence known, creating a band of purple that tinted the horizon.

Moments like these were what Chris lived for. They were a stark reminder that every day was a blessing to be cherished. That was wisdom his father made sure to impart before his untimely passing. They bonded over many trips across the Arkley mountains, where Chris would learn about the culture his family did their best to uphold.

Chris might not have had the Animist beliefs of his native ancestors, as he didn't believe in metaphysical constructs such as the soul. But, he believed in the sanctity of nature. After all, he spent his life as a farm boy. How could one do that and not get wrapped up in the beauty around them?

The only thing missing was somebody to share these moments with.

Chris was lonely. His parents passed away when he was young. His sister had moved on as soon as she was old enough, an act he certainly didn't blame her for. She was young when their parents died. She didn't have the connection to this place that he did.

Their farmhand was a kind man who struggled to fill the gap left in the lives of the Redfield siblings. He did an admirable job being the father figure that Chris desperately needed. Unfortunately, he was now getting on in years and finding it exceedingly difficult to make any trip, let alone one across mountains.

Chris had a girlfriend, but their relationship was still relatively young. The honeymoon phase was more or less over, but it didn't feel like either of them was ready to 'get serious,' even if that's what Chris wanted. Bringing it up felt more like it would scare her off. So, Chris held back, hoping there would be a time when it felt right.

Besides, she was a city girl, and Chris didn't want to push the transition to the country too hard. Her work hours didn't help matters either. She was constantly doing long days and late nights, which meant that she needed what little sleep she could get.

And yet, Chris couldn't help but feel slight resentment. Not at her, of course, but at the hole he perceived in their relationship. How much of themselves would they have to keep separated

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from one another? How long was it genuinely acceptable to be in love with someone while getting to share so little with them?

Whatever. Relationships were complicated, and it did nobody any favors to dwell on them. The whole point of these trips was to get away from the noise and clear the head.

Still, Chris wasn't exactly alone. He reached into the bucket, procuring one of the freshly caught fish and placing it on a nearby rock as he slumped onto the ridge. It was time for the best part of his early morning routine to begin.

The trout was granted respite for seconds, flopping back and forth on the rock's cold surface as an eagle coasted toward it on a wind channel. Chris instantly recognized its heavy beak and its impressive wingspan. He retrieved a small notepad and a pen from his pocket, ticking off the bird's name from a list and making quick notes.

He was named Goliath, a moniker that Chris picked because it was the only way to encapsulate just how larger than life this eagle was.

Typically, this bird of prey would have shown some apprehension at a fish that suddenly appeared

on a rock three thousand feet above the highest water source — they were intelligent creatures, after all.

However, this was a game that Chris and his avian friend had played many times, and Goliath wasted no effort in landing next to the rock, perched over its prey.

“Take it, Goliath. It’s yours.”

Goliath scooped the trout up in its beak and flew away.

“See ya next year, guy.” Chris muttered, grinning ear-to-ear. Their interactions were brief, but such a simple exchange brought Chris joy.

He excitedly set down another trout on the rock before taking his seat, ready to observe what would happen next.

Goliath had a girlfriend of his own — a smaller eagle who was a little shy. But, she made herself known as she circled the air above Chris.

Chris couldn’t help but wave, the same way he would when greeting any other old friend.

“Cleopatra!”

Upon hearing her name, Cleopatra pumped her wings, swooping down towards the rock. Chris

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scrambled back to his seat, scribbling more notes into his notepad.

He looked up from his writings, only to see Cleopatra prematurely reverse her descent, gaining altitude and resuming her hovering as though she was still unsure about the safety of her pre-provided meal.

Puzzled, Chris offered a reassuring “Come on. Come on down.”

There didn't seem to be a problem. There were days in which Goliath needed some coaxing, too. Chris could never predict how the animals would behave on any given day.

Cleopatra decided to attempt her descent again, arcing herself into a downward swoop. She reached the rock this time, perching atop it as Goliath had only moments ago. However, she was hesitant, staring at the fish as it flapped for its final moments.

Chris slowly got to his feet, craning for a closer look.

“What's the matter, beautiful?”

He wanted to take a step closer to see if he could ascertain what seemed to have frightened

Cleopatra. However, he didn't dare move. The last thing he wanted to do was startle her. If she got scared, she would flee. That would be a waste of fish.

Still, Chris couldn't figure out the cause of her distress. He thought they were alone, but somebody might have been nearby. If that was the case, it was also possible that the incredibly sharp vision of an eagle could pick it up while he couldn't.

Chris tensed up, unsure what to do, hoping Cleopatra would ease up and take the fish. Her hesitation was starting to unnerve him, too.

Eventually, Chris stepped forward, only for Cleopatra to let out an ear-piercing shriek, peeling from the rock.

Wincing, Chris went from cupping his ears to shielding his eyes as Cleopatra speeded toward him, narrowly missing his face as she zoomed into the forest, where she disappeared amongst the trees.

Chris stared forward, transfixed. What out there could have elicited this reaction? The forest was a sanctuary, and Chris wasn't a threat.

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He mulled over the possibilities in his head, unaware of the movement behind him. His gaze remained on the trees, looking for any signs of Cleopatra.

Finally, his concentration broke thanks to a sharp, profoundly inhuman sound – somehow feral, but not enough to resemble any of the sounds Chris had gotten used to in his many years of observing the forest life. It rocked Chris to his core, his fingers shaking as his heart rate jumped. It suddenly made sense to him why Cleopatra was so spooked.

With a deep breath, Chris turned around, expecting to face whatever twisted malformation of nature could have caused such a sound.

Instead, he met nothing. There were no signs of life anywhere in the vicinity.

Even the fish, whose death throes rang out as its scaly body hit the rock's surface, was nowhere to be found.

Something had taken the fish and disappeared.

THREE

Chris' mind was still wracked with the night's events as he carefully stepped into his girlfriend's apartment, making sure to limit noise as he closed and locked the door behind him.

Stepping into Jill Valentine's apartment was always a surreal experience for Chris. He'd lived in the farmhouse his entire life. Every room told a story. You knew everything you needed to know about Chris Redfield simply by walking in and looking around.

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By comparison, Jill's apartment was stark. The furniture was minimal, no art or photographs adorned the walls, and there was a lack of anything to suggest anyone even lived there for that long.

Characterless was the word Chris had carelessly used when he first saw the place. He didn't mean to say it. The thought had simply crossed his head, and his mouth unceremoniously blurted it out. It hadn't helped that they had just returned from Pilato's, a nearby bar where they washed away their inhibitions with various beers and spirits.

In typical Chris fashion, he immediately started showering Jill with apologies, assuring her that he meant no disrespect. He was afraid that the date would end there. Imagine inviting a guy back to yours, and the first thing he does is criticize your choice of decor (or lack thereof).

If Jill minded, she did almost too well a job hiding it. After multiple reassurances, they went to her bedroom like nothing had happened. That was the first time they slept together.

As Chris started quietly shedding his clothes, he reflected on how it had become a regular occurrence for them. Of course, part of it was that

they were both incredibly attracted to one another. Jill's job required her to be fit, giving her the perfect body to compliment her striking face. Chris never thought much about his appearance, but Jill pointed it out when she first saw him take his shirt off — he had the perfect farmhand body, not pumped, but lean and tight.

They connected the most in bed — not just physically, but emotionally, during all those quiet moments after. That was when they would stare at the ceiling and discuss whatever was on their mind.

Sure enough, that was where Jill was, lying on her side. Moving lithely, Chris peeled back the bed sheet and eased beside her.

As Chris gently draped an arm over her, he could feel the night's events slip away. His body relaxed, his muscles loosening as he realized how tired he was. Maybe a morning nap with Jill was what he needed.

“Glad you're still here, lady,” Chris spoke out — half a whisper, half a mutter, to Jill and himself. It was less a declaration of love and more a reminder that whatever the future had in store, everything was okay now.

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“It’s my apartment.”

Chris tensed up, reddening as Jill faced him with a welcoming smile.

“You’re awake,” he sighed.

“I’ve been awake since you left.”

Oh, shit. Chris could feel the guilt swelling up in his gut.

“Sorry.”

Jill raised an eyebrow as if to ask Chris whether or not he was seriously apologizing. It was just like last time; only Chris didn’t have the excuse of being drunk now.

Not wanting to add to how often he said sorry, Chris cleared his throat.

“There was... something wrong.”

Part of him wanted to bury what happened in the hills, but his brain refused to relent. It may be better to hear what Jill thought as well.

Jill stared back before uttering, “What, with my dinner? I never had a mother. I’ll learn.”

It was true that Jill was an incredible woman with many talents, but Chris conceded that cooking wasn’t one of them.

He shrugged politely, “I’ll do the cooking.”

They shared a light-hearted snicker. As their room returned to silence, Chris wanted Jill to continue the conversation however she could. It didn't need to be profound. It just had to stop Chris from dwelling on what happened.

He could feel the smile fading from his face as the thoughts came swirling back in. Jill picked up on the mood change immediately – what she lacked in cooking skills, she more than made up for in intuition.

Her concerned expression practically egged Chris on as he stammered through the night's events.

“On the mountain... there... must have been something... prowling up there.”

As Jill blinked, Chris could see the investigative mode of her brain engaging. He felt less like her boyfriend telling her a story and more like a witness providing a statement back at the station.

She gingerly touched his shoulder, “There are probably all kinds of things prowling around up there in the middle of the night.”

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As he felt Jill's soft fingertips against his skin, Chris decided to change the subject to something less unsettling.

"I'm sorry. Really. You... have to be there at dawn. They ride the wind over the ridge."

"Dawn? You left at one A.M."

"I had to go fishing. It's the fish that bring them down, so I can get a close look at them."

Chris started to become animated.

"I've tracked a dozen of them, Jill. Twelve of those big bruisers. I can actually recognize them. I've even given them names over the years."

"You've been doing this for years?"

"Only in the early Autumn, when they're migrating."

Jill smirked, "I'll set the alarm for October." With that, she rolled over, turning back to face the wall.

Chris stared at the simple light fixture on the ceiling, sobered by her reaction to his sudden vulnerability. It had made the divide in their relationship feel all the more real.

As though sensing his discomfort, Jill swiveled around, resting a delicate hand on Chris' chest.

“I wish I could get excited. Really. That’s the truth. As excited as you over such... simple things.”

Chris examined that word – simple. In a way, it perfectly encapsulated the way he felt about himself. He was a simple guy with a simple life in a simple town.

But, he couldn’t help but take umbrage with the blanket use of that word. He might be simple, but what he just described was a wonder of the Earth – one regularly taken for granted.

“Beauty isn’t simple,” Chris retorted, “If it was, I’d be beautiful.”

Jill raised her hand from Chris’ chest, only to poke him in the same spot.

“You are.”

That put a smile on Chris’ face as he said, “No, no, no. I’m simple. You, on the other hand...”

Chris nuzzled closer to Jill, allowing her to fill his senses simultaneously.

“... have all that stuff hiding underneath somewhere. That’s what fascinates me.”

“Fascination. Not love?”

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Chris knew Jill was being playful – her way of diffusing the conversation. Still, he took the statement to heart.

“I honestly don’t know. I guess I’ve been living alone too long. You’re the first – the only woman I’ve thought of as a real partner.”

Now, it was Jill’s turn to be introspective. It was a side of her that Chris had yet to witness.

She sighed, “I’ve always been afraid of living alone. I’ve always had people... talking at me... knowing they could wind me up and I’d do...”

She struggled for the words before giving the mildest shrug and following up, “... whatever they wanted.”

Whatever this admission meant for their relationship, Chris let the gratitude for Jill’s vulnerability radiate as their eyes met again.

Jill punctuated the moment by leaning in and planting a brief and delicate kiss on Chris’ lips. The second the kiss parted, she spoke in a low, intimate whisper.

“We all have... something hidden underneath. Beauty may not be simple, but it’s not all that

complicated, either. Most of the time, you find it... right in the middle of all the confusion.”

Chris smiled, “I’m part Mohawk. Indians are never confused. At least, they never let it show.”

And, with that, the conversation was over. Jill cut him off with another kiss, longer and more passionate.

They rolled over, Jill wrapping herself around Chris as they greeted the ensuing dawn by making love again.

FOUR

Dawn smothered Raccoon City and the neighboring mountains, with the once-purple horizon changing to a deeply auburn hue. It was a matter of minutes before the sun would bring life to the city.

For the Redfield ranch, this was when work began. At least, it did for a farmhand named Rake.

Rake had a history with the farm, being hired to oversee its upkeep in the late thirties by a Native American who introduced himself simply as Redfield. At the time, Rake was in his late teens and desperately needed steady work. However, he didn't

tell Redfield on that fateful day that he was also in desperate need of a family.

Ultimately, Rake got more than he bargained for, sharing many of his greatest memories with Redfield and his family.

Redfield would have children during Rake's time on the ranch. He even had grandchildren – a boy and a girl named Chris and Claire.

Redfield and his wife passed away from old age, but they created a legacy that would keep the ranch vibrant and prosperous for decades.

Once Redfield's son took over, Rake stepped up his time on the farm, moving into its homestead and tending to it daily.

A few years later, tragedy struck.

Rake was completing his work for the day, the young Chris and Claire in tow, when a Raccoon City Police Officer approached them with a grave look on his face.

Due to a tragedy in the city's outskirts, Chris and Claire Redfield were now orphans.

Then, Rake made a difficult decision: stepping up from a farmhand to a parent. While the process came with many new difficulties, it was a challenge Rake met head-on.

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Years passed, and Rake could not have been prouder of the adults that Chris and Claire became. They were tough, intelligent, sensitive people. Ultimately, though, Claire was resolute in forging her path and seeking a college education while Chris stayed with the farm.

Rake didn't have a life outside the farm, but he didn't need one. He was perfectly content with helping Chris keep the Redfield legacy alive.

Then, reality came knocking yet again. Chris met someone – a woman from out of town who had moved to Raccoon City for work. They'd hit it off instantly, and suddenly, for the first time, Rake was waking up to perform the chores alone, and his old bones were starting to feel it.

Part of it was that Rake was never truly prepared for this moment, even though a part of him suspected that it was inevitable. Chris loved the farm, but something would eventually take him away, and it made perfect sense that something would be a woman.

The other part was that Rake wasn't sure how much he trusted her. He'd only met Jill Valentine a handful of times. Sure, she was a lovely girl — charming and a hell of a looker, but he also thought she was hiding something. How she carried herself

mirrored many stuffy business types Rake witnessed the late Redfield square up against. They were very courteous and professional, but you could sense how calculated their responses were if you knew where to look.

The difference was that, unlike Jill, you could immediately tell a business stooge's agenda. Rake lost track of how many unassuming neighbors came to the farm, looking to introduce themselves to the owner, only to accidentally telegraph that they were working for one of the many businesses that had set up shop in Raccoon City and were looking to expand to the nearby mountains. It turned out that the Redfield ranch was prime real estate.

The most aggressive of these companies was the Umbrella Corporation, a pharmaceutical giant with a worldwide influence, even though their CEO was a Raccoon City native. They made many attempts over the years to try and coerce the land from Rake, but he remained steadfast and held his ground.

Did Rake think Jill Valentine was an overqualified suit and tie working on an overly elaborate gift on behalf of the Umbrella Corporation? Of course not. He never got that impression for a second. But, he couldn't help but wonder what she was hiding and whether or not it

bode well for Chris and his absolute infatuation with her.

At least Rake had farm work to keep himself busy. Sure, his joints were aching as he led three tethered horses from the stable, a flashlight in his other hand doing very little to stop him from stubbing his toe on the uneven ground, but the routine helped him stay centered amidst all the further chaos.

Rake led the obedient horses across the farm, only to pause as his ears picked up a distant skittering. He shined his flashlight at his surroundings, looking for signs of movement.

He then turned towards the horses, all three of whom seemed unperturbed. Maybe he was more paranoid than he thought.

As Rake shifted his attention forward to continue leading the horses, two black masses burst from the darkness, racing straight toward his legs.

Startled, Rake shifted the flashlight downwards to reveal a labrador and a spaniel, who were now excitedly romping at his feet.

Of course! He still had to walk the dogs – he completely forgot! His mind wasn't as sharp as it was in his heyday.

So, Rake continued through the pleasant morning breeze, leading the animals to a waist-high log gate that led to a large, well-maintained corral.

Once Rake had opened the gate, two untethered horses trotted through the opening, galloping through the ample open space.

Rake turned his attention to the remaining horse – a large, beautiful prized stallion that Rake affectionately called Lucky (as in, he was lucky that Rake didn't kick his ass). Lucky always needed a bit more corralling than his fellow horses, choosing to snort at Rake before tossing his head in high spirits.

Rake found Lucky's attitude fun, heartedly responding, "Get in there, Lucky. Quit horsin' around. Get in."

Lucky approached the gate. He was close to following Rake's order but needed some extra encouragement.

"Swear. If I didn't know you was just an animal, I'd say you was all full of yourself. Get in there!" Rake pretended to chide the animal, waving his flashlight.

Getting his extra share of attention for the morning, Lucky was more than happy to strut through the gate and join his friends inside the

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corral, where the trio continued their display of equine athleticism.

Rake shut the log gate and watched the horses in awe. This routine never got old.

However, it was time to give the dogs a walk. If Rake waited any longer, they'd start barking and wake up the rest of the farm.

So, Rake turned his attention to the dogs, only to find they were no longer at his feet. Confused, Rake watched as the dogs took point, their playful excitement dissipating as they sniffed the air, their ears perked. They started to whine in unison.

“What’s wrong with you two?”

A thunderous crack arrested Rake’s attention. He turned back to the corral to see that the horses were just as startled as he was, their eyes flaring as they tried to kick down the fence.

Something big sped past the terrified horses with extraordinary speed, clearing the fence. Time slowed to a crawl as Rake whirled around to find his vision filled with swirling darkness, bright yellow eyes, and rows of razor-sharp teeth.

The slathering creature slammed into Rake’s chest, sending him sprawling to the harsh ground with a blood-curdling cry.

FIVE

It had been the first emergency for S.T.A.R.S. in a very long time, and the result was overwhelming.

A communications officer, a digital two-way radio gripped tightly in his hand, struggled to navigate the blinding glare of all of the halogen lights, the deafening aircraft engines, the stench of sweat and metal, the harsh taste of his dehydrated mouth, and the constant shoving of armed fellow soldiers as they piled into helicopters, ready to start this critical mission.

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On any typical day, his fellow soldiers would refer to him by his job title of radio man. While they were training in combat or performing investigations, he stayed back at the base. He manned the radios, waiting for the time when he could demonstrate his skills as a communications officer.

Today was a far less typical day, and now his fellow soldiers didn't even regard him at all.

Still, the radio man had his orders and wouldn't mess them up – not when this was the only chance he would get to make a good impression. He just had to find the target.

The only problem was that he didn't know the target's identity. The only information he had to go on was that he was looking for a man with a skull tattoo on his forearm. The radio man continued to weave his way through the calamity, hoping that his target chose to roll up his sleeves today.

Eventually, through the mob of moving camo and khakis, he spotted the tattoo on the muscular forearm of a tall man with a gaunt face, slicked-back blonde hair, and large aviator shades.

The radio man dashed towards his target, holding the radio outwards and blurting out, “Top brass, sir!”

His target smirked at him before snatching the radio and grunting, “Alpha Leader.”

Shit, this was the leader of Alpha Team? Suddenly, that promotion felt ever closer.

The response came quickly, as a distorted voice crackled through the radio, “How long before you get in there?”

“Fifteen minutes”

There was a brief silence, broken by a sudden snip, likely the cutting of an expensive Monte Cristo — the cigar of choice for men of influence. As if to confirm that, the man on the other end spoke with the cigar between his teeth.

“You’re good, soldier. But not that good. It’s five hundred miles away in the backwoods of Pennsylvania.”

There was a scraping sound, likely the lighting of a match.

Alpha Leader responded, “We have troopers on sight – a first-strike force, undercover.”

The radio man shuddered. Was he hearing something he wasn’t supposed to?

The man on the other line blew a mouthful of smoke, “Very resourceful. You have my permission to activate them.”

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“I’ve already done that. You have my permission to say that you gave me permission.”

With that, Alpha Leader shoved the radio into the radio man’s stomach, who caught it with a grunt. Then, the Alpha Leader ran off, joining the other soldiers in a nearby helicopter.

Jill lay in her bed, Chris gently snoring beside her as the sun’s rays poked in through the slightly open shades. Intrusive thoughts enveloped her mind about her relationship, her profession – anything it could dig up to obsess over.

All those thoughts slithered away as a concentrated rattle broke the silence. Jill slid out of bed, reaching for one of her shoes lying nearby. She procured a small black box the size of a tic-tac container from inside one of them. It vibrated between her fingertips, signaling a work call.

With a sigh, she turned to see that Chris was still absolutely conked out. Whatever energy he’d had left over from last night had gone into giving Jill the best sex she’d had in a very long time.

Still, Jill was cautious in leaving, making sure to tiptoe her way out of the bedroom. She took the call in the bathroom. That was where she took all her work calls, which guaranteed privacy.

Jill closed the door behind her, held the small black box to her ear with one hand, and extracted a small wire from it with the other. At the tip of this wire was a small microphone she held to her mouth.

“Valentine.”

It was HQ. They needed her in the office as soon as possible.

Jill groaned, “If this is just another drill, I’ll strangle you.”

It wasn’t. Jill’s throat went hoarse.

“Shit. Give me the activation code.”

As the voice on the other end threw letters and numbers at her, Jill reached for a nearby toiletry bag and fished a small envelope out. On it was a wax seal, which she broke to extract the envelope’s contents – a thick piece of paper that read ‘29-RC-6735’.

“Th-that’s a match.”

Today was the day she had been training for yet hoped would never come.

“I’m on my way.”

With that, she clicked off and turned the piece of paper over. Attached to it was a blue plastic card the size of a Visa. It was completely blank, save for a mag stripe running along the edge and a hole in one of the corners strung up with a small chain.

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Jill took a deep breath and slung the chain over her neck, wearing the card like a pendant.

Her heart sank when she stepped out of the bathroom and returned to find Chris still sleeping. She hated being so secretive around him. She wanted to wake him up and tell him what was happening – spending as much time with him as she had to ensure he believed her and understood perfectly.

No. There wasn't enough time.

Jill pulled herself away from Chris and opened a closet filled with clothes. The clothes hangers clicked as she pushed them aside. At the back of the closet was an inconspicuous numerical keypad with a small LED at the bottom.

Jill thumbed the buttons, only for the LED to beep as it lit up. She whipped her head over her shoulder, hoping the sound didn't wake Chris.

He showed no signs of moving, so Jill returned to the closet to see a secret panel open up, revealing a closet within her closet.

She entered the small space, where the walls showcased different combat uniforms and the latest military hardware. She was more than equipped for what the mission had to offer.

Whether or not she felt ready was a different matter entirely.

Eventually, Jill stepped onto the street, glad it was still too early in the morning for her neighbors to be awake. She felt ridiculous as she marched toward a gargantuan Humvee parked a few feet away. She was armed to the teeth and decked out in a uniform with a beret that bore the S.T.A.R.S. insignia.

That was her job, and her squadmates were waiting for her inside the vehicle.

As Jill opened the door and clambered inside, taking the front passenger seat, she failed to notice that a civilian was watching her.

Chris Redfield stared at his lover from the second-story window, having woken up when she closed the front door.

He was puzzled, he was angry, and he was very much wounded.

SIX

Silence and nervous energy filled the Humvee as it left the outskirts of Raccoon City. Jill looked over her shoulder at her fellow Bravo Team soldiers.

In the driver's seat next to her was Russo. In the back were Disimone and Williams. They were all rigid special-forces types, but Jill was responsible for them as the superior officer.

Disimone was the first to break the silence. "Another practice run, right?"

"We been practicin' six months! For what?" Russo grunted.

Jill turned to Russo, “For this.” Her eyes then drifted to the Bravo Team soldiers in the back, “This is the real deal.”

Williams straightened himself up. Up to this point, he was expecting yet another drill.

“Honest to God?”

With a sigh, Jill returned to staring at the road ahead, “Based on my experience, Williams, God isn’t always honest.”

“Where we goin’?” Disimone interjected.

Jill pointed ahead. “In there.”

At the end of her finger was the Arkley Forest – miles of old-growth trees shrouded in a ghostly morning mist.

Even though the morning brought sunlight, the forest still managed to look haunted. Perhaps it was how the fog enveloped the trees, obscuring just enough to beckon the Humvee’s curious inhabitants closer. Jill couldn’t help but shudder as she started fidgeting with the blue keycard wrapped around her neck. Bravo Team trained for this but wasn’t briefed extensively on what exactly ‘this’ was. It was hard not to let the mind wander when confronted with such unconventional mission parameters.

The Humvee plunged into the mist, bouncing over non-roads and batting away tree branches.

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Russo hid his frustration at the treacherous terrain as he navigated the forest. Eventually, the Humvee abruptly stopped fifty yards from a pair of wrought iron gates with an ornate 'A' emblazoned on their surface.

The squad could barely contain their amazement as they caught glimpses of their destination through the shifting fog. It was an impossibly colossal mansion that put Xanadu 2.0 to shame.

As the soldiers approached the gates, Jill hoped they could tear their eyes away from it and focus on the mission.

Russo placed a gloved hand on the metal, feeling its cold touch against his exposed fingertips.

“If you had the jing to build a place like this, would you build it in the middle of fuckin’ nowhere?”

“Paris,” Williamson chimed in.

“Manhattan.” Disimone added, “Upper West.”

Despite herself, Jill wistfully joined in.

“Some people prefer a quiet life.” Her mind drifted to Chris and how peaceful he looked as he slept in her bed. She couldn’t wait to get back to him.

Now wasn’t the time to let the mind drift, though. These men were counting on her. So, she cleared her

throat and declared, “Our orders are to secure the area.”

Disimone scanned the area. Sure, it looked sinister, but there were no signs of an immediate threat. He turned to Jill, giving a disinterested shrug.

“From what? This area’s been secure since the French and Indian War.”

A snarl reverberated through the trees. Jill felt a tingling sensation slither up her spine as she and her cohorts raised their weapons, trying to peer into the underbrush through the thick plumes of fog.

A maze of shadows surrounded them, but the sounds were clear as day – the fluttering of leaves and twigs snapping.

Dark shapes formed in the mist, circling the team. Jill tried to count them – four, five, six! Maybe more! She was quickly losing count.

Jill whipped out a transmitter, quickly typing in the access code as sweat formed on her brow. She spoke into the radio through deep breaths, “This is Valentine, Bravo Team. We, er... we might be in trouble here.”

Jill ducked as something leaped from the bush into a spray of automatic gunfire. It was nice to know her teammates were alert.

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More shapes lunged from the surrounding brush, scattering the four troops, each struggling to fire at their agile attackers from all sides.

Jill dived for a nearby shrubbery, shouting into her transmitter over the sounds of gunfire and the cries of her teammates.

“We are in trouble!”

Jill’s message was being transmitted to a Huey hovering over the seemingly endless sea of trees that made up the Arkley forest – specifically to the ears of Albert Wesker, Alpha Leader.

Wesker listened intently as the words came disembodied and quick.

“Under attack... by... assailants... Unidentifi...”

Radio silence.

Wesker pursed his lips and turned to a steely-eyed pilot named LaGuardia.

“Can you get a trace?”

LaGuardia shook his head, “Lost the beacon. It just cut out, like it was... swallowed by something.”

Swallowed. Wesker hung on to that word. That LaGuardia chose that word was a fact that Wesker found amusing. A smile crept across his lean, mean face that would have made LaGuardia uncomfortable had he been paying attention.

“I do believe, gentlemen, that we’re gonna be earning some combat pay.”

Three other men were on board, but the only one Wesker cared about was the one closest to him, Barry Burton. The duo’s history began in their army days in the early eighties. None of their squadmates suspected that ice-cold ubermensch Albert Wesker would have the time of day for anybody, let alone Barry Burton – a black man built like a grizzly but with the heart of a teddy. Yet, in their military career, Barry was the only one to crack Wesker’s reinforced exterior. Perhaps it was Barry’s affable personality, his extroverted nature, or maybe the many close shaves he’d helped Wesker out of with his combat skills.

When Wesker became the Alpha Leader of S.T.A.R.S., nobody was surprised that his first order of business was to recruit Burton for his squad.

Now, Barry returned Wesker’s smile with one of his own. “Damn, if you don’t love a fight.”

“Hey, if I didn’t, you’d be a dead man,” Wesker yelled over the deafening Huey engine before returning to LaGuardia.

“Call in a nine-nine. I want Raccoon City evacuated.”

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Wesker relished at the thought of the all-out war he was walking his men into as the chopper continued its journey above the forest, followed by an entire fleet of attack helicopters, all keeping formation.

Bravo Team stood their ground, firing at their unseen aggressors. Their guns blazed against a mass of unknown shapes – all growling and snapping.

Jill rolled into a natural trench, staying low as she aimed for a more precise shot. Disimone and Russo were nearby, providing covering fire.

She wondered where the hell Williams was. He wasn't the type to cut and run, even under such dire circumstances. No one in S.T.A.R.S. was. That was why they were hand-picked for S.T.A.R.S. in the first place.

Then, the fog parted ever so slightly, and she saw Williams crawling just ahead, his legs pumping. Jill hurried past him, hoping she didn't have a deserter on her hands.

The good news was that Williams wasn't fleeing from the battle.

The bad news was that Williams' legs weren't attached to his body. The muscles and organs that, at one point, connected them to Williams' torso lay

in a gruesome pile dragged along the ground. One of the inhuman aggressors pulled the spasmodic legs into the underbrush. While nature obscured its appearance, it was clear that this wasn't just some rabid animal, as it noisily fed on Williams' remains.

Jill's heart was racing. S.T.A.R.S. training was comprehensive, but it didn't cover monsters living in the middle of the woods.

She jumped to her feet, weapon raised and ready to fire at the monsters attacking her team. Instead, she was greeted by Disimone and Russo, both dumbfounded as smoke billowed from the barrels of their guns, joining the wisps of fog surrounding them.

The three remaining Bravo Team members were breathing heavily, eyes darting from one another to their surroundings. Had they deterred the enemy? Were they safe?

Before Jill could issue a single order, Disimone fell forward, his face slamming against a nearby tree as his body fell limply to the ground. Jill sprayed hot lead into the fog, hoping to hit whatever had attacked him.

Eventually, Jill's gun ran out of ammo. She tossed the empty gun aside, watching in horror as Disimone reached towards her, whimpering as tears

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ran down his face toward a bloody, pulverized heap of shattered cartilage, and finally settling at his mouth, where blood oozed from torn lips and shards of broken teeth.

Before Jill could reach Disimone to offer assistance, he was dragged into the fog, wailing in terror.

That left her and Russo.

Jill pulled out her sidearm and loaded it, ready to do whatever it took to get herself and Russo out of this forest alive. Russo's hand outstretched before him, his eyes transfixed on his palm.

Jill took a few steps toward Russo, only to see what had captured his gaze so powerfully. He was cradling a pound of flesh – his flesh, strands of muscle and tendons connecting it to the jagged slashes that lined his neck. Blood quickly saturated Russo's entire torso.

In an instant, Russo flew back, reaching out desperately with his other hand as the fog claimed him, too.

Jill was the only member of Bravo Team left. She held her pistol close as the sounds of the forest dulled down to several overlapping growls. She could sense the monsters sizing her up, waiting for the perfect moment to strike.

BRAD HAZIO

All she could see were her dead teammates, the ones she couldn't save, the ones that were her responsibility – Jill let out a guttural war cry before firing her pistol as red-rimmed eyes, snarling jaws, and drooling teeth descended upon her.

SEVEN

Chris, fully dressed, stepped through the front doorway of Jill's apartment, determined to find her and get some answers – about her, her mysterious job, and their relationship.

He made it a few steps from Jill's building before a fleet of camo-painted Hueys swooped from the sky above, keeping their formation as they sailed towards the city center.

Chris could feel the hairs on his body standing on end. What the hell was going on around here?

There was only one way Chris was going to find out.

The choppers landed in Raccoon City, where armed soldiers leaped out to greet the hordes of confused citizens.

Immediately, soldiers began escorting the populace, ignoring their constant cries for explanation. They didn't care about whether they were being rough. There had been a biohazard. They needed to evacuate the city. There wasn't time to worry about whether the citizens were comfortable.

One of the soldiers flicked the switch on a bullhorn, causing a burst of sonic feedback. "There's been an accident in the hills nearby. A military aircraft, carrying live weapons, has crashed..."

Chris wasn't an idiot. He knew that charging the city center and demanding answers would be a one-way ticket to getting arrested or shot.

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So, he stuck to the side streets. He could discover what was happening if he stayed out of sight and kept an ear to the ground.

He turned into a nearby alleyway, hoping to slink through and find a better vantage point.

As Chris made his way across, he remembered why he wasn't a fan of the city in the first place. The acrid stench of pollution filled the air, and litter lined the ground. The buildings were soulless concrete behemoths covered in advertising — a depressing ode to industrialization's chokehold on the population, causing depression and environmental destabilization wherever it went. He spotted the graffiti on the walls, noting how crude it was but admiring it nonetheless. Anything anybody could do to bring humanity to this place was a benefit.

Chris reached the end of the alleyway when a soldier cradling an M-16 turned the corner, and the two immediately locked eyes. As Chris turned to run, he spotted another pair of commandos on the other side of the alleyway, both armed.

They boxed him in.

“Let’s go, hayseed,” the soldier behind Chris said, prodding him with the barrel of his rifle, “You gonna be a good boy?”

Chris wanted nothing more than to wrench the soldier’s rifle from his hands and whack the butt against his smug face. But, since Chris didn’t have a death wish, he swallowed his fury, gritted his teeth, and allowed the soldiers to lead him away.

The commandos led Chris to the center of Raccoon City — the one place where he didn’t want to be. Chaos had broken out. Herded citizens clustered inside helicopters and trucks, courtesy of the local National Guard Post.

They would make eye contact with Chris, making pleading glances. They had no idea what was happening, and the guards seemed unsympathetic. These people were scared.

Did Jill condone this? Was that the person he fell in love with?

Chris kept his head down as the squad escorting him turned their attention to a man running towards them at a full sprint, sweat drenching his pajamas.

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The squad leader lifted his rifle away from Chris' back as he turned to the sweaty man, who had skidded to a halt and was now trying to catch his breath.

“Look here, I’m the Sheriff of this-“

“Step aside.”

“But, I’m the Sheriff! An ex-Army man, like you.”

Chris wondered what this meant. He was always critical of the Raccoon City Police Department, but even he felt uncomfortable that they weren't in on this grand scheme. It added another sinister layer to this mystery.

Before the soldiers could respond to the Sheriff, the sound of the bullhorn filled the street.

“There is no immediate danger, but as a precaution, we are evacuating the area. You will be provided shelter until the weapons have been removed from the crash site.”

The Sheriff scoffed. “That’s a worn-out scenario. If a plane crashed nearby, don’t you think somebody would have heard it go down?”

Chris wanted nothing more than to tell the Sheriff to shut up. The man would’ve had to be an

idiot not to realize he was grossly outranked here. Maybe it would've been smarter not to try and unravel the government conspiracy in front of the armed guards when you were still in your pajamas.

The Sheriff leaned closer to the soldier. "Tell us the truth, guys. What's this really about?"

In response, the soldier remained stone-faced.

"I said, step aside!"

The soldier raised his rifle, ready to club the Sheriff, whose smirk turned to pure anguish. Chris lunged at the soldier, grabbing his arm. The soldier wasn't expecting resistance and certainly wasn't expecting what came next when Chris kicked him square in the balls. All that body armor, and the guy didn't even think to wear a cup.

The second the soldier buckled, Chris bolted away. He heard the whiz of bullets as they zoomed past his head and hit a nearby shop window, shattering the glass and sending it raining onto the poor civilians standing nearby.

If the scene was chaotic before, now it felt apocalyptic. All semblance of order disappeared as the people began running and screaming in all

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directions, soldiers trying to relay orders at one another over the massive din.

Amidst the panic, Chris ducked into a nearby building. He raced through corridor after corridor, not taking in any details unless they could lead him to an exit.

Eventually, he shouldered through an exit door, ending up in a warren of back alleyways.

Now that Chris knew where he was, it was time for take two, which hopefully included not getting caught.

Chris weaved through the backstreets, relieved to find himself at Jill's apartment building — specifically, the back alley parking lot where her Jeep Sahara was parked.

It wasn't long before Chris had the key and was in the driver's seat. He had the perfect destination in mind and the chaos in the city's center to cover his tracks. The Jeep roared off, heading for the outskirts.

Wesker's helicopter was still hovering above the forest, his men watching as he yelled orders into a radio.

“Charlie, David, Edward, proceed to Raccoon City. Assist the e-back. I'm going on target with Alpha Team. All forces stand ready to support.”

With that, the helicopter began to move.

The next phase of the mission was a go.

EIGHT

Chris rumbled the jeep onto the entrance of the Redfield ranch, shuffling out of the car as soon as he brought it to a stop.

The plan played on a loop in his head. He would regroup with Rake, and the two would lie low until the evacuation was complete. Then, Chris would return to the city and find Jill, using the buildings as cover. Given the circumstances, it wasn't foolproof, but it was the best he could do.

His first instinct was to run to the homestead, but he spotted the corral in disarray. Beyond the broken fence, the horses were lying on their side.

As Chris approached the corral, he felt his stomach drop. He was so occupied with what was happening in Raccoon City that it never occurred to him that his home might be in danger.

The images that Chris' mind conjured up brought a wave of nausea – soldiers descending on the farm, Rake asking questions, showing resistance, the soldiers breaking the fence and hurting the horses to make an example, maybe even going as far as to hurt Rake.

But then Chris reached the fence and realized that none of the soldiers, no matter how sadistic, could have done this.

These animals were torn apart – lying motionless in a pool of their blood.

Struggling not to throw up from the overwhelming stench of decay, Chris turned to Lucky, his childhood stallion – a horse he spent his entire life growing up alongside. The poor creature had been disemboweled and was in its death throes as its mutilated neck twitched erratically.

“Aw no... L-Lucky”

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Was this what the soldiers were trying to cover up? Something that could tear a horse's meat down to the bone? That would warrant an over-the-top response like the one in Raccoon City.

Chris had too many questions. But first, he needed to find Rake and ensure he was okay.

A weak moan derailed his train of thought. He followed the sound to see Rake curled up next to a water pump, cradling a gigantic slash on his torso, desperately trying to keep his innards from spilling out onto the cold, wet ground.

Chris knelt beside Rake, struggling to keep his emotions in check. Rake was barely clinging to life; the last thing he needed to see was Chris drowning in tears.

Rake coughed up a mouthful of blood, "They... they come outta the trees, Reddy. Don't... don't know what they was. Figure... maybe some kinda... wolves, or somethin'..."

He winced in agony.

"I... I never seen 'em comin'."

"Don't try to talk, Rake."

"I... ain't... never left this farm... untended... since your daddy first took it over."

"I know. You kept the place running better than me."

“I just... never seen ‘em comin’, Reddy. Never even... had a chance to... turn a gun on ‘em.”

The moment was interrupted by a thunderous chorus of engines. More jet-black hueys sailed over their heads. Chris watched, confused, as they broke formation. Most took off toward Raccoon City, but Chris focused on the three that settled above the forest before slowing down and dropping their altitude.

“Where are they going? There’s nothing in there... except...”

“Y’oughta... remember it... real good. I do. From... when you was a kid.”

Chris turned to Rake, “The... the old Arkley place?”

“I remember them days. I surely do... remember them... them old days.”

Rake was drifting in and out of consciousness.

Chris put a hand on his shoulder, “I’m not gonna bullshit you, Rake. You’re in a bad time. If there’s any way to save you, I’ll find it, I swear. You just hang in there, old guy. I’ll be right back.”

With that, Chris took off for the farmhouse. He wasn’t an idiot. He knew that Rake’s chances were the slimmest they could be. Still, Chris knew he would not be able to live with himself if he didn’t

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do everything he possibly could to help. Had the roles been reversed, Rake would've done the same for him.

He burst into the Redfield homestead, bounding across the hardwood floor into the great room, where he marched towards a nearby telephone and snatched it off its cradle.

The second he brought it to his ear, he knew his efforts would be for naught. He didn't get a dial tone. He didn't even get a sound. The line was completely dead.

That signaled the end. If he couldn't call for emergency help, there was no way he'd get Rake the medical attention he needed. The man's fate was sealed.

So, Chris rushed to a gun cabinet on the other side of the room, opening it to find the trusty Redfield Winchester, a firearm that served the family for a long time. He picked it up, hastily opening a small drawer with his other hand, where he snatched a box of ammunition and poured its contents into a nearby shoulder bag.

When Chris reached the farmhouse's front porch, he spotted movement in the distance. Something was moving inside the corral.

Chris approached the broken fence, mouth agape as he saw his prized horse trying in vain to stand, slipping in its blood and tripping over its splayed entrails.

“Oh God, Rake. Oh Jesus, the poor thing’s still alive.”

Hands shaking, Chris shouldered his ammo bag, fishing a round from inside and loading the rifle. He felt the cold of the rifle stock against his cheek as he aimed at his beloved horse, which let out a pathetic whine as it struggled to maintain balance.

“Sorry, old hoss.”

Chris fired a shot clean through Lucky’s head, sending the horse to the ground where it would never move again.

Having put his friend out of its misery, Chris lowered the rifle, succumbing to an all-encompassing numbness. It was the same sensation when he learned that his parents had died, his mind doing everything possible to protect him from having to process these new thoughts and feelings.

His sister's voice brought him back at that time – a potent reminder that he needed to be here, in the moment.

But Claire wasn’t here. Chris would need something else to anchor him to the present –

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something to focus his senses, not the pungent mortal miasma that made the air nauseating or the swarms of flies gathering around the dead flesh.

Instead, Chris focused on the sounds of the helicopters reverberating through the trees. Wherever they were, they had yet to land. They were a distant but adequate reminder that Chris had a mission. He couldn't bring Rake and Lucky back. He could ensure he held the responsible people accountable.

That meant he needed to get moving.

Chris approached Rake. The old farmhand's eyes had glazed entirely over. The innards he had fought so hard to keep inside his body had spilled out into his lap.

Chris felt his jaw tighten. Rake deserved a dignified death, not whatever the hell this was. Sure, there wasn't time to mourn, but Chris couldn't leave him there.

He crouched beside his old mentor, carefully closing the man's eyelids. Then, he reached towards the grass below, digging it aside and procuring a handful of dirt. After delicately placing the dirt into Rake's open hand and closing his fingers, Chris got to his feet and bowed his head.

"The Earth keeps us."

He would give Rake a proper burial when all of this was over. Now, he had work to do.

Newly motivated, Chris ran towards the jeep and tossed his rifle and shoulder bag in the passenger seat before jumping in.

The second the engine roared, Chris shifted into four-wheel drive, gunned the accelerator, and headed straight over the field for the trees. If the Arkley Mansion had the answers he sought, he would find them, no matter what.

An eerie calm drifted over the farm as the jeep disappeared and the dust cleared. The Redfield ranch would be utterly silent if not for the helicopters in the distance.

Had Chris stayed just a second longer, he might have noticed the remains of Rake's spaniel: its crushed head, bloody neck, and a single broken paw strewn over the corral.

Another second, and he might have noticed these severed limbs twitching, trying to crawl.

Another second, and he might have caught the earth spilling from the recently deceased Rake's now relaxed hand.

One more second, and he'd have noticed Rake's eyes popping open.

Πῖπε

The first of S.T.A.R.S.'s black Hueys dropped hazardously into a small clearing within the forest below. It was treacherous, with barely enough space to allow the large helicopter, but Wesker knew LaGuardia could clear it. He was one hell of a pilot.

Sure enough, a few leaves clipped as the helicopter hovered ten feet off the ground. If that was the only casualty of today, the operation was going smoothly.

Wesker and Barry jumped from the helicopter, followed by the two accompanying commandos. They were ready for action.

LaGuardia raised the helicopter's altitude, allowing the second Huey to take its place. More soldiers were going to deploy.

Not far away, Chris navigated the undergrowth in Jill's jeep, hoping she'd forgive him for all the scuff marks and scratches she'd have to buff out. Eventually, he got within a hundred yards of the soldiers' activity, close enough to see the third helicopter air-dropping more soldiers in S.T.A.R.S. uniforms.

Chris climbed out of the jeep, leaving it in the bush, and maneuvered behind a nearby tree, hoping he wasn't spotted.

Wesker watched as the rest of the S.T.A.R.S. Alpha Team approached him, performing a head count in his head. Everybody was present.

He looked up at the remaining Huey, reaching for his radio.

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“You’ll have to rotate or you’ll run out of fuel, but I want one chopper to remain in the air at all times. We might need help in a hurry.”

“Roger that,” the pilot replied as the third helicopter banked away, leaving the forest silent. Wesker noted the expression on Barry’s face. The man was trying to hide it, but he was clearly taken aback. What could a dozen trained professionals possibly need help in a hurry from? What was Wesker leading them into?

In the short term, Wesker was leading them into the woods. What he didn’t know was that he was leading Chris as well. Alpha Team had no trouble clearing the dense vegetation and the uneven terrain, but a civilian would have needed help tailing them.

Chris wasn’t an ordinary civilian, though. He grew up with this land. He felt comfort traversing it, brought on by his ancestral instincts.

Eventually, the crunching of combat boots stopped, Wesker signaling the end of their walk with a hand gesture.

The low-lying mist at their feet parted to reveal what the team was searching for. The remains of

Bravo Team left a collage of weapons, ammo belts, tattered scraps of uniform and segmented chunks of human meat – all saturated in a thick layer of dried blood. This wasn't just a massacre; it was an all-out feeding frenzy!

The first to react was Brad Vickers, Alpha Team's computer techie. The man was a genius when navigating IT systems but had the bare minimum combat training and was a bit of a coward.

“Holy... Goh... gaah...” was all he could manage before vomiting onto the grass below. There were groans and snickers as Rebecca Chambers, another of Alpha Team's non-combatants, reached into her pack and procured an ammonia capsule. She held it under Vickers' nose, regarding him with a look of pity. She was Alpha Team's medical officer – an incredibly bright young woman whose intellect was matched only by her compassion.

Less empathic with Vickers' current situation were Richard Aiken and Kenneth Sullivan, two G.I. Joes right out of every war movie. Aiken was staring at the carnage, chewing a wad of gum.

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“You ever eat roadkill, Sullivan?”

“Aiken, a guy with a brain your size would be better off dead.”

Both men turned as a coarse voice rang out, “Want me to shoot ya, Aiken?”

Approaching the duo was Rosie Rodriguez, a tough, body-built babe. She put her hands on her hips and regarded Aiken with a smile.

“I’m ready ta shoot somebody.”

Aiken shrugged, “I’ll pass. Shoot Sullivan.”

Everybody turned as another S.T.A.R.S. member cleared their throat. It was Forest Speyer; a wiry Willem Dafoe type. He was holding something up for the rest of the group to see – a S.T.A.R.S. beret.

Forest got to his feet, marching towards Wesker and handing the beret to him. Wesker peered inside its brim to see an I.D. tag.

“Valentine.”

This confirmed the worst. Wesker turned back to Forest, a grim look on his face.

“Radio Washington. Bravo Team found on site. No survivors.”

As Forest nodded, Wesker pitched the beret into the brush with a grunt.

“We’re goin’ in. Watch your back.”

As soon as the soldiers cleared the area, Chris emerged from his hiding place, fighting off a wave of shell shock.

He crept over the massacred remains, trying to step on as little of Bravo Team as possible. Heart racing, Chris bent down to pick up the beret. Maybe that guy misread the tag. He was wearing aviator sunglasses, after all.

Yet, Chris turned the beret over, and his heart sank as he read the name tag for himself.

‘Valentine.’

Morbidly, it made sense. He had already lost so much; what was the love of his life on top of that? That was assuming, of course, that was even who she was. Chris thought he knew Jill Valentine. He wasn’t expecting to question that when he woke up this morning.

That thunderous roar filled the forest again, sending a powerful gust of wind through the trees. One of the Hueys had returned.

RESIDENT EVIL

Chris stared at it – a big, black war machine whose presence brought a new course of pain throughout his body. He couldn't grieve anymore – not for the farm, not for Lucky, not for Rake, and not for the Jill he once knew.

So, he let that pain turn into a coarse, fiery rage that he knew would keep him going until he tore that mansion apart.

He brandished his rifle, sensing movement in the bushes nearby. Something was disrupting the shrubs, and it wasn't the helicopter.

Chris kept his eyes trained on the shadows, trying to spot the dark mass moving around him. Suddenly, it stopped, poking its head from the greenery to reveal a wolf. Rake was right.

Or was he? Chris readied the Winchester, training it on the canine as it stalked towards him, head down, a low growl passing through its jagged teeth.

Chris knew what wolves looked like. This was not one of them. It was someone's cruel idea of a dog – gray flesh mottled with rotting lesions, hair matted down with mud, pus, and blood, bullet holes in its belly, chest, and neck.

This dog was coming apart at the seams. But that didn't bother it, as its pearl-white featureless eyes were trained on Chris, eager to turn him into its next meal.

The dog signaled its next move with a blood-curdling snarl, leaping towards Chris with its teeth bared.

Chris took a deep breath and fired.

The shot rang through the forest, immediately catching the attention of Wesker and his commandos, bringing them to an abrupt stop.

“Who fired?” Wesker bellowed, only to get no response from his bewildered team, “Who fired?”

There was a collection of confused shrugs. Wesker could sense it amongst his men; they were starting to realize something was wrong.

Good. That was exactly how he needed them to be. They weren't getting to the objective unless they were fully alert.

It almost delighted Wesker to see the welcoming wagon brought out to greet them. Dogs burst everywhere around Alpha Team, all

RESIDENT EVIL

Dobermans and Shepherds with decaying flesh and dead eyes.

Chaos erupted around Wesker as the ravenous hounds charged toward several streams of automatic gunfire. Sure, these creatures were tough, but Alpha Team weren't pushovers.

Wesker reveled in the carnage as his teammates' weapons tore through the monsters, grinding their heads into a gory paste filled with skull fragments and brain matter. These things were dropping like flies.

But, Alpha Team was being pushed back. It wasn't long before they had their backs to the iron gates that heralded the Arkley Mansion.

The dogs kept coming, lumbering over each other, hoping to tear some flesh off their armed aggressors.

Hesitation began to spread amongst Alpha Team. Surely, there was no sense in them using up all their ammunition so early in the mission, right? Wouldn't finding cover and assessing the situation make more sense? Of course, nobody wanted to vocalize that, lest they end up on the receiving end

of Wesker, a man whose bark and bite were comparable to their current enemy.

Rodriguez ejected an empty mag from her gun, fishing a new one from her belt and pausing to yell. “Let’s get inside!”

Wesker stopped firing and whipped his head toward her, “No!”

Then, he turned his attention to the rest of the firing squad. “I want ‘em all dead! You hear me? Stand fast until they’re all dead!”

Wesker was confident. There was no need to run. The enemy would be long dead soon enough.

But, there was weakness in his ranks. One of the soldiers tripped and fell. His name was Joseph Frost, and Wesker had picked him for Alpha Team due to his extensive expertise in heavy ordnance and equipment maintenance. That, however, wasn’t going to do shit for him as he landed on his front, getting the wind knocked out of him. His teammates wanted to help him back up but were too occupied with the immediate threat surrounding them.

One of the dogs seized the opportunity to pounce on Joseph, using its powerful jaws and

jagged teeth to tear through everything: first, the nylon of his vest, then the cotton of his shirt, then flesh and bone.

Joseph wailed with agony as there was a clamp around his beating heart. Suddenly, he could feel the arteries stretching, the ventricles snapping, nerves fraying – his heart was pulled through the cavity in his back.

The rest of Alpha Team could only take horrified glimpses as they maintained their firing line. The only deviation came from Wesker, who broke his line of sight to riddle the creature attacking Frost with forty rounds. It didn't matter. Frost was dead.

But it meant that Wesker's back was no longer at the gate. He heard a snarl behind him, one of the stragglers deciding against charging the frontline like a martyr.

He dived into the grass, but it was too late. The dog soared through the air, ready to tear him to shreds as soon as it landed.

Wesker braced for impact, ready to fight till his last breath, when a shot blasted the creature out of mid-air, spraying him with its blood.

He turned to his team, looking for who fired the shot, only to see Barry pointing his smoking magnum like Charles Bronson in a Death Wish movie.

“Even-Steven, boss. You saved my ass in the desert. I saved yours in Pennsylvania.”

Wesker stood back up, adjusting his shades.

“I don’t believe in being Even-Steven with anybody. A man saves my ass, I pay him back.”

He marched over to Barry, giving him a friendly clap on the back.

“Before this day is over, I’ll pay you back, Barry. Just stick with me, okay?”

With that, Alpha Team dispersed. Some were reloading their weapons, and others were looking at what remained of Joseph Frost. Rebecca went from person to person, tending to their minor cuts and abrasions. Brad Vickers was, once again, fighting the urge to vomit.

Wesker looked down, only to notice something missing from his equipment belt. While the others were occupied, he grabbed his flashlight and clicked it on, shining the beam through the rolling mist at his feet.

RESIDENT EVIL

Eventually, his gloved hand fastened around a small electronic unit the size of a cell phone.

Cursing himself for his carelessness, Wesker clipped it back onto his belt. It was critical to the mission. He couldn't afford to lose it in a skirmish.

Chris watched Alpha Team from the brush, trying to process what had happened. Was this the kind of madness that Jill encountered?

He turned to his kill, the dog lying with a rifle round between its eyes in a sleep it was never waking up from.

Chris slinked toward it, making sure not to attract any attention. He knelt beside the corpse, inspecting its body.

It wore a collar that read 'SPIKE #26' followed by a corporate-looking logo – an octagon evenly divided into red and white sections, the Umbrella Corporation logo.

The floodgates opened to even more questions. Why was the Umbrella Corporation keeping rabid hounds? Why did they send them to kill Rake, Jill, and everyone else in Chris' life? Weren't they a medicine company? Didn't they spend their days

making cough syrup and jacking up the price of insulin? What were they doing in the Arkley Mansion?

Chris didn't have time to think further as a growl rumbled behind him. Another dog was advancing, aiming to finish what its dead brethren started.

So, Chris turned, readying his rifle and steadying his nerves. A second of hesitation would mean a shot missing, and a missed shot meant death.

Chris took another deep breath and delicately pulled the trigger, only to be met with a click. He was out of ammo.

His mind rattled. Did he have time to reload? Not likely. The fear was starting to settle in. His hands were shaking, sweat forming on his brow. This kind of fear lets a predator know you were easy prey.

Chris' options were fight or flight, and he wasn't in any condition to fight. So, he scrambled away, trying not to trip as the dog bounded after him. The forest didn't make it easy, and it wasn't

RESIDENT EVIL

long before he could feel cuts and bruises from clipping the various trees surrounding him.

He didn't dare stop, though – not even for a second. The only reason he was alive was that he kept moving.

One significant advantage Chris had over his pursuer was that he knew this forest well. He'd grown up in it and had a destination in mind. Chris dropped to the ground, pushing against a nearby tree root, relieved to see it swing open to reveal a small recess. It was just as he remembered it. He dived into the pit, pulling the false root shut over him.

Amidst the darkness, Chris gasped for air through coarsened, pained lungs, trying to ignore the stinging cuts adorning his body.

Rodriguez strolled through the forest, grateful for the opportunity to step away from the rest of the team and be alone with her thoughts. It was amazing how serene the forest could be when she wasn't surrounded by tough-talking jarheads and foaming hellhounds.

That serenity didn't last long, as she spotted another dog that had somehow managed to stray from the rest of the pack and was absent-mindedly barking at a nearby tree. Whoever sent these hounds after them wasn't getting their money's worth.

Rodriguez paid the creature barely any mind as she lifted her weapon and sprayed the nearby foliage with its brains. Whatever a goddamn tree had done to earn the yappy little bastard's attention wasn't her problem.

Her problem was that now that she'd fired a shot, it wouldn't be long before she'd have to report back to Wesker and explain what happened, lest he overreact and send the rest of the squad to investigate.

So much for her short break.

Wesker was startled as Barry approached him, clearly perturbed.

"Look here, man. I'd follow you into any kind of enemy fire. But these things ain't firin' at us. They want us for breakfast! When are you gonna tell us what the hell is going on here?"

RESIDENT EVIL

“When you need to know. Just do your job, soldier. That’s what I’m doin’. My job.”

This frustrated Wesker more than anything else. Barry’s hesitation was the kind of shit he would expect from one of the greener Alpha recruits – hell, even the non-combatants. Not from a soldier with a career as decorated as Barry Burton. How long could Wesker expect Barry to have his back if a little firefight with some jumped-up bitches was enough to rattle him?

Stepping away from Barry, Wesker reached into his shirt, pulling out a chain with an access card attached. This one was green and slid easily through a slot presented by the large iron gates.

At first, a buzz rang through the vicinity, followed by a long, spine-tingling squeal as the gates swung open, giving the team a better look at the mansion looming over them, beckoning them inside.

Τ Ε Π

It had been over a decade since Chris had navigated this tunnel. Where he used to stand upright, he was now reduced to a crawl, feeling his way across the earthen walls to reach the other side.

For the first time that day, Chris felt optimistic. He'd managed not only to avoid the soldiers but also to get a head start on them. If the secrets were in the mansion, as the late Rake supposed, he would find them first.

RESIDENT EVIL

S.T.A.R.S. Alpha Team watched with a collective nervousness as Wesker stood at the front door of the Arkley Mansion. He ran his fingertips against the hand-carved solid oak, settling them against a slot that would have been near invisible to the naked eye – perfect for his green keycard.

With a swipe, the wooden monolith creaked open, revealing the contents of the Mansion to the onlookers outside. If any of Alpha Team's eleven remaining members had reservations about going inside, they were shit out of luck. There was no going back.

Wesker led his team into the haunted house. What was once a spectacular display of intuitive craftsmanship was now a glorious ruin, now mysterious and threatening. The furniture and chandeliers were covered with sheets rippling from the breezes caused by a thousand faults in the old walls. This building was a lifeless husk, its vibrance ravaged by decades of decay.

Aiken was the first to try to lighten the increasingly tense mood. “Old. They probably don’t have cable.”

“They probably don’t have radio,” Sullivan joined in.

“Who’s they?” Rodriguez interjected, having none of it, “whose place is this?”

Wesker closed the door behind the team, resulting in a boom that made his teammates wonder if that door would ever be opened again.

“Guy named Arkley,” Wesker replied, “Bootlegger. Built this old fortress during prohibition. He figured nobody’d ever find him out here in the backwoods. Nobody did till he died. Feds have had it ever since. Place has been here for eighty years... derelict... a safe-house.”

Those last words caught Barry’s attention. “A safe-house... for who? For what?”

Wesker turned to his friend, weighing how much intel would be worth divulging.

“There’s a... a secret installation below – a network of laboratories.”

Barry’s mouth was agape. Rebecca jumped on the opportunity to respond with a question of her own.

“What kind of laboratories?”

RESIDENT EVIL

It was a good question that any responsible medic would have asked. Wesker knew what her concern was, responding with a shrug.

“They didn’t issue us gas masks, so I figure it’s okay to breathe.”

The medic had their question answered. Now, it was time for the soldiers to pipe up.

Rodriguez asked, “Why send in a strike force?”

“Yeah,” Sullivan accompanied her, “What are we supposed to do, polish the silver?”

“There’s a man downstairs,” Wesker snapped, “A top priority man. It’s our job to bring him out. Hopefully, there are others alive as well. We’ll rescue them too, if we can. But, Dr. John Marcus... he comes out alive, at any and all cost.”

That would’ve been a poor choice of words had Wesker given a shit. Every surviving member of S.T.A.R.S. Alpha Team under him wondered what ‘any and all cost’ truly meant. They signed up for danger but not to end up like Joseph Frost and Bravo Team – all ground meat for the sake of a mission on which they were drip-fed information.

Still, what was the alternative? They had to stick together to survive, which meant following their leader and hoping he knew what he was doing.

To the outside world, it was a sunny Pennsylvanian morning. There would be no such luck for the current occupants of the Arkley Mansion. Someone had sealed the windows long ago, flooding the building in all-consuming darkness. The place would feel completely lost in time were it not for the constant ticking of clocks rattling through every space.

Inhabiting this death incarnate was an army of lost souls — lurching shadows sluggishly scraping their feet from room to room, all of their thoughts and feelings reduced to a single instinct that clawed at the remnants of who they used to be.

Little did they know, what they were searching for was only a stone's throw away, past a corroded iron accordion gate. If only they'd had the intuition to follow the hum of a motor as it signaled the arrival of an elevator.

RESIDENT EVIL

Luckily, its occupant thought to stop the elevator just below floor level, her eyes peeking cautiously to find the room empty.

Satisfied, the very alive Jill Valentine sent the elevator car up the rest of the way. She stopped it by removing her blue keycard from an incongruously modern receptacle, anachronistically placed amongst the elevator's vintage design.

With a grunt, Jill slid the accordion gate aside, stepping into a dim and dusty corridor as she pulled out her sidearm, still shaking from outside events. It was taking a concerted effort not to dwell on the revolting afterimages of Russo, Williams, and Disimone seared in her mind.

It only took a few steps before Jill learned that this corridor wasn't as empty as she thought. With a ghostly moan, she was accosted by a man in a lab coat – at least, it looked like a man. He also looked like one of the monsters outside, rotten flesh barely clinging to his bones, rivulets of saliva pouring through snapping teeth. He was trying to bite her – no, he was trying to eat her!

Jill leaped to one side, lifting her pistol and firing once, twice – three times! These were shots

to the stomach, heart, and neck – all that would have taken anyone down in a second.

So, why did he keep on coming?

Finally, Jill fired at his head, and some normalcy returned to the situation. Whoever this was, a headshot could take them down like anybody else.

Instinct kicked in as Jill ejected the mag and quickly reloaded. Her eyes remained trained on the body lying splayed out before her, seeing the hardwood floor through the hole she left in his skull.

Her mind raced, trying to rationalize how this crazed cannibal shrugged off slugs that would've knocked down anyone else.

She also couldn't shake the feeling that he was seconds from getting back up.

Alpha Team froze as gunshots echoed through the spacious central hall. Wesker turned his attention toward one of the doors, swiping it open with his green keycard.

“Three men stay here. Chambers.”

“I'm not a man.”

RESIDENT EVIL

“Rodriguez.”

“I’m better than a man.”

Wesker smiled, “Alright, you come with us. Aiken, Sullivan, stick here with Chambers.”

That was that. Alpha Team dispersed, leaving Rebecca Chambers, Kenneth Sullivan, and Richard Aiken to ponder the vast, empty space.

The second the door closed, Aiken turned to Sullivan.

“Why us?”

“I dunno why me. You? I guess the C.O. figures you’re as worthless as a dame, Aiken.”

He chuckled, only for his grin to slowly dissipate as he met Rebecca’s gaze.

“Er... sorry, ma’am. I... I didn’t... I meant Aiken... Not you.”

Rebecca smirked. You wouldn’t last long in S.T.A.R.S. Alpha Team if you couldn’t handle their sense of humor.

“Relax. I get it.”

Wesker led his troop into an enormous library. However, one would have to wonder whether Arkley understood the purpose of a library back in

his heyday, as the shelves surrounding the team were populated entirely by cobwebs instead of books. It was unsettling to think about the sheer number of spiders it would have taken to create the various webs that practically coated the abandoned space.

Adding to the confusion was the layout of the room. There were four walls, each with a separate doorway. Would Wesker split the team into pairs to save time? Would that leave them more vulnerable to whatever lurked in the building?

Wesker opened one of his pouches to pull out a small device that resembled one of Nintendo's Game Boys. It was a dark-gray miniaturized computer whose keypad he proceeded to thumb. On the small LED screen, a map of the mansion appeared.

Barry watched this process, unable to hide how impressed he was as Wesker used the unit's arrow keys to scroll through the map.

"That thing tells you where to go?"

Wesker didn't answer, placing the computer back in its pouch and turning to address his squad.

RESIDENT EVIL

“One man stays here. Ridley, you’re it. Shoot to kill. Just make sure it’s not one of us. The rest of you, this way.”

Ridley might not have been the youngest in Alpha Team, but he was the youngest soldier. Typically, that motivated him to push forward, as he had to prove himself to his teammates.

However, this was the first time that fact held him back, as he watched Wesker lead the rest of Alpha Team out of one of the library’s many doors. It had hit the young, relatively inexperienced Ridley that he would now have to deal with whatever the mansion threw at him by himself.

Indeed, Wesker wouldn’t have left Ridley alone if he hadn’t been sure he could handle it.

Right?

ELEVEN

A small lightbulb hung from the ceiling, dimly lighting the earthen tunnel that Chris was slowly reaching the end of. Memories began to flood back from a time Chris had long repressed.

Toys lay at his feet, covered in dust and grime. Among those toys were miniature soldiers, used in many of the young Chris' war games. Posters for old sci-fi and monster movies that the Raccoon City Theatre would screen in double features clung to the walls. Graffiti surrounded them, courtesy of Chris and his young friends. At the center of it all, Chris

found his nickname etched into hardened mud — ‘Christopher Reddy.’

It started as a secret playhouse. Chris had found it while exploring the nearby forests on a hike with his father. Despite his father’s warnings to never go there again, Chris made it a regular habit to go to the tunnel and make it his own.

This would pay off when the tunnel became his sanctuary after his parents died. It was a safe house when he was so full of emotion that he couldn’t face the world. He wanted to be strong for his sister, but he couldn’t do it all the time, and that’s where the tunnel came in handy.

Then, he grew up and found he didn’t need it anymore. He’d moved on, leaving the tunnel and its contents to be ravaged by time.

Over a decade later, he was back.

He moved into a small, sheet-rock chamber that was comparatively featureless. Chris hadn’t dared go that far previously, as there was nothing in that room save for a door that looked like it had been there since the beginning of time. Chris’ father explained that it was likely a secret entrance into the Arkley Mansion, and Chris and his friends never wanted to go there. After all, if the rumors were true, it was both haunted and owned by the cops. If they

didn't arrest you first, you'd have to face the restless ghosts and ghouls that roamed the halls.

Yet, Chris had always wondered what was on the other side of the door, even if he'd never had the guts to open it himself. Now, he was going to find out.

He gripped the door handle, only for a high-pitched alarm to sound, piercing the air with a deafening whine.

Ridley jolted upright as the alarm rang out. He aimed his firearm, eyes darting around the room for a potential enemy to shoot. Who knew that this shithole had a still-functioning security system?

He had to do something, right? Wesker told him to stay and stand guard. But was this the kind of thing he was supposed to guard against? Maybe his teammates required assistance. What would any of the other Alpha Team members do in this situation? Which door did they even take? He couldn't remember, and there was a seventy-five percent chance he'd get it wrong. Still, every second he spent trying to figure it out was a second that his teammates were potentially in danger. It didn't help that he couldn't concentrate with this fucking alarm blasting in his ears!

Ultimately, Ridley decided to pick a random door and go from there. It wasn't a great plan, but it was better than nothing.

So, he shoved his way through one of the doors to find an expansive kitchen area as unclean as the library — long expired food covered in a sickening mix of sludge and mold, rusted cookware and appliances, cupboards hanging open to reveal as many cobwebs.

As a bit of a germaphobe, Ridley's first instinct was to get the hell out of there, but a new sound caught his attention. It was rattling as though somebody was trying to open a locked door.

Ridley shined a flashlight at the doorknobs on either side of the room, only to find that none were moving.

The source of the sound was coming from inside the walls.

Chris wrenched the doorknob back and forth, growing increasingly irritated. Why the hell wasn't this doorknob turning? Did the mechanism get jammed somehow? Was the door not supposed to open?

He remembered the times he and his friends would try to guess what was on the other side. Some

imagined there would be treasure of some kind, and others assumed booby traps. They let their adolescent imaginations run wild. Chris would've laughed at the thought of them all finding out that the door they had spent countless hours guessing about didn't even open had he not been ready to tear it apart in frustration.

Then, the alarm stopped, giving Chris a moment of respite. Maybe the battery had finally run out after all that time.

He didn't realize that behind him, a dusty carpet bulged upward. One of the corners flopped aside.

Ridley didn't welcome the sudden silence that came with the alarm shutting off, especially when that rattling sound returned.

He didn't even know why, but he gripped his rifle with both hands, ready to aim and fire at any moment. There were no immediate signs of danger, but there didn't need to be. His gut was telling him — nay, it was screaming to him that something was very wrong.

“Who...” he croaked at the wall, “who's there?”

RESIDENT EVIL

Chris gave the doorknob a break, eyeing the door up and down for any clues. Maybe this was a puzzle of some kind.

Unbeknownst to him, the activity continued on the floor underneath the carpet. There was a drainage ditch from which a hand was now poking out. The hand was rife with decomposition — stiff bones creaking and joints cracking underneath graying flesh. After a stretch, the hand groped outwards, finding purchase on the floor.

Chris hurled himself against the door with a grunt, but it was no use. Even with his strong build, he was never going to break through.

The hand belonged to a figure that crawled from the ditch to join Chris in the entry chamber. It was once a scientist, as evidenced by its crumpled and bloodstained lab coat and cracked eyeglasses.

It pulled itself up, its spectacles catching the side of the ditch. They fell from its nose, the rims scraping its cheek and causing its parchment-like flesh to curl, revealing eroded musculature wrapped around a grungy jawbone.

That didn't matter. It didn't need sight anymore. It didn't even need the flesh covering its face. All it needed was the sentient pile of food in front of it.

But, the glasses clattered against the floor, and it lost the element of surprise.

Chris turned to find himself staring at a dead man reaching out towards him, gasping to have its hunger satiated.

He was trapped, but he still had his trusty Winchester. Could he believe what he was seeing? No, but there was time to process that later. He'd seen more than his fair share of zombie movies with Rake.

He aimed for the snarling corpse's head and pulled the trigger, only for a pathetic click to remind him that a Winchester was only trusty if you remembered to reload it.

His mind raced as the zombie crawled towards him. There was time to reload, but would it be enough?

Chris dug a handful of bullets from his shoulder bag, only to find that Jill's beret was in his grasp, too.

It was a brief distraction, but gave his enemy enough time to clear the distance between them. Shit, maybe he wouldn't have enough time to reload after all.

RESIDENT EVIL

He tried to jam the bullet into the rifle, only for the zombie to swat at him, its fingers closing around the beret.

The startled Chris tried to keep from fumbling the round between his shaking fingers as he watched the zombie's bloodshot eyes swivel in their sockets toward the beret. It was probably imagining the head that occupied it previously, no doubt fantasizing about tearing past the hair and skin and ingesting the sweet, juicy brains inside – the feeling of pulverized meat between its teeth, the taste of gray matter on its barely functioning tongue.

Chris' heart skipped a beat as the round slipped from his hands, falling to the floor. The second it made contact with the ground, Chris could feel the zombie's eyes train on him again.

Hopefully, he could try to load another in time.

Ridley could hear some commotion, but the walls muffled too much. He needed to figure out what was on the other side.

The answer was right in front of him – a blue access slot showing the extensive kind of upkeep the rest of the kitchen so desperately needed.

It was a shame he wasn't issued a keycard. That was for squad leaders only. Still, that didn't mean he was completely out of options.

He leveled his automatic at the slot and chewed it up with a short burst of fire, reducing it to a sparking husk of crumpled steel.

With a hydraulic whine, a panel slid open in the wall closest to Ridley.

Chris stumbled through the gap, landing on the cold checkerboard tiles. In his periphery, he saw one of the soldiers staring at him in bewilderment.

He opened his mouth to yell about the impending zombie, only for his undead aggressor to burst from the darkness, arms outstretched as it snarled at its prospective prey.

A gun blast sent the ghoul sprawling backward, swallowed by the shadows.

Chris scrambled to his feet, turning to the young soldier, where they bombarded each other with questions.

“Who are you?”

“Who are you? What the hell is S.T.A.R.S.?”

“How'd you get in here?”

“Who sealed the door?”

“Who knew there was a door?”

RESIDENT EVIL

Suddenly, Ridley seized as his gun clattered to the floor. His eyes rolled backward as the muscle between his neck and his shoulder was gleefully chewed up by another zombie. This one was wearing a security guard uniform.

“Who... who...”

The stunned Ridley dropped to the floor, tendrils of gore stretching from his newly formed cavity to the zombie’s gnashing teeth. It stared dully at Chris as it calmly continued its meal, blood dripping down its chin.

Swallowing, it reached out toward Chris, hoping to add him to its buffet. Chris grabbed its arms, flinging it towards the chamber, where it stumbled, landing on its back. It let out a sickly whine as Chris loaded the Winchester and fired into its head.

Once Chris was confident there were no more zombies ready to go in for the kill, he grabbed the edge of the panel, sliding it shut.

So, that’s what the Arkley Mansion was hiding? Is that what attacked Rake and the animals at the farm? Is that what killed Jill?

S.T.A.R.S., whoever the hell they were, had been sent in to fight the living dead, and Chris was now caught in the middle of it.

TWELVE

Wesker led his fellow Alpha Team troopers into a Hearst-sized dining room that was inexplicably candlelit, as though the team was being welcomed to dinner by some sinister force.

The team was about to begin investigating for clues when more distant gunfire rang out.

Speyer was the first to comment. “Where’d that come from?”

“Back where we just were,” Barry responded.

Speyer kicked over a small wooden dining chair in frustration. “Shit, man! We’re chasing our tails!”

RESIDENT EVIL

He expected Wesker to reprimand him for losing his cool. Yet, he turned to his commanding officer to find him surprisingly stoic. Perhaps he could understand Speyer's frustration.

Instead, Wesker continued onward, moving to the other side of the dining room as though nothing had happened — not even a gunshot that, under any other circumstances, would have required his immediate attention.

Speyer wondered what else there was to this mission that he wasn't telling them. It seemed the list of details grew longer with every passing second.

Chris froze as the sounds of clattering footsteps got closer to him. It had to be S.T.A.R.S., right? Part of him wanted to surrender. After all, if he was in a building filled with zombies, maybe it made sense to work alongside fully armed soldiers instead of against them.

But, it was hard to forget the activity in Raccoon City — how military personnel acted like blowhards as they enacted the evacuation. Who knew how they'd react to another civilian being somewhere they shouldn't?

As Chris mulled over how to respond to the approaching soldiers, he failed to notice a crackling that was taking place in the walls around him.

Wesker burst through the doors into a corridor rife with blood and rot. He led Alpha Team as they made their way across the carpeted floor, guns at the ready, anticipating another fight.

Instead, they found a corpse lying near an old-fashioned elevator, its skin perforated with oozing bullet holes, circled by flies.

“Damn. Sumbitch took a lotta lead,” Speyer mumbled.

“That’s not what killed him,” Barry grunted in response, “Blood’s still running. Wounds are fresh. But, look at his skin. This guy’s been dead for a couple o’ days.”

Rodriguez examined the body closer, pouring her flashlight over each of its wounds.

“He was dead... before he was shot?”

All eyes turned to Barry as his teammates tried to figure out what he was implying with his observation.

Chris knelt beside Ridley, checking for a pulse. There was nothing. The man was dead. However,

Chris knew how zombies worked. The second you were bitten, you would return as one of them.

There was no salvaging this situation. It was time to move on.

Chris stood up, ready to move to the next room, when he noticed a crackling sound from the walls. He approached the sound, trying to root out its cause amongst the fifty-year-old ivy-patterned wallpaper.

On closer inspection, he noticed writhing veins forming in the wall before him. Their movement became more aggressive, like the room was a living, breathing entity.

Then, Chris was forced to jump back as they punctured the wallpaper, revealing wriggling vines that had to have sprouted from some exotic plant.

Chris knew his Raccoon City flora, but this had him completely stumped, particularly as its vines aggressively climbed up the walls, displaying a kind of intelligence that suggested they were aware of Chris' presence.

“Ridley?”

Chris turned to see a young female soldier in the doorway, eyeing him with shock. She wore a tactical vest and was clearly with this S.T.A.R.S. outfit, but she looked meek — almost as if she wasn't even a combatant. Maybe she was a medic or something.

Maybe he could negotiate with her, saving himself some grief.

“Who... who are...”

Chris raised his arms defensively, “I — I’m one of the good guys, okay? I’m just trying to—”

Then, he stopped himself. What was the point? He could see it in her eyes.

She spotted Ridley’s corpse.

“Sullivan! Aiken!”

“Shit,” was all Chris could respond with. The time for negotiations was over. It was time to get moving.

He could try to run past this young woman through the doorway, but what would happen once he ran into this Aiken or Sullivan? Was he ready for a firefight with trained soldiers? He didn’t like his odds.

There was another option, however. Nearby, he spotted a small door, barely man-sized, almost invisible as it was covered in matching wallpaper with the wall around it.

Chris bolted for the small door, wrenching it open and diving inside.

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Rebecca wanted to pursue this mysterious man, but the door closed behind him as soon as Sullivan and Aiken joined her inside the kitchen.

“Who was that?” Aiken asked.

Before Rebecca could answer, Sullivan cut her off. “Forget him. What are they?”

He was pointing at the vines protruding from the wallpaper. The trio watched as they swirled around each other, forming a hand that groped the floor.

This makeshift floral arm was trying to reach for Ridley’s dead body as it clawed and palmed its way across the tiles.

Chris was in a tight, dark space, arms and legs stretched out, hands and feet pressed against the walls on either side. He felt every muscle coiling around his bones as he made a controlled descent.

This had to be some kind of laundry chute. It had less natural light than the earthen tunnel. Luckily, it also hadn’t been used in a very long time, meaning Chris avoided the unfortunate smell of dirty laundry. It would have been a living nightmare if Chris had been claustrophobic.

The further Chris moved, the closer he got to thin sources of light that announced his destination.

That destination was another crawl space. Chris was hoping that he'd be able to stand up, but his luck had run out.

This was a drop ceiling that had to have been recently installed. Immaculate iron frames supported air-filtration systems and other heavy machinery – what should have been old soffit and fascia. The light was coming from below, knifing through the vents at Chris' feet.

“Somebody did some major remodeling.”

Rebecca, Sullivan, and Aiken watched in horror as the vines continued their advance toward Ridley's body. Some individual vines had made contact and appeared to be nestling their tips under his skin.

Rebecca frantically turned to her teammates.

“We gotta get him out!”

The troopers rushed towards Ridley's body, hoping a plan would come together once they reached him.

The vines that weren't already digging into the late Ridley rose to meet their challengers, hovering like cobras waiting to strike.

Sullivan made the first move, lunging towards Ridley's body. He tore some vines out, green liquid

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pouring from the breaks. The remaining vines recoiled, but they continued to dart back and forth.

Rebecca joined in, helping Sullivan drag their dead teammate back, only for vines to slam into the corpse – leading to a game of tug and war.

Aiken didn't rush in. Instead, he was assessing the situation. These vines weren't a direct threat. They were more like timid animals trying to secure a food source. Sure, they were moving back and forth, but it was all for intimidation – they wouldn't attack. They just wanted the readily provided meal.

Aiken brandished his M-16, ready to fire off some warning shots. Before he could pull the trigger, the vines seemed to react, retreating immediately toward the wall.

The team secured Ridley, struggling to catch their breath as the remaining vines disappeared behind the wallpaper.

Aiken's eyes drifted from the body to Sullivan and Rebecca, his mouth agape as the reality of the situation hit him.

“What? Smart fuckin' plants?”

“No big deal,” Sullivan responded, “Most plants are smarter than you, Aiken.”

Rebecca rolled her eyes. Sullivan's abrasive humor was great at relieving tension, but the

situation didn't call for it. Their comrade was dead at their feet, and there were monsters all around them.

In the event she didn't make it, Rebecca didn't want the impact of her death to be swept away with a joke.

THIRTEEN

Wesker was growing restless with his fellow Alpha Team soldiers as they continued to investigate the dead body by the elevator.

Of course, they were wasting time. But Wesker couldn't tell them why. They were on a need-to-know basis, and he'd already told them a bit too much.

He watched in frustration as Speyer and Rodriguez surveyed the dead body.

“Why would anyone shoot a dead man?”

“Lemme guess. Maybe ‘cause he was walkin’ around?”

Barry stepped forward, focusing everyone’s attention on the body’s collapsed skull with a point of his finger.

“Head shot. We were sprayin’ those dogs outside. But, think about it. Were any of ‘em brought down without a head shot?”

Curious murmurs broke out amongst Alpha Team, which Wesker was not in the mood to entertain. He decided to sweep the room and order them to keep moving.

His first stop was the elevator, which raised questions as its open door exposed the inside.

Wesker trained his flashlight on the keycard console inside. It was recently installed, and it would only respond to confirmation from specific keycards that only two people would have access to, and Wesker was one of them.

He looked down at his chest to find his green keycard still attached to the chain around his neck.

That left two possibilities, both of which were equally unlikely. Either someone had managed to

steal Jill's blue keycard from her dead body, or Jill didn't die with the rest of Bravo Team.

Wesker heard gasps, breaking his concentration. Before he could turn towards them, he felt cold steel press against the back of his head.

"I lost three men."

It was Jill. She wasn't dead after all. She was, however, incredibly distraught. He couldn't see it, but he knew it was her pistol that was pointing at him.

"You killed them, Wesker. You did... and I did, because I didn't know what to expect... because you didn't tell me!"

Wesker raised his hands, wondering why the hell nobody else was doing anything.

"Tell you what?"

"Anything! I wasn't told anything!"

Wesker took a deep breath before slowly turning around. He removed his shades, making direct eye contact with the disheveled young woman before him. She was shaking with rage, glistening with sweat — truth be told, Wesker found it kinda hot.

He cleared his throat, "Put down the gun."

Jill clicked the hammer back.

Losing his patience, Wesker reiterated, “Put down the gun,” retaining a calm voice but emphasizing each word.

“Not until-“

“Release! That’s an order, soldier!”

Wesker put his shades back on, lowering his arms. He was done playing nice. If Jill really had it in her to shoot him, he wasn’t going to grovel for his life.

Instead, Jill blinked before slowly and reluctantly lowering her pistol. Wesker turned to watch Alpha Team, who had watched this display in shock — even Barry stood there, dumbfounded.

At that moment, Wesker couldn’t have felt more ashamed of how useless Alpha Team had been if he had tried. Even Barry, the guy who always had his back, looked absolutely neutered as his best friend had a gun pointed at his head.

Wesker met Jill’s gaze with one that was just as withering.

“How did you get in here?”

“How ya doin’, Valentine? Good to see ya. Glad you’re still alive. Same here, colonel, I’m-”

Unamused, Wesker repeated himself, maintaining the exact tone and inflection.

“How did you get in here?”

This prompted Jill to explode, “The same way those fuckin’ dogs got out! Through their pens!”

Exhausted, Jill slumped against a nearby wall, propping herself up.

“I locked them off.”

“Good thinking,” was all Wesker offered as a pointed response.

“Man down!”

It was Sullivan's voice cutting through the tension and bringing the room back to a much-needed normalcy.

Alpha Team members left the room, one after the other, until only Jill and Wesker were left, staring each other down like gunfighters at high noon. Wesker hid his consternation behind a stone-cold poker face. Jill's survival had a lot of implications he was struggling to reconcile, but he'd be damned if he let her know that.

Jill was seething. Her uniform was covered in the blood of her squad, and it was either because

Wesker was either dangerously incompetent or he'd deliberately set them up.

Either way, he was going to pay.

After what felt like an eternity, a wry smile slithered across Wesker's face.

"Ladies first."

"Fuck you!"

The remaining Alpha Team members had converged in the kitchen, crowding around Rebecca as she examined the ragged bite on Ridley's neck.

Rodriguez nervously fidgeted with her gun, "Maybe they're in the house – more dogs."

Rebecca shook her head, "Diameter's too small. It... almost looks as if... it was done by a..."

"A human?"

Rebecca looked up to see Jill staring at her. Jill's expression made it clear. She wasn't suggesting what could have bitten Ridley. She was telling them.

Still, Rebecca wanted to argue back. She didn't even have a coherent counter, but she didn't want

to concede and confirm that a person was capable of this kind of violence.

“Yes, but... what kind of human would do something like this?”

Aiken chimed in. “Not a vegetarian, that’s for sure.”

Sullivan smacked him over the head, “Aiken, you’d be better off-”

“There was a guy,” Rebecca interjected, “Not part of the team. And, there was some kind of plant that seemed alive.”

Rodriguez’s shoulders sunk, “Gimme a fuckin’ break.”

Aiken pointed to the peeling wallpaper behind Rodriguez. “No shit. It disappeared right into the wall.”

Following Aiken’s finger, Rodriguez turned to face the wall behind her, cringing as she realized she was standing right where the vines would have been.

“I guess it’s time to spill it.”

Wesker made his presence known, staring soberly at his teammates as they regarded him with puzzled faces.

“I don’t know much more than what I already told you. I’ll tell you the rest now. The labs here are working on special apps for bio-engineered materials.”

“Speak English, hombre.”

“Marcus has been experimenting with an artificial... man-made virus, coded the ‘T’-Virus. Financing came from a private corporation. You might have heard the name, Umbrella.”

Jill gasped, “They’re multinational. Huge.”

“So huge that they have connections in high places. That’s why we’re here.”

“This virus...” Barry murmured, “it jumped, right?”

Speyer wasn’t as reserved, kicking a nearby kitchen counter. “Shit! We’re all dead! We got the bug, and we’re all dead!”

“It’s not airborne,” answered Wesker, raising his voice, “It was spread in the water supply. Lab animals and the researchers themselves passed it on by-”

“By biting.”

Wesker turned to Jill, hanging his head in affirmation.

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Barry began to pace the room, trying to project an air of calm that would hopefully spread to his teammates as he acknowledged his commanding officer.

“You catch this virus and... what?”

“You die. But, not for long. The chemical revives the brain and-”

“You stand back up...” Rodriguez cut in, “and chew on the first guy you see.”

“Christ,” Speyer exclaimed, “this is like Night of the Living Dead!”

The cool that Barry was trying to portray slowly evaporated. Wesker wasn't just marching them into a death trap – he was marching them into a death trap where they could come back as flesh-eating ghouls.

“Why, in the name of Jesus, would anybody wanna mess with shit... that does that shit?”

“Victory, friend. Civilization has come a long way, but we still have war. Imagine a soldier who can't die. That was the concept.”

“But the virus jumped,” Jill groaned as she confronted Wesker.

“Hopefully, if we got all the dogs, we’ve contained it.”

“Hopefully? Jesus, why didn’t you tell us?”

“By telling you now, I’ve put your lives in jeopardy. Nobody has this information except a few high-and-mighties, me, and now, you.”

A silence fell over the room like a blanket putting out a fire. Nobody knew how to react as all of this information sunk in. Either Wesker was telling the truth, and they were in the epicenter of a deadly biohazard that filled the battlefield with zombies, or their commanding officer was completely fucking insane.

“We have to get Marcus out of here.” Wesker ordered, “He developed this thing. He’s the only one who understands it.”

Rebecca stood up, not letting her small stature affect her standing as she approached Wesker, not hiding her intent to challenge him.

“I don’t know, this all sounds pretty shaky to me-”

Wesker didn’t acknowledge her presence, cutting her off by drawing his pistol and pointing it toward her. She flinched as he pulled the trigger,

anticipating the pain as the bullet sailed towards her...

... only for it to sail past her head. Whatever Wesker was firing at, it wasn't her.

A sickening splat filled the otherwise silent space as Rebecca turned to see Ridley standing up, his pallid face contorted into a snarl as his arms were mere inches from her throat. The bullet had shattered his skull, sending him back down to the floor where he collapsed in a pile.

Perhaps it was from having a gun waved in her face from someone she trusted, or nearly getting eaten by the reanimated corpse of one of her teammates, or even having years of medical school and biological study get thrown back in her face – but Rebecca was not handling this well as she babbled toward her concerned squadmates.

“Th-that man... was dead. I – I'm a doctor! I should know! That man was dead!”

Vickers, who'd been more than content with hanging back as the day's events had played out, decided to break rank by snatching Rebecca's medical bag off the floor. He dug through its contents to procure another ammonia capsule.

Slinging the bag over his forearm, Vickers snapped the capsule, placing it under Rebecca's nose, the way she had done to him outside the mansion.

It was a welcome show of solidarity, and the hyperventilating Rebecca appeared to be calming down – at least, as much as possible, given the unique circumstances.

Rebecca turned to Vickers, her eyes filled with gratitude. Vickers responded with a good-natured but half-hearted smile as he held up the broken capsule.

“I hope you have a lot of these.”

FOURTEEN

Chris continued to crawl along the drop-ceiling, approaching another light source as it poured up from the vents.

All of these tight spaces were starting to make him sore. Say what you want about zombies; at least they got to stand up.

He peered through the gridwork, checking for any signs of activity. There was a laboratory below, but it was in pure disarray. Files were scattered throughout, dotted with smashed

fragments of furniture and mangled computer hardware.

The wall nearby was lined with rattling cages that housed various lab animals. Some were in states of distress, nervously chattering amongst themselves. Others were in a daze, robotically performing tasks they were no doubt trained to do.

They were all in different states of decay, flesh, feathers, and fur lining the bottom of their living spaces, leaving exposed muscle and bone in their wake.

Chris was transfixed on a monkey, watching it sip dirty water from a dish. He wondered if these zombies even needed hydration. Was that a need that registered to them the way it would have in life? Was this primate really thirsty, or was it just doing something it remembered from before its untimely death?

Was that all that the zombies were doing? When not overcome with that primal urge to eat those around them, was the rest of their mind occupied by afterimages of a former life that they were subconsciously clawing their way back to?

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Chris was about to shift his attention from the animals and continue his journey when his attention was caught by movement nearby.

Outside the cages was a man in a lab coat seated by one of the desks. He hovered over a notepad, frantically scribbling.

Great, he was probably some egghead trying to figure out the solution to this whole thing.

“Hey,” Chris called out, hoping to get the guy’s attention. Maybe they could work this out together. Chris needed a proper ally he could count on, not soldiers raring to shoot him at the drop of a hat.

What, was this guy deaf?

“Hey!” Chris yelled, relieved that he seemed to have gotten the scientist’s attention, as he stopped writing, dropping his pen.

The scientist slowly turned his head toward the ceiling, looking for the source of the voice. Chris could feel his heart sink as he saw the ground meat that was the man’s face. Odd-colored fluids seeped from the mangled raw tissue. A single eyeball was nestled tenuously in the ooze. There was an opening that likely would have been a mouth as the muscles twitched and groaned.

As the zombie moved, Chris caught a glimpse of its writings — erratic scribbling that could never come close to English letters.

With a sigh, Chris pumped his Winchester. It looked like he was in for another fight.

The doors burst open as Alpha Team streamed into the lab, their weapons raised as the zombie turned its destroyed face toward them.

As it rose from its seat and began its deathly shuffle, their leader fired a quick burst, its head shattering on impact. The gunshot startled the animals, who shrieked as they threw themselves at their cages in a frenzy.

Chris kept his head down, hoping not to catch the squad's attention as they moved into a formation, their guns scanning the area for other stragglers.

They seemed to have the area covered pretty well. Chris prepared to move on.

Then, he spotted it — another zombie. This one's face was more intact, but that did little to help it since the second half of its body was on the other side of the room, connected by a lengthy blood trail.

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Still, it crawled towards one of the soldiers, using the desks as cover. It looked like the soldier wouldn't notice until it was too late. Chris' brow furrowed. Was it worth giving away his position? What if the soldiers decided to thank him by blowing him away?

Then again, Chris wasn't the kind to look away when someone needed help. So, he took a deep breath and aimed his rifle, hoping they'd understand.

Speyer felt pressure around his right leg. He looked down to see a fetid hand constricting his ankles. A pallid head popped out, its teeth brushing his skin.

"Heads up!" The voice came from the ceiling, followed by a gunshot that spooked Speyer more than he'd ever admit.

The zombie that was mere milliseconds from biting into his leg lay dead on the floor — really dead, brains oozing from a newly formed hole in its head.

As Speyer caught his breath, Brad Vickers leaped forward, screaming as he fired haphazardly at the ceiling.

Chris couldn't believe it as he ducked and rolled, dodging the onslaught of bullets as they punched a line through the ceiling panels toward him.

He scrambled onward, cursing his luck as the bullets continued to spray behind him, inching closer and closer to his feet.

Chris eventually found himself on top of an enormous checkerboard of vents and plexiglass panels. They wouldn't hold, not while the bullets were weakening the framework. The ground was crumbling beneath his feet.

At first, the ceiling sagged, then it cracked, dropping away. Chris' body splayed out as he plunged into the darkness below.

There was a splash, accompanied by an icy chill that sent jolts of pain through Chris' body. He was underwater — something he wasn't expecting inside a decades-old mansion.

Chris kicked and paddled with his rifle, trying to set himself right, hoping that the water's surface wouldn't be too hard to swim to.

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The good news was that this was one of the few well-lit areas of the mansion. Chris could clearly see that he was inside a gigantic aquarium tank, and the surface was nearby.

The bad news was that six sharks were eyeing him. The even worse news was that these sharks had rotting flesh, their leaking blood and pus dotting the water around them. If Chris tried to swim to the surface, they'd be on him in seconds.

The largest of the pack decided to try and draw first blood, snapping at Chris with its powerful jaws. Chris kicked away, feeling its teeth as they clamped down, swiping a clump of his hair. Chris responded in kind by firing his Winchester at its face. The bullet wimped out, restrained by the water. Sure, it penetrated the shark, but barely. The casing was firmly lodged in its decaying flesh.

Chris was running out of options and oxygen. His lungs felt like they were seconds from shriveling up, so he kicked his way toward the aquarium glass, pointing his rifle directly at it.

Jill finished assessing the laboratory. It was all clear. There were no hostiles except for the SeaWorld from hell right behind her.

She turned to find a gun pointed at her face, separated by the thick aquarium glass. She raised her M-16 in kind, now in some kind of gunfighter's standoff with a mystery aquatic opponent. Jill looked at the person brandishing the rifle, stunned to see her boyfriend, who looked equally as shocked to see her.

One of the sharks was circling in, ready to finish what its pal had started. Jill moved away from the line of fire as Chris pulled the trigger. The glass cracked, but it held.

“Hang on!” Jill called out to her teammates, “We’re gonna get wet!”

With that, Jill fired some shots of her own. More cracks formed in the glass, but it still had not broken. Umbrella must have paid extra.

Barry moved beside Jill, providing additional gunfire. The cracks spider-webbed towards the ceiling and the tank burst.

A surge of water besieged Alpha Team, knocking everybody to the floor. Jill watched as

Chris was flushed out, sailing across the room and colliding with a nearby wall.

Everybody scrambled to their feet, now standing in a knee-high pool of dark water, shark fins slicing the surface.

The room erupted into gunfire as Alpha Team fired at the circling zombie sharks. The sharks had many advantages, from the room's darkness, the speed of their movements, and the thickness of their hides.

“Where the fuck is a shark’s brain,” Aiken yelled as he fired at the oncoming enemy.

“In its head!” Sullivan snapped back, “I swear, Aiken, you would be better off dead!”

The bizarre frenzy continued, the darting sharks snapping at any signs of warm flesh while the troopers splashed around wildly, hampered by the water. The ten spitting automatics caused a thick fog of graphite to form in the air above the soldiers.

However, they were starting to make progress. The zombified sharks were taking enough damage from rifle fire that they were slowing down. The water darkened with clouds of blood. It also helped

that the water, which had reached several grates in different parts of the floor, was now seeping through, causing the water level to drop.

Eventually, the water had reduced to ankle levels, and the troopers watched as the sharks pitifully tried to scrape themselves across the floor. Suddenly, picking them off one by one was no longer a challenge, and it wasn't long before the area was zombie-shark free.

FIFTEEN

As Alpha Team regrouped in the center of the laboratory, a klaxon-like sound blared through the room. The entry door slammed shut.

Wesker bounded towards Jill, his eyes practically glowing with a red-hot fury that his sunglasses would have hidden had he not lost them in Jill's self-imposed tsunami.

"Nice. Very nice, Valentine! You set off a containment breach!"

"It must have been the water. God, the water!"

She turned to Chris, who stood up and was now taking large lungfuls of air between coughing and spluttering.

“Did you swallow any?”

Before Chris could answer, Speyer and Sullivan interrupted.

“I did.”

“A bunch of us did, man.”

Wesker could tell they were nervous. He had to dispel their fears before they panicked and made everything worse.

“Separate systems. Salt water. No germs. But, it breached!”

He pulled out his miniature computer, trying to type on it. It was all for naught. The thing was fried, water spilling from its various ports as the screen remained completely dead.

“We can go in deeper, but we can’t get out. Not with my card key.”

It almost gave him glee to tell the team that they were fucked. It was what they deserved for such unbelievable incompetence.

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The only response any of them could muster was Rodriguez soberly muttering, “So... we live here now.”

A second after she made that observation, she noticed that Sullivan was looking at her, visibly curious.

In response, she shrugged, “Landlords. Shit hills. Kicked my family out of six apartments. I got used to sayin’ ‘So... we live here now’.”

Wesker held up the little computer, showing it to the rest of the team.

“There are override exits, but I can’t find them without this!”

Seething, Wesker flung the computer at a nearby wall, where it shattered on impact, metal pieces falling into a pile on the damp, dirty floor.

“That was a smart move.”

Chris didn’t mean to say it. It was a slip of the tongue — something he would’ve taken back if he could’ve. However, Chris has always had problems with authority, especially authority figures with attitude problems. It always made him happy to

talk back to people who thought their rank made them better than everybody else.

Alpha Leader bristled. He probably wasn't used to being talked to in that way. He turned to Chris, jaw clenched as though he was preparing to lunge at Chris and tear his throat out, blaming it on the zombies.

Chris foresaw a fight, tensing up as the leader marched towards him, veins bulging on his forehead. The closer the leader got, the more Chris realized he was vastly outmatched. This guy wasn't just a soldier; he was a machine — muscles, battle scars, that killer instinct in his eyes. This guy had seen shit.

Chris almost flinched when the leader reached him, but then the leader bent down and picked up his sunglasses lying next to Chris' feet. After wiping his glasses on his shirt, Alpha Leader slotted the shades back on, his ice-cold demeanor returning as he asked a simple "And... you are?"

That unnerved Chris even more — the fact that this guy could instantly turn off all of his rage. It was as if those glasses were not to protect his eyes from the scorching Pennsylvanian sun. Instead,

they were to keep the rest of his team from seeing his eyes and gauging his emotions. Whoever this guy was, he was hiding something from his crew, and they were either too loyal or too stupid to care.

Chris swallowed before answering, “Nobody. Just a local guy...”

He spotted a dry lab coat hanging on a nearby wall hook. After prying it from the wall, he started using it to dry his rifle.

“... who gets pissed off when he finds his farm animals, and his father’s oldest friend — dead—”

And then his eyes met Jill’s. In that split second, Chris felt his face go red.

“And the only woman he ever cared about turns out to be a goddamn metal head!”

Jill rolled her eyes, running an exasperated hand through her wet hair. Alpha Leader seemed unmoved.

“Valentine, who is this asshole?”

“His name is Chris Redfield. He was... part of my cover, sir.”

Chris’ fingers went numb. That word hit him like a punch to the gut.

“Cover?”

Now, it was Jill's turn to make her way toward Chris. This was a fight that he knew was going to hurt.

"This is not the time to mouth off, Chris! You're in deep shit here!"

"Why didn't you let me in on this?"

"Why did you have to come after me? How did you get in here, anyway?"

"I used to play here, when this was a fucking laundry room! And what makes you think I came after you?"

It was a bold-faced bluff that Chris thought Jill would immediately see through. Then again, he didn't know shit about Jill Valentine. Maybe he was giving her too much credit.

Jill couldn't believe what she was hearing. When she woke up this morning, the last thing she was expecting was to have to babysit her gun-toting boyfriend. Did she feel sorry for him? Absolutely. She wasn't a psychopath. She knew how much those farm animals — how much Rake had meant to him. But this wasn't the time, and it especially wasn't the place.

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Before she could continue their lovers' quarrel, Barry piped up.

"Whoa! Look here."

Jill turned with relief to find Barry stooped over the zombie Wesker shot when they entered. He tore the ID badge from its coat and tossed it to Wesker.

"Is this the pile of shit we're supposed to bring out of here?"

"It... it once was."

The room went silent. They could see it in each others' eyes. Everyone was thinking, 'now what?'

"I got something here!"

It came from Vickers, who had quietly tapped away at one of the lab's computers. Barry rushed over, peering over Vickers' shoulder.

"A map."

He turned to Wesker.

"Same as on your gizmo. Exits marked blue and green."

Wesker stepped in, watching the screen curiously as it reflected off his shades.

"The greens are the overrides."

He placed a hand on Vickers' shoulder.

“Can you print this out?”

“I can try.”

Vickers entered a print command. In seconds, an HP printer in the corner of the room began to feed copies of the map with a high-pitched whine.

Vickers was sweating. Why couldn't this be the mission? Instead of shooting through the bowels of hell, he could be sitting at a computer, performing logistical problem-solving. That was his wheelhouse. That was his bread and butter. That's why he got a Masters in Computational Science and Engineering, majoring in data security. He never should have let Wesker talk him into joining S.T.A.R.S. This was ridiculous!

Jill watched as Chris calmly retrieved his wet shoulder bag from the floor. After wringing out the soggy cloth, Chris used the lab coat to wipe the bullets dry, one after the other.

If anything, she found herself in admiration of how calm he was. The man had lost so much and had no doubt encountered the same horrors that they had in entering this horrible building. Yet, here he was, showing the same, if not stronger, resolve that they were. He was just a civilian,

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holding his own alongside trained soldiers — against the best of the best. Maybe there would have been a place for him in S.T.A.R.S. Except Jill knew that Chris would never join the military in any capacity. He was critical of the Government in all its forms and very stubborn regarding his morals.

Who knew what Chris was thinking as he dried each bullet individually? He was angry at her, but he had every right to be. She had lied, after all, even if it was to protect him. It almost didn't matter that Chris wasn't the kind to hold a grudge. She'd still hurt him, and she'd felt awful about it.

Jill didn't want to spend another second on it. She turned to Wesker and Barry, who were still hovering over Brad as he scrolled through the map on the screen.

“We're on level 'A'.”

“We have to get down to level 'D'.”

Barry turned to Wesker.

“Hold on. Marcus is dead. If this mission was about bringin' him out, we're outta here, right?”

“I wish we were, but no. We have a potential outbreak here. We might be the only ones who can stop it.”

The rest of Alpha Team was listening in on the conversation. Speyer approached the trio.

“Stop it? How?”

Wesker turned away from Vickers, addressing the rest of the team.

“There’s an antidote.”

That had them interested. It was one thing to have to fight hordes of the undead. It was another to do so with the knowledge that it was possible to fix all of this.

“We can’t bring Marcus out, but we can bring out the serum. Maybe somebody can analyze it and figure out how to beat the virus.”

Jill turned to Chris, not surprised at all to see him weighing up his options. It was an opportunity to be a big damn hero. Of course he was considering taking it.

Still, she didn’t want him throwing his life on the line for a situation he didn’t train for. She approached him.

“Not simple.”

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“Not complicated, either. We only have to decide what’s right and what’s wrong.”

She smirked, careful not to give Chris a full smile. She still needed to keep her cards close to her chest — make sure he was making the right decision for him.

“I forgot. You’re never confused. So what’s right, Mohawk? And what’s wrong?”

Chris opened his mouth, only for Vickers to yell, “Shit!”

Everyone turned to find Brad rubbing his temples, visibly frustrated.

“There are no green exits on this level. Why — why would that be?”

Chris stepped forward.

“They didn’t want anybody up here to go snoopin’ upstairs or down.”

Jill found herself perturbed by how Wesker turned to Chris. It was the same look he gave all potential Alpha Team recruits — the kind of look he gave when he saw a possible equal.

“Pretty good guess. You must have been in the military, son.

Chris met his gaze, doing very little to hide how unimpressed he was.

“Native American. Exempted.”

That was it. Wesker dejectedly retreated to Vickers, who was typing furiously, signs of panic spreading across his whole body.

“Fuck! There — there’s no way out!”

“Yes there is!” Chris called out.

He was pointing at the broken grid above the shattered aquarium. Wesker turned, following Chris’ finger. He was impressed yet again, but he wouldn’t show it this time. Wesker wasn’t the kind of person to beg.

Instead, he simply said, “Not a bad idea,” before looking down at Vickers.

“See if you can call up service charts, schematics.”

Now, Vickers was in his element. His fingers flew as he scrolled through menus, calling up essential documents.

“Got it. Ceiling grids, ladders — the whole infrastructure.”

“Print it. Print all of it.”

RESIDENT EVIL

Vickers typed a batch print command, and a ream of documents poured out of the printer. Wesker rushed toward it, scooping up the stacks of paper and sifting through them with robot-like efficiency.

Rebecca approached Brad, hoping to congratulate him for his skills. He might not have realized it yet, but he'd helped the team out of a major jam.

It was part of her philosophy as a medic; keeping the team physically well meant helping their morale wherever she could.

However, when she approached him, she noticed some blood on his sock, just above his boot.

As he turned to her, she pointed to the bloodstain.

“What’s that from?”

“I... snagged it... on the desk, when we were scrambling.”

He was nervous. Rebecca could tell. Admittedly, Brad “Chicken-Heart” Vickers couldn’t hide when he was nervous.

“Lemme look at it.”

“No. It’s just a scratch!”

Rebecca wanted to insist, but she knew that wouldn’t be productive. Vickers was the kind of guy who would only get more defensive, and the team was already on edge enough as it was. A fight would only make things worse.

Still, if an active biohazard surrounded them, she’d have to keep an eye on him. Even a tiny scratch could potentially pose a threat – not just for Brad, but for anyone who happened to be standing next to him. Still, that was just one of her many responsibilities as the Alpha Team medic.

Wesker poured over the documents. Say what you wanted about Vickers; he was useless in a fight, but when he delivered, he really delivered.

Wesker was so absorbed in figuring out the team’s next move that he didn’t notice Chris approaching him.

“There’s a – part of an old laundry chute. It might not show on there. It runs up to the kitchen.”

“I’m not going up. I’m going down.”

RESIDENT EVIL

From there, Wesker turned to the rest of his team, a grim look telling them everything they needed to know, even before he started talking.

“I’d like to let you guys off the hook, but I can’t. I need backup. You’re comin’ with me. Any objections?”

The troopers exchanged glances. To Chris’ chagrin, Jill was the first to speak.

“No objections. We’ll back you up.”

That hit a nerve with Chris, who resembled a wounded animal, as he turned to Jill.

“You said... people wind you up and you do whatever they want you to do.”

Was there some truth to what he was saying? Sure. But Jill couldn’t help but find herself annoyed at Chris’ inability to see how her hands were tied. The guy lecturing her a second ago about what was right and what wasn’t was refusing to see the stakes of this mission.

Luckily, Wesker interrupted before the argument could begin anew.

“Stay out of this, son. You’re the only one who doesn’t have a choice in this. There’s no place to lock you up. I can’t let you go, you’re a security

risk. I could shoot you, legally. But, your lady friend would probably get all over my ass. So, I'm afraid you're comin' with us, whether you like it or not."

Chris gulped, which Jill noticed. It was a little cathartic for her to see his righteous self taken down a slight notch, even if she'd never have admitted it.

Then, Wesker turned to her, "He's your responsibility, Valentine. See that he doesn't make trouble."

With that, Wesker disengaged and shifted his attention to the crawlspace. Chris turned to Jill, bubbling with resentment.

"You up to the challenge?"

"Try me."

"I already have."

Oh. So that was how it was going to be.

SIXTEEN

One by one, members of Alpha Team wriggled up into the crawl space above the ceiling. It was decided between Chris and Jill that she would take point while Chris would also have Barry watching his six. It was the typical protocol for civilians, even if Chris wasn't the typical civilian.

Jill climbed into the crawl space, followed by Chris.

Wesker and the others were already on the move, using the printouts as a guide. Jill was about to follow them when she felt something grab her arm.

Was there a zombie in the vents? No, this was delicate – tender, even.

Jill turned to see that Chris was the one grabbing her arm, looking at her earnestly. Damn it, she was in the wrong mindset for this. Still, she stopped. The sooner she heard him out, the sooner they could put this behind them and focus on moving forward.

“Jill, I... I’m sorry. I’m just angry. When I thought you were gone, I... then, when I saw you – alive, I just realized that-”

“You were still fascinated.”

“Stop. Stop!”

He pulled her into an embrace. She could tell how he was feeling – sick of the fighting, sick of the reticence, sick of pretending their relationship didn’t mean as much as it clearly did. Jill allowed herself to be pulled in, grateful that someone was here to remind her that she had something personal to fight for – someone who cared about her beyond her military rank.

“Come with me,” he whispered in her ear, “We can get out of here.”

“I... I want to. I want nothing more. But, I can’t. When I’m in this uniform, I’m more than just me. Try to understand, there’s no ‘I’ in ‘team’, Chris.

“There’s no ‘I’ in ‘dead’, either.”

Chris pulled away from the embrace and looked at her. Neither of them had to say anything. They could sense that air of forgiveness between them for their mutual distrust. No matter what happened over the rest of the day, their relationship would stay intact.

“I should order you to come with me,” Chris joked, “you’d never refuse an order.”

“You go. You’re not part of this.”

Chris ran his hand across her forearm.

“I’m part of it as long as you are.”

There was the Redfield warmth that Jill didn’t know she’d needed. It didn’t matter that they were facing insane odds and a low chance of survival – at least, they were facing it together.

“This is very uncomfortable.”

Jill and Chris turned to see Barry halfway through pulling himself up the grate. Jill wondered how much of their conversation he’d overheard.

Chris chuckled. “For me too, brother.”

Barry shook his head before nodding to the iron grate pressing against his belly.

“It’s very uncomfortable.”

Snapping out of their shared headspace, Chris and Jill shifted toward Barry, pulling him upwards.

The second Barry had his bearings, the three started to crawl after the rest of the troop.

“This is gettin’ old, Man, I swear,” Barry grunted, “I been in this Army eighteen years.”

Chris peered over his shoulder at the prone soldier.

“Eighteen years?”

“Yep. Two away from the big re-ti.”

That caught Jill’s attention. She’d never thought to ask Barry how long he’d served. She always considered him a S.T.A.R.S. man, yet it had been only the slightest blip in his military career.

“Desk job, right?” She asked, “Nobody lasts that long if they’ve seen action.”

“I’ve seen action in Granada and Desert Storm. Would have lost it all there if my buddy didn’t bring in a team, against orders, to pull my ass out – buddy named Wesker.”

Chris stiffened, “You’ve been with this asshole since-”

“Since before that. We were kids together. Macon, Georgia. He’s only an asshole some of the time.”

That sometimes asshole was straight ahead, bracing the rest of the troops as he discovered a service ladder.

Taking the lead, Wesker began climbing down. The rest of Alpha Team obediently followed.

“Who knows what we’ll find down there?” a shaking Vickers mumbled, looking for reassurance.

Aiken was happy to oblige, “Think positive. The farther down we go, the worse it’s gonna get. So, until we hit bottom, we’re in good shape... relatively speaking-”

A harrowing growl, distant but distinct, cut him off. It was as though the MGM lion itself were a T-virus infectee.

“What the fuck?” Speyer grumbled.

The growl returned, slightly louder this time.

“Whatever it is... it can’t get us. We’re in the ceiling!” Brad mumbled through a quivering lip.

Aiken couldn’t help himself. “Maybe it’s like, really tall.”

Sullivan groaned, “Aiken...”

He would’ve continued to chastise his partner had they not reached another section of the ceiling.

Alpha Team cluttered around a vent, looking through the segmented grate into another laboratory. This one was more high-tech than its predecessor.

What it lacked in zombified animals and elaborate aquarium tanks, it made up for with large computers, all linked by metal-shielded conduits to jacks in the walls.

“Mainframe,” Wesker observed, “Might have some data we could use.”

He looked up at the team, who were all awaiting his command.

“Fox, Marini, Vickers. Down.”

He raised a boot, bringing it down on the vent. It immediately bucked, sailing down to the floor below. Before the team was done flinching, Wesker jumped through the opening, landing gracefully down.

Chris was stunned, turning to Jill.

“The man has balls, I’ll say that.”

Wesker grabbed a nearby desk, shifting it directly underneath the vent. He was considerate, too.

Marini climbed down, followed by Fox. As they joined their team leader, Vickers was hesitating.

Wesker jutted a finger toward him.

“Hustle it, Vickers. You’re the guy we need to cut into the network.”

Vickers wasn't going to wait for Wesker to tell him twice. He feared his leader as much as he did whatever was lurking around these labs.

Wesker surveyed the room, noting three doorways with nothing but darkness beyond them. He wasted no time closing them before returning to the others.

“Watch these entrances, guys!”

Fox and Marini nodded and took up their posts. Meanwhile, Brad was gingerly lowering himself from the opening in the ceiling. Eventually, he had to let go, dropping the last two feet onto the desk and landing right on his bloody leg.

“Aaaah! Shit!”

He toppled, falling to the floor. Before anyone could call him out, he shot back up, muscling through the visible agony shooting through his body.

“I'm alright. I'm alright.”

He limped over to one of the nearby computers, slumping into the ergonomic office chair, thumbing the terminal on and attacking the nearby computer keys.

Another growl caused the room to pause, everybody trying to calculate where it might be coming from — everybody except Wesker.

“Hold tight. It doesn’t sound like it’s on this level.”

“Shit!” Vickers, smacked the monitor with a gloved hand, “I’m locked out. Any clues for a password?”

Wesker turned to him, “Try ‘umbrella’.”

Under any other circumstances, Vickers would have dismissed that outright. There was no way one of the largest pharmaceutical companies of all time would make the password on one of their computers their name. It was the kind of negligence he saw when he worked as an IT guy in various offices during the summers when he was studying. The idea that an organization sitting on an army of zombie monsters would do that made Vickers’ skin crawl.

That said, if Wesker said the password could be ‘umbrella’, it was probably ‘umbrella’. He could have told Vickers to type ‘abc123’ or ‘password’ and Vickers would have done it, no questions asked.

So, he typed rapidly, but his nerves were getting the better of him as he accidentally entered ‘umbrells’ instead.

After a deep breath, Vickers typed in the correct password and stared at the screen, anticipating the response.

“Nothing. Wait. I’m into... No. No data. Just some kind of video feed. Time-coded. Yesterday. It’s a play-back.”

Fox, Marini, and Wesker watched Brad as he eyed the screen, his jaw slowly dropping in absolute horror.

“Holy shit!”

Suddenly, the computer’s speakers burst with digitally compressed panic — shouting, screaming, thuds and crashes, glass breaking.

A woman’s voice broke through, her words distorting and breaking through various audio peaks.

“Please... please... if anyone is receiving this...”

Brad shot up from his chair and limped around the desk, spinning the monitor for the others to see.

On the screen was an Asian woman who addressed the camera with a look of pure anguish as pandemonium broke out behind her. Several white-coated figures were running back and forth amidst pixelated muzzle flashes and the sound of gunfire.

“... the situation is completely out of control. We-“

The breath was knocked out of her lungs as something pushed her out of the way. A dark blur

plunged through her previously occupied space, swiveling past the camera lens like a pendulum.

The lens was suddenly coated with blood. As it trickled down, the man that had come to the rescue of the young woman was now upside down, his head barely poking into the frame from the top. Then, his arms flopped below him as he was slightly lowered. On his back were three gouges, so long and so deep that they might as well have been punctured by heavy industrial machinery.

Then, the perforated man was pulled upwards at an alarming speed.

Vickers jumped as Wesker suddenly appeared beside him, turning off the monitor. Both concerned, Fox and Marini turned to each other before whipping their heads up.

“Maybe the ceiling’s not such a safe place, after all,” Fox observed.

The door behind him burst open. Before he could react, a zombie grabbed his face with its rotten hands. Suddenly, Fox could feel skin and muscle ripped from his body — his cheek, neck, and shoulder.

He dropped to the floor, the zombie straddling him as it continued its ravenous attack. Wesker

aimed his pistol, struggling to get a shot at the creature.

“Scram! Scram!”

Marini was the first to reach the desk, grabbing the still limping Vickers and helping him towards the ceiling opening. Through the corner of his eye, he could spot more zombies entering through the opened doorway.

Wesker spotted them as well, quickly shooting them dead. However, he knew they weren't the only ones. There was movement, but it was distant. Who knew how many more zombies were on the way?

So, he turned his attention back to Fox. The dying soldier was flailing his arms, screaming in a gurgling, high-pitched falsetto. Still, Wesker couldn't get a safe shot.

Sullivan and Aiken yanked Vickers into the ceiling. Chris pushed past them, reaching for Marini, who had outstretched his arms.

Letting out an intense growl of his own, Wesker kicked the mauling zombie in the head — once, twice, three times. That was what it took for the zombie to finally end its assault on Fox and look at its attacker. The second its eyes met Wesker's shades, he blew out its skull.

Now that Wesker had a window, he tended to Fox, who was lying on his stomach, writhing as he bled profusely from half a dozen jagged bites. Wesker stooped down, trying to roll the man over and hoist him up. Sure, he was bitten. The situation looked dire. But Wesker wouldn't leave this man behind if he could help it.

Fox was resistant. As Wesker tried to help him to his feet, he continued flailing his limbs like he had against the zombie mere moments ago.

As Chris helped Marini into the crawl space, Barry poked his head through the opening, calling out to Wesker.

“Haul ass, boss!”

More zombies were making their way through the doorway, reaching towards Wesker and Fox. Barry tried to shoot the one at the front, but the opening was an awkward space to aim from, and his shot went sailing into the darkness. It took a second shot to kill one of the zombies. If Wesker didn't move soon, he would have to fight his way out.

Wesker grimaced, trying one more time to hoist Fox. This time, the whimpering soldier rolled over on his own, drawing his pistol with a twitching hand, tears streaming down his face.

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Before Wesker could stop him, he jammed the barrel into his mouth and blasted his brains out the back of his head.

The corpse of Fox fell backward, a zombie batting it aside as it lunged at Wesker. Barry fired two more shots. None managed to hit its brains, but it was at least staggered, falling towards Wesker.

The colonel rolled onto his back, narrowly avoiding the zombie and kicking himself away. Before the shambling ghoul could recover, Wesker whipped his pistol from his holster and blasted its head to smithereens.

Wesker scrambled to his feet, darting toward the desk and making an inhumanly high leap at the opening. He was hanging from the grate, biceps bulging as he tried to pull himself up.

The zombie returned, grabbing him by the leg and trying to pull him back down. Wesker looked up to see Barry's gun pointed directly at him.

Wesker lowered his head, closing his eyes and hoping his faith in Barry would pay off as a bullet whizzed past his head, humming like a mosquito.

He heard the squelch of the soup that used to be that zombie's brain, feeling its grip on his leg weaken. Sighing with relief, Wesker raised his head to see Barry reaching for him with a single strong

arm. In a matter of seconds, Barry pulled Wesker into the crawl space.

As soon as Wesker was inside, he took a moment to lean against the wall, catching his breath as he stared at his old friend.

“That’s two I owe ya.”

“One. We were all ‘Even-Steven’.”

“Two, Remember? ‘Even-Steven’ is not in my vocabulary.”

A choir of moans wafted up into the crawl space from below. Barry and Wesker peered into the lab to see a mob of zombies clawing at the desk, trying to climb their way up so they could get at the all-American buffet hovering just out of their reach.

“Let’s move,” Wesker ordered before taking off. Speyer, Rodriguez, Aiken and Sullivan were quick to follow. However, the rest of the team lagged behind.

Nobody said anything, but nobody had to. They knew that, as long as the desk was down there, there was a platform that the zombies could use to access the crawl space. If that happened, Alpha Team was screwed.

Someone had to deal with it.

Chris took charge, bracing himself at the edge of the opening.

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“These things could get up here. We can’t let that happen. This is our way out.”

He swung his legs through the grate and landed on the desk. The zombies attempted to claw at him, so he booted one square in the face, knocking it back and creating an opening.

Chris braced himself, then he took a step back and made a running start, leaping off the table and trying to clear the cluster of undead in front of him. The exit got closer and closer. He almost made it.

Suddenly, one of the zombies caught Chris’ foot in mid-air, toppling him down. His Winchester fell from his back, skimming the floor and landing a few inches away.

The zombies had him cornered, so he desperately crawled toward his rifle, hoping he’d have enough time to get to it and load it.

Luckily, the living dead were not only slow, but they were getting in each others’ way. Chris pumped a shell into the firing chamber as they pushed and shoved against one another to try and shuffle closer to their easy meal.

He aimed the rifle at the closest zombie — once a young laborer in overalls. Chris couldn’t help but notice the name tag attached to his chest.

“Caruso.”

He looked sympathetically into Caruso's dead eyes, wondering about the man that those eyes once occupied.

"Can you hear me?"

Caruso simply lurched forward. Maybe he didn't hear Chris. Maybe the T-virus did a number on the ears.

"Caruso! Can you hear me?"

It was a mixture of wishful thinking and denial that was fueling these actions. Chris knew that Caruso couldn't hear him — that there was no Caruso anymore, nothing but a disease that had hollowed out his body and was now puppeteering it in search of meat to tear and rend.

Caruso grabbed the Winchester's barrel, yanking it aside. There was no room for Chris to orient it for a headshot. The best he could do was pull the trigger and hope it would at least deter the enemy.

No such luck. The round blasted Caruso's belly, but it did little to stop his advances. Chris could feel its bony fingers closing around his throat as it leaned in for a bite, the same way he saw other zombies fatally wound Fox and Ridley.

Chris closed his eyes, hoping Jill couldn't see his final moments. Then, just as he was anxiously anticipating the sinking of teeth in his flesh, he heard

a gunshot and felt viscous liquid spray against his face.

He opened his eyes to see Caruso's headless corpse. In the distance, Jill was standing on the desk, her pistol pointing directly at Chris. She fired another shot, causing a second zombie's head to explode. Damn, she was good.

The zombies were utterly flummoxed, deciding which prey to go after. Chris seized the opportunity to get to his feet and join Jill as she jumped down from the desk.

Together, they groaned as they tensed up, shoving the cumbersome desk out, ramming it into the small cluster of zombies, and pinning them to the nearby wall.

They then returned to the center of the room, beaming with pride. After all, they'd managed to kill two birds with one stone. The zombies were incapacitated, and there was no longer a way for the undead to climb up to the opening and potentially ambush the team.

"Thank you," said Chris.

"Any time. How do we get back up?"

"Shit. If you didn't have a plan, you shouldn't have jumped down here."

"We have a real problem here, Chris."

Jill nodded toward the open doorway, where more of the shambling masses were piling in from the darkness, salivating at the prospect of fresh meat.

Dumbfounded, Chris was muttering to himself. “How big is this place? How many people were down here? How-“

“How do we get up?”

Jill was running out of patience, about to aim and fire another shot when a dark shape swung down from above, wrapping a limb around her waist. It was Barry! His mighty arms lifted Jill up toward the opening, where Aiken and Sullivan pulled her to safety.

Just as Jill had her bearings, she realized that Chris was sitting right next to her, Barry having lifted him up shortly after.

Now, there was just the matter of getting Barry back inside. Without the desk, this was going to be difficult. Still, the zombies were advancing toward him. If they didn't get Barry out, he'd be joining Fox on the floor.

Barry squatted, giving everybody a split second to deduce his next move. Then, much like Wesker did before, he attempted a leap toward the opening with his beefy legs.

As Barry swiped at the air, Chris caught his forearms. But, as gravity was pulling Barry back down, Chris could feel himself being pulled down too.

“Big! Heavy!”

Just as Chris was about to tip over, Jill grabbed on, followed by Sullivan. They had the man, now they just had to pull him up.

Chris, Jill, and Sullivan strained as they played tug-of-war with Barry.

Suddenly, Jill spotted a zombie at Barry’s feet, screaming as it grabbed Barry’s kicking legs. It launched its teeth at Barry, causing a loud tear as the commandos pulled him into the crawl space.

Jill watched in horror as the zombie chewed on something between its teeth. Could it have been Barry’s flesh? Would he be one of them in a matter of minutes? Shaking, she turned to Barry, who was wiping sweat from his brow.

“It got you!”

Barry darted his head towards his leg, checking for any signs of bites. Instead, there was merely a tear in the pant fabric.

“No skin broken. I’m alright.”

Chris triumphantly clapped him on the back.

“We owe you a pair of pants.”

With that, the remaining Alpha Team members regrouped with the others. The zombies gathered below the opening, palming the open air, groaning for something to eat.

SEVENTEEN

The commandos made their way down another steel access ladder, one after the other. This one led to what appeared to be a storage room stacked with crates and cartons. There was only one door, so the place would be secure as long as nothing was waiting on the other side.

Wesker was the first into the room, planting himself on a nearby crate and pouring over the map.

As the others poured in, he regarded them without averting his eyes from the paper before him.

“Stand down. Five minutes.”

The troops took a moment to relax, leaning against the walls and crates. Some were even lighting cigarettes.

Not Speyer, though. He was still very much on edge.

“I’m through, Wesker.”

Marini joined him, “Me too, man. This ain’t nothin’ I signed on for.”

“You want to wait here? Fine,” Wesker uttered.

“Wait here? No. We’re gettin’ out!”

“You can’t,” Wesker stated, holding up his green keycard, “Not without this.”

Speyer took a defiant step forward, smacking Wesker’s keycard aside.

“Fuck you! And your fancy doors and your green key! The choppers have rockets. They can blow out a wall if they have to. I’m callin’ ‘em in.”

There was a collective shiver as Speyer pulled out his radio and started punching in codes.

Wesker had never been challenged like that by a

subordinate. They were expecting him to explode.

Instead, he said, “You wanna see a wall blow? I’ll blow ‘em all for you.”

Speyer froze, eyeing Wesker as he procured a small cell phone-sized electronic unit from his belt. From it, he pulled out a long wire with a small sensor on the end.

“I’ll put a crater in this forest that takes out Raccoon City and everything else for twenty miles with this.”

All eyes were on Wesker, watching aghast as he jammed the sensor into his ear and pressed a button on the belt unit. Small LEDs on its surface began to blink.

“It’s a radio detonator to set off explosives that are buried underneath us somewhere – the ultimate containment measure, incinerate the place.”

Wesker didn’t even realize, but a smile had crept across his face as he reveled in the horrified expressions before him.

“It has a dead-man mechanism...” He explained as he tapped the earpiece, “... that reads my pulse. My heart stops, and boom.”

Chris shoved his way to the front of the group, standing over Wesker, shaking with rage.

“You... lunatic! That damn thing can slip out of your ear by accident!”

“That’s right. It’s your job – all of your jobs to see that it doesn’t, and to see that my heart doesn’t skip any beats.”

Wesker’s eyes scanned the sea of shell-shocked faces staring back at him, finally settling on Speyer, whose finger was hovering over the radio, ready to punch another button as soon as his brain was back online.

“Give me the radio, soldier.”

He lowered his sunglasses, training his eyes on his squadmate, letting him know that he was not bullshitting.

Still, Speyer hesitated — the wrong move.

“Gimme the fuckin’ radio, or we all go up!”

The room went dead silent. This was a lot to process.

Finally, Sullivan croaked, “Sumbitch might do it, Speyer.”

“I’ll be obliged to do it! If I don’t get that antidote, I’ll have to burn this place out!”

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Speyer's hesitation continued. So, Wesker shifted his attention to someone he knew would be more obedient.

"Valentine, the radio!"

Jill stepped over to Speyer, wrenching the radio from his hands. She was about to present it to Wesker when Chris stepped between them.

"What are you, this guy's flunky? He just threatened to blow us all up, for Christ's sake!"

"That's what I'm trying to prevent!" Jill snapped back.

LaGuardia was hovering above the Arkley Forest in his huey. Next to him was his radio man, who slotted his headset from his ears.

"How many digits did you receive?" LaGuardia asked.

"Six. The beginning of an air-support code, but it just went dead on me.

"Call S.T.A.R.S. in Washington. I want--"

"Hold it..."

The radio man lifted the headset to his ear as LaGuardia looked on apprehensively.

"... it's Wesker."

He lifted the mic to his mouth.

“Yes, sir. We got the signal, sir.”

A second later, the radio man clicked off, turning to LaGuardia.

“He says it was a mistake.”

LaGuardia shook his head.

“Call Washington anyway. I want the authority to take action if necessary.”

Holden sat at his desk. A typical day in the office for him meant casually idling for the right calls from the right people to ensure that the operations he oversaw were going smoothly. Usually, these were boring sit-reps, done out of courtesy more than necessity.

Not today, however. Today was not typical.

Sure, as one of the top brass of the Umbrella Corporation, he'd seen his fair share of messed up shit. That said, he'd never encountered anything quite like the video footage from the previous night. Umbrella had a line of unconventional products, but they contained these freaks of nature in a controlled setting where the supervising scientists were always under control. It sent chills

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up Holden's spine to see the chaos that unfolded with the outbreak in the Arkley Mansion facility.

Maybe, as Holden puffed on another Monte Cristo, he was trying to distract himself from what would happen if today's operation went tits up. The best case scenario would be tons of pay-offs and a mountain of paperwork, while the worst scenario was unthinkable – death and tragedy on an unfathomable scale.

When the phone rang, the startled Holden accidentally took in a lungful of thick smoke, coughing it back up as he answered the call.

“Holden.”

The details came thick and fast. Holden's response was immediate.

“Denied. This is Wesker's show. If he was in real trouble, we'd have lost half of Pennsylvania by now.”

He flicked ash away, waiting for his turn to speak as the radio man mumbled on the other end. Finally, he cut the radio man off.

“No authorization.”

The radio man clicked off the call, shrugging apologetically toward LaGuardia.

“No independent action.”

“Damn. I feel so fuckin’ helpless!”

Still, LaGuardia kept the helicopter hovering above the forest, looking down at the mansion, which looked as stable from the air as the Rock of Gibraltar.

Wesker had managed to calm himself down from his rampage, adopting the more staunchly heroic demeanor he presented to his team before the day’s events. That didn’t matter, though. Even as he addressed them as his old self, Wesker could tell their guard was still up.

He didn’t care.

“You guys were hand picked — a special unit. Most of you have been sitting on your asses, drawing pay checks for more than two years. Well, it’s time to repay those Government loans-“

Speyer took a step forward. “Bullshit, I’m not-“

He closed his mouth as Wesker lifted his automatic. For a split-second, he thought he was as

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good as dead. Wesker had snapped and was about to paint the storage room walls with his brains.

But Wesker didn't fire. He was checking on his ammo.

"Pitch your empties," He ordered his team, "Put all your loaded clips on that crate there. I want a count. Then, I want the rounds divvied up evenly."

Alpha Team followed his orders obediently, even if their unease permeated the room in a thick haze. Eventually, their half-used clips were reloaded, and a pile of loaded clips had been deposited in the center of the room.

Wesker pulled out his map, checking it as he addressed his squad.

"Alright. We're on... level 'C' -"

Smirking, Aiken interrupted. "Lingerie. Notions."

"God dammit, no more jokes!"

Wesker rammed his fist into the crate, causing the entire room to jump.

"We have men dead upstairs! This hell-hole is full of people who died... because of this stinkin' bug!"

Another deep silence filled the room; Aiken's backfired joke reminded them that their leader was a madman leading them into the inferno.

Jill had kept herself occupied by counting the number of clips. She stood up, pointing to the pile, and nodded to Wesker.

"Forty two."

"That's all we have?" Speyer asked.

Wesker turned to Speyer.

"We weren't expecting a war, Speyer."

Then, he shifted his attention back to Jill.

"I'll take three. Three to your boyfriend—"

Chris patted his shoulder bag.

"Don't need 'em. Got my own loads."

Wesker's eyes darted angrily towards Chris. It was bad enough that he had to take insubordination from his team. It was infuriating to get the same attitude from the fucking farm boy. He was about to take disciplinary action when he noticed Jill was watching him. Would it have been satisfying to backhand his smug face? Maybe. But it wasn't worth losing Jill's loyalty — not when she'd been so helpful until now. So, he calmed himself.

"Good. Then we all get four clips."

RESIDENT EVIL

Speyer fidgeted with one of the loaded mags.

“They must have weapons down here, somewhere. A powder magazine.”

Wesker shook his head in response.

“No more side trips. It was a mistake to go into that lab upstairs – my mistake, and I’m not makin’ another one. From now on, it’s straight ahead, in and out.”

He marched toward the only door in the room, shoving it open. Outside was a service corridor lined with unfinished walls – raw metal beams with insulation stuffed between them. Great. If the zombies didn’t kill them, the asbestos might.

Wesker checked the jamb outside, noting that it had a blue lock mechanism.

“Not an override. My key won’t work here on the way out. Prop the door.”

The troopers dragged a heavy crate toward the door to hold it open. The Alpha Team, led by Wesker, fanned out as soon as passage was available.

However, Chris held Jill behind for a moment. She was twitching impatiently, eager to move, so Chris didn’t waste time.

“Jill, this guy is a Loony-Toon.”

“He’s just trying to get the job done – doing what he has to do.”

“Yeah, well... I hope you’ll say the same about me, when I do what I have to do.”

With that, Chris peeled away, following Alpha Team into the corridor.

A frustrated Jill gave Chris a second before following him out. She understood his attitude. After all, he’d already lost so much, and now everything else was on the line. But he didn’t realize how big of a powder keg they were standing on. He was an outsider, stumbling into a situation where he was way in over his head.

He was lucky to have survived this long. Hell, they all were. Jill was concerned about how long that luck was going to last.

EIGHTEEN

On the other end of the service corridor, Alpha Team clustered at a blind alley flanked by a door on either side.

Wesker held the map against the wall, lighting it with his flashlight.

“It’s not clear which way to go.”

“Want me to flip a coin?” Rodriguez replied.

Wesker rolled his eyes, hiding the reaction behind his sunglasses. If the map wouldn’t help him, he would have to pick a door – so he did. He opened

one of the doors using his green keycard, leading the troop inside.

The door led to a vast room, fifty-by-fifty yards, filled with heaters, air conditioners, water pumps – all kinds of infrastructure. Mainframes for the internal computer network lined one of the walls, and fuse boxes and switcher panels lined another.

Wesker felt proud of his intuition. He picked the right door – this was the systems center for the entire facility.

There was an attendant's desk nearby, which Aiken and Sullivan wasted no time in dragging toward the door to prop it open. The acoustics spread the sound it made as it scraped against the floor around them, giving everyone goosebumps.

It prompted a response – another animal-like snarl from somewhere in the distance. Sullivan and Aiken turned to each other, resting against the desk they had just finished pushing.

“What’s that sound like to you?”

“A meat-eater.”

They rejoined their teammates, who stepped further into the room, where they were surrounded by thick columns that were floor-to-ceiling every ten feet. The space between each column was very

dark, with the soldiers using their flashlight beams to cut through all the dust.

Alpha Team ventured through the space one step at a time, their flashlight beams dancing from one angle to another as they navigated the ominous soundscape of electronic humming, clicks, chatters emitting from switchers, and pings from the heaters. It was as though the room was sentient and breathing.

Chris' gut kicked in. He could tell something was very wrong.

“This is the heart of the whole place. They've gotta have it protected somehow.”

It was a good point. Was there another monster waiting in the wings? While the Alpha Team members focused on the space between the pillars, looking for whatever would jump out at them next, Chris kept his attention on the pillars themselves. Something about them made him uncomfortable.

Then, the columns lit up — dotted with seemingly endless electrical eyes. Chris noticed it immediately, launching himself at the floor.

“Duck! Hit the deck!”

The other soldiers turned to him in disbelief. Marini was too focused on Chris to notice a zombie throwing itself at him from the shadows.

Jill whirled herself around, whipping out her pistol and pointing it at the zombie, but Chris got to his feet, grabbing her and flattening her on the floor.

Marini staggered as the electrical eyes lit up. Laser beams shot out in all directions, forming a tight net that Chris and Jill lay directly beneath.

The lasers hit the rest of the team, harmlessly bouncing off their bodies. However, the electrical hum gave way to a faint hiss. Chris could tell it was an omen of something.

“For chrissake, get down!”

The commandos took the hint, ducking underneath the laser beams as jets of steam shot out from nozzles dotted alongside the electrical eyes.

Marini wasn't so lucky, being blasted directly in the face. His clothes ignited, the flesh on his face bubbling and melting to reveal his skull. He fell to the floor in a puddle of flesh.

These weren't just jets of steam — they were acid!

Marini's zombie wasn't fazed. It began stumbling toward the commandos.

“There's no way outta this mousetrap!” Sullivan screamed.

Rodriguez turned to him, “So, we live here now?”

Speyer's voice cracked. "We gotta run for it."

The zombie tripped one of the lasers, only to be blasted with acid, much like Marini. Its already decaying skin melted as it hit the floor with a splat.

"Bad idea, Speyer," Aiken responded.

"Down. Through these," Chris called out. Once again, he had the attention of all the commandos, who were wondering what he was talking about. He was pointing to the hinged panels on the floor. Maybe this guy was worth keeping around.

"Where do they go?" Vickers pondered.

"Does it matter?" Sullivan snapped in response as he whipped out a Swiss Army knife, frantically working on the screws that held down the panels.

The rest of Alpha Team followed suit. They had an objective and worked together as a cohesive unit.

So did their enemies. Zombies were stepping out from the darkness, looking to succeed where their dead friend failed.

Alpha Team made progress, pulling up panels and ducking through the openings. A second zombie hit one of the red laser beams. As it recoiled from another blast of acid, Chris and Jill were spattered as well, tiny pinpricks drilling into their skin.

Despite the pain, Jill didn't stop. She couldn't stop. Chris wasn't equipped to open up his panel. If she failed, he was dead too.

Eventually, she got the panel open, climbing through the opening. Chris was about to follow suit when a third zombie tripped the lasers. He ducked for cover as more droplets of acid rained from above, needling his body.

As soon as the air was clear, Chris began his journey through the opening.

Hands closed around his leg, accompanied by an intense burning sensation that made Chris cry out.

Behind him was one of the zombies that had tripped the laser beams. He couldn't recognize which of the mob it was, as its face was a stringy mass of goo hanging from its skull. It was trying to bite at Chris with its exposed, jagged teeth.

Chris retaliated, jamming the stock of his Winchester rifle into its mouth. It was successfully keeping the zombie at bay, but Chris was stuck. With the lasers above his head, he couldn't move.

Jill popped up out of the floor, pressing the barrel of her pistol into the zombie's forehead as she and Chris locked eyes.

"On three!"

"One... two..."

RESIDENT EVIL

They moved in perfect synchronicity, Chris pulling his rifle away as Jill fired a bullet into the zombie's skull, propelling it backward, where it set off another of the lasers. Chris scrambled through the opening, landing on Jill as the acidic smoke hissed above them.

Wesker had just gotten his panel open and crawled into the opening when he felt pressure on his ear.

Another zombie had accidentally hooked its fingers onto the wire that ran from the detonator to Wesker's earpiece.

Wesker tensed for a second, expecting the wire to be pulled out and for this adventure to come to a swift, explosive end.

His hand whipped towards the pulse-reader, holding it in place as he twisted his body, pumping three handgun shots directly into the groping creature's brain.

The zombie flopped over, but its fingers remained entangled in the wire. Without missing a beat, Wesker leaned over, pointing the pistol barrel directly at the zombie's knuckles, the bones exposed by the acid. Three more shots and Wesker was free, brushing the severed fingers off his torso.

Enough screwing around. Wesker pulled himself into the opening on the floor, leaving the death traps behind.

ΠΙΠΕΤΕΠ

The S.T.A.R.S. commandos found themselves in an air duct. The space was cramped, to say the least — no room to stand, hardly any room to even crawl.

Chris sank against the cold steel wall, looking at his rifle stock. The trusty Winchester rifle, an heirloom that was full of sentimental value, having been a part of his family for as long as he could remember, had its stock corroded by acid because the sick fucks at the Umbrella Corporation devised an elaborate hell trap for anybody that just so happened to be snooping around.

Jill noticed his consternation as she sat next to him.

“God... and it doesn’t even stop them.”

“It’s not meant to stop them. It’s meant to stop... something else.”

The distant snarl returned as if to punctuate his point, bringing a shiver to Jill’s spine.

The rest of the troops were strung out along the metal shaft. Rebecca crawled from soldier to soldier, treating the worst burns wherever she could. Wesker was checking the maps, trying to figure out the route with Barry by his side. Speyer, clearly shaken by what happened to Marini, crawled his way toward his team leader with red in his eyes.

“We damn near got turned into Rice Krispies by that gizmo of yours. If you don’t want me to nail that fuckin’ thing into your ear, you deactivate it, right now!”

“I can’t. They fixed it so you can’t chicken out. The system can only be turned off at the main panel.”

Barry turned to Wesker, “Where the hell is that?”

“Where the explosives are, down farther than we need to go. We only have to make it down one more level. If — when we make it back up to the

choppers, we can fly out of the detonator's signal range."

Chris' voice reverberated across the shaft, catching everyone's attention. "I'm not willing to rely on that! I live here. This is my town!"

Wesker continued. "the town's been evacuated. Just — just in case."

"That explains the lie about the plane crash. An airplane down with weapons on board would nicely explain a big explosion, wouldn't it? You figured all along you might have to blow this place!"

"I don't want to do it. I — I hope I don't have to."

At that moment, Chris wished that he could've seen Wesker's eyes more than anything. His gut told him that the man was disingenuous, but he would've liked to know. Maybe Barry was right, and there was something human underneath that abrasive exterior.

As though he could hear Chris' thoughts, Wesker responded, "That's the best I can do for you, kid. Good faith. Now, let's knock on it."

With that, he pocketed the map and continued down the dim air shaft, Alpha Team in tow.

As they shuffled across, Chris nestled his way closer to Jill.

“I... I can’t let this happen. I’ve got to find that bomb.”

“I’ll help. Once Wesker gets what wants, my obligation is over.”

Chris looked at her with appreciative eyes.

“No. I want you out with the rest of them. Wesker won’t push the button until you’re clear.”

“He doesn’t want to push the button.”

“He has to. Don’t you see? He can’t leave these labs here. And, Jesus, walking corpses! He’s gotta get rid of the evidence.”

Jill knew Chris was right. When she joined S.T.A.R.S., she was ready to follow Wesker into hell. But that was before she found out that the team was risking a city to serve corporate interests — especially when said corporate interests included human experimentation and biological weapons. Even if Wesker wasn’t the monster that Chris thought he was, and even Jill was starting to doubt that, he still betrayed her trust.

There’d be time to think about that when the mission was over, and she knew that Raccoon City was safe.

Until then, she had no choice but to forge ahead.

The journey through the vent was a descent into hell. The long pockets of pitch blackness, the constant stream of air and the eerie moaning it brought, the space feeling like it could crumble at any minute, the constant turn-offs that made navigation feel like a crap shoot – it was enough to drive anybody insane.

And that was without considering what could be waiting for them on the other side.

Jill had to keep looking over her shoulder to make sure Chris was following her. She found herself doing it more times than necessary, more for her own reassurance than anything else.

Then, they passed through another pocket of pitch-black darkness. There was audible movement. The second they were in a meager amount of light, Jill turned back to find an irritated Rodriguez staring at her.

Chris was at the rear of the pack, pressed against the side wall, waving everyone past.

“Chris, no!” Jill called out. They had to stick together, damn it! They could find the explosives when Wesker had what he was looking for. Trying to find it beforehand was suicide!

Chris shrugged in response, “I’ve got to try and stop this.”

Jill started to crawl towards him, unsure whether she wanted to talk him into following her or punch him in the face.

She was halfway through pushing past a cursing Rodriguez when everybody stopped. Was it an earthquake? Something was rattling the vents.

“Shit,” Rodriguez lamented, “one thing after another-”

The air shaft rocked as if punched by a giant fist.

“Sit tight!” As he braced himself against the wall, Wesker ordered his team, “Ride it out!”

His words were brushed aside. Alpha Team was preoccupied by the sheet metal panels that were buckling around them. All along the shaft, panels began to fold inward. It was as though something outside was crushing the duct like a tube of toothpaste – squeezing the troopers inside.

Rivets were popping, and the panels were starting to separate, revealing walls of pulsing flesh. A concentration of flashlight beams confirmed the texture of this flesh – it was that of a plant, not an animal.

This had to be where the vines from the kitchen retreated to. They had woven together to form twisted floral limbs ripping the ductwork apart.

RESIDENT EVIL

Chris, Rebecca, Aiken, and Sullivan tried to brace themselves as their air duct section became physically separated, piece by piece.

“Chris!” Jill called out as, with a metallic crunch, the duct section underneath him fell away, tossing him into the void below.

TWENTY

For a moment, Chris, Rebecca, Sullivan, and Aiken were trapped in suspended animation, surrounded by infinite darkness, broken only by the occasional hiss of sparking cables that dangled from the broken ceiling.

Was this death? Had the mansion claimed them amongst its many ghosts? Did they step into hell and emerge into purgatory?

The answer came quickly, as with a burst of light, the quartet found themselves hitting the floor of paradise itself.

RESIDENT EVIL

They each stood up, finding themselves in an enormous hot house – a lush indoor jungle of plants, ivies, and grasses. It was like a rainforest, with a thick, damp mist that made it difficult to see.

Chris could feel a sense akin to vertigo forming in his stomach. He knew where he was – an underground scientific research facility inside a mansion in rural Pennsylvania. But, his senses didn't get the memo, going haywire from feeling like they were suddenly outdoors despite what the brain was telling them.

They might as well have been on another planet. Chris was knowledgeable about flora, and none of the foliage surrounding him looked native to Earth. There were leaves the size of bed sheets, flowers the size of armchairs – at the center of it all was the mother of all deadly vines.

As Chris, Rebecca, Aiken, and Sullivan collected their thoughts, they confronted a monstrous Schefflera, twenty times average size. Most of its limbs reached upward, embedded in the ceiling where they coiled their way through the rest of the facility above. The rest of the limbs were acting independently, like tentacles of an octopus, each with a large, drooling pod at their tip.

A sign at the plant's base read 'PLANT 42'.

As the monstrous plant arched itself, Chris exchanged nervous glances with his teammates, wordlessly wondering how they would leave this room alive.

Jill tried to silence that screaming voice in her head. She needed to figure out Chris' status as she followed her teammates down the air shaft.

But then what? What was she going to do, jump out after him? Not likely. He couldn't be too far away. Once they got to solid ground, she could find him.

Hopefully, he could hold out until then. Surely, he could hold out until then. He'd survived until this point, after all.

Then again, all it took was a moment of disorientation for Marini to die – and he didn't even die quickly. Jill couldn't erase the image from her head of him flailing around as his eyes and skin melted into a puddle of ooze that dangled from his bony chin.

She was almost grateful when a gunshot rang out in front of her. Sure, it hurt her ears, but it was a nice distraction.

The gunshot came from Wesker, who was pointing his M-16 at the floor. He'd reached their

destination. Other Alpha Team members passed Jill to join in as multiple guns shattered the vent.

Once a sizable opening was made, Wesker jumped through. The rest of the team followed suit, landing in a very unusual corridor stretching forever in both directions.

Not only were there no doors, there were no visible means of exit or entry. The walls were multi-colored polymer tiles that fit together like an elaborate jigsaw puzzle. The floor was faceted heavy steel, seemingly designed to shift. The more Jill investigated the corridor, the more she understood that it could bend – to change position like an airport jetway.

There were disconcerting signs of damage, such as claw-like gouges in the tiles and clean-cut holes punched through the metal ceiling that were larger in diameter than any bullet.

Smears of blood were everywhere as if a series of terrible battles had occurred.

“This way,” Wesker announced before moving down the corridor.

“No, that way,” Jill retorted, pointing in the opposite direction, “Chris and the others.”

“If they’re dead, they’re dead. If they’re alive, they’ll still be alive in twenty minutes when we get back.”

“Maybe not. And, how do we know it’s only going to be twenty minutes? How do we know we’ll be able to come back this way?”

“We don’t, but we’ll do our damndest to try. This is it, guys. The home stretch. Let’s go.”

The discussion was over. Jill knew that pursuing her line of questioning would only be worth it if she wanted to experience another Wesker-ian outburst.

And yet, when Vickers and Rodriguez started to follow Wesker, Jill couldn’t will herself to move. Barry and Speyer were standing with her, waiting for her response.

She was torn. She wanted to go back for Chris.

“Valentine, you’re on the clock! Fall in!”

That did it. Jill could wrestle with her emotions all she wanted, but an order was an order.

So, she swallowed her pride and fell in.

The troopers moved on, not hearing the nearby scratching sounds nor the high-pitched squeal of metal on metal.

Plant 42's arms undulated with fury as Chris and his companions tried to spot an exit through the thick mist and cramped vegetation.

"Th-this thing was no accident," Rebecca observed, "It was cultivated!"

"And it didn't rip out the ceiling for the fun of it," Chris added, "Stay alert."

However, the plant had yet to attack. Its behavior was the same as the vines in the kitchen; its natural tendrils cautiously darted forward to try and sense the available food, then pulled back timidly.

As the plant performed this activity, Chris spotted a doorway.

"Here!" He yelled, leading the others toward it. Rebecca was about to join them when one of the pods swooped down in front of her. Plant 42 was done with its surveillance. Now, it was time to feed.

The quartet paused as the pod's follicles opened like jaws, displaying serrated cartilage daggers resembling teeth. Inside, a pulsing calyx emitted a pistil that twitched and swelled.

Aiken and Sullivan readied their weapons, trying to determine whether firing would startle the otherwise sheepish plant into attacking.

"My mother made me eat vegetables. I know 'em all. This ain't one of them."

“Aiken-“

Another pod swooped down, landing squarely on Sullivan’s back. Its beak clamped onto the flesh between his shoulder blades. Its pistil shot out, puncturing Sullivan’s back. He stiffened, his eyes widening as the color was drained from his skin.

In a matter of seconds, Sullivan looked deader than the walking corpses that roamed the mansion’s halls. Their skin was rotting – Sullivan’s had turned to flakes of parchment floating to the ground, leaving dry, exsanguinated muscle.

Aiken went just as pale as he watched the emaciated husk of his best friend collapse to the greenhouse floor.

“Sullivan! Jesus, Sullivan!”

Aiken rushed towards the body.

“Get out of the way!” Chris yelled as he launched himself off a stone retaining wall around one of the gardens. Leaping up, he reached for one of the sparking conduits that came loose when the vents gave way. It was a long shot, but he had to try it if they didn’t want to end up as plant food.

For it to work, Aiken had to move his ass.

“Get outta there, Aiken!”

But, the soldier was transfixed. Part of it was grief, while the other part was trying to comprehend

the exact circumstances behind Sullivan's death. What would he tell Sullivan's family? Would he omit the details about the vampire plant?

Chris shouldered Aiken out of the way, landing right in the path of a couple of tendrils. If this plan didn't work, he was plant food.

He jammed the semi-rigid conduit into a pool of sprinkler-fed water that had accumulated around the plant's roots.

The effects were instantaneous – a bright current stuttering through every twitching vine at once. Plant 42 let out a hideous shriek as the surge of electricity caused fluids to spurt from boils that developed on its flesh, down along its vines, and into its blood-sucking pods.

The plant sank to the floor, its pods smacking the floor with the same kind of wet thud that would accompany the impact of a human skull.

"They... they killed Sullivan..." Aiken muttered in shock, "The bastards... whoever did this shit... they killed Sullivan!"

In a white-hot rage, he unsheathed a long-bladed knife and charged the remains of Plant 42, slashing at its limbs. The plant wasn't moving. It was likely very dead. Aiken didn't care. He was angry and grieving. Chris knew he'd have responded the same

way had he encountered Rake's killer back at the ranch.

But, then Aiken stopped his assault on the dead plant. His knife drew warm, red blood. Plant 42 was one fucked up perversion of nature, but it didn't bleed, did it?

Aiken traced the vine where he'd struck a vein, following it with his eyes toward the tree branches high above, where the vine was coiled.

It stirred. It wasn't part of Plant 42.

In fact, it became very apparent that this wasn't a plant at all. Plants didn't have scales, for one thing — none of the ones that Aiken had ever seen, anyway.

Chris recognized the shape of the body. He regularly encountered it in the forest throughout his many hiking trips. It was a copperhead. Not just any copperhead, though; this one was oversized with a belly that looked six feet in diameter.

There was one major problem — Chris couldn't see its head.

Aiken realized what he was looking at, letting out a spellbound gasp cut off by the emergence of the snake's head, now occupying the space where he was standing.

RESIDENT EVIL

In an instant, jaws like the open hood of a Cadillac and teeth the size of windows clamped onto Aiken's mid-section with the power of a dozer shovel, instantly crushing his ribs.

Chris jolted into action, scanning the room for something he could use. This gargantuan reptile probably wouldn't even feel any bullets, and he wouldn't be able to get close enough to use the conduits to his advantage. He needed a new plan. His eyes settled on a skein of rope. It wouldn't kill this thing, but maybe he could hinder it.

As Chris gathered the rope, a half-plan formed in his head. He threw the long end over one of the ceiling beams that hung overhead, wrapping the end in his hands into a lasso.

He took a deep breath, tossing the loop at the snake's head. Chris had wrangled horses with lassos before, but these were slightly different circumstances.

The lasso bounced off Aiken's legs, which dangled from the snake's mouth. Chris regathered the lasso, preparing for another throw as Aiken disappeared, being swallowed whole.

Chris made the second throw, watching as the rope encircled the beast's head without Aiken's legs to block it.

He pulled as hard as he could, the noose slipping down over the snake's maxillaries and tightening around its neck. It was taking all of his strength, but he used the ceiling beam as a pulley, slamming the snake's head against the rafters.

Keeping his eyes on the trapped snake, Chris yelled out, "Hold this!"

He braced himself, waiting for Rebecca to grab the rope so he could enact the next phase of his half-plan.

But she didn't move. Normally, Chris wouldn't have blamed her, but now he needed her on full alert.

"Get in here, soldier!"

She turned to him as though a gun went off near her face. Chris' throat swelled up instantly because he knew what brought on her reaction — he'd just reminded her of Wesker.

It was a sobering moment that forced Chris to make a mental note. If he was getting out of here, he had to make sure he didn't lose his humanity in the process. There were many ways to become a monster in this mansion, not just being bitten.

Rebecca snatched the rope from his hands, pulling with all her might. It turned out that she was

stronger than she looked as she held the snake in place.

Chris wasn't going to let her down. He rushed to where Aiken's knife was lying on the floor, glinting in the artificial UV light.

He snatched it up, feeling its sheer weight in his hand. This could carve the creature into ribbons. Chris lunged toward the creature, ready to slice its scaly skin, only to spot movement inside the snake's beaded torso.

It couldn't be, could it?

Was Aiken still alive?

Chris plunged the knife into the beast, growling as he hacked through layers of fat until he reached a bloody cavity.

Aiken was curled up inside, like the biblical Jonah inside the whale. His arms were wrapped around his torso, which had been crushed to half its normal size. Acid from the monster's intestines had begun eating the flesh on his hands and face. However, he was still alive. In fact, he was conscious, opening his mouth to try and wheeze out words as he shook profusely.

"K-kill me. S-Sullivan said... I'd be... better off dead. That... ain't never been truer than now. Kill me!"

Chris knew he had to put this man out of his misery, but how? He didn't know if he had it in him to slash Aiken's throat or stab his gut. What if he only caused Aiken more pain?

Rebecca yelped as the snake used its strength to lower its head from the ceiling. She held the rope even as it lifted her off the floor.

The room echoed as the rope snapped, sending Rebecca to the floor. The trailing edge of the noose caught on twisted debris, delaying the snake for a couple of seconds...

... a couple of fragile seconds that gave Chris the opportunity he needed. He reached into the open belly of the monster, pulling the pins on two grenades dangling from Aiken's vest.

He could see the gratitude in Aiken's eyes, even if one of them had turned a milky white from the acid lapping at the optic nerve, faint swirls of red from burst blood vessels circling his damaged iris.

The giant copperhead snapped at Chris from behind, missing him by mere inches. He dived away like a wide receiver, reaching for a pass.

He caught Rebecca's arm, his momentum carrying her to the floor. They rolled behind another stone wall containing tons of earth.

RESIDENT EVIL

It provided the perfect cover as the grenades attached to Aiken exploded, sending his body and yards of the snake's mid-section into oblivion.

ΤΩΕΠΤΥ-ΟΠΕ

Holden could feel all the eyes in the room baring down on him as he hovered over a speakerphone at the end of the conference table. He couldn't help but fidget, not caring whether his fellow board members noticed.

Wesker's voice scratched through the speaker, his deep register weaving through fits of static.

"We're close. I think I'll be able to get the package. It's been very interesting."

RESIDENT EVIL

One of the suits stood up from their seat — an older gentleman with pursed lips and a perturbed expression.

“Anything you can’t handle?”

The response from the speakerphone was a chuckle.

“There’s nothing I can’t handle.”

Holden clicked off the speaker phone, flicking ash from his cigar as he turned to address the sea of suits staring back at him.

“I’m reassured, Gentlemen, that everything is under control.”

Jill traversed a corridor toward Wesker, who was packing away his radio. He met her gaze, and she saw herself in his shades, reflecting on how much she seemed to have aged over a single day.

“Where are the others?” Wesker asked.

“Right behind me. Were you talking to someone?”

“To Washington. To my superiors.”

Wesker took a few steps closer, ensuring he was towering over Jill when he continued his speech. He wanted to ensure his authority was abundantly clear for what he would say next.

“They’re your superiors too, Valentine. Don’t forget that.”

Jill scrunched up her face. There was nothing she wanted more than to tell Wesker to go fuck himself – that she was done letting him walk all over her, and she was going to stick to her principles the way Chris did.

But before she could open her mouth, she was interrupted by footsteps clacking behind her. It was Rodriguez and Speyer. A moment later, Barry and Vickers appeared from the opposite direction.

Barry approached Wesker, “Nothin’, man. No doors. Nothin’. We hit a dead end.

“Us too,” Speyer added, “Cement wall.”

Vickers sprawled against a nearby wall, flicking beads of sweat that ran down his sickly face.

“We’re never gonna get to that lab.”

He leaped away from the wall as the loud sound of crunching metal resounded in the corridor. It was akin to a rivet gun — repetitive but random, not rhythmic.

Chris and Rebecca found a two-foot-high feeder passage for electric cables. It wasn’t the most comfortable way to move through the building, but it was their best shot at regrouping with the others.

RESIDENT EVIL

So, they crawled through the claustrophobic space, their bellies scraping the floor, their backs the ceiling.

There was movement in the distance. Something was treading on metal nearby.

Something inhuman.

Something big.

Rebecca's professional facade gave way to quiet sobs.

"I... can't take this anymore."

"We take what comes. That's the secret of our genius."

Chris turned back to give Rebecca a reassuring look. She sniffled in response.

"How old are you?" He asked her.

"Not very old at all. Not nearly old enough to... to..."

"None of us is old enough for that."

Rebecca nodded in response, forcing an appreciative smile.

"Jill told me you were nice."

Chris returned the smile, grateful they weren't in a situation where he had to bark orders like a jerk.

"She did? She never told me."

Chris was connecting with someone for the first time since he left Jill's apartment. It felt good,

especially in a situation that felt so unbelievably bleak. He could tell by the look on Rebecca's face that the feeling was mutual.

However, the moment was short-lived. Whatever was moving atop the feeder passage had returned.

Now, it was getting closer.

The remaining S.T.A.R.S. members followed Wesker, their flashlights slicing through the never-ending darkness as they moved along one of this building's many runways.

Their once confident strides suddenly buckled.

The path ahead was clear and empty, but there were restless sounds of hostiles.

They were coming from the ceiling.

Internal debate raged amongst every human in the room. Should they raise their flashlights and risk agitating a potential enemy for a better look, or press on through the dark and hope for the best?

Hesitantly, one flashlight beam after the other trained on the ceiling, revealing monsters that defied any rational explanation. Sure, over the day, S.T.A.R.S. faced rabid dogs, roided-up sharks, and reanimated corpses, but those were downright logical compared to whatever the fuck these things were.

RESIDENT EVIL

They had the proportions of a giant primate, but the skin was reptilian. Its ferocious eyes glared from beneath an insectoid carapace. This could only have been engineered in a lab, as it was an amalgamation of every nasty creature that made its home in people's nightmares. The Umbrella Corporation seemed serious about their military pursuits — they had scientifically engineered the perfect hunter.

There were six of these hunters, all hanging from the ceiling. Their hands and feet had powerful claws that had no problem embedding themselves in the metal above.

Wesker was running calculations in his head. Fighting these hunters head-on would, at best, slow them down and cause more casualties at worst. Could there be a scenario where they all turned their flashlights off and moved cautiously enough to avoid combat and reach the next sector?

His train of thought was derailed by an ear-piercing growl, followed by several metallic crunches. Suddenly, it all made horrifying sense. These were the creatures making all those inhuman sounds before. Only now, they were up close and personal.

Wesker didn't even have to order his team. Everyone raised their weapons and started firing, showering the ceiling with automatic gunfire.

Chris and Rebecca flinched as nearby gunfire rattled the tunnel around them.

"Hurry!" Chris yelled as he crawled onward, arms pumping as he dragged himself further.

Rebecca hesitated, only for a second. In front of her, massive claws punched through the tunnel floor. She could almost feel the enlarged keratin spikes as they scraped against the metal, close enough to bring a tingle to her nose.

As the claws retreated from the tunnel, Rebecca shrieked. Chris contorted his body through the tight space, ignoring the aches in his neck and shoulders and reaching toward her, feeling her soft hand in his grasp.

More claws penetrated the metal, threatening to tear the duo to shreds if they didn't keep moving.

Rebecca could feel the jagged metal press against her as Chris carefully led her forward, anticipating the pain when she leaned the wrong way.

But, no pain came. She was following Chris, grateful for the care he was showing her. You didn't get that kind of consideration from soldiers who

expected you to carry yourself, even if you were a medic first and foremost.

She hoped she could return the favor to him before the day was through.

Wesker, Jill, and the others continued to spit hot, fiery lead at the advancing hunters. The bullets had to be doing something, as they clearly impacted the creatures' bodies, resulting in bursts of bright green blood.

Whatever that something was, though, it wasn't enough. These things were taking body and headshots and barely slowing down.

Barry's voice boomed over the gunfire, "Head shots ain't doin' nothin'!"

Wesker shot back, "That was the idea!"

"What idea?"

"To win! The idea was to win!"

Jill aimed her M-16 at one of the hunters as it lumbered closer, pulling the trigger as hard as her finger would allow. Amidst the kickback, the recoil, the sound, and the fury – Jill didn't let go until her clip was empty, and her gun offered nothing but impotent clicks in return.

Her barrage did some damage. The advancing hunter had the skin removed from its ragged face.

However, now the hunter's eyes were staring back at her from inside an iron endoskeletal superstructure.

“Now that is a metal-head!”

Jill saw Chris leap from an open grate, landing in front of her with athletic grace. Rebecca wasn't far behind.

Seeing Chris' determined face energized Jill in a way she never thought possible. He had every reason to give up – more than they ever did. If he was still in high spirits, she had no damn excuse.

“What d'ya think?” He asked her, “Should I wait for orders, or just wing it?”

“Wing it!”

“You know... that just might be the ticket. Wing the fuckers!”

Chris aimed with his Winchester, lining up a precise shot. With a crack, the hunter's wrist jerked backward, and the creature crumpled to the floor in a heap.

“Forget the head shots,” Chris excitedly called out, “Shoot for the joints – the joints!”

Rebecca unslung the late Aiken's M-16 from her shoulder, the kickback slamming into her as she fired at the hunters. She knew she wasn't going to do any severe damage. She wasn't exactly a crack

shot, even with her mandatory S.T.A.R.S. marksmanship training. There was no way she would deliberately hit the joints of these agile monstrosities.

But that wasn't her intention. She was only trying to hold them off to buy the rest of Alpha Team some time – enough time to reload their weapons.

Barry was the first to resume firing, his shots sending the closest of the hunters ragdolling to the floor, its limbs flailing.

The rest of the troops followed suit, concentrating their shots on knees, ankles, and elbows – all weak spots in their perfectly curated bodies.

It was working!

Hunter bodies lined the floor, but they were only incapacitated, not killed. Whatever limbs they had that were still in operation were now desperately clawing at the floor, pulling themselves closer to their prey.

Speyer's voice rose above the gunfire.

“Run! We slowed ‘em down! Run!”

Barry kept his eyes on the targets, firing back with, “Where? As far as we'll get, either way, is a cement wall!”

Speyer had seconds to ponder the question before a hunter made a mighty, seemingly impossible lunge toward him, hitting him like a battering ram.

As Speyer hit the floor, the hunter slashed at his chest, tossing handfuls of flesh and shards of bone to reveal the pulsating red matter underneath.

Alpha Team backed away as the wave of incapacitated hunters crawled their way toward the downed Speyer.

They could only watch in horror as the hunters halted their advance, using their claws and teeth to violently tear away any of the meat still attached to the wailing Speyer's bones. If they didn't slow down, they would choke on him.

The sight was too much for Vickers, whose weapon slipped from his trembling fingers. He stepped back, his completely crazed brain trying to calculate where to flee next. There was no apparent exit, but maybe he could shoot through a wall. Sure, that was desperate, but so was he.

Then, he spotted it – one of the tiles near Forrest's flayed corpse had started to take on a red glow, quickly growing in intensity.

Great. He had anxiety attacks many times in his life, but none were so bad that they caused hallucinations.

RESIDENT EVIL

Then, a series of metallic clicks ran across the floor toward him. With each click, steel facets along the floor began to separate, sliding away from each other.

The troopers backed away, but what was left of the screaming Speyer was not so lucky. He and the predators still feeding on him fell into the newly minted gap, where blades greeted them by shredding their bodies into a processed puree.

That was enough for Vickers. He turned and fled, limping as fast as his injury would allow. He didn't have a destination in mind, but that didn't matter. As long as there was distance between him and the carnage at his feet, that was all that mattered.

Luckily for Vickers, an invisible, jigsawed door glided open twenty yards down the hall. The rest of the troopers noticed, and it wasn't long before they caught up to him, helping him get closer by propping him up.

A single hunter remained, clinging to the ceiling for dear life. It was trying to strategize to get as much food as possible. Would it try to pick off any stragglers or launch itself at the cluster of soldiers, swiping at whatever it could? Now that there was an opening in the wall, was there an opportunity for

more food, or would it be more advantageous to focus on the soldiers in the immediate area?

Greeting the soldiers was the Asian scientist they spotted in the surveillance footage.

“You lost a man.” She lamented, “If I had only been faster. I was unfamiliar with the mechanism.”

The hunter had decided its next move. It crawled across the ceiling, looking for the perfect spot to begin its final assault.

The scientist noticed it, exclaiming, “God. One of them is still... Quickly! Inside! Quickly!”

She moved out of the way as the troops rushed inside, one by one. Chris was the last to enter, diving to the floor as the doors slid shut.

He turned to see how close the hunter was, his heart almost skipping a beat as the creature lunged at him. Its powerful claws slammed through the opening — just long enough for Chris to jump back to his feet, ready for another skirmish.

“Don’t worry, it’s mindless!” the scientist declared. “It doesn’t realize that it’s strong enough to push the door open.”

Barry stood beside Chris, ready to cover fire if the creature managed to breach the space.

“Sometimes the dumb get lucky.”

RESIDENT EVIL

“Hasn’t happened to me yet.” Rodriguez joked. It would’ve landed with the team had everyone not had their eyes trained on the hunter, waiting to see what it would do next.

It growled in response, its snout darkening the space between the door and wall. Both Chris and Barry recoiled as mucous from its nostrils spat through.

Eventually, the hunter retracted its claws, and the doors slammed shut. The snorting faded away, followed by the distant clacking of its claws against the floor, growing fainter with each passing second.

The threat had passed. Everybody could catch their breath.

TWENTY-TWO

The soldiers found themselves in a security cubicle. The scientist who helped them inside introduced herself as Ada Wong and was now pointing at two of her haggard peers who had pressed themselves cautiously against the wall on the other side of the room.

“My colleagues. Benjamin. Toshiro. As far as we know, we are the only ones left alive. We worked on ‘C’ level. One of the biologists saved us. Brought us down here. He knew that he didn’t have long to live.

He started the mechanism out there in the corridor, and he... let it take him.”

As those last few words poured from her mouth, she turned to a nearby control panel, where every inch was covered in complicated mechanisms. The instruction manual for this thing had to have weighed several tons. They would've had to harvest the entire Arkley Forest to get the paper.

It was hard to avoid the sincerity in Ada's eyes. A collective understanding made its way across the room — the soldiers that had cursed the scientists that spawned this horror now realized that said scientists were as in the dark as they were. There was no need to distinguish between military and scientists. Everyone in this room, regardless of their specialty, had been used — a tool to bring about a horrific agenda that was going to swallow them whole before the day was through.

The image of Speyer's death and how it mirrored the death of her biologist friend had left Ada in a distressed state.

“I only saw it used that one time, or perhaps I would've been faster. The man you lost—”

Rodriguez turned to Ada, cutting her off.

“You did fine, lady. We're obliged.”

She was right. Speyer was dead, regardless of whether the floor's mechanism had activated or not.

"As are we," Ada responded with a sigh. "We believed... we believed we would die here — believed the bomb would destroy us."

Jill weaved her way around the rest of the commandos, approaching Ada.

"You knew about the bomb?"

"The end for a place like this must be a bomb, yes?"

Jill turned to Chris, who couldn't help but purse his lips in a way that said, 'I told you so.'

"But, now that you are here..., " Ada added, "... the bomb will not come."

Chris shook his head apologetically.

"It already came, ma'am. We brought it. The colonel here..."

He pointed at Wesker.

"... he's wearing it."

Ada sized up Wesker, focusing on the detonator attached to his belt.

"Is it true? Are you here to rescue or destroy?"

Wesker couldn't help but reintroduce that deranged smirk.

"Both. If I have to pick only one, I'll pick destroy."

It was an answer that shocked nobody. After all, Wesker was never one for subtlety.

“You’re not S.T.A.R.S.,” Ada declared, “You’re Umbrella!”

“Once again; both. Two salaries — three if you count combat pay.”

Ada scoffed in disgust. Throughout her scientific pursuits, she’d encountered dozens of people motivated solely by money, even if it meant selling what little soul they had left. Such an ethos puzzled Ada. Only a short-sighted fool would hoard wealth in a world doomed to destruction. Perhaps they had not realized that hard currency had minimal merit in the apocalypse.

“The man I loved, John Marcus, developed the organism that caused all this. He did it for humanitarian purposes. It was taken away from him for inhuman purposes by men like you!”

“No, ma’am. Men like me are just errand boys sent in to do the wet work — all of the glory, none of the benefits.”

“After what you’ve seen down here, do you think any of it could be turned into benefit?”

“Yes. I think it could be turned into five or ten million dollars. How do we get into ‘D’ lab?”

“Death lab?”

Ada slumped against a nearby wall, the exhaustion of the day's events getting to her.

"John was killed, never even knowing it existed. They kept him isolated upstairs while a separate team was down here, corrupting his research — using it to build B.O.W.s."

Chris piped up, "B.O.W.s?"

Ada turned to him, grateful to no longer talk to a man as repulsive as Wesker.

"Bio-organic weapons."

"The sharks... the plant...," Rebecca surmised.

"Early experiments."

"The snake," Chris added.

"A failure. Its behavior remained reptilian. All they could ever get it to do was grow in size."

"Those dogs," Rodriguez gasped, "They were weapons!"

"No. They simply became infected, as did everyone else — janitors, the cook, electricians, guards, people who believed they were serving their flag, scientists — great minds turned into mindless ghouls!"

Chris started reloading his Winchester, unable to shake the image of that hunter's claws from his mind.

“Before the outbreak, the experiments went further, didn’t they? Those... ceiling crawlers out there-“

“The product of human DNA spliced with the DNA of vicious carnivores — animals, even insects,” Ada replied, “Plated with armor beneath newly cultivated skin, then injected with poison, so their biological components would die.”

“Die?” Jill asked. What tactical advantage would you get from killing your soldiers?

“The ‘T’-virus reactivates them in a matter of minutes,” was Ada’s response, “but, in battle, lost minutes are... inconvenient. So, the B.O.W.s had to die and be allowed to revive before they could be used to full advantage. They were murdered by their own people, so they could never be murdered again by the enemy.”

Hearing this was giving Chris a migraine.

“Were any more of these weapons developed?”

Ada opened her mouth to answer, only for Wesker to grab her by the shoulders.

“How do we get into ‘D’ lab?,” he barked.

She swatted his hands aside, snapping back, “You don’t!”

Wesker followed her gaze toward an innocuous wall panel with a green card key slot.

“It can’t be opened.” She continued. “Thank God. None of us is cleared for that level of security.”

She turned back to Wesker, only to be caught off-guard yet again by that devilish smile.

“How fortunate,” he purred, “that I am.”

Everyone in the room turned to Wesker as he sauntered over to the wall and swiped the slot with his green key card. The panel slid open, revealing a steel door with another green slot.

The door to ‘D’ lab was open in a matter of minutes.

“Barry,” Wesker ordered, “come with me. The rest of you, make sure this door doesn’t close. Remember...”

Wesker tapped his earpiece. Nobody needed any further clarification. So, he and Barry made their exit through the opening. As the large steel door began to close, Rodriguez leaped for it, catching it before it could shut completely.

Ada turned to the soldiers, eyes wide with frantic realization.

“Have you been leaving doors open?”

“Yes,” Jill replied.

“This place is going to be overrun by-”

“Brad’s in really bad shape!”

Now, all eyes were on Rebecca, who was tending to Vickers' leg wound. Blood and pus had pooled against the gauze that she applied. Vickers was sweating and shivering profusely.

"That's not just a scrape." Rebecca deduced. "You were bitten, weren't you?"

She could see it in Vickers' eyes. His first instinct was to concoct a lie, but even he knew he couldn't hide from the truth any longer.

"One of the sharks," he whimpered, "its teeth — I just brushed up against its teeth after it was dead!"

"Shoot him!" Ada boomed with uncharacteristic urgency and presence. "Somebody shoot him!"

All the soldiers raised their weapons, some pointing at Brad, some pointing at each other.

"No! We're so close!" Jill called out to her fellow troopers, "The antidote!"

On one hand, Vickers was their comrade. On the other, it might only be a matter of minutes before he wasn't any longer.

TWENTY-THREE

Barry followed Wesker down a metal staircase that stretched into darkness. With each step, it was difficult for Barry not to feel like he was descending further into hell.

Nothing unsettled him more than how quiet Wesker was. Sure, Wesker wasn't the kind to crack-wise on missions. But he would always find ways to tell Barry what was on his mind. It was why he was such a good captain.

But now? Wesker was utterly silent. He had gone from threatening to blow up the entire city to

offering absolutely nothing. This was not the Albert Wesker that Barry knew.

For all Barry knew, his best friend was leading him to their deaths.

“What’s gotten into you, man?” Barry nervously croaked, “This... this isn’t like you.”

At first, there was no response. Barry could sense ticks in Wesker that he’d never experienced previously – nervousness, anxiety, possibly even fear. All of that accompanied a sensation that Barry recognized all too well. Whenever a goal was within reach, nobody anticipated that more than Wesker. He had an uncanny ability to turn the atmosphere electric when the primary objective was close to completion, even under the worst odds – another of his uncanny leadership abilities.

“This is what I’ve been all my life,” Wesker continued, “a guy suckin’ up to the honchos – wipin’ the shit off their asses, all while lookin’ for a break – a way to get some of my own! Well, this is it, friend. I’m myself, alright. And I know exactly what I’m doing.”

Wesker stopped and turned to Barry, removing his shades so they were making perfect eye contact. He wanted Barry to know that he meant every word of what he was saying.

“I told you. Before this day was over, I’d pay you back.”

Rodriguez flinched as Chris and Jill rushed toward her, shifting through the gap left by the slightly open door and taking off down the ‘D’ lab stairs.

Before Rodriguez could turn or call out, she spotted Ada wrenching a desk drawer open and pulling out a .45. Shit. Everyone was losing their minds.

“You know how to use that thing, chica?,” Rodriguez yelled, hoping it would give Ada enough pause to reconsider what she was about to do.

“Of course I do,” she responded, “I’m a scientist.”

Rodriguez groaned, wishing her arms weren’t occupied with the door as Ada clicked back the bolt of her gun and aimed it directly at Vickers. There was no way around it. If somebody didn’t do something quickly, his brain would be swiftly evicted from his head.

Rebecca dived in front of Vickers, arms spread out, a pleading look on her young face.

“No! You can’t! Not while there’s still a chance to save him!”

RESIDENT EVIL

Barry was mildly relieved to see the end of the staircase, where he and Wesker arrived at a set of plexiglass doors whose contents were wholly obscured by a thick, impenetrable fog. Whatever was in this chamber, Umbrella wanted it frosty.

As Wesker approached a key slot, Barry wanted to reach out, to yell something – anything that would bring the man to his senses and make him realize that whatever was in this room couldn't be worth all of this carnage and bloodshed.

But Barry remained tight-lipped. What could he do? The man beside him was not the Albert Wesker he once knew.

Wesker swiped his access card, and the doors opened, unleashing a cloud of hyper-cold mist that engulfed the men instantly.

Barry shielded himself as frost coated his body, forming goosebumps, stinging, and aches.

He glimpsed at Wesker, who hadn't even flinched. He was standing perfectly straight, radiating triumph as he stepped through the mist and into the room on the other side.

'D' lab looked like the cockpit of a Concorde, only a hundred times larger. This room seemed to stretch the definition of laboratory beyond human comprehension, as Barry found barely anything

recognizable. Elaborate desks held futuristic computers, and a befuddling array of buttons, switches, and stuttering lights covered every inch of wall space.

At the center of this dystopian futuristic nightmare stood a tall, cylindrical tank. From what Barry could tell, it seemed like a stasis tube filled with ice. It was mounted on a six-foot elevated platform, like an altar, with cables and extensive tubing puncturing it from all angles.

Wesker was fixated on the tube, squinting at its contents. Sure enough, there it was, standing sedated inside the tank.

It stood nine feet tall. Its form was more or less human, though its bulging, rock-hard musculature was anything but. One of its arms was scaled to its size, while the other was much longer, with monstrous steel claws that nearly extended as far as the floor.

Wesker couldn't hide his awe as he announced, "It's called the Tyrant. Nobody knows it exists, except us and Holden."

"Holden?"

"Umbrella's man in D.C. We need him. He signs the checks."

RESIDENT EVIL

Barry couldn't help but feel disturbed when Wesker turned to him with an excited grin. Where Barry saw the epitome of man's evil – a grim embodiment of destruction and terror, Wesker saw a payday.

As if to remind Barry that he was in hell, Wesker reiterated, “We've got it, Barry! Our fortune!” “You're not gonna try to get this big mother outta here?”

“Don't have to. All we need is the data. Then, these things can be cranked out on an assembly line!”

That hit Barry like a punch to the gut. He had daughters. The last thing he wanted was for them to grow up in a world roaming with these monstrosities.

Who in their right mind thought these things could be controlled? They were called Tyrants, for fuck's sake!

While Barry contemplated the end of the world, Wesker had set his automatic down and was now hitting computer keys.

Suddenly, a disk popped out of a master feed, and Wesker snatched it, holding it up to the light.

“Yes! This is it!”

“What about the antidote?”

There was silence. Barry hung onto the question like a life raft. He was hoping to reach the Wesker that broke protocol all those years ago to save him. Maybe that Wesker could be reignited when he remembered that he had a teammate upstairs who needed his help.

A chuckle burst from Wesker that formed into a cruel, patronizing laugh.

“Antidote? There is no antidote. That was just happy horse shit to keep the team going.”

Barry could feel his face reddening with red-hot fury as he clenched his sizable fists. Wesker was beside himself, overjoyed that his bank account would have more zeros than he could have ever fathomed.

Neither man noticed that removing the master disk had triggered several system failures. Red lights had begun to flicker, heralding rivulets of liquid sweat that lined the walls of the Tyrant’s cylinder.

The ice was melting.

“You’re gonna give this to Umbrella?” Barry pleaded, ignoring his conscience as it told him his efforts were useless. The Wesker he knew died a long time ago.

“No. I’m gonna sell it to them. Then, I’m gonna open a Swiss bank account, right next to yours—“

“God... damn!”

Both men turned to find Jill and Chris, who had made it to the doorway and were now staring in awe and terror at the Tyrant as it continued to lie dormant in its cylinder.

“That thing can’t be real!” Jill exclaimed as she took further steps inside the room, unable to believe her eyes.

“It is real,” Wesker replied, “and it’s worth more than gold — more than uranium!”

“Do we get a piece of that action?” Rodriguez asked, her eyebrow raised. Behind her stood Rebecca, Ada, Benjamin, and Toshiro.

Wesker extended a hand to Rodriguez like a game show announcer announcing the life-changing grand prize.

“All of you do! Anyone who comes out of this alive gets a taste.”

Rodriguez slung her weapon over her shoulder and took steps toward Wesker.

“I’m in. I been eatin’ shit all my life. I’m happy to eat some more as long as it’s got some gravy on it.”

Wesker put his hands on his waist. He felt fucking powerful, and he was going to enjoy every second of it.

“Anybody else see it my way?”

Toshiro nervously skittered across the floor, taking his spot next to Wesker.

“You disgrace yourself!” Ada spat at him, disgusted.

Toshiro shrugged in return, mumbling, “I... I want to live.”

Wesker chuckled.

“Smart. Anyone else?”

His eyes settled on Jill. Her response was to look at the floor to avoid his piercing gaze.

“Valentine?”

She turned to Chris, not saying anything. Her eyes were pleading, though, begging him to understand what she was about to do.

She swallowed her pride and stepped through the doorway, taking a defensive position beside her commanding officer.

Chris scoffed.

“And I was gonna try to disarm the bomb. This place should be destroyed. It needs to be destroyed!”

He lifted his rifle, only to find that Wesker had quickly drawn his pistol and was now pointing it squarely at his belly.

“Gotcha, son.” Wesker remarked, “It’s only because of Valentine, here, that I didn’t squeeze the trigger.”

Chris turned to Jill, and the two exchanged dagger eyes that were sharp enough to draw blood.

“If she’s on your side,” Chris bitterly announced, “she doesn’t mean shit to me. And I don’t mean shit to her.”

He made sure to add extra venom to that last sentence. He wanted everybody in the room to feel his pain.

“Chris, please!” Jill retorted, “There’s only one way to go, here.”

“That’s right!” Wesker interjected, “My way!”

This couldn’t have been more perfect. Not only was he about to make a shitload of money, he even managed to break Jill up with her hick boyfriend.

“Yes, sir! Your way!”

Jill pressed in close to Wesker. He could feel her complete allyship. He was tempted to invite her to the mansion he would undoubtedly buy once this was over. Obviously, his would look much nicer than this shithole. It would be nice and modern,

perfect for him and Jill. It's not like she had any reason to say no. She practically owed him for what he was about to do. They were all going to have a lot of money and free time to do whatever they wanted.

"I... can't tell you Chris how much I wanted things to have turned out differently." Jill morosely explained. "Goodbye."

Then, Wesker felt a snatching sensation in his ear. He raised his fingers to the area to find that the sensor was gone.

Jill was holding the detonator wire in her clenched fist, the sensor dangling at the end of it.

Everybody in the room shut their eyes, anticipating the destruction of the lab, the mansion, and all of Raccoon City. They counted their blessings, grateful that the city had been evacuated, and that they would be the only casualties. They achieved solace by remembering that their imminent death would save the rest of the world from the horrors that were hidden in this mansion...

... but the explosion never came.

One after the other, each of the room's occupants opened their eyes to find they were all still very much intact. The nightmare was not over just yet.

Jill pulled the detonator off Wesker's belt, staring at a small LED screen that read '14:42:16.'

'14:42:15'

'14:42:14'

"Shit." She said with a mischievous smirk. "I got all my courage up, and we still have fifteen minutes!"

She tossed the detonator to Chris, who caught it with a smile of his own.

Wesker turned on Jill, snatching his M-16 off the table and lifting it towards her. He hoped that lying bitch and her rube boyfriend had fun with their little con because he was going to make sure they paid for it.

"You shoot, I shoot, boss."

Wesker turned to find Barry's weapon aimed squarely at him. Even his best friend was betraying him. What the fuck was going on here?

"Shit, here I am still callin' you boss."

Before Wesker could respond to Barry, the data disk disappeared from his hand. He lowered his gun and turned to see Ada fleeing to the doorway, shoving the disk into her lab coat pocket.

Snarling, Wesker aimed his weapon at Ada. As his finger went for the trigger, he suddenly felt a sharp pain in his head. Jill had kicked him, the steel-

toed edge of her boot clipping him in the eye. Buckling, dazed, he looked up at Jill, who regarded him with absolute disgust.

“We believed in you. I believed in you. Boy, was I a sucker.”

Before Wesker could respond, she sent another kick into his stomach, knocking the wind out of him and sending him to the floor. His gun clattered from his grasp. He tried to grope for it, letting the mental image of killing everybody in this room and reclaiming his golden ticket motivate him.

Then Barry stepped in, booting his gun away.

A klaxon sounded, filling the room with the wailing of alarms. This was an emergency.

The ice in the Tyrant’s tank had melted down to critical levels.

The monster was waking up.

TWENTY-FOUR

With the alarms sounding, a mechanism tripped, causing the plexiglass doors to begin sliding shut. Ada strained to hold them back as she yelled over her shoulder.

“Get out now, or you never will!”

“So we’ll live here!” Rodriguez shot back, glancing at the Tyrant and adding, “No. The landlord looks like a sonuvabitch!”

Rodriguez rushed in to help Ada hold the doors. This prompted Benjamin to make himself useful. He

couldn't do much in a situation like this, but the least he could do was help hold the doors open.

He felt a hand grip his shoulder. He turned to see Vickers. Great! Another soldier was here to help!

Then, Vickers viciously sunk his teeth into Benjamin's neck. Blood poured from Benjamin's newly severed carotid artery as he dropped to the floor.

Ada growled as she fished her .45 from the pocket of her lab coat. "I... told you... to shoot him!"

She raised the weapon and blew Vickers away, leaving little of his head beside the lower half of his jaw, where his disembodied tongue gurgled and snaked between chipped teeth.

She then turned her weapon to Benjamin and fired at his head without hesitation. Such a move would have seemed callous to the uninitiated, but Ada knew she was putting a loved one out of their misery.

By this point, Jill had reached the doors and was now helping Rodriguez keep them open.

"Everybody!" she yelled, "Out!"

Chris was next to reach the doors, reading the LED screen on the detonator.

"Thirteen minutes!"

RESIDENT EVIL

Barry turned to Toshiro, whose knees violently trembled as tears streamed down his face. The man had spent all day afraid, and the death of Benjamin was the last straw.

He gave the scientist a sympathetic smile, simply uttering, "Go."

Toshiro tried to contort his look of pure terror into a grateful smile of his own. However, there was a loud metallic crash. Water and bits of ice flew out in all directions, and the last thing that Toshiro would ever see was an enormous bionic hand as it closed around his head and crushed it like a cantaloupe.

Toshiro's blood and grey matter splattered Wesker's face as he searched for his pistol. His automatic might have been too far away, but his sidearm had to be close.

The Tyrant wasn't completely free. Much of the cylinder wall had cracked away, but sections of it clung to a now misshapen mass of ice that still held the monster bound. However, there was no way it would last for much longer.

Wesker had gotten to his feet and was advancing toward the doors, vengeance radiating from his eyes.

Barry reached out, grabbing the back of Wesker's shirt and pitching him across the lab.

"You and me, we ain't goin' nowhere. Not just now, boss."

He turned to the others, who were all clustered at the doorway.

"This thing gets loose, it's gonna be pissed. Somebody's gotta hold it back. Give you guys a fair chance--"

"Look out!" Jill screamed.

Barry ducked instinctively, expecting the Tyrant to have finally escaped. Instead, he heard gunshots. Wesker had found his pistol. Most of the shots had missed, but Barry could feel the couple that had successfully grazed him.

Wesker was back on his feet, reloading his pistol as he approached the door.

Barry popped out from behind a desk and shot back at Wesker with pistol shots of his own. He'd managed to clip Wesker's legs, halting his advance for a second.

Ada and Rebecca pulled Rodriguez and Jill from the doors. They began to slide closed. At the last minute, Chris leaped forward, trying valiantly to keep them open.

RESIDENT EVIL

Wesker was crawling like a dog, seething as blood oozed from his legs. He made it to the opening, flinging his arm toward Chris, only for steel bumpers to press on the meat of his forearm.

He looked up, his eyes meeting with Chris through the plexiglass. Chris was the one person keeping the doors from crushing his arm.

“Get me outta here Redfield,” Wesker sputtered through spittle, “or so help me God, you’re a dead man.”

With his other hand, Wesker held his pistol against the door, pointing it at Chris. Both men knew the bullets would not penetrate the plexiglass, but Wesker hoped he could at least look intimidating.

Chris pitied the man’s constant attempts at macho posturing. He turned to the others, who were eyeing him with curiosity, wondering why he was wasting precious minutes.

“Get going,” he said to them.

Jill stepped forward. “Not without-“

“Move!”

Chris could sense it again — that feeling he had gotten when his demeanor started to mirror Wesker’s. However, he knew this was the last time

he would act in such a way. The next few minutes would be very cathartic.

As Ada, Rebecca, and Rodriguez wrestled Jill away, Chris turned to the man he was now holding responsible. Sure, Wesker didn't create these monsters. He didn't build the mansion. He didn't start the outbreak. He didn't sanction this mission. But that didn't excuse his behavior. He was willing to sell out his team and endanger the entire world because he thought he could beat the odds and take the house. In that way, he was no different than all of Umbrella's top brass, trying to control forces they'd never understand. Everybody that died today did so because of men like him. Rake died because of men like him.

He needed to be punished.

“Come back!” Wesker wailed, his authoritative stature having entirely eroded. “Rodriguez! Valentine! That’s an order!”

“Orders don’t mean shit anymore, Wesker. Especially when they come from sell-out bastards like you!”

With that, Chris let go of the doors, watching them squeeze tighter onto Wesker’s arm. He could hear the bone warp and crack under the pressure. Wesker was trying not to scream and risk giving

Chris any satisfaction, but a guttural growl passed through his grinding teeth.

Chris caught a glimpse of Barry, who responded with a military salute that he couldn't help but reciprocate. He wasn't a fan of the military, but he had nothing but respect for men like Barry Burton.

Dusty blemishes formed on the glass in front of Chris' face. Wesker was petty enough to get some base enjoyment from giving Chris a good scare.

Chris made a break for the stairs, eager to regroup. Wesker twisted his body, attempting to push his pistol through the opening. If he could fire one last shot, he could hit Chris somewhere important, incapacitate him – see the look of terror on his face as this place blew to kingdom come.

His fist, wrapped around the pistol's stock, was too thick to fit through the tiny gap. Nevertheless, he fired as many shots as he could, watching as they screamed off the banister rails.

Wesker howled, letting all that pain and anguish out as Chris disappeared up the stairs. Through the corner of his eye, he spotted the Tyrant's stasis tube — namely, that the ice inside it was turning to slush. The Tyrant was about to break loose.

Barry approached his former ally, regarding him with contempt.

"B-buddy," Wesker pitifully stammered, "you gotta get us out."

Barry shook his head.

"Not sure I know how, boss. Do you? Is there some other 'need-to-know' secret for shutting down the Big Bopper here?"

"No. It... it can't be shut down."

Barry cracked his knuckles, stretching his neck. He amped himself up as he turned to face the Tyrant, which was pulling against the ice that kept it from killing everything in this mansion.

"The ultimate warrior." Barry mused, "The ultimate soldier. We'll see how it does against a couple of hard-ass career guys, like you and me."

With his back to Wesker, Barry couldn't see the pistol aimed at him. Wesker pulled the trigger, hoping to end Barry's life and give the Tyrant something to chew on while he figured out his escape.

All the gun gave him in response was an impotent click.

Ada was the first to enter the security cubicle, waving Jill, Rebecca, and Rodriguez inside. While Rebecca checked on Jill and Rodriguez, Ada rushed

toward one of the instrument panels, her hands dancing across various buttons and switches.

“The corridor outside can be moved.”

With the pull of a lever, an intense rumbling filled the room with the intensity of an eight on the Richter scale. Ada peered over her shoulder at the remaining soldiers.

”You won’t come out in the same place. But you’ll find a freight loader that can be accessed with-“

“A blue key... ” Jill answered, pulling out the blue card key underneath her shirt, “... I hope.”

“No. Not blue or green.”

Ada pulled out her keycard from under her lab coat and snapped the chain on her neck, holding it out to Jill.

“Red.”

Jill took it from Ada, observing its striking hue as Ada continued to speak.

“I took it from an Umbrella agent assigned to us here. He died... like all the rest.”

Jill looked up from the card, meeting Ada’s gaze.

“Red overrides green.”

“Yes.”

“So, you could have unlocked ‘D’-lab.”

“I was hoping it would never be unlocked again.”

Ada stepped away from Jill, procuring the Tyrant's data disk from her pocket and holding it up.

"Go. I will see that this is destroyed."

A clammy hand fastened around Ada's wrist. She turned, expecting to see a drooling zombie or even a vengeful Wesker.

Instead, she saw Chris Redfield, who snatched the disk from her grasp. Before she could utter a word, he folded the disk into itself, dropped the shards to the floor, and pumped three Winchester rounds into it for good measure.

"It's destroyed." He said, catching his breath. "It's worthless."

He finished this spectacle by placing an empathetic hand on Ada's shoulder.

"But, you're not."

"I helped develop it!"

"Unwittingly. They lied to you. They lied to Marcus. They made you believe you were doing a good thing when it wasn't good at all. It was evil — the kind of evil that resides in all of us, makes us greedy, uncaring — the kind of evil that will wipe us out in the end, unless we stand up against it."

Ada stepped away from Chris. He didn't dress like a soldier or conduct himself like one. He was

just a civilian, knee-deep in a nightmare. In other words, she couldn't help but find him naive.

"Stand up?," she retorted, "Against powers that have ruled the world since before we were born? We will only be eliminated, or locked away someplace else. I'd rather die here, knowing that the virus has died with me."

Jill joined the conversation, standing beside Chris, never wanting to leave his side again.

"What if it's already spread? You're the only one who knew anything about it."

Their words were having an impact. Ada tilted her head ever so slightly, contemplating what would happen in the unspeakable event that the T-virus made it out of the mansion.

There wasn't an antidote, but that didn't mean one could never be developed. But that would take time that the world probably wouldn't have, especially with her limited expertise.

"But, I know... so little."

"More than anyone else," Chris replied. "You have a responsibility."

"To a higher command," Jill added. "The highest."

With that, her eyes met Chris'. She was no longer the S.T.A.R.S. Alpha Team soldier she was when

she began the day. She was done taking orders from soldiers and G-men. Like Chris, she had her own moral code, and she was going to stick to it.

Together, they would make it out of this hellhole.

TWENTY-FIVE

The Tyrant flexed its monumental muscles, the ice around it cracking but still clinging to its gargantuan form. Its giant heart dangled from its chest, pumping rapidly and sending fluids through exposed synthetic veins that ran to the creature's brain.

Barry stared in disbelief at this biomechanical flourish.

“That’s one helluva big pump.”

“An implant,” Wesker replied.

“From what, a fuckin’ elephant?”

“Rhinoceros.”

Barry looked down at Wesker, bemused.

“Shit. I figured you knew more than you were telling.”

Barry raised his gun, firing at the encased organ. Surely, that would be the weak spot. And yet, his bullets harmlessly bounced off with no effect. These nerds had to have concocted some transparent shielding lining their perfect soldier’s vital organs.

“How do we kill this thing?”

“I told you, we don’t! W-we can’t! It’s unstoppable!”

Ada felt light-headed as she stepped into the outside hallway, which continued to bend and shift as it reconfigured itself.

“I don’t know if I can face this,” she asserted to Chris, Jill, Rebecca, and Rodriguez as they emerged from the security cubicle.

“Just get us upstairs,” Chris responded, “I’ll take care of it from there.”

“Alright.”

Ada sighed, steeling her nerves.

“Come.”

The group broke into a run, their boots clacking along the faceted steel floor. They kept moving until

the system suddenly stopped dead, nearly knocking them off their feet.

The corridor had completed moving. However, their destination wasn't in sight. Much like before, there were only dead ends on either side.

That was until Ada slammed her fist into one of the jigsaw tiles on the wall, causing it to glow red from within.

A nearby panel started to grind open, revealing a brand-new doorway that led to a more natural-looking corridor. Unlike the multicolored hedge maze of tiles, this was a freight corridor. Steel prongs protruded from a nearby wall.

It took only a couple of steps for the corridor to fill with a soul-shriveling sound – the hungry moaning of the dead.

Ada froze, turning to the team with a grim expression.

“Doors... were left open...”

With no more ice to constrain it, the Tyrant stepped out of its chamber and onto the floor of ‘D’ lab, eager to satiate its bloodlust.

Wesker's fear had hit a fever pitch. If he wanted to make it out of this mansion – and God knows, he

wanted that more than anything else; he needed to find a way out of these doors.

His trapped arm wasn't completely useless. He started groping around with it, looking for something he could use to hold the doors open.

It was only a matter of seconds before his fingertips settled on scuffed leather matted with dried blood. It was the late Vickers' boot, and it would work perfectly.

Barry was occupied with the Tyrant, staring down like a matador facing a particularly irate bull. He sensed this creature wasn't as mindless as the other monsters roaming the mansion. It was intelligent, going so far as to size him up. Smart move. It might be stronger and faster, but he was armed, and it just woke up from a coma.

Barry wasn't going to wait for his opponent to make the first move. He opened fire, full bore, with his M-16.

However, if his stream of bullets was doing anything beyond pissing this perfect engine of destruction off, he wasn't noticing it.

Ada, Jill, Chris, and Rebecca ran down the freight corridor, hoping that the inhuman wails of the

damned were the result of good acoustics and not a sign that danger was close.

Their hopes were dashed immediately as an army of zombies made themselves known on the other end of the corridor – twenty, thirty, forty, more!

The team could only watch in horror as the walking remains of all of the humans that were infected in the labs were now crawling all over each other in their neverending search for living flesh.

Ada led the group to their destination. Those metal prongs protruding from the wall were part of a freight loader, extending from a heavy chain drive that ran up and down through openings in the ceiling.

With a nod from Ada, Jill swiped the red key through a slot and pushed a button, prompting the chain drive to grind upward, hoisting the prongs.

“Step on!” Ada ordered.

The group hesitated long enough for Ada to groan frustratedly and push Rebecca onto the next prongs as they emerged from the floor. Now wasn't the time to be delicate. The dead were coming.

Dumbfounded, Rebecca stood atop the prongs, but her footing was precarious. She had to hold onto the chain as she was hoisted upward to the next floor.

The lift moved slowly, with eight feet separating each set of prongs. Jill, Chris, Ada, and Rodriguez shared nervous glances, mentally trying to negotiate who should go on next.

“I don’t know if it’s gonna happen,” Jill pointed out, saying what everybody in the room was thinking. The zombies were approaching at too quick a pace.

Rodriguez stepped away from the group, raising her M-16.

“Come on. I been waitin’ all day for somethin’ like this!”

She opened fire on the advancing undead. With a shrug, Jill and Chris followed suit with their weapons while Ada stepped onto the next set of prongs.

Blood flew. Skulls shattered. Front ranks dropped. The zombies pushed their fallen comrades ahead, using them as shields to get closer to their dinner. The corridor was a giant syringe filled with corrupted bodies that pushed inexorably forward.

Rodriguez continued her assault while Chris helped Jill onto the next set of prongs. Jill responded in kind by handing Chris her M-16. He slung it on his arm, levering his old Winchester to give

Rodriguez extra firing support, making sure every shot counted.

The next set of prongs emerged from the floor.

“You’re up!” Chris announced to Rodriguez.

She responded with a defiant head shake.

“I’m havin’ too much fun. You got a lady. I just got me.”

Chris opened his mouth to protest, but she cut him off.

“Anyway, I ain’t gonna die in this rat hole. I’ll make it. Get outta here!”

Chris knew he wasn’t going to win an argument here. He handed Jill’s rifle to Rodriguez and watched her fire it deftly at the ensuing zombies as he jumped onto the lift.

She was doing a damn good job at thinning the herd. The zombies were being mowed down at an efficient rate. Still, they kept coming.

The syringe kept on pressing.

The next set of prongs rose from the floor. Seeing her chance to escape, Rodriguez stepped on. With one hand, she gripped the chain with as much strength as her muscles would allow. With the other, she continued to blast at the advancing horde.

She continued to rise upward, but the zombies reached her location. She continued to shoot downward, hitting targets left and right.

They were grabbing at her legs, grabbing the chains, rocking the prongs. Rosie could feel herself slip. She was so close to the ceiling, but she was equally close to losing her balance and falling into the sea of the dead below.

She was carrying too many weapons. Between her rifle and Jill's, she was weighed down, struggling to make the shots needed to keep the zombies at bay.

Rodriguez tossed Jill's rifle at the crowd, watching as its thick metal build crushed the malleable skulls of a couple of her pursuers. Rodriguez hoped that she didn't just doom Jill to an easy death. At that moment, Rodriguez knew that she was going to make it if for no other reason than she owed Jill that much.

Rodriguez raised her own weapon, carefully picking off the most threatening zombies.

In a matter of moments, a miracle occurred. Rodriguez had risen out of the zombies' reach and into the ceiling.

RESIDENT EVIL

The lift led to the tightest, darkest space that Rodriguez had encountered in this entire mansion, with sheet metal walls that loads of freight had bruised. All around her, the walls echoed with the rumble of the chain drive. She felt like the walls were closing in.

Rodriguez looked up to see the others, Rebecca, Ada, Jill, and Chris, all rising slowly up the freight shaft. The atmosphere was rife with apprehension and vulnerability. They had averted death, but they sure didn't feel any safer.

At the top, Rebecca looked up to see light spilling through an opening through which she was about to pass. They were making progress.

"Level 'C'. Have your weapons ready," Ada called out from below.

"Whoop-de-doo," Rodriguez sighed to herself as she began following her teammates.

Rebecca was the first to reach the floor of Level 'C', her eyes peering into the room. Everything seemed quiet, but who knew what lurked in the darkness.

The Tyrant was aching for combat, but it was still sluggish as it took its first steps toward Barry. His bullets weren't penetrating its tough hide, but they were disorienting it.

Barry jammed in a fresh clip, continuing to try and hold it back with as much gunfire as he could muster.

Wesker remained on the floor, still trying to pull on Vickers' boot without passing out from the pain.

It was one hell of an effort. Wesker occupied his mind with thoughts of the raise he was going to negotiate with his employers – anything to not focus on how the skin on his trapped arm was peeling to reveal the gore beneath.

Eventually, the boot was caught between the doors, and Wesker found that he could wriggle his arm free. Sure, it was drenched in blood, and a ring of fiery agony made every second hurt beyond comprehension, but at least he could move.

The second Wesker was back on his feet, he was rushing to a nearby computer console. Gritting his teeth through the pain, he furiously typed in console commands. Once again, he was downloading the 'T'-virus data. The plan was back on track.

“Get under a desk, man!” Barry exclaimed, “I’m gonna feed this thing a pineapple.”

With a tug, Barry brandished a grenade from his belt.

“No!” Wesker howled, “It might damage the system! I’ve got to get this data!”

Wesker could see that Barry didn't care. Of course, he didn't care. He didn't see the way out that Wesker had generously offered him. He didn't want to end his career with enough money to retire and provide for his family. He wanted to die in combat like a good little soldier.

Suddenly, Wesker spotted a glint in the corner of his eye.

It was his M-16. It had been lying nearby.

He rushed to recover it, feeling its weight as he carried it with his good arm.

"Forget it!" Barry advised him, "Bullets don't work!"

With his attention back on the Tyrant, Barry was about to pull the pin from the grenade when he heard gunfire.

"They seem to work just fine."

At first, Barry was confused. Not only did the bullets not seem to affect the Tyrant, they didn't even appear to hit it. Wesker had completely missed. It was almost as if the Tyrant wasn't his target.

Then, Barry looked down.

He was so caught up in the moment that he failed to notice the many bullet wounds that had formed in his torso.

So, that was how it was. His comrade, brother-in-arms, and best friend — the man who had his back for as long as he could remember had just decided it was all for nothing.

All over a fucking paycheck.

Wesker fired another volley of shots, blasting Barry off his feet.

The back and forth between Wesker and Barry had given the Tyrant the time it needed to recover from its lengthy slumber. It plucked Barry from the air in a frightening display of its enhanced strength and speed, catching him in its steel claw.

Barry Burton spent the last moments of his life staring into the eyes of the Tyrant — the eyes of pure evil.

Then, his bones snapped, and he went limp.

Wesker paid the event little mind as he watched a small progress bar crawl against the screen.

“That’s it. Take a little lunch break, Mr. T. I just need a few more seconds.”

The Tyrant effortlessly lifted Barry’s dead body off the floor, regarding it with a head tilt. This was the creature’s first fight, and it was far too easy.

With a fling of its arm, the Tyrant launched Barry’s body aside, casting it away like garbage.

RESIDENT EVIL

It wasn't like its zombie brethren. It didn't need to feed on flesh. It only lived for slaughter.

Wesker noticed the Tyrant as it began to lumber toward him.

"Come on, come on!" He muttered under his breath as he turned back to the computer monitor.

'90% COMPLETE...'

'95%...'

'98%...'

It was so close — so damn close!

But, so was the Tyrant.

If he could just hold it off for a few more seconds. Wesker fired another burst at it, prompting it to recoil as one would when faced with bothersome insects.

'100%... TRANSFER COMPLETED.'

Wesker ejected the floppy disk and jammed it into his flack jacket pocket. It was time to leave.

He made a break for the exit, sprinting as fast as his wounded legs could manage. His brush with death had given him a second wind, and it wasn't long before he reached the exit, with numerous desks and consoles between him and the Tyrant.

There was still time! He could make it!

He shoved his M-16 into the gap in the doors, using it to pry them wider. His arm felt like it would snap in two, but he didn't relent for a second.

A warning buzzer went off, startling Wesker. The Tyrant dimly registered the sound. Its eyes dilated like a camera shutter as it fixated on its prey, noting how close it was to escaping.

The Tyrant roared, striding forward at top speed as it easily pitched desks aside and smashed through consoles as though they were made of balsa.

Wesker pried the doors wide, elated at how much space he'd given himself. The Tyrant was bouldering toward him. He was cutting things very close.

Good. Just the way he liked it. He lived for the moment when a mission was at its peak — that moment when it was down to the wire and victory was only a breath away.

Wesker leaped through the gap, ecstatic to end up on the other side. He turned to see the Tyrant get closer. It would not fit its enormous body through the door gap.

As the doors began to glide shut, he couldn't help but laugh. This was Umbrella's magnum opus — their unstoppable weapon, and he just outsmarted it with a door.

RESIDENT EVIL

Looks like Umbrella had to go back to the drawing board.

Wesker couldn't help but laugh.

“Eat shit, you-“

He didn't get to finish his sentence. The Tyrant's long, bionic claws shot through the gap in the doors with switch-blade speed, skewering him through the torso.

But he wasn't dead yet, blood gurgling in his throat. The Tyrant sensed that its fight was over, and it would be better served looking for prey outside of this confined space.

So, with Wesker still impaled, the Tyrant used its hands to push against the doors.

Wesker's mind was racing. Could he pull himself free? Was there any chance of escape? The question was answered immediately when the Tyrant forced the doors completely open, one of the steel bumpers slicing through Wesker's neck, cleanly separating his head from his shoulders.

The Tyrant stepped through the doors, fascinated by the sight of Wesker's headless corpse hanging from its extended digits.

It turned towards the doors, which were about to glide shut, and extended its arm, holding Wesker's

body inside their path. The bumpers were stopped by the Tyrant's iron hand.

Then, the Tyrant pulled back, letting the doors scrape the remaining dead meat from its claws.

It contemplated its next move as it watched Wesker's remains hit the floor with a splat. It had killed the two scientists inside the lab, but there were at least five other people – one scientist and four soldiers.

They couldn't have gotten too far. They had to be close.

The Tyrant would use its heightened senses to locate them and then leverage its superhuman strength and speed to catch up to them.

Then, it was going to slaughter them all.

TWENTY-SIX

“Level ‘B’.”

Ada guided the remaining soldiers through the freight shaft as Rebecca approached another opening.

It led her to a long and narrow corridor, with only occasional pools of light from bare, overhanging bulbs.

Rebecca carefully rose like a spirit from the floor, minimizing any sounds. She lifted her

weapon, eyes darting around for any signs of danger.

Eventually, she realized that the only sound in the entire corridor was the rapid thumping of her heart, so she took a deep breath, concentrating on regaining her composure.

The second she was calm enough, she leaned back down through the opening, whispering to the others.

“Don’t see anything.”

“Good,” Ada whispered back.

They went from another corridor to another freight shaft. Rebecca didn’t want to admit it to the others, but the constant dark, cramped spaces and the need to constantly hang on to chains while checking for danger were all getting to her.

Sure, Chris, Jill, and even Rodriguez would probably be friendly and accommodating about it, but they all had more significant problems.

“We’re almost there!” Ada announced. “You’ll have to jump off. The belt won’t stop.”

While Rebecca was grateful that the end was close, she was disconcerted by Ada’s raised voice.

If there were monsters nearby, she didn't want to attract their attention.

A high-pitched shriek pierced Rebecca's eardrums. Something dived down on her from out of the darkness.

Instinctively, she ducked, which also threw off her balance. She clung to the chain as other small, dark creatures whipped past her head.

"Bats!" She screamed, "There are bats in here!"

"No! They're crows!" Ada retorted, "Infected! Don't let them bite you!"

Rebecca dodged with new urgency as more black birds vengefully dove past. She didn't want to look up, lest her feathered friends decide to go for her eyes, but she needed to know what was coming as she ascended the shaft.

She hazarded a peek. More birds were coming. She aimed her M-16 and fired upward. Two of the birds burst on impact, their limp bodies plummeting downward.

One of them smacked Ada, who swatted it aside. From there, it dropped down to Rodriguez, who jumped with a gasp.

"Rats! Flying rats!"

Rodriguez spotted a murder of crows hovering in a tuft of light from Level ‘B’ below. They circled before launching themselves upward.

She opened fire at them, filling the shaft with ribbons of lead. She was so preoccupied with the crows below that she failed to notice any coming from above.

One such crow sliced at her cheek with its talons.

“Agh! You fucker!”

“You alright?,” Chris yelled from above.

“Yeah. I’m cool! I’m... cool.”

She wasn’t cool. Questions were flooding her head as she felt the blood trickle down her cheek. Was she now infected? Would she turn on the others like Vickers did?

Now wasn’t the time. She continued firing at the oncoming birds. If her clock was about to get punched, she would make the most of it.

Had she just paused her gunfire for even a second, she would have heard the scratch in the adjacent sheet metal wall.

RESIDENT EVIL

Alas, she didn't. She was utterly surprised when the metal was torn apart like tissue paper, only for a new enemy to join the fray.

It was the last surviving hunter! One of its steel claws snatched the chain drive, stopping the mechanism dead.

Rebecca, Ada, Chris, Jill, and Rodriguez held on to the chain for dear life as they struggled to keep their balance.

"I thought it wasn't supposed to stop!" Rebecca wailed.

"Climb up! Out!" Ada replied.

If Rebecca wanted to give the others a fighting chance, she couldn't delay them. So, with another deep breath, she hoisted her up into the Level 'A' corridor, rolling to safety.

Ada steeled herself. She didn't have the athletic training of the others, but she couldn't let that stop her from reaching the top.

She wasn't wearing gloves, and her hands slipped on the greased-up chain. This was going to be more difficult than she thought.

Below, the hunter decided to let go of the mechanism, causing the chain to jerk, nearly throwing the escapees off balance again.

Yet, they still managed to hold on.

Rodriguez found herself being raised toward the hunter's now free hands. It tried to swipe at her, only for her to jump down, hoping in that split second that another set of prongs would be there for her to catch.

There were, and she barely caught them, her chest slamming into their rough, metal surface as she pulled herself back up.

This was quite a precarious situation. She had to find a way to stop that hunter, or it would keep blocking her escape.

Ada reached the top, sighing with relief as Rebecca caught her and pulled her up.

Jill wasn't far behind. Ada grabbed one arm, Rebecca, the other, as they pulled her upward into the corridor with them.

They all braced themselves to grab Chris when the mechanism stopped once again.

The hunter grabbed the chain with one hand and swiped at Rodriguez with the other. She was

crouching, avoiding its grasp while trying to remain balanced.

Chris was a natural-born climber, but even he struggled with the chain.

“Rosie!” He called out, wondering if she needed his help.

“I’m alright! Go!”

More lying. Rodriguez was trapped. All of her attempts to outmaneuver the hunter were failing spectacularly. Even her attempts to shoot the damn thing weren’t effective, as the bullets kept missing the joints and bouncing off its protective steel under-hide.

Chris wasn’t faring much better, falling two feet for every three he managed to climb. He could spot Jill and Rebecca at the opening, trying to reach out to him, but their efforts weren’t enough. He was just too damn far away.

Rodriguez was coming to terms with the idea of going down swinging. She let herself get closer to the hunter.

“Here! Here, you... lizard! You fuckin’ cockroach! Here!”

It was struggling to reach her, growling in frustration. In its carelessness, it had let go of the chain. The mechanism was moving again.

Chris was finally close enough for Jill and Rebecca to reach him, lifting him into the space with them.

Rodriguez watched as the hunter was now at eye level with her, dodging as it swiped at her, its claws combing her hair.

She anticipated the next attack, but it didn't come. Instead, something crashed through the adjacent wall. Rodriguez leaned forward for a closer look. A monstrous claw had impaled the hunter.

The Tyrant peered through the gap, examining what its claws had managed to catch. Disappointed, the Tyrant scraped the hunter free, its twitching body sailing down the shaft and into the darkness below.

Rodriguez watched in horror as the Tyrant turned its clicking, dilating eyes up at her.

It reached out with a powerful arm, gripping the chain and bringing the mechanism to a grinding halt.

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“Bad news, guys!” Rodriguez shouted, her voice shaking, “This thing’s not so stupid!”

“Climb, Rosie!” Chris desperately ordered from the top of the shaft.

Rodriguez knew the odds. Even if the Tyrant didn’t have her in its sights, she would never make it without slipping. Besides, even if she did, she was probably just going to zombie out on them anyway.

“No. I’m finished. I live here now.”

“Rosie, no!”

Rodriguez dived off the prongs directly at the Tyrant. She wasn’t expecting to hurt it in any significant way. There was no surprise at all that its response was to catch her in its bionic claws, crushing her ribs in an instant. She could feel her broken bones spearing her viscera. Her body was shutting down.

This was the end.

Still, she could see in the Tyrant’s eyes that it wasn’t satisfied with such an easy kill. It was mad. For her, that made it all worth it.

Blood oozing from between her teeth, she smiled at the Tyrant, uttering her last words.

“Eat me, you pile of shit!”

As Chris and Rebecca watched in horrified bewilderment, Ada found herself assuming the role of the pragmatic leader.

“Come.”

“Rosie-”

“Come! You convinced me that there were larger matters. We’re at the top. You said you’d get us out!”

Her words might have seemed harsh, callous even. But they snapped Chris back to reality. Their situation was urgent. They needed to move.

“Th-this way,” He stammered, stepping through a nearby doorway.

It wasn’t long before they returned to the mansion, meaning they were now in familiar territory. Chris took charge, leading the group into a nearby powder room.

It was decorated garishly in an East Indian motif, with a ceramic tiger head sitting atop a vanity. Chris probably would have grabbed it out of curiosity, even if he wasn’t inside a mansion filled with secret passageways. It was the kind of

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ostentatious furnishing that practically begged you to fuck with it in some capacity.

He sure as shit was grabbing it now.

As his hands threaded along the porcelain, he intuited how its mechanisms worked. After he twisted the bust on a pivot, a panel spun, prompting the nearby commode to disappear into the wall behind it.

He just opened another secret passageway.

“Hell of a shit-house,” Rebecca remarked.

“The guy was a bootlegger with a sense of humor,” Jill replied dryly.

Of course, as the remaining survivors made their way down the passageway, nobody asked the obvious question looming over everybody’s heads:

If the explosives were armed to take out Raccoon City, where would they run in the mere minutes they’d have left?

Before they could further contemplate the situation, they’d reached a small, blank chamber.

The only other inhabitant besides them was a grandfather clock, its wooden surface adorned with a thick dust layer.

Chris approached the object, deducing that it had to be the key to leaving this room.

“I hope they haven’t disabled this.”

With nervous hands, he opened the glass door covering the clock’s face. He spun the hands toward high noon. That would probably be the best place to start.

At first, there was a satisfying click. Chris didn’t realize he’d prematurely solved the puzzle until the wall beside him began to grind open, straining against the accumulative rust and dirt from decades of idleness. Cobwebs pulled apart, revealing something the team never thought they would see again.

Daylight.

Chris couldn’t help but smile as rays of sunlight caressed his skin.

“Alright. We made it.”

He urged the others through the opening. As they made their way out, he took a moment to check the detonator’s LED.

They had six minutes left.

TWENTY-SEVEN

LaGuardia was getting sick of hovering over the mansion. Once Wesker went dark, the only company he had was his radio man and the corpses strewn throughout the forest below — rabid dogs and S.T.A.R.S. team members alike.

Was Wesker dead? What happened to Alpha Team? Was the mission a failure? What happens now? He didn't know. He was only briefed on a need-to-know basis. Apparently, these details didn't matter.

LaGuardia was about to tell his radio man that they were pulling out, only to spot something in the distance.

Things were starting to get interesting again. A trio of women emerged onto the mansion's front lawn; one a scientist, the other two being S.T.A.R.S. members!

LaGuardia turned to his radio man.

“I’m goin’ in.”

“You don’t have authority.”

“Fuck authority.”

Chris emerged from the secret passageway to find Jill, Ada, and Rebecca waving at an incoming chopper. A sense of relief washed over him. Salvation was here. They were going to make it.

Then, Chris spotted plaster falling from one of the mansion’s stone walls. He wanted to believe that it was just the mansion’s age — that the sudden anxiety that gripped at his chest was unwarranted.

But he knew what was coming. He had to warn the others.

“Watch it! Watch it!”

The wall blew apart as the Tyrant burst through, landing on the grass. With its superhuman speed, it

rushed the group, sending them in all directions as they scrambled to dodge its frenzied attacks.

LaGuardia watched the melee below, trying to wrap his head around what he was seeing. If Wesker knew about whatever the hell this thing was, he sure hadn't mentioned anything about it.

"What in God's name is that thing?" his radio man asked nervously. It was a damn good question.

"Somethin' we weren't supposed to see."

LaGuardia was pissed. Why weren't they told that they were walking into the monster mash? Was Alpha Team given bad intel, or were they just expendable?

He looked forward to getting some answers, but that meant dealing with the colossus below.

So, he turned to his radio man.

"Drop the ladder, and drop the stinger."

The Huey swooped down as low as safety would allow, unfurling a faceted ladder.

Chris turned to Jill, Ada, and Rebecca.

"Get up!"

He pushed Jill toward the ladder, hoping she would start climbing. Instead, Jill responded by

coordinating Ada, and Rebecca so that they could go first.

The Tyrant closed in, swiping at Chris. All that agility Chris honed in the forest his entire life came in handy as he avoided the slice of its mighty claws.

“Catch this!”

Jill turned to see the radio man leaning out of the helicopter as it hovered above. He carried a large case — presumably what he wanted her to catch.

Jill outstretched her arms.

“Toss it to me!”

The radio man dropped the case, and Jill caught it, setting it down and flicking the latches.

Chris hit the dirt, avoiding another swipe. The Tyrant responded in kind by trying to crush him with a stomp aimed at his torso. He rolled out of the way as its bionic foot slammed into the ground, leaving a crater in its place.

He could see it on the Tyrant’s face — the creature was relishing having to earn its kill.

“Chris!”

He turned to see Jill, who nestled against the helicopter ladder. One hand clung to one of the rungs, while the other held a rocket launcher with a shoulder mount. It was a long shot, but if anything was going to hurt the Tyrant, this was it.

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There was one problem, though. The Tyrant was relentless. It didn't stop its assault for even a second. It was too difficult to ensure an accurate shot, but Jill couldn't afford to miss. If their rocket didn't hit, the Tyrant would kill them all.

One of its claws snagged Chris' vest. He unzipped it and rolled away, landing directly under Jill. Their eyes met. An unspoken plan formed between them.

It was their last chance. If this didn't work, they were fucked.

Jill pitched the rocket launcher, and Chris caught it, mounting it on its shoulder.

The Tyrant was on him immediately, ready to launch a powerful kick that would pulverize him and merge his innards with the grass below.

Chris gritted his teeth and fired the rocket, aiming directly for the monster's rhinoceros heart.

The projectile slammed into the Tyrant, and a fireball ripped through its torso. It let out a sustained shriek as the blast tore its heart to shreds, leaving smoking, charred remains.

The Tyrant went limp. The ultimate weapon was no more.

It dropped like a giant Redwood, landing on Chris' legs. He struggled to free himself, but the

dead Tyrant was still a behemoth that weighed several tons. Even without the draining events of the day, Chris didn't have the strength to pull himself free.

He fished the detonator from his pocket and checked its screen.

'00:03:00... '

'00:02:59... '

'00:02:58... '

'00:02:57... '

'00:02:56... '

LaGuardia dropped the chopper a bit lower, allowing the bottom of the ladder to hit the ground. It wasn't long before it was within Chris' reach, and he grabbed on.

The helicopter gained altitude, pulling Chris out from under the Tyrant's steel body and lifting him away. He started to climb the ladder frantically, following Jill as they approached the cabin.

Ada and Rebecca pulled Jill inside as the Huey banked over the forest. Chris held on as the top of many of the forest's trees whipped at his legs, continuing to climb until he finally reached the top. The others grabbed his hands and hoisted him inside.

He checked the detonator LED again.

'00:01:45...'

"We have to get out of range," Jill announced, peering over his shoulder.

"No," Chris responded.

He turned to LaGuardia.

"Circle around."

"Are there more survivors?"

"No. Just circle, okay? I want to take a last look."

LaGuardia shrugged.

The Huey banked into a circle. Over the hills, Chris could see his farm. Jill moved over to him, wrapping a sympathetic arm around his waist and resting her head on his shoulder.

"It's your home."

He turned to her with a resigned smile.

"I hoped it would be our home."

She returned his smile.

"I guess we're gonna be moving."

Chris felt like he could finally say goodbye — to Rake, to the farm, and to the traditions of the Redfield family. He was going to create a new life now. It didn't matter where. All he knew was that he would live with Jill Valentine for the rest of his life, and they would make their own family and their own traditions.

He checked the detonator LED one last time.

‘00:00:38... ‘

Time to leave.

“Full throttle! Out of here, man!” he yelled to LaGuardia.

The Huey lunged forward at top speed, the inertia sending Rebecca, Ada, and Jill back. Chris held himself upright, staring out into the receding sky.

Flying past the helicopter was an eagle, gracefully riding the wind. This wasn’t Goliath, Cleopatra, or any other friends he’d made throughout his countless trips in the forest below. Yet, he felt a connection to it nonetheless.

They were kindred spirits.

They were free.

TWENTY-EIGHT

The Arkley Mansion died that day.

It started with an underground explosion that shattered its foundations and caused the ground around it to erupt. It wasn't long before the entire building was reduced to particulate.

However, the shockwave that emerged didn't stop at the mansion's gate. It continued to spread throughout the forest, destroying everything in sight. An entire ecosystem had been reduced to splinters and ash.

Rake had spent his first day of reanimation mindlessly wandering the vicinity in search of food. He'd managed to work his way through the livestock, the entire lower half of his face matted with feathers, fur, and blood.

He was still hungry. He needed to feed on something more substantial.

Something human.

Before Rake's zombified brain could even fathom the idea of leaving the farm, the blast had reached him.

The explosive force hit him quickly and mercilessly, reducing him to a red mist.

Raccoon City was a ghost town. Its only inhabitants were nine lonely souls lumbering down Main Street. These ghouls didn't remember how they ended up in the city's center. They didn't remember much of anything beyond brief flashes of a previous life that they would never understand.

Eventually, the hot wave reached them, too. Two were immediately vaporized. Fire engulfed two more. Two others escaped the brunt of the

blast, only for their barely functional brains to be destroyed by flying debris.

The remaining three didn't escape the onslaught of either. Arms were torn off. Iron shafts from shatter plumbing, shards of window glass, slats from picket fences — all punched through necks, chests, bellies.

It didn't matter. These creatures didn't feel pain. They barely slowed down. All that mattered was that, despite everything, their skulls remained intact, protecting the brains inside.

So, the ghouls walked on through billows of dust, drooling hungrily.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

BRAD HAZIO has written both screenplays and novels. Since *Resident Evil* is his favourite video game series, and his favourite film trilogy is the original *Night of the Living Dead*, *Dawn of the Dead*, and *Day of the Dead*, it made sense that he would gravitate to this project.

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