

AGAINST THE DYING LIGHT (PROLOGUE ONLY)

THE SUCCOURI SAGA

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PROLOGUE

While others might have found solace in the night's stillness, to Donovan Bradshaw it screamed a warning that prickled across his skin. Every time he closed his eyes he saw it: the flash of light, the explosion of fire and debris, and the blood of his brothers in arms splattering on his fatigues. The sounds of carnage echoed in his ears: screams of terror and groans of desperate torment. Undergirding the deafening chaos, he heard laughter, a mocking voice he couldn't silence no matter how hard he tried.

The taunting resounded with the voices of his mother and father, menacingly synchronized with the scoffs of a wicked enemy who stood over him, rejoicing as he watched blood pour from his open wounds. Triumphant, he kicked him in the side, believing him dead. And indeed, in that moment, he hadn't been sure himself, but he'd been close enough to play the role flawlessly, knowing that if he indicated otherwise, his enemy would be sure to leave him with no doubt.

"You've thrown your life away," the chorus declared.

“You were meant for more than dying with your face in the dirt.”

But then, there came another voice, repeating a whispered prophecy he’d heard for as long as he could remember. “Take courage. You are a guardian, a keeper, a protector for the one who is chosen.”

As he lay dying, Donovan had wondered why this voice spoke now as his life ebbed away like a wave retreating from the shore. It was too late to repeat this incomprehensible call. It was over. He’d done his best and laid down his life to protect the country and people he loved. Wouldn’t it now relent? Wasn’t this sacrifice sufficient?

A rustling in the bushes just beyond the reach of the house lights brought him back to the present. Contrary to what he’d believed possible, he had survived that dreadful night nearly two years ago; that is, if you could call this existence survival.

As he had trained himself to do, Donovan tuned out the voices, focusing solely on his task. He crouched lower, using his night-vision goggles to peer into the thick darkness. Someone was there, but he was crafty, perhaps trained like himself in camouflage. Unhurried, his enemy plotted each movement carefully, staying in the shadows and using the occasional gust of wind to mask his footsteps. But Donovan knew the game well.

Noiselessly, he used the cover of the rock wall that circled the governor’s home to maneuver into the darkest recess of the sprawling front yard. He needed to get behind the intruder and ambush him, leaving him no time to respond with deadly force.

Patiently, Donovan waited, but there was no movement from the bushes. It appeared the enemy had no plan to attempt a breach of the home itself, knowing the effort

would be fruitless as security was far too tight. Instead, he was content to wait for the governor, or perhaps his wife, to come to him. Whether the intruder was the author of the frightening death threats against the family or merely a hired gun was unclear, but that distinction didn't change Donovan's mission. After tonight, he wouldn't trouble this family again.

Though the governor already employed a team of personal bodyguards, Donovan had been hired for his skills at technological surveillance, specifically his training in undetectable sensors and cameras capable of alerting security personnel to an approaching threat. And in this case, the near-invisible technologies had done their job. Donovan had easily tracked the intruder's movements once he breached the property's boundary, giving him plenty of time to intercept him before the threat became critical.

Despite the echoes from the past and the merciless pain that throbbed through his body, his experience and training overtook competing distractions, sharply focusing his senses. Use the environment, keep silent, time your approach, fade into the ambient noise, take cover in dark corners and shadows, and control your breathing.

Moving heel-to-toe, he advanced, each step corresponding with nature's own utterings: the hoot of an owl, scurry of a nocturnal critter, rustling of dry leaves, and clashing of woody branches.

Arcing a wide circle, he moved steadily but deliberately until he was twenty yards behind the intruder. After glancing one last time at the sensors' feedback on his dimmed screen to confirm the exact location of the intruder, he lowered himself onto the ground and inched forward on his stomach, approaching like an invisible serpent slithering in the underbrush. His breaths barely

stirred the air, but as he advanced, Donovan could hear the enemy's respiration, and he timed his own to coincide.

When the distance between them closed in on ten yards, something scurried a few feet behind him, its hasty retreat igniting a sudden shuffling of leaves and an audible clamoring of rocks. Donovan flattened to the ground, and the skittish gunman whirled around, squinting into the darkness, affording Donovan a look at the man's face thanks to the advantage the night-vision technology afforded him.

Too high, Donovan mentally chastised the man as he watched him strain his neck, focusing on the dimly illuminated space between the underbrush and the lower limbs of the trees. Perhaps this guy wasn't as skilled as he'd given him credit for.

Don't worry about what you can see. Worry about what you can't. Donovan winced, recalling the critical lesson he'd learned the hard way.

Unbreathing, Donovan remained motionless as the man weighed the threat, at last returning to his crouched position facing the house.

Big mistake.

When the man's shoulders relaxed, Donovan resumed his advance, patiently strategizing each motion. Luckily, the man was restless, and his repeated shifting gave Donovan ample sound cover as he moved stealthily, halting when he was just a few yards behind him.

In the distance, a train whistle blew, and he seized the opportunity to stand, sheltering behind the trunk of a sturdy tree and sliding off the goggles. Remaining statueque, he allowed time for his eyes to adjust to the darkness as he began to plot his surprise attack.

This was not a battlefield and, as of yet, the only known

crime this intruder had committed was stalking and issuing death threats. Until that changed, terminating him was not an option. But he was armed and had murderous intentions, which meant he would put up a fight if he got the chance.

During his brief glance, Donovan had determined his height, five feet ten inches, and his weight, one hundred ninety pounds. His stature was smaller than Donovan's six feet three inches, giving him an advantage in a takedown if he could maintain the element of surprise. But he would need to plot each footfall as he rushed him, staying undetected even as he acquired enough momentum to sweep him off his feet and capture him in an inescapable stranglehold.

Listening to his enemy's breathing to ensure he remained undisturbed, he risked a quick glance around the tree, needing no more than half a second to capture a mental image of the terrain. Right foot down in the soft dirt just beyond the sprawling tree root. Left foot, heel first, into a moldy pile of limp leaves. Then the controlled slide, letting his own weight and momentum propel him forward as he swept beneath the man's bent legs, knocking him off balance and enabling Donovan to capture him in a tight grip.

It all sounded so easy, a textbook takedown, but in his experience, nothing ever went quite that smoothly. Contingency planning was as important as plotting the first strike. One last time, his mind hovered over the mental snapshot he'd taken during his brief glance, zooming in on each rock and twig until he had rehearsed three ways to defend against an unforeseeable error or unexpected countermove.

Sliding his hand down his side and into his boot, he fingered the grip of his nine-millimeter then the handle of

his knife, fervently hoping lethal force would not prove necessary. He'd done his share of killing, and unless that defense became inescapable, he had no stomach for unnecessary violence.

Gratefully, since he'd retired from military service and begun his work in private security, he'd not been forced to kill anyone, though he couldn't claim to have avoided inflicting serious injuries in a few cases. After watching his brothers, fellow SEALs, die in torment and enduring his own brush with death, he feared losing himself, the part of him that remained tenderly human.

Though the call to serve was as much a part of who he was as the blood that coursed through his veins, he'd seen too much to deny the impact on a soul that occurs when the soldier identity begins to take over the heart of a man. In his estimation, humanizing virtues like kindness, compassion, forgiveness, and mercy were not discardable, even when they interfered with the demands of soldiering. It was a precarious balance to sustain in his chosen occupation and, before he'd become critically injured and subsequently released from service, he'd felt himself losing his footing in that struggle. Throwing aside moral restraints may provide a kind of strength and resolve necessary for survival as a warrior, but at the end of that dark road lay a hellish existence, one more frightening than any battlefield he'd encountered.

Therefore, when his injuries ejected him from the life he'd once believed to be his destiny, he'd resolved to find a new way to satisfy the need to serve, rooted deep in his soul, while also reclaiming as much as he could of the man he'd been before he'd become an expert at the art of killing.

But Donovan couldn't deny that most of the time, he struggled with unanswerable questions as he sought an

ever-elusive inner peace. Why was the call to defend so relentless, even now when he'd served and sacrificed so much? And, almost equal in its uncompromising demand, came the dire warning to stay true to who he'd been before he'd donned the soldier's uniform.

Each time the blinding pain of his battle wounds shot through his body, fresh anger seized him, but he had no one to fairly blame for his misery. He'd signed up for this life, disregarding his parent's warnings and sharp rebukes, and despite the consequences, he did not regret his choice. His head spun as he wrestled with conflicting questions, which he'd assuredly not live long enough to resolve with any degree of satisfaction.

Setting his jaw, Donovan determinedly refocused on his present task, knowing if he allowed himself the slightest equivocation, his mission would fail, potentially costing him, and perhaps those in the house, their lives. Taking one last noiseless breath, he mentally counted down from three, then sprang from his hiding spot, letting the soldier in him have its way.

