

Chapter 1

Impact plus five weeks.

All things considered today could be much worse, Chris thought as he watched Katrina stoop down and check the game trail for tracks. He could see the sun was nearing its peak in the crystal clear sky. It was a beautiful spring day, just warm enough to be comfortable and perfect for hunting in the densely wooded hills. Between the nice weather and the fact that he was accompanied by his two best friends in the world, Chris was in a pretty good mood indeed.

Not much had obviously changed in the small western Montana town in the weeks since the invaders had arrived. There had been refugees at first, but they had mostly continued deeper inland, running from whatever terrible things they had seen out on the coast. The only noticeable differences were in the restrictions that had been placed on power usage and the reduced availability of food. Infrastructure across the entire country had been completely upset by the aliens' attacks and supplies no longer moved as easily as they had before.

Katrina stood up and scanned around the area, her eyes squinting through the trees before settling on some distant point. She was 18 years old and very slight of frame, so much so that she was often mistaken for a middle school student rather than a high school senior. Her hair was a fiery orange-red and her features were sharp and angular. Her most remarkable feature though were her eyes, which were so gray they were nearly black, and so seemingly full of some unspoken knowledge that they made most people uncomfortable if she looked at them too long. Without a word, she began walking off through the undergrowth.

Chris looked over at his other companion questioningly. In contrast to his tiny cousin, Luke was a giant. He stood at least 6'3" and weighed in at nearly 250 pounds, all of which seemed to be muscle. His black hair was cropped close to his head and unlike Katrina his eyes were pale green, almost yellow. Luke shrugged and, using his bow to push a branch away, followed along behind her. Left to trail behind with his own bow hanging loosely at his side, Chris let his mind wander.

It was strange, he thought, that the three of them had ended up becoming friends in the first place. Before the world had changed he had never even talked to either of them. Luke had entered school as a junior in the same class as Chris, with Katrina a grade behind. He had only known what everyone else in town knew, that they were both orphans who lived with their aunt in the rural area outside of the township proper and generally kept to themselves. The aunt had a reputation that was

best described as “crazy cat lady,” and the rest of the population generally avoided her on the rare occasions when she actually came into town. That would likely have been all Chris ever knew about them if not for the arrival of the aliens.

Chris’ parents had been on a weekend getaway for their anniversary enjoying the San Diego beaches when the attacks happened. Everyone had heard about events on the coast in the weeks that followed. San Diego, like most major coastal cities, had been completely destroyed in the tidal waves and initial attacks. By the time the first week had passed Chris had come to accept the fact that his parents were likely never coming back. With no other family in town and most people busy with their own concerns, Chris found himself totally alone and becoming severely depressed.

Two weeks after the attack Chris was sitting alone in his living room. The shades were drawn and faint rays of sunlight shone around the edges like an unwelcome intruder, casting a dreary gloom around the house. A sharp knock sounded from the front door and Chris jumped at the unfamiliar sound. The knock sounded again and he found himself unconsciously shuffling to the door, opening it for the first time in nearly a month. The light was so intense outside that it seared his eyes and caused him to rear back like a frightened cat. He blinked, trying to clear the tears that were blurring his vision. All he could see were two blurs, an adult and a child maybe, standing on the porch.

“We heard you lost your parents,” said a deep voice he couldn’t identify, “we know the feeling.”

From that day forward the three of them had been almost inseparable.

A strong hand in his chest brought Chris to a sudden stop, snapping his thoughts back to the present. Luke pulled his hand away and nocked an arrow to his bow. Ahead, Katrina was pointing to something down a small hill. Straining his eyes, Chris could just barely pick out the small deer camouflaged against the tangled brush.

Chris nocked his own arrow, knowing that he probably had no chance of hitting the deer. The bow had been his father’s, but Chris himself never took much of an interest in hunting. He was hoping that Luke would be able to take the deer down, but in the weeks they’d been doing this the big guy had missed as many targets as he’d hit, always grumbling about using such a “clunky stick thrower.” In fact of the three of them Katrina was the only one consistently reliable in the forest. Her dark, bottomless eyes were so sharp that she saw signs where the other two saw nothing at all and never failed to lead them to game of some sort. Unfortunately she was too petite to manage the full powered bows that the much larger men used. Chris was sure if she could have she would have hit her target every time.

Luke drew back and let an arrow fly. They all watched it sail harmlessly over the deer’s shoulder, spooking the animal. It bolted through the underbrush and Chris sent his arrow chasing after it...and missing by a mile. Luke growled something unintelligible and took off running after it. He was incredibly fast and the other two quickly lost ground struggling to keep up over the uneven terrain.

Suddenly Luke came to a skidding, stumbling stop in the distance ahead of them. There was an ear splitting crack and Luke was thrown backward to land in a twisted pile ten feet away. Chris and

Katrina ran to his limp form lying motionless on the ground. The rank smell of burning flesh was thick in the air as they approached and Katrina sucked in a sharp gasp at the sight of him.

Chris felt nausea swell up as he looked down at his friend to see the smoldering, softball sized hole in Luke's chest. Chris couldn't breathe and his head started spinning. Katrina dropped to her knees and felt Luke's neck for a pulse, but his still open eyes stared skyward with no sign of life. Through his shock, Chris was vaguely aware of how calm Katrina seemed to be as she stood up to search the direction they'd been running.

The calm look on her face turned suddenly to one of panic. She grabbed Chris' arm and started to clumsily run back the direction they'd come from, the much taller boy stumbling along beside her. "Run!" her yell echoed through Chris' ears, as if she were screaming at him through a dense fog. Another crack rang out, shaking him from his disoriented state. A brilliant blue flash shot over his head, shattering a tree in front of them and sending splintered wood slicing across their faces and arms. Chris risked a quick look over his shoulder and saw his worst fears realized. Crashing through the trees behind them came the huge figure of one of the invaders. It looked just like the pictures they had seen from the attacks on the coast.

There had been reports of the aliens pushing inland destroying everything in their path, but they were moving incredibly slowly. Even though there had been no success by the military in stopping the advance, it was widely believed that it would still take months at the pace they were moving before they made it this far eastward.

The thing stood at least 8 feet tall and half that wide. It was pushing over smaller trees like twigs as it thundered through the woods behind them. From the glimpse he had Chris got the impression it was completely covered in some kind of armor or shell. Rumors said that not only had the military not won any confrontations with these things but that they had not even killed a single one of them, and seeing one in person Chris had no trouble believing that was true.

Not only was the thing apparently strong but it was remarkably fast as well, gaining on the pair quickly. Chris began to pick up his pace, but with her shorter legs Katrina fell behind. He reached out to grab her hand, but she jerked it away.

"Just run," she said flatly, an unmistakable air of command tinging her high pitched voice. She stared at him with those unsettling eyes and he found himself transfixed. Vaguely Chris was aware of her eyebrows becoming thicker, her hairline rapidly moving down her forehead, but he couldn't make himself break the stare. The disturbing crunching and cracking of bone on bone sounded at the edge of his distracted hearing.

And then there was a strong, small hand on Chris' elbow and he was flung harshly away. Drunkenly he stumbled through a complete spin as he tried to keep his feet underneath him. He briefly caught a glimpse of Katrina as his rotation brought her into his line of sight. She had appeared to be taking off her shirt and running toward the alien rapidly closing on them, and her back seemed to be

engulfed in blazing orange fire. *Oh no*, Chris thought, *it shot her too*. And then she was out of his sight again and he found himself tripping forward.

He risked a quick peek over his shoulder as he found his footing. Luke's body still lay where it had fallen, but Katrina was nowhere to be seen. The alien, however, appeared to have stopped his pursuit and was instead spinning in place, swatting at the air as if trying to shoo away an annoying insect. Occasional flashes of color continually zipped back and forth around the behemoth at the level of its waist, appearing to be the cause of its agitation. The source of the disturbance came to a rest for a moment between Chris and his attacker and he realized it was a small red fox.

Again and again the fox launched itself at the alien, biting and scratching to no apparent effect. The invader swung his weapon in wide, powerful arcs that the smaller, faster fox nimbly avoided. The two combatants almost appeared to be participating in a well-choreographed dance with neither gaining the upper hand.

Suddenly the alien changed its weapons trajectory mid-swing, catching the fox across the hind legs. There was a sharp pained yelp and the small creature was sent spinning end over end away. The fox came to a rest a short distance from where they'd been battling, and Chris could see it was struggling desperately to get back up. One of its back legs was visibly twisted and obviously broken. He could hear its agonized whimpers as it feebly clawed at the ground beneath it. But then the alien turned its attention back to him and Chris no longer had time to worry about the fox. Pivoting on his heel he broke into a flat sprint through the forest.

Or at least he would have, but behind him the crack of the alien's weapon sounded and Chris' world became a haze of pain as an intense fire bit into the back of his calf. He hit the ground hard, dirt driving into his nose and mouth and he lay there unable to think, let alone move through the pain, for what seemed like forever. Yet ever so slowly his instinct to survive pushed the pain away from his consciousness, forcing him into action. He attempted to stand, but much like the fox found his leg worthless and collapsed back into the dirt. From behind him came the sound of the alien's heavy approaching footsteps.

Chris Forced himself to roll over which sent a fresh shot of agony racing up his damaged limb. The alien was still a short distance away and seemingly not in a hurry to reach his incapacitated victim. Slowly and methodically it continued toward him. Chris glanced at his leg to assess his wounds, his mind hopelessly racing to process all of the available information and formulate an escape plan.

What he saw made him retch. The entire calf muscle of his right leg was gone, the exposed tissue beneath it blackened and charred. A very slight trickle of bright red blood seeped slowly out of the nearly cauterized artery behind his knee. Any hope of getting away from the alien evaporated at the sight. He shifted his gaze once more to his soon to be executioner, much closer now, and tried to swallow the lump forming in his throat. The alien was less than 10 feet away.

A rustling in the undergrowth announced movement to the side and the fox appeared, raggedly limping to place itself between Chris and the alien. From this close the foxes wounds didn't appear as

bad as Chris had suspected. He also noticed details about his small defender that were unusual on a fox. Its hind feet were larger and wider than normal and its front legs noticeably longer. Chris was also fairly certain that each of its limbs consisted of more joints than was normal, or maybe joints in odd places at least. Somewhere in the back of his mind Chris found himself amused by the brain's ability to capture so much detail in a situation like this.

The fox took up an aggressive stance, growling fiercely, but the alien continued apparently unconcerned. The smaller creature twisted its head to look at Chris and their eyes met. Its eyes were strange, incredibly dark gray and so intense that they burrowed into him. They were unsettling eyes, unique eyes. They were.....Katrina's eyes?

The alien took one more heavy-footed step and brought its weapon to bear on the Earth creatures in front of him. The fox reared up on its back legs, appearing strangely human-like, and threw its head back in a pealing howl. The alien paused, possibly confused by the strange new sound, but the hesitation was short lived and the weapon came down in a mighty swing. The fox put its front legs up to protect its face like a boxer and Chris noticed that its front paws were almost hand shaped.

The blow landed and caused the fox to stumble, a wicked crack announcing the breaking of a bone, but the fox remained standing. Again it howled and again the alien's weapon crashed down. This time the fox's arm hung limply at its side unable to block, and the attack caught it in the face. Blood erupted from the fox's mouth as it was thrown to the forest floor, catching itself on its remaining good arm. Weakly, it howled once more.

The alien raised its weapon, obviously intending to land one final mighty blow. Chris felt as if time had slowed as he watched the killing strike begin its descent. With a perfect clarity he watched every inch bring it closer to the fox's inevitable end.

A huge furry paw reached around the aliens back and grabbed its arm in mid swing, instantly stopping the motion. Wicked looking claws dug into the aliens arm causing cracks to spider-web across its exoskeleton. The alien soundlessly spun to confront the source of this disruption. Where the invader had been a nightmare creature out of science fiction, what stood behind him was straight out of a horror movie.

The hand that had saved them was attached to a monstrous wolf-man, much larger than a human. Powerful muscles rippled under coarse black fur that covered its entire body, except for a large bald patch on its chest. Shining yellow eyes shone above a long snarling muzzle full of vicious, deadly looking fangs.

The wolf creature yanked the alien's arm, bringing them face to face. Its free hand shot into the invaders chest, the knife-like claws burrowing up to the knuckles into the armor plating. The alien staggered back under the assault, and the other hand repeated the action on the opposite side. The alien swung its weapon to defend itself, but the strike had no leverage and the wolf didn't even acknowledge it. The wolf-man snarled, baring its teeth and pressing its muzzle to the alien's head. The

muscles in its arms and back bulged and with a sound like a boulder splitting the alien's carapace cracked straight down the center of its breastbone.

The alien went immediately limp, held upright only by the fact it was still impaled on the wolf creature's claws. A putrid yellow liquid poured from the chasm the creature had made and pooled at their feet. The wolf-man roared his victory in an ear splitting howl and unceremoniously dumped his defeated foe on the ground. The alien landed in a twisted pile and did not move again.

A sense of relief washed over Chris, which he found somewhat odd. He would have thought the creatures standing before him would have been frightening, but instead he felt safe. As the adrenaline within him began to subside the pain in his leg returned with a vengeance. Blackness started to encroach on the edge of his vision as his consciousness faded. In front of him the wolf-man began to shrink in on himself, growing smaller. The hair that had covered him receded to reveal a tall muscular human. Luke suddenly stood over him, naked and bearing a fresh pink scar where the smoking hole in his chest had been.

"We need to get him some help," Chris heard Luke say as his eyelids began to slide closed. "Grab me my clothes."

"Sure," Katrina replied from somewhere off to the side. Chris let his head roll in that direction. The last thing he saw before passing out was his friend's bare back as she walked away, her arm bruised and swollen and the tip of a bright orange tail rapidly disappearing back into her body.