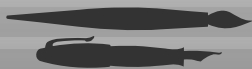


UNDAUNTED

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ONE

“Everyone lies. Everyone. The people in charge. The teachers and historians. They’ve been lying to you for years. But I’m going to tell you the truth. Even better, I’m going to show you . . . now. With this video.

“We all know that a new virus broke out on the east coast of America twenty years ago — the Ferae Naturae virus. And we all know that it killed millions of people within weeks, and then the healthy people abandoned the sick. Utterly and completely. The healthy fled to the west and turned the Mississippi River into one long quarantine line. Then came the wall — the Titan wall — built by the very corporation that created the virus. Titan’s CEO called the wall ‘an act of reparation.’ Whatever you call it, the wall gets the job done. It cuts us off so completely, we forget that half our country even exists — the eastern half. Most people try to, anyway. But not me . . .

“I always wanted to know what lay beyond the wall in the area we now call the Feral Zone. And then, six months ago, I found out — I learned the truth. Last fall, I crossed the quarantine line and spent three days in the Feral Zone. I wasn’t supposed to be there, let alone record what I saw, but I did. And I edited that footage into a video — the one you’re watching now.

“You see, the Ferae virus didn’t wipe out everyone in the east like we were told. They lied to us. The government. The Titan Corporation. Everyone in a position to know . . . lied. The truth is that, over time, the virus adapted so that it didn’t kill its human host anymore. Now the Ferae virus does exactly what it was created to do: transfer DNA from one species into another. Animal DNA. So now, when you get infected with Ferae, you don’t die. No, you just mutate into a horrifying human-animal mash-up. And that is what is living just beyond the Titan wall — these hybrids that the Titan Corporation calls manimals. Lots and lots of manimals. And here’s the truly terrifying part: They all go feral . . . eventually.

“That’s the truth, plain and simple. And now you’ve seen it with your own eyes. I kept this video short so you can download it fast, watch it fast, and forward it to everyone you know — fast — before the truth disappears from view . . . again.”

When the video ended and the music faded out, my best friend, Anna, pried her hand from her mouth — she’d clapped it there thirty seconds in — and looked up from my computer tablet. “I hate you!”

I blinked. She actually sounded like she meant it, and Anna wasn’t the dramatic type. “Why? You’ve seen my footage before,” I said.

“Not edited!” She flung the tablet onto my mattress and glared. “I’ve been sleeping with a kitchen knife under my pillow for months now because of your stupid footage. And then you go and turn it into a *story*? What’s wrong with you?”

“So, seeing what’s over there . . . that makes you mad?”

“No, Lane,” she seethed, turning my name into an accusation. “I’m mad at *you* for showing me that real-life monsters live right. Over. There.” She jabbed a finger at my bedroom window with its view of the looming monstrosity that was the Titan wall. “And those poor characters —”

“They’re not cha —”

“Shut *up!*” She rose from the bed. “I don’t want to hear that those people are real, because then all the awful things that happened to them *actually* happened. I don’t want to know that. Who wants to know that?”

I got where she was coming from. Editing my footage had forced me to relive my time in the Feral Zone, and that had come at a cost — headaches, anxiety, nightmares, and a general inability to fit into my previous life. Once my dad had recovered from his many leg surgeries, he’d taken me to a therapist with the warning that I couldn’t be totally honest about where I’d been and what had happened to me. Crossing the quarantine line was illegal. Very, very illegal — as in, a death-sentence offense. So, I’d let the therapist assume that the manimals in my story were human. The main predator in my story became a stalker, though I was still the prey. Big surprise, her diagnosis was that I was suffering from PTSD, something I’d already suspected. But my dad agreed that I couldn’t continue to see her. Eventually I would’ve slipped up and said *feral* instead of *man-eating psycho killer*, and then she’d have thought I was really going off the deep end.

So I found my own way to deal with what I’d experienced. I began to edit my footage. Sometimes editing seemed to make my symptoms worse, but eventually it didn’t matter. I had a new goal and I’d been willing to take the jangled nerves and nightmares if my video told the truth about what

lay beyond the wall. I knew the final version affected me like a punch in the gut, but then, I'd lived it. I'd been desperate to know if it had the same emotional impact on someone who hadn't been there. And now I had my answer.

I grinned. "Thank you!"

Anna's dark eyes narrowed. "I just said I hate you."

"I know." My smile grew exponentially. "That means I got you to care about the manimals."

"*One*. You got me to care about *one* manimal. That little ape. The rest are horrifying." Her spring-loaded curls quivered as she feigned a shudder. Or maybe her shudder wasn't so feigned. "You can't post this, Lane," she said, turning dead serious. "You know that, right?"

"I know I *shouldn't* post it."

"Do you have a death wish?" she demanded. "The biohaz agents aren't going to care that you're only seventeen."

She lurched for the computer tablet, but I got there first. Jumpy nerves had their perks. Claspings the tablet to my chest, I scrambled across the bare mattress. My bedding had been put into storage, along with everything else in our apartment. For now, according to my dad; forever, according to me.

Anna rounded the foot of the bed. "If you post that video, the jumpsuits will put you in front of a firing squad!"

"Only if they catch me — and they won't. Biohaz agents can't go where I'm going."

"But then you can't come back. Ever." She pointed at the window again. "You'll be stuck over there with those monsters. You'll be stuck with . . . with . . ." Leaning into me, she scrolled back through the video until she found the image she wanted. "*Him*."

With a tap, she enlarged the frame. A feline face filled the screen and hollowed out my chest.

Copper eyes glowed up at me, hot and hungry. Black lips pulled back to reveal fangs as thick as my finger. Half human, half beast, all nightmare. *Chorda*. The tiger-king of Chicago, who'd wanted to rip out my heart and eat it because he'd believed it would make him human again. Sometimes seeing a clip of him would make my heart thrash like a wounded bird trying to take flight. But not now. I brought in a slow breath. I was past this now. Editing the scenes with Chorda had been unbelievably awful. For weeks, my dad had worried about me, but I couldn't explain why I was such a wreck — couldn't tell him how I stayed up late at night, working on my video, because I couldn't tell him about my video at all. He never would've let me risk arrest and execution for "compromising national security." Heck, he wouldn't have let me risk my mental health. And editing Chorda's footage had made me crazy; even I had to admit it.

"He's dead," I whispered, more for myself than for Anna. She didn't need to be convinced of that fact, but I did. Every night after waking from yet another dream about being eaten alive.

"There are others like him," she argued.

"Not like *him*."

"Right," she conceded. "They could be worse."

Not possible. On the screen, Chorda's fangs glistened with saliva — saliva that teemed with the Ferae virus. My fingers went numb at the thought without so much as a prickle of warning. Again. The tablet slipped from my hands into my lap.

Anna didn't notice. Her eyes were on my face. "Please don't post it."

“I have to. It’s not okay.”

“There’s a lot here that’s not okay.” She circled her palm over the screen. “Starting with ‘*tiger-man*.’”

“I mean the lies.” I shook the feeling back into my hands and scrolled past Chorda’s starved glare. “The Titan Corporation says there’s nothing over there but infected wildlife, and the government just goes along with it. People need to know the truth.”

“Forget people. I care about *you*.” Anna stilled my fingers with a touch. “You don’t have to go just because your dad took a job over there. Stay here with me. My parents love you.”

Her words warmed me the way they did every time she made the offer — which had been every day this month — but my answer stayed the same: Thanks, but no.

Chairman Prejean had agreed to set my dad up in Moline, on the other side of the wall, and provide us with monthly supplies — including the inhibitor that slowed the rate of mutation in those infected with Ferae — if Dad fetched blood samples from people infected with the missing virus strains. The Titan scientists needed samples of all fifty in order to create a vaccine. And I’d do anything I could to help that vaccine become a reality.

Last fall, I’d come back to my safe indoor life in Davenport, Iowa, only to discover that my nerves had gotten calibrated for the Feral Zone, and nothing I did seemed to lower the setting. I simply didn’t feel at home in the West anymore. As scared as I’d been in the zone, at least I’d felt alive in a way that wasn’t possible on this side of the wall, with our virtual schools and adult population of germaphobic plague survivors.

But my own discomfort wasn’t the main reason I wanted to return east. I’d powered through my online classes and

taken my GED months ahead of schedule because I needed to get back to *him*. Rafe. I needed to know that he was okay after all that had happened. Hearing it secondhand wouldn't reassure me. Rafe was too good a liar. He'd tell anyone who asked that he was fine. He'd even convince himself of it. But one look into his eyes and I'd know the truth. Maybe then he'd stop showing up in my dreams. Stop reminding me of my promise — the one I wished I hadn't made.

Anna entwined her fingers with mine. "We'll never see each other again."

"Of course we will. The quarantine won't last forever."

"Says who?"

"Me," I said lightly. "And if it does, I'll just have to sneak back for a visit."

She smiled halfheartedly.

"I need to get going. The patrol 'copter is waiting for us on the roof." I zipped my duffel bag. Stuffed as it was, it still felt as if I hadn't brought enough. There were so many things that I'd have to learn to live without, starting with my pets. I'd found good homes for every one of them, but my heart still felt like I'd dropped it down a disposal. "Promise you'll give Gulliver lots of love?"

"Please," she scoffed. "I didn't learn how to give that cat an insulin shot for nothing."

"I'm going to miss you more than anything," I admitted softly.

"More than iced lattes?"

"More than hand sanitizer." I hugged her tightly, and she squeezed back just as hard.

"I hate this," she said into my hair. "Now I'll have to enlist in the line patrol just to see you."

I laughed as I let her go. “You’d make such a great line guard. I can just see you stomping along the river bank, hunting down quarantine breakers . . .”

“Forget it,” she said with a grimace. “Now that I know those quarantine breakers have fur and fangs, I’m moving to Seattle first chance I get. As far from the wall as possible.”

My smile fell away. “Are you sorry I told you about the zone?”

“No! Well, you could’ve left out that chimpacabras are real. But otherwise, I’m glad you told me.” She paused, realizing what she’d just admitted, and heaved a sigh. “Okay. You’re right. People do need to know what’s over there.” She plucked my tablet from the bed. “Go ahead. Put it out there for the world to see.” She pushed the computer into my hands and headed for the door. “I’ll distract your dad.”

Good idea. If my father knew what I was about to do, he’d have an aneurism.

With a shaky breath, I signed onto a social media site, one used mostly by teens. It was after midnight, so hopefully my video would fly under the radar. Maybe get a couple dozen hits before morning and maybe get reposted on other sites before the authorities caught on and scrubbed it from the Web forever.

I’d unpinned a grenade by making this video. Now all I had to do was throw it. I gritted my teeth and hit post. Maybe my video would explode onto the Web and then set off a ripple of aftershocks. Or maybe my so-called grenade would have no impact at all. Either way, I’d never know, because after tonight, I would be beyond reach.

Beyond the wall.