

Chapter 7



Manny.

Manny was used to war. He wasn't quite as used to being on the losing side of one. As chaotic as things got in ciudad de muerte, his guys had always held the upper hand. Manny had come to expect safe supply lines and reliable transport to and from the battlefield. During past offensives the Martyrs hadn't controlled the skies.

His first hint that this had changed came when the 50 caliber machine gun atop their transport fired into the sky. It was soon joined by the echoing boom of the lead vehicle's twenty-millimeter cannon, and a sparking whoosh as anti-drone rockets arced up into the sky.

"Nuts!", Reggie yelled as the gunfire jolted him awake. He'd drifted off a half hour or so into the ride. Manny grabbed onto him and looped his own legs around the bench seat for stability. An instant later the transport veered off of the road and into the high grass surrounding the highway. There was a flash somewhere to the left, followed by the roar and heat of an explosion. When Manny looked back he saw the smouldering wreckage of one of their escort vehicles.

"Drones!" He shouted into the journalist's ear over the blistering gunfire.

Manny scanned the skies as their transport plowed through the tall grass. Wounded soldiers screamed as vehicle banked and bounced and sent them slamming into each other. He caught sight of a small drone, maybe the size of his torso. It was matte black and an almost perfect oval. The only break in its seamless form was the bulge of a missile pod on its belly. A red light blinked above the weapon. The drone slowed to a stop maybe a hundred feet above them.

There wasn't time to think. The fixer shoved his journalist, hard, off the back of the transport, and then leapt off himself. He hit the ground with a painful thump that knocked the air out of his lungs and the sense from his mind. For a second the whole world was stars and shock. Manny rolled to a rough stop against what felt like a large rock. Something cracked inside his chest.

And then there was another explosion, this one louder and closer than the last one. The heat hit him like an ocean wave. Manny was vaguely aware of the scent of burning hair. His hair.

He cried out but he couldn't hear his own screams. Manny's ears rang like the inside of a church bell. It was several moments before the pain and shock subsided enough for him to open his eyes. He looked down at himself first; his pajamas were scorched and his arms were scraped and bloody from the fall. His backpack was gone. But there were no signs of serious injury. None of his bones seemed broken.

What remained of the transport smouldered half-a-football-field away. He saw a few writhing, burning shapes inside. Manny's stomach turned.

Reggie.

The pain of the fall had, momentarily, wiped the journalist from his mind. Manny scanned the field and found the other man curled into a fetal ball a dozen or so feet to his left. He ran over, gave the journalist a quick scan and determined Reggie wasn't seriously injured either. A small sliver of shrapnel had pierced the other man's bicep. He was just as scraped and bloody as Manny, but also basically intact. Except his eyes didn't quite focus when Manny looked into them. Maybe a minor head injury?

The journalist said something, a lot of somethings in fact, but Manny's hearing was all tinnitus. There was no time to talk anyway. He hoisted Reggie up by the armpits, ignored the other man's pained expression and pulled him along as he beat feet away from the flaming wreckage and the ongoing firefight. Another blastwave rolled over him, this one more distant, and then another, coming from somewhere above them in the sky.

The extent of their injuries meant their 'run' was more like a hobble. Reggie had dislocated his unshrapneled arm. Manny had fucked his knee up in the fall and done something awful to his ribs. The two stumble-staggered as fast as they could manage, towards an abandoned gas station by the side of the old highway. They reached their temporary salvation and took cover inside the dusty, cobwebbed building.

"Cuntcuntcuntcuntcunt!" Reggie screamed as he slumped down against the wall. It took Manny a second to process the fact that he could hear again.

"You're alright!" he shouted, "You're fine. We're going to be OK." Manny had no idea if that was true, but he knew managing fear would be critical to their survival.

The gas station had been abandoned for a decade or more. Most of the glass was gone but the basic structure of the inside counter was still intact. He and Reggie took cover behind it, careful to avoid the piles of shattered glass and shrapnel. There were old bullet holes in the wall all around them. At one time there'd been a plexiglass window on the inside wall behind the counter, with a little bucket in it so the cashier could do business at night without letting customers inside.

Most of the plexiglass had been removed, leaving a gaping wound in the building's concrete hide. Manny stuck his head out of the hole and looked out at the site of the massacre. Both transports had been hit. Much of the field was aflame. The sick-sweet smell of burning human flesh wafted over them like a dense fog. Manny saw two of the escort trucks still firing

into the sky. There was another flash above as one of them hit a drone. It corkscrewed out of the air, burst on the ground and ignited the dry grass.

“What the fuck do we do?” Reggie shout-asked. There was panic in his voice, and quite a lot of pain, but the journalist didn’t seem to have lost his wits.

“We need to get out of here,” Manny said, “while those drones are still occupied.”

The highway was a couple hundred feet away. The civilian vehicles following them had scattered when the attack began. Some of them had clearly been hit by machinegun fire from one of the drones. Others had crashed, rolled into ditches, and been abandoned by their occupants. Manny spotted one, an ancient white jeep, that looked like it had taken a round through the window. He could see blood inside the vehicle, but the engine and wheels seemed intact. The treeline of a sparse forest was just on the other side of the highway, a half-mile away. If they could reach it...

“Reggie,” he put a hand on the journalist’s shoulder. The two men locked eyes, and Manny tried to force all the fear out of his voice, “When I say so, run. Very fast. Straight towards that white jeep. Understood?”

The Brit brought a hand to his dislocated shoulder and winced in intense pain. But then looked back to Manny and let out a sharp sigh.

“Fuckin’, alright. Shit. Yeah.”

Manny took that as a yes. He glanced back at the firefight in the field. The “fire” part was literal now. At least a full acre was aflame. The smoke seemed to have interfered with the drone sensors. That was probably the only reason their last two escorts had stayed unfucked for so long. Manny watched in horror as large beetle-black drone buzzed down low and opened up with a machine-gun. He saw bursts of red as the rounds tore into the escort’s gunner and flung him off the truck’s bed.

“Time to go!” Manny slapped Reggie’s uninjured shoulder and sprinted as fast as his janky ankle could carry him. It was increasingly obvious that his leg was supremely fucked. The middle of Manny’s back itched the whole run, in anticipation of a bullet. That peculiar sense was even louder than the pain.

They reached the jeep. Manny went for the driver’s side door, pulled it open, and jerked back as the soupy remains of a pulped human being oozed out onto the asphalt. He heard Reggie start to retch behind him.

It was fucked in there, for sure. The man- he was sorta sure it had been a man- had taken a couple rounds from a very large weapon. Manny guessed they’d been .50 caliber mass-reactive bolts because the impact had torn the man apart. He wasn’t sure if additional rounds, or bone shrapnel, had hit the two kids in the back seat. But they were all exceptionally dead.

Manny pulled his shirt off and did his best to wipe the corpse from as much of the seat as possible. He hopped in and glanced over to the journalist. Reggie retched outside.

“Hey, get the fuck in! We don’t got all-”

A concussive blast echoed from the field. That was one more escort down. The fight was as good as over. Manny felt a tinge of panic rise up in the base of his spine. Reggie still hesitated.

“Dude, either deal with some gore on your clothes or stay here and die. Your choice.”

The Brit snapped out of it, went for the passenger door and hopped inside. Manny wasn’t a great driver, or even a very good one. But this was a simple vehicle and he was blessed with the motivation of not wanting to die. He turned the car back on and the engine woke up with a rich electronic hum. The fixer flipped the vehicle into drive and gunned for the treeline.

The jeep bounced and swayed over the lumpy grassland terrain. Reggie puked out the window. Manny felt nauseous too. He honestly wasn’t sure if it was more from the pieces of people scattered inside the vehicle or sheer motion sickness. Fifteen seconds went by. Thirty. A minute. Manny allowed himself to think they might make it out of this alive.

And then he heard the buzz. That sickening, familiar machine hum that every warzone kid knew as well as the sound of their own mother’s voice. A drone. Closing in.

Manny jerked his head out the window and scanned the sky. The jeep hit a pothole and his head slammed up into the top of the windowframe. He saw stars and almost lost control of the vehicle entirely. It veered to the right and lifted up onto only two wheels. He righted the jeep, spun it back to the left and gunned it again as he turned the other way. He stuck his head out again and scanned behind them.

There it was. The black beetle fucker, buzzing towards them. It was close enough that he could see the glint of its camera optics and the barrel of the heavy machine-gun slung underneath it. Manny knew it was picking up speed to compensate for the recoil of its weapon. It would be low on ammunition now. It’d probably wait to fire until it was too close to miss.

The treeline was so near he could almost grab it. Another fifteen seconds and they’d be there. But the drone was close. They didn’t have that long.

He looked over to the journalist.

“Get ready to bail.”

“Get ready to wh-?”

Manny saw the muzzle flash, and in the same instant he spun the wheel hard to the right. The drone’s first round chunked through the back of the jeep, cracked the axle and blew apart the left tire. But the jeep was in the air an instant later. It flipped over like a drunken dolphin and the rest of the drone’s shots blasted chunks out of the ground where the jeep would have been. By the end of the burst, the recoil had robbed the drone of its momentum and brought it to a spinning halt in the sky.

For a few seconds he just let the pain wash over him. His knee. His shoulders. He could feel something stuck deep in his back, too. Maybe a shard of glass? Or some shrapnel from the start of the firefight? He had quite a few deep cuts. The trauma nanites in his circulatory system had clotted most of them, but the deeper ones still oozed blood. It was hard to tell just how injured he really was, since his body was also covered in blood and viscera from the jeep's previous occupants.

Espere, he thought, *how am I alive?*

His brain gradually spun up to meet his body. Someone had shot that murderbeetle out of the air. But who? Reggie? Where would he have gotten a gun? And the man was British. He couldn't shoot.

"Reggie?!" He shouted.

"Over here!" the Brit called back. He sounded weirdly cheerful, "I, erm, think we've made some friends."

For the first time in his life, Manny found himself face-to-face with two post-humans.

The first appeared to be a lady. She was hunkered up in the branches of a tree and she cradled a very large gun in her arms. Most of her body sort of faded into the forest. She was only easy to see now because of her smile. The shine of her teeth was quite unlike anything else he'd ever seen. They appeared to be made of some sort of strange, swirling-colored metal. Where a normal person would've had incisors she had long, curved fangs.

The other chromed was a black man. He was of average height, with a muscular body and a wide build. His head was shaved and he had a plump, friendly face and round cheeks that accentuated his broad smile. He wore a red kilt and silver breastplate over his muscular chest. It gleamed in the afternoon sun. His only weapon appeared to be an enormous sledgehammer larger than Reggie's entire body. He smiled and nodded at Manny. His whole body twitched as he stood there, as if a constant stream of electricity buzzed through him.

Reggie stood in front of the man. It looked like the journalist had run into the post-humans during his flight from the drone. He looked terrified, in the friendly sort of way only the British could manage.

"Hey...y'all." Manny said. He wasn't really sure how nomadic half-god warrior people preferred to be addressed. 'Y'all' seemed a safe bet.

"Hey guy," said the woman up in the tree.

"Sup," said the kilted man.

"Um. Can we help you?" Manny asked.

The man chuckled. He had a deep, throaty laugh that bounced off the trees and seemed to get louder as it reverberated.

“Naw, buddy. You guys look pretty near death. I’m a guess you don’t have anything I want. Nice pajamas, though.” He pointed down to Manny’s blood-soaked and burned pajama bottoms. The fixer’s face turned red with embarrassment.

“They might have whiskey,” said the woman. “Ask if they have whiskey.”

The big man smiled, lowered his maul and spoke.

“The name’s Skullfucker Mike,” he said. “The lady who shot down your drone is Topaz MacMillan. Do you guys have whiskey?”

Manny didn’t. But Reggie did (“Holy fuck,” he shouted, “I actually do!”). Somehow, the journalist hadn’t lost his backpack in the chaos. He unzipped the main compartment, dug around for a few seconds and produced a small metal flask. Reggie passed it off to Skullfucker Mike, who took a belt of it and let out a dog’s bark. He didn’t bark like a dog. It was the exact sound of a large hound barking.

Skullfucker Mike passed the flask up to Topaz. She took a pull and cooed appreciatively.

“Alright Skully, I like these guys. They get a ride.”

“A ride?” asked Reggie. “A ride to where?”

“To Rolling Fuck,” she said. “To the city of wheels.”