

THE FALL

BOOK 1 - CONVERSION



S.T. CAMPITELLI

A NOVEL OF POST-APOCALYPTIC AUSTRALIA

Prologue

Mackenzie Traynor

The Mallee, 550 kms north west of Melbourne, Australia

5.42am, Australian Eastern Standard Time, Wednesday, 27 April, 2050

Cresting the final hill on his early morning drive, Mackenzie Traynor eased the ute to a stop and gazed open-mouthed at what had once been, to his eye at least, an idyllic, gently undulating valley.

No longer, lord no.

What used to be the north paddock had been bisected down the middle and halfway up the following hill. A trench, at least two meters deep here at the southern end, now ran the length of the field where yesterday lay unspoiled earth. Gnarled, long-buried Mallee-roots and rocks the size of footballs had been blasted out of the ground, now strewn around the paddock like toys from an angry child's sandpit.

'Good god. What does that, Nell?'

Mack scratched his chin with its grey two-day stubble and considered what it was he was going to investigate. Truth be told, he had no idea. But an intense white light had shot across the pre-dawn sky, waking him just before half past five this morning. Figured he may as well check it out. Fifteen minutes later, here he was in his vehicle, Nellie in the back, forepaws on the rail.

'Well, we're here. Might as well go see what's what, ey?' Nellie sniffed at the crisp morning air.

After driving down the dusty dirt track running alongside the paddock, he pulled up to the left of the small incline which sported a bowl-shaped crater the size of a decent swimming pool. In the middle of the depression sat what appeared to be a disappointingly small object, given the fuss it had caused to the paddock.

Mack got out of the car and gazed at the crater, Nellie settling in beside him. 'Well, my girl,' Mack whispered to her as though whatever was within could hear them, 'if we're to turn around and go home, grab a cuppa and forget this, we're gonna do it right now.' Cocking her head to the side, the Border Collie gazed up at him, communicating both genuine interest and foreboding as only dogs can do, otherwise remaining silent.

'Yep, thanks for the tip, love,' he said as he commenced the short trip up the incline and into the crater.

As he drew closer to the object, he noted the vaguely warm edge it lent the bracing April morning. With a grunt, he went down on one creaking knee to get a closer view of the thing which had

the appearance of a grey coloured rock the size of a coconut. Upon closer inspection, he saw it was streaked with fine yellow powder. *Gold?!* No, the dust resembled minute spores, like the ones you see on the back of some ferns. A fine crack, lined with more of the yellowish-grey powder, ran from the top to the bottom of the object. No rock he'd seen before looked like this. He hesitated over it, reaching out a finger to touch it when, without warning, the object collapsed in on itself like the husk of a rotten melon. It settled quickly as a small mound of grey-yellow powdery residue.

'Well, I'll be buggered. That was a disappointment, wasn't it girl? ... Girl? Nell?' He looked around the crater for the Collie. 'Nell? Where are ya?'

Mack got to his feet and ambled to the lip of the crater. He spied his dog almost a hundred meters away in the middle of the paddock chasing a low-flying magpie. He put his forefinger and thumb to his lips to whistle her back, then thought the better of it. 'Nah, you do that. Mind you don't get swooped darl'. Maggies hurt.'

Right then he heard a rustling in the copse of Mallee scrub and ghost gums ten meters to the other side of the crater. He scoped the bush for movement. Nothing. Just as he was wondering if he'd really heard it, there it was again, this time accompanied by a low growl. *OK, time to get geared up.*

He hustled to the ute, opened the passenger door and grabbed his 12-gauge Remington pump-action shotgun from the bench seat. He knew it was loaded. He'd double checked before he left home as he always did, but he checked again anyway. As Louise had always said when it came to anything important, check three times and, though she could nag, that woman had known a thing or two about a thing or two, rest her soul. Noting Nellie's position, Mack made for the patch of scrub where he'd heard the noise.

He stopped five meters away from the tree-line when an animal emerged, a dingo, female, in pretty bad nick. 'What are you doing round here, hey?' Mack wondered out loud. Must be pretty hard going further north; dingoes weren't necessarily rare in these parts, he knew, but not all that commonplace either.

The animal was disoriented, unsteady as it walked towards him, shaking and drooling, whitish foam gathered around its mouth. Three meters from Mack, she stopped, anxious, her eyes darting left and right, but sweeping through him. Her pupils were fully dilated. Geez! They almost filled her eyes. That wasn't normal. She also had flecks of greyish-yellow powder around her mouth and nose.

Moving closer, Mack gestured to the animal with an open hand. 'Shh... shh... s'OK. Ah, ya poor devil, you've got bloody rabies, ey? C'mon, lie down, we'll take care of ya.' He figured he'd be best positioned to do that with a 12-gauge shell. He took his eyes off the dingo for what he thought was a millisecond to ready his weapon when she struck out like a cobra and bit him hard on the right forearm. Mack, his quick-response times well behind him, cried out, jerked his arm back and fell square on his backside. Keeping a grip on his gun with his left hand, he scuttled away from the dingo, getting himself to the side of his ute.

Nellie dashed to Mack's side. Racing in, hair raised at the back of her neck, teeth bared, the dog snarled viciously at the dingo, but Mack held her in check. 'Get behind, Nell! No girl! Stay!' He didn't want her bitten by the rabid animal. Like any good working dog, Nellie obeyed without hesitation, but kept her eyes locked on the troublemaker.

'I'm OK, girl, I'm OK,' Mack reassured the collie, stroking her head. With his left hand he held the Remington barrel, bracing the stock of the gun in the soil, and grabbed the ute's passenger-side rear-view mirror with his other hand for leverage. 'Jus' lemme get up and have a look at meself... *eeyuh!*'

Mack hauled himself to his feet while Nellie kept watch on the dingo, now slumped on its side. It was panting, drooling into the red sandy Mallee soil, the last of its energy spent on the attack. Mack opened the creaking car door, grabbed the Remington and laid it on the driver's side of the bench. He then got in and slumped into the seat. 'OK, let's take a squiz at this.'

He examined the bite. There was blood – not too much – but the affected area was angry-red and had already started to tingle. He reached under the passenger side of the seat, sliding out a hefty, well-stocked first-aid kit by the side-handle and popped the lid. He located a medipen from one of the slide-out trays in the top of the box. Holding it up so he could read the lettering on the small touchscreen display, he dialled up a general purpose anti-biotic then placed the tip next to the bitten area, depressing the end of the medipen with his thumb to give himself a painless compressed-air shot.

'OK, one down. One to go.'

Discarding the medipen, he grabbed a lightweight plasti-can of Coag-spray, covering the infected area with a thin layer of white creamy foam which began to set immediately, a protective coat that would be dissolved later when he got his arm checked out. Mack inspected his handiwork with satisfaction and slumped with relief into the seat. He took a few moments to collect himself, taking bracing lungfuls of air. That pulled him together; yeh, he was good to go. He looked over at Nellie, her eyes still fixed on the distressed dingo.

'Reckon I got lucky on this one, Nell. Could've been worse, y'know.'

He'd reacted quickly, stopped the bleeding, and felt alert enough to drive back to the house. On a farm after an accident, response time, minimal blood loss and mobility counted for a heck of a lot. He *was* lucky.

'Now, let's take care of that sick animal.' He grabbed his Remington, got out of the Ford, walked over to where the still-panting beast lay in the sand and, without a word, gave the dingo her grace. He'd return later when he was cleaned up to bury the corpse. He now resolved to put it all behind him by going home and having a big mug of black coffee with two sugars, or maybe even a nip of the ol' Mr Walking J. Might even make it a double. Mack ambled around the vehicle to the driver's side, Nellie leaped over the tray rail into the back.

Oh, well, that turned out to be quite a morning. Geez, what about that rock? They don't just crack and collapse like that, do they? None that he knew of anyhow.

As he drove off, the grey-yellow powder began to blow away and scatter as molecular remnants in the breeze. In a few minutes, it would be as though nothing had ever been there.

At all.

The trip home proved something of a challenge. As Mack battled blurred vision, a growing fever and an increasingly hard-to-fight lethargy, he veered off the track more than once, Nellie barking her disapproval. He'd hoped the jab might have stopped something like this from coming on, but he was now finding it difficult to concentrate, let alone keep his vehicle on the road. His hands shook so much it was all he could do to keep his grip on the wheel. God, he was seeing triple! He switched to driver-free, said 'Home' to the vehicle and slumped in his seat. By the time the ute eased to a halt on the white gravel drive at the edge of his property, Mack was feeling worse. Downright bloody awful, in fact. He was shivering violently, harder than the crisp morning temperature would have made him, and his heart rate was up. Way up.

Mack got out of the car, and stood, the ground feeling as stable as the deck of a sinking ship. He tried to force himself to slow his breathing, but it felt impossible. He was panting like a run-out dog. A rising tide of panic threatened to utterly consume him.

'Jesus, Mary and Joseph, help me.' He took a step and staggered. Nellie darted around him and barked. 'Forget the coffee, love,' he told the dog, his chattering teeth a hundred hammers inside his head. He blinked his eyes trying to clear his vision, thousands of white pinprick lights danced in front of his face, hot and cold flushes swept his body.

'I'm gonna have a lie down,' he panted. 'Get up in a little while and buzz Dr Jackson in Mildura. Yep, we'll do that. He knows what he's doing, good bloke. He'll see me right. Off ya go now girl, go on!'

Nellie tilted her head and took a last look at him, then scrambled off. Mack opened the unlocked side door to the house, shambled through the kitchen and down the hall, overturning the side-table on the way, and into the master bedroom. He collapsed onto his side of the double queen he'd shared with Louise for 49 years. 'Oh, Lord,' Mack said to himself as he lay there staring at the intricate ceiling rose around the central light. 'Oh, Lordy, please help me. I am not right, not right at all.' He was, by now, alternately shivering and sweating, feeling as though his insides were liquefying and his head being pounded by the front end of a bulldozer.

Mack wasn't usually a sick man. He had always been, as they said in these parts, as fit as a Mallee bull. In fact, he *never* got ill.

And right now, that scared him more than anything.

Wallace Black

7.35pm, Friday, 29 April, 2050

It'd been a long day on the shears, and it was a Friday evening, both of which meant that Wal could do with a cold beer. His old mate Mack was always good for a drink or two and a yarn, even though he flat out made up half the stories he told. And half was being kind. But Wal hadn't heard from him in a couple of days now. He'd tried calling Mack on his commlink, but it kept ringing out. That wasn't like Mack. He seemed to need a chat with someone every other hour.

'Dot!' he called out to his wife in the living room. 'Gonna shoot over to Mack's. The old bastard's not answering his comms.'

'OK love, give him my best. Oh, and grab some milkenbread on the way home, please.' That was one of their private jokes – Dot had asked him to pick up milk and bread so often it had merged into a single word. He chuckled at it for probably the six-hundredth time in his married life as he walked out the door.

On the 10K drive over, Wal worried over Mack's silence. He was often out in one of his paddocks tending to some loose fencepost, or in the shed tinkering with his beloved '44 Harley Knucklehead. But it was past 7.30. He should be well inside by now, parked in front of the telly or playing his never-finishing online chess game with that bloke in Romania or Pennsylvania, or some -ania sounding place. As he pulled into Mack's driveway, Wal noticed the side door ajar. Something wasn't right. 'Hey, c'mon now Wallace, let's just go and see what's what,' he told himself.

Getting out of his car, his boots crunching on the gravel drive, Wal approached the open side door and was met by Nellie, agitated, whimpering and circling, hyper-anxious about something. He tensed, gearing himself for the worst as he stepped into the dark house. He switched on the kitchen light. 'Hey, Mack... Macka? It's me, Wal. You here, mate?' he called out. Nothing. He made his way through the kitchen into the hall, frowning at the overturned table on the floor. Not good.

'Mack? ... Hey, Macka?!' Wal waited for a response, straining to hear over Nellie's whimpering. 'Shhh girl, it's OK, it's OK,' he whispered to the dog, thinking it was anything but OK. He pressed on down the short hallway towards the bedroom.

The door was slightly open. He put his head to the doorjamb, about to call out again when behind him Nellie began making a low growling sound. He turned around to face the Border Collie, lips pulled back baring her canines, the fur at the nape of her neck standing on end. Wal was alarmed now. He knew dogs, especially working dogs. They responded to real threats. And something was threatening from within the bedroom. Then he heard a groan.

Wal zipped through the possibilities. Robber? Wild animal? Yeh, right, what? A wombat? Could be a robber though. One of those buggers knocked over that lady's house in Lascelles a couple of weeks ago and had even raped the poor thing. Geez, who the heck did that to an 86 year-old woman, for chrissakes? God strike me, the world had gone to bloody hell in a handbasket since the riots of '41. Cripes, maybe he should have brought his service weapon with him. He considered returning to the kitchen for a knife but decided to press on.

'Mack, you in there, mate?' he called out again, at the same time stroking Nellie's head, trying to keep the dog from a state of out and out panic. She growled again. 'Whoever's in there, I'm comin' in. I've got an angry attack dog here with me and she's trained to go for the throat, OK?' He hoped like heck that Nellie actually *would* go for some part of the body with aggressive intent, if it called for that.

He opened the bedroom door and was assaulted by a smell that he hadn't experienced since coming across some days-dead rebels in an airless hut on his Syria tour in '21. He pulled his shirt collar over his nose, trying to cover up that god-awful stink. A form stirred in Mack's bed.

'Macka, old son, you alright?' From under the sheets, Mack, or what Wal assumed was him, groaned. 'Geez mate, you don't sound crash hot at all, and to be honest with you, bud, it smells worse than a jailhouse bog in here. C'mon fella, let's see what's what.'

Wal pulled back the bedsheet and recoiled. Nellie went into a meltdown of barking, growling and whimpering, adding another layer of noise and confusion to the mind-altering scene laid bare in front of him. 'Macka, cripes mate, is that you?! What in the *bejeezus*?!'

What lay on the bed appeared human and had facial features that sorta resembled Mack. But it was smooth alabaster white, missing most of its hair, wearing the shredded remnants of a shirt, and was lying in an unholy mess of snot, spit, shit, piss and vomit... and hair. Cripes, this was off the freakin' charts. A Dali painting come to life. The thing was ripped, with a six-pack that would make a bodybuilder pop; a physique that a beer-gutted Mack had never sported in the 30-odd years Wal had known him.

Mack's eyelids popped open and, at that point, Wal was as close to losing it as he had ever been in his 60 years. And as an ex-Special Forces operator with four active duty tours on his CV, he'd seen things that would make the ordinary punter lose their breakfast. This was something else again. The thing's eyes were burnt-black, the pupils fully dilated, filling the eye sockets.

Mother of mercy.

Whatever that thing was on the bed, it wasn't his mate Mack anymore. Not really. Behind him, Nellie's snarling reached fever pitch. As he staggered backwards, Wal wished he had been thinking more like a soldier and armed himself. He could only watch, helpless, as the Mack-thing now squatted on the bed, its fingers splayed on the mattress. It opened its mouth, saliva falling from its lips, breathing very fast, its head cocked to one side, an animal scoping prey. As an ex-soldier who knew a bit about hunting, Wal knew what he was looking at. A thing with no soul. A predator.

It leapt off the bed, straight at him, arms extended, mouth open.

Wal had one more lucid thought.

Jeezus, that's fast.

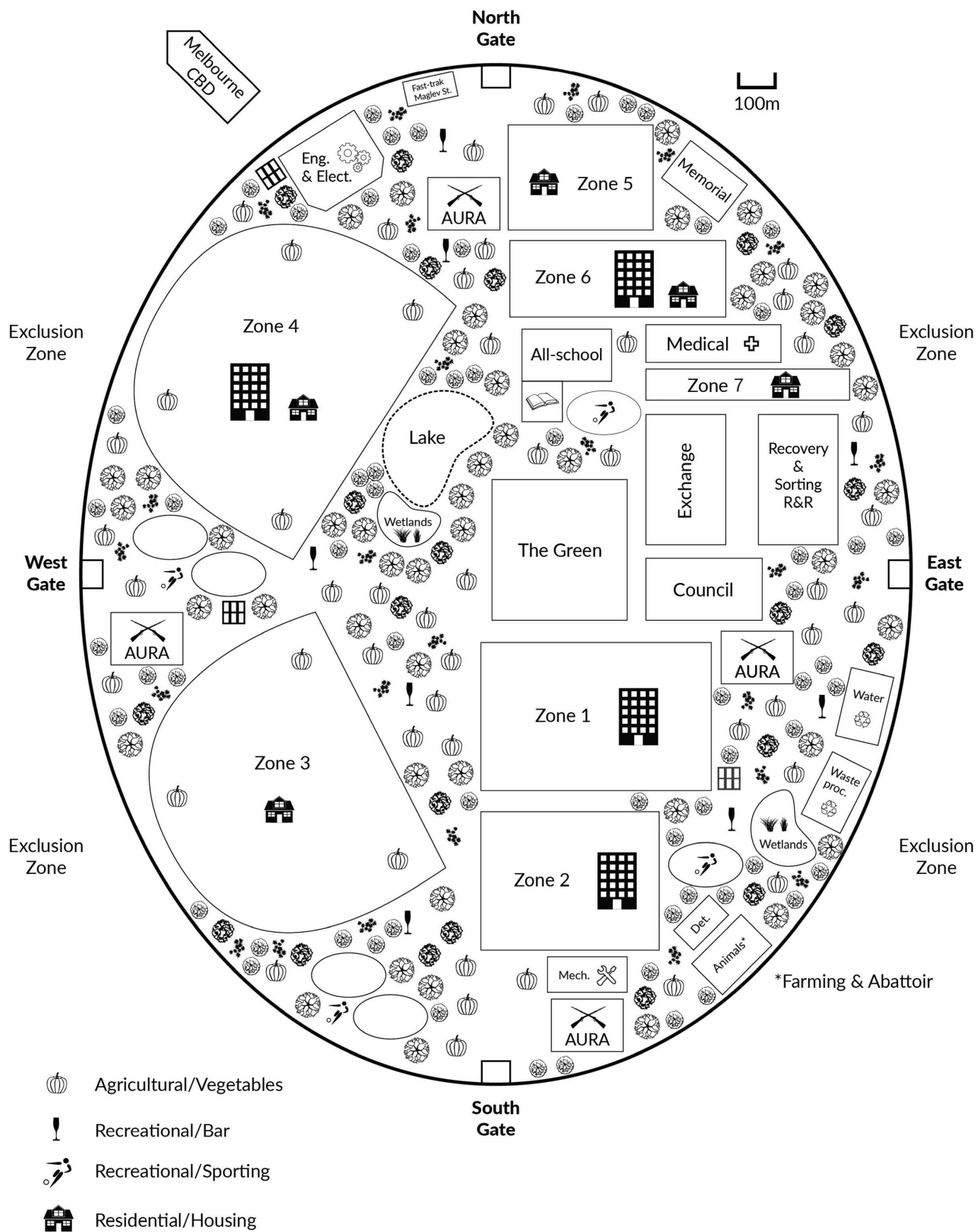
Part 1 – The Wasteland

Ozymandias (1818)

Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792–1822)

*I met a traveller from an antique land
Who said: 'Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert. Near them, on the sand,
Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them and the heart that fed:
And on the pedestal these words appear:
'My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!'
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away.'*

KULIN WALLCOM 2052



TWO YEARS LATER

Chapter 1 – John Bradley

Wasteland, approx. 6 km south east of Kulin Wallcom

4.45pm, Saturday, 6 July, 2052

It was late. Dammit. They shouldn't still be out. This time of year, it got dark between 5 and 6 o'clock. Dusk, that's when the infected started coming out of torpor. And you did *not* want to be outside the compound when that occurred. No thank you, sir.

But he'd got a bit caught up in this Recon and Recovery detail on a search for meds. To do that he'd needed to get to a chemist or a supermarket that wasn't wrecked, ransacked, gutted, torched, or worse, inhabited by infected. He'd found a pharmacy that fit the bill, thank god, and had even snagged six maxi-packs of Panamax (try saying that six times fast). They were the old-fashioned tablet form, but they'd do. He'd also found a nice 50-pack box of unspoiled protein-shake sachets, two medipens and five plasti-cans of Coag-spray in an office at the rear of the shop – *that* was a good pick. He was now on his way to the rendezvous area to hook up with Matt to make the quick return haul to Kulin Wallcom before dark.

Now, speaking of which, where *was* he? Matt Johansson, his R&R partner, liked to split up and go out alone to double the chances of recovering useful stuff. It wasn't in the regs, they were meant to stay together. After all, that was the idea of going out in pairs. Still, they'd been doing R&R, a while now and John couldn't argue with how good Matty was at salvaging stuff by himself. Clothes, fuel, electronics, bits of iron, aluminium or steel he gave to Metal. Last time John had tried bringing back some scrap the guys in Metal said, 'Yeh, this is good scrap, minus the 's'.' So, he stuck to things he understood, meds, food, books – as in print ones, 'real books' his father used to call them. He loved to read, so yes, that last one was a bit selfish. John also knew how to find infected. Seemed to have a sixth sense about them.

John scoped the area for his partner, listening for the tell-tale sounds of coordinated foraging. Problem was that Matt dampened his 360 comms out here to concentrate. 'Throw me a message, why don't you?' he says. 'You don't even have to type, just think 'n' throw.' Yes, of course, Matthew. Apart from the throw function being only effective to a range of twenty-five or so meters, you had to have a visual on the receiver, and he bloody well didn't know where his peripatetic partner was. He was probably imagining it, but he swore his microchip implants tingled whenever he thought about throwing a text. He scratched at the little bump at the back of his neck.

He was reluctant to call out his partner's name. Some of the stronger infected were active at semi-dusk, willing to bet their quick reflexes against their pre-dark weakened vision for the chance of a feed. God, 'a feed'. He didn't think he'd ever get used to the idea of people, even brain-fried ex-people,

eating other people alive. Animals yes, he got how the infected ate them, but people? But that was the world he now found himself in.

And the infected weren't the only problem out here. Ahead he spotted a blood trail leading from the road he was walking on. John stopped to have a closer look. There was a mess of smudged paw prints in the blood. He stiffened – dogs.

He shouldered his Austeyr F92 rifle and scoped the area. There was nothing in the vicinity, nothing he could see or smell anyway. He bent down and examined the blood. It glistened, fresh, a daylight kill. Which meant it was a 'clean' pack. As known animal Jackson Virus carriers, any sort of dogs were a threat, the non-infected ferals as much as their JV counterparts. And they were damn aggressive.

He inhaled through clenched teeth. 'Alright, Bradley, let's see where this goes.'

John followed the blood trail to a clump of bushes by the roadside and listened. Nothing. He pushed aside a branch. *Oh shit!* There wasn't much to go by, but it looked like a male. What was left of the poor bloke. Jesus H Christ, the ferals could pick apart a corpse.

Using his rifle barrel, he rolled the body over enough to check the back of the neck. No tell-tale red spot. Not chipped. A wastelander, a cleanskin – not infected. But also not a wallcom res. Part of John felt relieved; he hated next-of-kin duty. Another part of him felt like an arse for thinking that way. He regarded what remained of the tattered rags the man had been wearing. Ferals, some wallcom folk called them, like the dogs. And they could be just as dangerous if they felt threatened. In some ways, fair enough. We shut the gates when it all went pear-shaped and kept them shut. And the result was lying in front of him.

'OK,' he said to himself, 'let's hook up with Matthew now, and get on home.'

Leaving the body where it lay, he resumed his walk towards the rendezvous area, rifle up, casting a careful eye across the blasted, rubbish-strewn landscape. How quickly it had all broken down. By 'it' he meant the areas outside Kulin Wallcom. And, most probably, the areas outside the other wallcoms around Melbourne, though he wasn't sure. You could only know what came through sporadically from micro-chipped refugees or what came over the commlink, which could be second, third or even fourth-hand info. You know, the 'this guy heard from that bloke, who talked to her and she said that Longreach Wallcom was gone' type of thing. Communications were often garbled because, as John understood it, the commlinks were localised, compound-based systems, having been established as intranet clouds that piggy-backed onto bigger tera-clouds. Comms between them had become unreliable post-Fall as pretty much all the external linked systems had gone down.

What he *did* know, however, was what was in front of him, what he came out into at least four days a week. This was his reality. If Derrida's deconstructionism challenged attempts to establish any ultimate or secure meaning in a text, then the 'text' of this landscape after the Fall of Melbourne was *very* deconstructed and insecure; a wasteland straight out of *Mad Max* from his old-school vid collection.

And he had no definite idea what else remained out there. Of the twenty-eight wallcoms that existed in greater Melbourne and outer areas in pre-Fall Victoria, the general consensus was that only four remained: Avalon, Oakridge, Blue Rock, and Kulin, home to John, his family and around 22,000 other cleanskins, located 45Ks south east of the ruins of Melbourne, once The Most Liveable City in the World.

Not anymore.

John glanced at the top right of his 360 VWAS, the Virtual Wrap-Around Screen in front of his face; the time glowed 4.49pm in insistent high-res electric blue. The display clicked over to 4.50, accompanied by a scrolling flashing message: *Time to wallcom 1hr ... Time to wallcom 1hr ... Time to switch that off.*

Geez, Matt, c'mon!

He quickened his pace, his boots crackling on the glass-littered sidewalk in front of broken shop windows revealing dark, looted and gutted interiors. Even here, the better part of fifty clicks from Melbourne, the effects of the prolonged, uncontrolled fire in the wake of extensive last-ditch URAAF blanket-bombing were visible everywhere.

Weapons fire pockmarked buildings, vehicles lay abandoned, mute rusted memorials to long-dead owners. The landscape now resembled something from the netfeeds out of Saudi in '29. Retro-style billboards still advertised what was now frivolous, the irrelevant detritus of a dead past: London Look Lip Gloss – *You'll be Helen Mossberg in London Look!*; Radio 360 Max 102 Kris and Janie's breakfast show; the latest End of Financial Year SALE SALE SALE at Parvis-Gorman!; Powerball Jackpot – this week e40 million! Right. Forty million e-coin was now as useful as forty million tubes of London Look.

And there was a pre-Fall ad for Blue Rock Wallcom. Rare vacancies – now accepting applicants.

They'd mounted two or three contact missions to Blue Rock, 116 kilometers north-east, but the squads hadn't returned. So, after some very heated debate in ops meetings, contact missions had been shut down, the feeling being, let's get our own house in order. Post-Fall Rule 1: Worry about yourself. John didn't necessarily agree, didn't like it, but he got it.

Of the wallcoms that had fallen, the closest to their position, Archangel, had gone down late in '51 in a screaming, fiery heap. As per other doomed compounds before it, the collapse of Archangel released a whole wave of refugees. Not many made it to Kulin. The wasteland was unforgiving; home now to scattered survivor bands, some doing well, others hanging on by the plaque of their teeth.

Then, of course, there were the infected, jacks most called them, J's, white people. There were always them.

As for the rest of the country, he had no real idea but, judging by the silence, he knew it wasn't beer and skittles. It was two years since the poignant, final InfoNet Message to the People from President Lauren McCann: 'People of the United Republic of Australia, the government can no longer

guarantee your safety. You must now look to yourselves for your survival. You are on your own.’ A glowing endorsement on the state of the nation, thank you, Captain Obvious. OK, that last reference was a bit tough. Can’t blame McCann for *The End Of The World As We Know It*. As for the rest of the globe, well, they didn’t know. It all went dark about eighteen months back. The lights, literally and metaphorically, had gone off.

The empty street revealed an echo, a depopulated shadow of what had been there before. The thin veil of modernity had been very thin indeed. To think, pre-Fall, post-apocalyptic fiction had been far and away his favourite reading genre. Now he was living it. The end-of-the-bloody-world-as-we-know-it indeed. Shelley’s *Ozymandias* came to mind every time he came out here: *Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair! Nothing beside remains. Round the decay. Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare!* The great poet had written about fallen empires and that’s exactly what it felt like out here. It described the end as well as anything else did.

Sounded like the end too. The quiet could be disarming, at least during the day when the infected were in that light-sleep state they entered. They made up for it with a heck of a racket at night, like damn banshees, but during the day, it could be quite peaceful. Until sunset.

A sudden scrabble of movement off to his right pulled John out of his reverie. Fingernails on metal. He stopped dead in his tracks. The noise came from the backyard shed in the nearby house. The fence had been knocked over so he was now looking at the open door of the three-by-three aluminium shed. Typical infected rest-up location; easy access, cool, enclosed, no windows.

John checked the suppressor on his rifle then inched forward, careful to avoid stepping on anything that might give him away. He was ten meters from the side of the shed when a white hairless head and muscled upper torso appeared in the doorway. It was an infected male coming out of torpor a bit early as the windowless shed was still in shadow. It hadn’t seen him. Blinking in the twilight, it focused directly ahead on the tree line opposite, cocking its head to the side, hyper-breathing. John could never get used to that manic fast-breathing thing. It made them more demonic than any of their other dehumanising features. That and the eyes. John stood stock still, forefinger paused on the trigger-guard. Despite their heightened senses, the infected weren’t so good at tracking you if you didn’t move. Easier to say than do, granted.

A bird cawed somewhere behind John.

The male snapped its head around, catching sight of him. It spread its arms out like a raptor, elbows bent, jaw extended and hissed. John brought his weapon to bear, sighted the male and made to squeeze the trigger when the left side of its forehead erupted in a pink mist of blood, bone and brains. It collapsed to the grass without a sound; a puppet with its strings cut.

‘You can be *too* contemplative, Johnny.’ Matt stepped out from the tree line facing the shed, shouldering his Austeyr, wearing that smug, faintly cocky smile of his. The male had been looking directly at him, but Matt was that good at blending in that it hadn’t managed to get a good read on him.

John walked over to the dead male. On his outstretched left hand was a wedding band. In spite of the altered features – mostly hairless, alabaster white body, soulless black eyes, broken filth-encrusted fingernails, dark veins criss-crossing his body like a road map – the ring reminded him that this was once a person. Despite knowing what it would have done had it got a jump on him, John could only feel pity for it.

‘John, seriously, don’t get so caught up in thinking what that guy used to be that you compromise your safety. You *do* know that he would rip your throat out as soon as look at you, yeh?’

‘Matt, I wasn’t–’

‘Ah-ah-ah,’ Matt waved his forefinger from side to side, as he stepped over the dead male, ‘don’t bullshit a bullshitter, John. Don’t bullshit a bullshitter.’

A little under an hour later they reached the bush-line opposite Kulin. The wallcom dominated the landscape, an enormous oval-shaped compound with a continuous 10-meter high, smooth-polished concrete wall partitioned into four segments each assigned a compass direction. They were now facing the middle of the east wall, with the north or front wall being where the main gate was located more than a kilometer and a half to their right. Kulin Wallcom represented more than seven square kilometers of safe haven from the wasteland and the infected.

They each took a knee and scanned the Exclusion Zone, the EZ, a cleared strip of land consisting of the asphalt ring road encircling the wallcom bordered by a stretch of well-trodden dirt and patchy grass, extending in a 100-meter wide strip before giving way to low level brush and scattered trees. It was a killing zone.

‘That’s the second time in a week.’ Matt kept his eyes straight ahead as he spoke. He continued when John didn’t volunteer a comment. ‘John, I get it, OK? I know you’re not into ‘wasting the jacks’ like a lot of the kill chart heroes in there.’ He gestured at the wallcom. ‘You don’t *enjoy* killing them, neither do I. But, hey, mate... you can’t let one get the jump on you coz you feel sorry for it, y’know?’

Matt was a pragmatist. He saw killing infected simply: a solution to a threat, a job that needed doing. John thought of it more as a grace; a release from a miserable existence. Perhaps he just had to be a bit more dispassionate, like his friend.

‘Yep, I hear you.’

Matt smiled at him. ‘Hey, times like this, coming home after a pick, I get a bit misty-eyed seeing this place.’ He sniffed.

He appreciated his mate lightening the tone again. John glanced at him eyebrow raised. ‘I’ll give you misty-eyed.’

The sentiment was right, though, it was an imposing structure. The wallcoms had all gone up well before the Fall, a response to the major loss of life in the 20s and 30s as a result of the Third and Fourth Global Conflicts, terrorism that became more shocking with each act, and the jarring Petrol Riots of '41. Then the Fall hit, and when the infected came to outnumber the non-infected, the wallcoms became islands of sanctuary.

For some.

He did a bio-sweep of the area behind him. Clear. John looked to the wall. One of the military three-person patrols was scoping them. 'OK, Matty, we've got a three-pat waiting for ID confirm.' John swiped his hand in front of his face, activating his vis, the barely visible soft pale electric blue shimmer of the unit enveloping his head. He dragged the ID app from a space near his left ear to the corner of the display area and swiped his forefinger through the icon activating his unique biometric profile.

'Ready?' When he got no reply, he glanced at his partner, frantically swiping the air around his ear as though spinning an invisible hoop. App setup was an endless debate between them. Matt liked his 360 setup in a ring array around his head, reckoning he could rotate through the apps faster that way. John nudged him, gesturing to his own setup. 'Factory settings, I rest my case. Hurry up, will you?'

Matt gave him that cocky grin of his. 'Whaddya talking about, old man? I've already sent mine.'

John rolled his eyes. Dammit, the old app fake-out trick. John swiped his finger through the ID icon and shot off his bio-data to the receiving app that the three-pat signaller on the wall would be assessing within seconds, matching the information to the compound database. A confirm reply message appeared in the form of a green tick next to the 'Accept' field in the vis display. Identity confirmed, they then sent through their Jackson scale results on their last infection check which was, thankfully, under 50.

They waited. The JV confirms could take time, even with a pos result – any doubt, you stay out, as the saying went. Without JV clearance, you remained out in the wasteland till you got it, and that meant finding a safe house, a vacant lockable residence or even a tall tree, which John and Matt had to do once. He winced at the thought of that all-night branch in the back.

'Oh, c'mon, c'mon! We're jacking clear, for crying out loud!' Matt yelled at the wall.

'You know it can take a while, Matt. They've gotta be sure.'

His partner rolled his eyes. 'Why are you always so goddammed reasonable? I tell you, John, I'm not pulling an all-nighter in a bloody tree again. No way.'

'Juuuust a few more sec--' As he spoke two green flashes came through from the wall. All-clear. 'OK, we're good! Up 'n at 'em, Matty, let's go.'

They stepped out into the Exclusion Zone for the quick jog to the compound perimeter. At one point the EZ had been mined, but after the first friendly fatality in one mad dash to the compound early

days after the Fall, the explosives were dug up and removed. There were still of course the wasteland-facing Detonation Lines protecting each main gate, but they weren't pressure-activated ordnance and, therefore, not an issue for returning operators. They could move safely. Despite knowing all this, John still kept a wary eye on where he was stepping. Force of habit. Twenty meters from the wall, he swiped his night-vision app in order to locate the UV-painted portal. Arriving at the wall, he activated the virtual touch screen with his 360 to open the portal. And for that you needed to be chipped.

'Jaysus,' came a voice from above, 'they're lettin' anybody in these days!'

On top of the wall, gazing down at them, was one of the three-pat team, Sergeant Mick McManus. With a brick-shaped head and a permanent frown, he was an odd-looking sort.

'Good evening, Sergeant Mac *Anus*,' Matt called up. 'How are you on this fine evening, ya slack bastard?'

'Slack bastard, is it now? And here's me keepin' 60-60 vigilance on the wasteland up here lookin' out for the likes o' you, every minute, every hour, boyo.' He seemed to slather on this Guinness-thick Irish accent especially for Matt. 'Though, if you don't hurry up 'n' get in here, numbnuts, I just might deactivate the portal and leave ya for the jacks.'

'Oh, yeh, alright.' Matt grinned. 'And then who'd be retrieving your Woodsmoke Fine Kentucky bourbon, huh?'

In another three seconds, they were through the meter thick wall and inside Kulin Wallcom.

They were home.

Chapter 2 – John Bradley

Kulin Wallcom

45.5km south east of Melbourne CBD

Home.

John acknowledged the wall patrollers he knew as he passed. Banter aside, they did a ripping job on the walkway. He couldn't imagine doing it himself, though no doubt Helen would rather he did. She hated picking; he loved it. It was liberating. He also couldn't imagine wearing a BACC suit – the full body, black Bio-Armour Combat Chassis they wore. They were apparently lightweight and flexible and were, by all accounts, pretty nifty with Commlink-integrated IT and Medi-systems designed to protect and preserve. But they looked like robots in those things. Claustrophobic. No thanks.

A shout went up from the wall-top as they passed below, 'EZ free! Clear for fire, weapon hot!'

Katcha-katcha-katcha-katcha! Katcha-katcha-katcha-katcha! The heavy 50 cal Browning rattled off sets of maintenance fire into the EZ, the spent shells clinking on the concrete. The wall crews did it once a month with blank rounds to keep the machineguns in mint working order.

Again: 'EZ free. Clear for fire, weapon hot!'

Prrrt-prrrt-prrrt prrrt-prrrt prrrrrrrt. This time the rate of spent shells was phenomenal, the metallic hail counterpoint to the electric whirr of the rotary barrels.

'Hear the difference, John? That second one, that baby is all electric, the Gatling 7.62 minigun. The Grinder. That thing can deliver—'

'Six thousand rounds per minute, yeh, yeh, I know because you tell me every damn time they do a practice fire, Matt!'

The heavy guns were in their element defending against larger scale assaults – of which there had been a few in the early days of the Fall – but the wallcom barely had enough emplacements to create overlapping fields of fire; a fact, thankfully, not very well known in the wasteland. The heavy weapons required regular maintenance which meant they also had to be hauled off the wall, down the stairwells and across to Mechanical. Again, no thanks.

They walked on moving through the area that used to be the wallcom shopping precinct, now a quasi-industrial area home to Exchange and Recovery, among other things, sorting, allocating and producing the various items that could be used at Kulin. Dropping off their booty to be sorted at Recovery, John and Matt started the 10-minute walk through the compound to their residences.

The wallcom, despite its size and military functionality, had managed to retain a fair bit of its pre-Fall charm. In fact, if you factored the infected and the wasteland out of the equation, and the ubiquitous public awareness signs like the one they just passed (*Be water-smart: 1-minute showers*

MAXIMUM!), you could be mistaken for thinking there was nothing wrong with the world. Here and there, hawker stalls offered an extraordinarily inventive range of reclaimed goods or exotic foods (a Kulin favourite, rabbit kebabs – ‘*rababs*’ – ‘*Get ‘em while they’re hot, get ‘em here!*’), barbers, repairers of all sorts (the art of fixing things made a welcome comeback), book and knick-knack stalls, vegetable gardens in almost every available square meter of land; Kulin was an enclosed, working, bustling safe haven. And though the wallcom had gone a bit to seed in the post-Fall chaos, it was still landscaped in a way that managed to de-emphasise the 10-meter concrete wall backdrop. A family-friendly environment, it boasted walking tracks, sports areas, playing fields, schools, a lake and wetland, a (former) shopping precinct, residential zones, and an engineering facility to ensure energy supply. It was an enclosed, largely self-sufficient haven.

Largely self-sufficient – there was the catch.

They grabbed some bottled water at one of the stalls after a quick, half-hearted haggle. Matt took the bottle and raised an eyebrow at John. ‘Three credits for water! I swear the prices for these are higher here coz it’s Zone 1. They take advantage of the fact we’re single blokes who don’t know any better.’

‘Ha!’ John barked. ‘You don’t. C’mon, tightwad, it won’t break your credit bank.’

They found themselves in front of Matt’s building. Post-Fall, Zone 1 had been re-allocated to singles and also housed most of the military barracks. Matt, who had gone to college in the States, shared a smallish three-bedroom section with two other R&R operators and maintained the building was like a dorm – a bit mad. Matt held his eye in front of the retinal-ID pad next to the double doors. It scanned green acknowledging resident status. John did the same, scanning as ‘guest’. They stepped into the lobby area, a large cavern-like space with a row of grey metal locker-type boxes on the right side of the room – the magazine.

As Matt swiped through 360 apps deactivating and checking his weapons in, John piped up. ‘Hey, Matty, what’re you doing for dinner?’

‘What am I doing for dinner? Mmm, I dunno. Figured I’d get into some, umm, what’ve I got in there... ahh yes, some sweet teriyaki beef.’

‘An MRE?’

‘No, John. I went over to Exchange, traded for a steak, and then slapped together some teriyaki sauce to go with it. Yes, an MR-freaking-E!’

‘Geez, Matt, come to our place for dinner, Remi loves seeing you. And that MRE packaged crap you eat is exactly that, crap. They don’t call them Meals Requiring Enemas for nothing, you know.’

‘Oh, very good, John, *very* original. Don’t knock the old faithful MRE, I like ‘em, man.’

‘Ah-ah-ah.’ This time John extended his forefinger and waved it from side to side as he grabbed his friend’s arm and dragged him outside. ‘Don’t bullshit a bullshitter, Matt. Do not bullshit a bullshitter. C’mon.’

Chapter 3 – John Bradley

Bradley apartment, Kulin Wallcom

6.45pm

John and Matt entered the apartment, a standard short-hall, two-bedroom, living room, dining-kitchen with bathroom setup that most small families or couples had access to in the compound; a 2LDK in real-estate speak. They'd bought theirs in a special deal Helen had snagged through the hospital back in '46, her being classified as 'Vital Services' (John'd joked that *he* certainly wasn't) gaining them access to wallcom apartments at rates others couldn't. Even with their dual pre-Fall income and the special rate, it was still a stretch. An understatement to say they were lucky.

'Helen, Remi! I'm home. Got Matty with me!' John called out from the short hallway leading into the apartment. He unslung his rifle.

'Hi!' Helen called out from the kitchen. Her head popped out from the kitchen doorway. 'Hi Matt. John, weapons, please?'

'Helen, I've literally just got– OK, OK!' He held up his hands in surrender. 'They're going away now, ma'am!' He ripped off a mock salute. She shot him a look before withdrawing into the kitchen.

'Man, you walk in the door.' He rolled his eyes at Matt then packed and locked his Austeyr, handgun and hunting knives away in the hallway cupboard, de-activating the firearms via his 360. With a wave in front of his face, he muted his system to minimal settings. Work over.

'Hey, daddy! Oh, hi Uncle Matty!!' Remi, long blond hair trailing behind her, ran the length of the hallway and jumped into Matt's arms. He swung her in a circle, laughing. 'Woo hoo! Rem-girl!'

John smiled seeing his daughter and Matt get on so well. Matt's own people had all died in the Fall, and in their absence, John's was the closest thing Matt now had to family.

'What did you bring me from Out There, Matty?' she beamed.

'Hey, c'mon, Rem. What did we talk about?' John interjected.

'Nah, nah, it's OK, John. I got this,' said Matt. 'So, Rem-ay, what did you think I might have from 'Out There'? He made air quotes as he said it.

'Mmmm... a picture book? Gum maybe?' she said with the cutest expression of hope on her face. John's heart skipped a beat every time he saw it.

'Gum?! Oh, gee, Rem. I dunno. Lemme just see here in my Bottomless Bag of Goodies.' Matt made a great show of rummaging around inside the bag, even sticking his head inside it saying, 'I'm sure I had something in here... now, where *was* it?'

Remi was beside herself with anticipation, giggling and clapping her hands together as Matt exclaimed, 'Ah-HA! Found it! Now, close your eyes.'

Remi clamped her eyelids shut as Matt delivered his ritual line: 'No peeking now. *Okaaaaaay...* open!'

It took her a single second to process what Matt was holding two centimeters from her face – a 10-pack of Big Charlie Strawberry Bubble Gum. 'Woo hoo!' she shrieked. 'My absolute favourite! Mummy, mummy, see what Matty brought for me!' She whipped around to John, 'Can I have one now, daddy?'

'*One*, alright darling? Dinner's real soon. You go and play a bit now, OK? Oh hey, and how about a thank you for Matt?'

'Yes daddy. Thank you Mattyyyy!' she called out as she skipped to her room.

'She's a great kid, John.'

'Yeh, I know Matt, and she loves you. Well, she loves the gum, anyway!' He grabbed his partner in a playful headlock, while Matt reciprocated by grabbing John on the back of his thigh. 'Agghhh dammit, that hurts, you knucklehead!' he cried, laughing as he said it.

Despite their age gap, they'd got on like childhood friends since they first met at the university more than ten years ago, Matt a fresh-faced PhD, John an up-and-coming youngish History lecturer, eventually becoming workmates as academics. They'd become R&R pickers after the Fall, a job they'd been doing together now for the better part of two years. He trusted Matt with his life.

Helen entered the room wiping her hands on a towel. 'C'mon you two, cut it out. Welcome home, Mr Bradley,' giving him a hug with her wrists as her hands were still covered in god-knows-what. 'Hey Matty, how're you doing?' giving Matt a peck on the cheek. 'Staying for dinner? We've got real chicken.'

'Heya Helen. Yeh, I'm good. Ahh... *real* chicken?! Lemme think... YES please! Oh, Jesus, Buddha and Allah, I don't recall the last time I ate honest-to-goodness real chicken!'

'Wow, hon, how'd you snag that?' asked John, salivating at the smell coming from the kitchen.

'You know Jane Pham's little girl Rachel? Remi's classmate?' John nodded though he had no idea. 'She had that bad case of food poisoning last week. Not unusual, happens a lot. Anyway, some of those idiot parents at the school thought she had some magic case of Jackson Virus and wanted to take her to the isolation unit.'

Helen kept talking as she walked to and from the kitchen, her voice fading in and out as she moved.

‘One bright spark, Akasha Markham, yeh her... she wanted to put Rachel *outside the damn wall*, for chrissakes! Well, I went at Jane’s request, I mean the poor woman was beside herself, so I talked those idiots down and gave Rachel some anti-B shots and she settled in hours. Jane’s family works in the abattoir and she asked what we she could do for me in return and wouldn’t take nothing for an answer. So, I asked for something I didn’t think she could get, as a joke. Well, I’ll be a jack’s aunt if she doesn’t turn up today with three chicken fillets!’

John had been at the abattoir last week checking it out on one of his regular perimeter walks. They had a good number of animals but, despite an aggressive breeding program, there wasn’t enough chicken, sheep and cattle to sustain the compound. They’d seemed, on some intuitive level, to say, ‘We’ve had enough of this place, we aren’t going to cooperate.’ Of course, there were rabbits. Exfil sweeps brought them in regularly, so they couldn’t complain they had no meat. But chicken? Chicken was a rare treat.

He smiled at his wife as she returned to the room. ‘Helen, my love, I know you aren’t meant to take gifts, but I am super-glad you did in this case.’

‘Here, here!’ Matt added.

‘Remi! C’mon darling, dinner time!’ Helen called out as she laid the last of four steaming plates on the table.

‘Here Matty, hook into that!’ John passed Matt a plate of garlic chicken with fresh vegetables. Abundant water and rich soil meant high-yielding veggie gardens, and almost every available inch of space at Kulin had been cultivated.

Matt made an almost comical sniff over his plate, ‘Oh, good god, if that tastes a tenth as good as it smells, I will call you a genius, Helen.’

‘Well, you can call me that anyway, Matthew Stieg Johansson!’ she retorted.

Matt laughed, ‘Man, I’m that hungry I could eat the arse out of a low flying duck... oops, sorry Rem!’

Helen frowned half-seriously. Remi giggled, ‘You’re funny, uncle Matty!’

They spent the next couple of hours enjoying a candle-lit meal and another rare treat, a bottle of 2034 Red Hills Cabernet Sauvignon. ‘We *were* saving it for Helen’s birthday, but what the heck!’ They talked about Remi’s teacher Mr Orisano (*‘soooooo funny!’*), Helen’s more interesting patients at Medical, and the weirder stuff John and Matt had seen on Recon and Recovery in the last few months (*‘two dead infected mounted on bicycles, go figure’*).

The conversation drifted, as it often did, to the dangers of R&R missions. It helped that Matt was there. He had this ability to soothe Helen without her knowing he was doing it. At least, that’s how it seemed to John. Whenever he tried it, she was on to him in a second.

‘It’s during the day,’ Matt pointed out, ‘so we hardly ever see any infected and if we do encounter an IP, nine times out of ten we call in a Search and Destroy squad, the Special Forces guys, to take care of it. No brainer.’ Matt, by accident or by design, made it all sound so casual, never mentioning the frequent contact like today’s, that *did* occur and that they took care of themselves. For that, John was thankful as it would have shifted the discussion to a different plane.

‘I mean,’ Matt continued, on a roll now, extending his wine glass as Helen gave him a refill, ‘it’s not as if we go out *with* S ‘n’ D. Now *that’s* a whole different ballgame, what with some of the survivors wanting to take a shot. Those guys get contact all the time. They hunt it. Just last w—’

‘Soooo,’ John interjected, ‘enough of that. Are you going to the Green tomorrow afternoon, Matt? Skylar Kruse is doing a set with his brother Harley, and that uber-cool Japanese all-girl group Mach 4 are playing. They are brilliant. Want to come?’

‘Oh, I’m on to what you’re doing there, John Bradley,’ Helen said, pointing at him with her forefinger extended from her wineglass. ‘It’s called diversion, though not a bad tactic, I admit. They’ve still got it, the Kruse gentlemen, even without the rest of Pacifica.’

‘You want to meet the Kruse brothers, Helen?’ John offered. ‘He and his girlfriend, Riko from Mach 4, are R ‘n’ R too. They shadowed us for a while, remember? They’re naturals at it too, I might add. Very capable.’

Most pre-Fall celebrity meant nothing in Kulin. The only old-world fame that had any cache at all these days was that of a musician. One Sunday a month on the Green in central Kulin, the Governing Council put on a concert to keep morale up. The brothers from progressive-hard rock group Pacifica still sounded as good as they did years ago, even if two of the members weren’t there, and people still loved listening to them play. It was a pleasant diversion in an unpleasant world.

‘That might be a nice afternoon with Remi. I’m sure she’d love to meet Skylar, and yes, I would like to meet the legendary Mr Kruse,’ Helen added with a sarcastic grin at John.

He shrugged, picking at a piece of pumpkin pie. ‘Schedules, honey. Exfil schedules are diabolical. What can I do?’

Helen gave him one more eyebrow-lift then turned to Matt. ‘You coming along, Matty? I can do some sandwiches. I made some fresh bread.’

‘Yeh, I just might, we’ll see. Might also have a loooong sleep in. We’ve done two completes and a deuce in the last two weeks, and this last Turn felt like a long one,’ Matt yawned. ‘Hope we don’t have to go out till at least Tuesday. I am shagged, brother.’

Completes – four consecutive days of R&R – weren’t all that common, but usually got you at least four days on in-compound duties. However, that was always dependent on demand for certain goods for recovery. And there was *always* demand. When the wallcom first faced the idea of having to go outside the wall to recover supplies, John didn’t think the demand for goods would be anywhere near

as unrelenting as it was. That was until one of his neighbours, Greg Mathieson, who had taught Urban Environments at the university, gave him greater appreciation of what a 22,000-person residential zone consumed.

‘Can’t see the recovery demand? John, are you kidding?’ he’d exclaimed over dinner one evening. ‘The Smithsonian online magazine used to run these fascinating articles on weekly consumption of average families and it would blow my mind every time I saw it coz they would have a shot of the family and displayed behind them would be all the stuff they would consume in a week. And that’s just the food, John. Get the picture? People crave normality. They want their ‘stuff’. They want their cereal, their instant coffee and their gravy mix for their potatoes, and they also want their shaving cream, sneakers and a spare pair of jeans. That’s where Recovery comes in. Mark my words, R-and-R will be full time and it will prove the lifeblood of this community. Demand? As long as this wallcom holds, demand will be there.’

And he was right. It was there and it was demanding on all of them. You could be sent out at any time; nothing was guaranteed post-Fall.

As if on cue, the Bradleys’ wall-commlink buzzed.

‘What is it John?’ Helen asked, once he’d activated the wafer-thin tablet.

‘Uhh... lemme see here... it’s a meeting at the Governing Council rooms. It’s with Decameron, De Vries and Berkman, so it’s something big I’m guessing. Ahh, whadduz it say here? ... Tomorrow morning at seven AM sharp.’

‘Who for?’ asked Matt.

‘Us. Well, not only us, but all active exfil squads,’ replied John.

‘Seriously? Really?! Ah, jack it, there goes the sleep-in. I mean I get the idea that we hafta be ready to go at sparrow’s fart to do this stuff early. But sheesh, y’know, like, seven, on my day off?’

John gave him a ‘whaddya gonna do?’ shrug. ‘Fine with me. I’m a morning guy, Matty. Always have been.’

‘Oh, yes, I can testify to that,’ Helen added. ‘Doesn’t matter if he goes to bed at nine PM or three AM, he still gets out of bed at six and either goes for a run or goes to work, and he bloody-well wakes me up every single time.’ She gave him a faux-angry glare.

John finished off the last of his wine. ‘Yeh, well, swallow a bag of concrete and harden up, the both of you. Must be something big, though, for a full exfil ops meeting.’

Flashmail notifications came through John and Matt’s vis displays seconds later. ‘That’ll be the same message making sure they’re chasing us all up,’ Matt grouched. He stood up, ‘OK, I’d better get going and grab some shuteye or I won’t understand a single word tomorrow. See ya Rem-girl!’ He pounded on her door on the way out.

'Seeya Uncle Mattyyy!' she sang out.

'OK, bud, see you in the morning,' said Matt as he reached for his coat. 'Night guys. Thanks for the evening and thanks for that sweet chicken, Helen.'

'Pleasure. Hey, there's a bit of pumpkin pie left. Want to take some home?' she asked.

'Nah, 's'ok,' Matt grinned. 'I'll just get jumped for it in the kitchen.'

Chapter 4 – Paul Decameron

Kulin Governing Council Chambers

6.59am, Sunday 7 July, 2052

‘OK, thank you. Thank you, ladies and gentlemen.’ Lieutenant Colonel Paul Decameron, Army of the United Republic of Australia, positioned at the front of the double-basketball court sized public meeting hall, waited for order in the crowded room.

As the cross-section of wallcom operators came to order, he appraised how they presented. Decameron was a combination of modern perspectives on fighting and engagement, and traditional military in almost everything else: old school moustache, fatigues with hard-edged creases down the sleeves and pants, plus the conservative cut. He appreciated a certain level of presentation in his troops and was pleased to see that they, for the most part, met his standards. He again checked his AURA field-pattern uniform was in order as he stood, brushing an imagined dust spec from his lapel and adjusting the projection port on his left ear for the fifth time. Habits.

Present were his leaders and twenty-five of the unit commanders of the Search and Destroy squads plus the Wall Ops leadership group, both under his command. Also in the room were twenty of the two-person civilian R&R teams, most of whom he knew well. He activated his Proximal-ID app, a mind-boggling array of names and titles popped into view above heads.

Blast it.

Paul swiped his VWAS vis again and changed the setting to Direct Recognise. He regarded the man sitting next to him, an identifier hovering above his head [*Gerhard Berkmann, Kulin Governing Council, Head Engineer*], and then the middle-aged woman next to him [*Lynda De Vries, Kulin Governing Council, Civilian Admin & Logistics*]. Better.

Gerhard, grey-haired, mid-60s, a very competent engineer, and Lynda, a no-nonsense former CEO of a national transport logistics company who gave as good as she got. Together with Paul they formed the three-person Governing Council of Kulin. They each worked to their strengths and left the others to get their jobs done, though Gerhard cared more about machines than people, and Lynda could be a stickler. Still, it generally ran well enough, considering.

‘Gerhard, Lynda, ready?’ They indicated they were. He held up a hand as the display in his VWAS clicked to 7:00am, the room quietened.

‘Alright. Thank you, people, let’s get started. This is an important meeting with some clear objectives, but I am going to give you some broader context, so bear with me.’ He cleared his throat and continued. ‘We have been able to exist here at Kulin Wallcom as an oasis of relative normalcy and civilisation for more than two years as the world outside has fallen. Melbourne, pre-Fall, had a population of close to twelve million souls, most of them now dead with the survivors either in the four remaining wallcoms, of which this is one, or out there in what is called the wasteland. As you well know,

they are for the most part, either non-compound survivors who have managed to eke out an existence or they are those other beings.'

Paul swiped his 360, pulled a file to his vis and brought up a holo-schematic of Australia. He zoomed in to the wedge-shaped state of Victoria and splayed the projection into the air in front of him. It hovered in a soft blue glow with a number of white pinprick light spots dotted around the landscape, most of them clustered around the city of Melbourne, six of them further out. A Wallcom Australia logo glowed in the corner of the projection.

He walked around the image. 'And it's not just out there, in our immediate surrounds. We do know that the city of Melbourne was overrun, without doubt.' He pulled a video file from his 360 vis and splayed it with his fingertips. 'From the comms that came out of there from the last evacuees, the city and surrounding areas remain a hive of infected, despite the heavy aerial bombardment that URAAF put it under.'

The grainy aerial video, shot in spot-lit darkness, revealed a disaster zone, the view zooming in on uncontrolled spot fires, wrecked vehicles, panicked fleeing civilians and a small cluster of military behind a Bushmaster firing at an oncoming infected pack. Frantic comms added to the desperate urgency of the moment. Hearing scattered comments of dismay, Paul closed it with a swipe of his hand and turned back to the hologram.

'Grim. Included in the wider picture are twenty-four of the twenty-eight wallcoms in Victoria... gone, overrun... swamped.' As he said that, twenty-four of the pinpricks in the holo went a muted yellow, leaving four bright shining lights. Casualty rates scrolled across the image. He let the information percolate.

'As for the ones that are left, apart from us here at Kulin, we understand there are three other wallcoms standing intact, Oakridge, Avalon, and Blue Rock,' Paul gestured to each of them in the projection as he spoke. 'We don't know what sort of state they're in as our contact-seeking exfil missions have not been successful. This is our current intel, people. In terms of the state of the outside world, you know what I do.' He swiped the hologram away.

'So, that brings us to here, Kulin. We have a presence out there in our immediate part of the world as we have needed to be proactive about pacifying and claiming supplies from it, but even many of the safe houses we managed to establish have been compromised as well. It's not a marvellous picture, but, we *do* have a huge plus. We are intact here. We are an oasis of calm, an island in a rough, rough sea.'

He paused and moved closer to the front row of seats. 'That we are able to have this sanctuary of relative safety is thanks to the efforts of you people.' Paul gestured to the room. 'You people here. *You* maintain a vigil on the wasteland from the walls, *you* help keep the peace inside the compound. I'm not being ivory-tower naïve. I know it isn't perfect. We've had to banish lawbreakers to the wasteland for the rare cases of serious crime. Hell of a thing to have to banish someone, let me tell you.'

The room was silent. The banishment rule was still a controversial one, but Paul, along with Gerhard and Lynda, was adamant that there would be no capital punishment at Kulin, even under martial law.

‘We also have issues with supply and distribution, we have fights that break out. A particularly bad one at Exchange last week I understand, Lynda?’ Councillor De Vries nodded. ‘But for the most part it works, it does, and that in itself is no mean feat. If you don’t credit how important that is, consider what happened at Westgate.’

He paused at the front of the room to let them consider that. The closest wallcom to central Melbourne, Westgate had gone under in the early days of the Fall when comms were, for the most part, unaffected. They had taken pity on the army of people wanting in, non-chipped folk from the suburbs around the CBD, seeking to escape the rising tide of infection. The wallcom lasted barely a day. It was said that one infected person had come through the gates. One. Decameron had heard the final comms from Westgate. He’d never forget it, and he’d not let Kulin suffer the same fate. Not on his watch. If that meant a firmly locked front door, then so be it.

‘And you people in SD,’ he gestured to the Special Forces operators clustered together, ‘and you, the R-and-R teams, you go outside every day pacifying this area and bringing in vital goods. Vital. I can’t stress that enough. Without what you do, all of you... I reckon we might have, no, *would* have, gone under. And I do not say that lightly.’

He paused and took in the room.

‘So, why are we here today? Despite the magnificent work you do, we’re still just hanging on. In terms of energy and water we are, within reason, self-sufficient. Gerhard and his people do a brilliant job making sure those systems run. And don’t give me any grief over rationing. Send it to Wallcom Corp.’ The room laughed.

‘As for military hardware, we were lucky in that an AURA supply depot wasn’t too far away when this all went down, so we have enough to be both defensively and offensively secure. However, at any given point, and this stays in this room people, at any given point we are a few short months, perhaps even weeks away from running out of many essential supplies.’

‘Not if we can do something about it.’ Proximal-ID told him it was one of the R&R operators, Kyle Schechter. The comments drew some support from the pickers. The military were reserving comment for now, but he’d need to get to the point.

‘Let me continue. Because of the way our operations are set up, we don’t use a lot of the vehicles, but equally, we don’t have huge reserves of fuel, again, despite our best efforts to retrieve it. However, as we do most of our exfil ops on foot this is not yet a major issue. Food is perhaps the biggest thing, apart from veggies. I must say, I would give my left leg for a fresh orange, but, short of taking a Bushmaster to Queensland, I can’t see that happening.’ More general laughter around the room.

‘What we *do* require, however, is more of everything else. Things we need to survive. However, we do not, at least in the view of the Council anyway, merely want to *survive*. We want to be able to sustain a lifestyle here and perhaps beyond to start *thriving* and regrowing.’ Shouts of ‘Yeah!’ punctuated the room.

He paused and again brought up the holo-schematic of Victoria, zooming in to Kulin. He walked around the projection as he spoke. ‘There are the better part of 22,000 people in this walled community; 20,000-plus civilians, a lot of them with skills, and more than 1,400 military. We have significant operational capability and, therefore, the wherewithal to start doing something about the survive-or-thrive question. To do that we have to start taking a more long-term view, rather than thinking in terms of days or weeks. We need to plan ahead, start thinking about months and years. Instead of a box of recovered items here and there, let’s think about the warehouse the boxes are stored in. Rather than just planting vegetables and crops inside the wallcom, we need to plan on establishing and cultivating tracts of farmland on the *outside*.’ There was a general murmuring in the room.

‘That’s correct, protected farmland, out there *beyond* the wall! Let’s think more broadly about our position here, as people, and our greater responsibility to the human race to keep things from going under, even if it is in our small corner of the world!’ The murmuring became a chatter. This debate around how far they pushed out into the wasteland was a constant one in the wallcom. Well, he was going to shove it out a lot further in the next couple of minutes.

He gestured for silence. ‘For going on two years, we have stuck to small operational targets as sources of material and they, as the R-and-R teams will confirm, are getting harder to find.’ There was agreement from the R&R section. As Paul spoke, he grabbed the map schematic centred on Kulin’s position. ‘Now, there *is* a place, 58 kilometers northeast, so not that far away, that has almost all of what I am referring to as essential needs. In our line of work, when one event or place meets all operational targets, it is called a ‘one-stop’.’

He paused, swiped the map to his left, stopped it and pulled up a position north east of Kulin. Paul splayed it in the air in front of him revealing a 3D image.

‘We have a one-stop. Southstone Supermall.’

A hubbub broke out. It seemed to be divided equally between positive comments on the target, countered though by a number of negative. And they were vocal. Decameron let the room work off a bit of energy, then then began again as the noise tailed off.

‘People, we need material, and a lot of it. This place more than likely has it. What we propose is a combined SD, R-and-R mission to Southstone.’

Schechter piped up. ‘They used to say Southstone has something of everything. Well, if you believe what you hear out there, it’s more like something of every damn jack in Melbourne. The place is

a nest of White People. This could be a disaster.’ This brought a whole new round of back-and-forth, largely divided along military and R&R picker lines.

Before Decameron could reply, Lieutenant Fox from Special Forces addressed the speaker in a booming voice which dampened the debate as soon as he spoke. ‘Do you or anyone here know it’s overrun for certain? Have you been there, Kyle?’ He scoped the room. ‘Has anyone?’ No one replied in the affirmative. ‘Nah, didn’t think so. Wasteland myth for all we know.’ He turned to Decameron. ‘What about sending some drones to scope it, sir? Do we have any in working order?’

Sergeant Dominique Payne, a thickset, shaven-headed female from Mechanical cut in. ‘Nope, we had two. They’re both out in the Grid, shot to pieces.’

One of the Wall Ops leaders indicated she wanted to speak. Decameron knew Lieutenant Vasquez as a competent, but somewhat conservative, operator. He gestured for her to go ahead. ‘Sir, I think the idea has merit, I agree with the rationale, but wouldn’t this be better off attempted when the days are longer in summer, say December or Jan, giving us more time to complete a day op?’

‘Good observation, Lieutenant Vasquez, and ideally, I’d say yes, that would be the way to do this. But if necessity is the mother of invention, then timing is the mother of necessity. And the timing says this has to happen sooner than five to six months away. So, my preference is to get on to this in spring. Yes, Sergeant Harper?’

‘As you’ve pointed out, it’s the better part of sixty clicks to Southstone, sir. Apart from the long-range contact exfil ops to other wallcoms, that’s beyond any distance we have ever gone on regular SD or R-and-R sweeps. The farthest point an SD unit got was 42Ks north east and we all know what happened to those guys. We were losing them on the comms at that distance too, even though there was another unit ten clicks behind. The 360s may not work that far from the Wallcom.’

Decameron considered what he’d said. ‘Thank you, Sergeant. I have nothing to add on the distance, it is what it is with all the risks that entails, but point taken. On the 360s, we have people working on improving performance further away from the wallcom. Gerhard, did you have something on that?’

Gerhard Berkmann cleared his throat. ‘Well, we’re investigating the possibility of piggy-backing onto other wallcom systems based on pre-Fall settings. Blue Rock further east would be closest. Like us, they may have had to change many of the settings that don’t function anymore. Not sure what their status is over there, but it is part of what we are investigating.’

Decameron looked to one of his Special Forces people, Michael Lovell, a widely respected leader. ‘Captain Lovell, what’s your opinion?’

Lovell thought for a moment before speaking. ‘Sir, we have no intel on the situation at Southstone in terms of infected. As far as comms from outside go they haven’t always been reliable, and as Harper says, we haven’t been that far away from the compound to confirm what we’ve heard.’ He paused and rubbed his chin. ‘But given what you’ve said about our supplies at Kulin, we’ve gotta up the

program in terms of volume of material. I'm only speaking for myself, mind,' he said with a wry grin, 'but I reckon you can count on S 'n' D, sir.'

The last phrase was met with a roar of approval from the Special Forces section of the room. Decameron remained impassive, but he made a mental note to shout the man a beer at Georgi's bar. With the Specs on board, the rest of the military would follow suit out of pride. It was now down to the civilian teams of Reconnaissance and Recovery.

'Ms De Vries is the operational decision maker for the R-and-R teams. She was the proposer of Southstone as a target. Lynda, would one of your people want to comment?'

She looked at one of her team, John Bradley. Decameron had worked with him on a number of banishment tribunals. They were a while ago now, but he recalled Bradley as a thinking man with his head screwed on, one that could make sound decisions without worrying overmuch what others thought of him. Paul respected the way Bradley went about his business so was keen to hear what he had to say.

'John, as a senior R-and-R leader, what are your thoughts?' she asked.

John cleared his throat before speaking. 'Well, I will say that you're spot on about the wasteland, Lieutenant Colonel. Pickings are getting harder to come by, exacerbated by—'

One of the Wall Ops troopers called out, 'Speak English, Professor!' Everyone chuckled, even John.

'Philistines. OK, *made worse* by the fact that a lot of the districts we've been going to recently were harder hit by the carpet-bombing or they've been picked clean. There *is* stuff out there, plenty of it, but it's scattered all over the place; in shops, houses, on the streets, in cars, and it's small stuff. A packet of painkillers here, a carton or two of long-life milk there. It's becoming rarer that we bring in the big hauls we were getting six, seven months ago. We're filling in the Grid with greens.'

Decameron knew he was referring to the Exfil Operations map known as the Grid. In order to measure and map their ops targets Lynda De Vries had created the Grid. It mapped a 100-square kilometer zone around Kulin Wallcom, ten-by-ten kilometers, further divided into 100-by-100 meter grids which were given standard civilian number-letter references to make it easier for everyone to work with.

Exfil squads worked a given grid reference for as long as it took to clear it or pick it. Once 'clean', it was coloured green on the map. The SD squads generally went ahead of R&R, in order to sweep buildings clean and mitigate risk for the pickers, but there was always a chance of infected showing up almost anywhere. A green grid didn't always guarantee a clean grid, as the saying went. Decameron reflected on the last time he checked the Grid. It was getting filled in.

John went on, 'I'll also say the outlanders are getting more aggressive and territorial.'

‘You can jacking well say that again!’ *[Proximal ID: Matthew Johansson, R&R]*

‘Yes, but I can’t blame them, y’know. They’re only trying to eke out a living here like we are, and for the most part they stick to themselves. But it means less for us. The good news though, is we understand the outlanders won’t go to Southstone, which means there’s a good chance it’s still a pretty attractive place in terms of useable materials.’ He glanced at his grinning partner Johansson, then at Decameron. ‘If you’re after my opinion, for what it’s worth, I say we try it.’

The cheering now drowned out the dissent, though one voice cut through.

[Proximal ID: Siska Gunawan, R&R]

‘Kyle Schechter has a point. This is a real risk, the most dangerous thing we’ve done. This could be a massive can of worms that once opened can’t be closed.’

Another picker, Georgi Golovkin, the enormous Russian (no proximal ID required), spoke up: ‘My friend, no one says you have to go.’

Gunawan stood up. ‘Didn’t say I wasn’t coming, Georgi, just putting it out there.’

John Bradley stood and placed a hand on Gunawan’s shoulder. ‘He’s correct. It is a risk and someone needs to say it so it’s recorded and planned for.’ There were still one or two voices of agreement. ‘But, perhaps the can needs opening.’ He grinned. ‘Lieutenant Colonel, you’ve got your pickers.’ The room broke out into cheers.

Decameron acknowledged John with a small tip of the head. He surveyed the teams of hardened men and women he had in the room. They wanted to do this. He raised his hand.

‘This is an opportunity to take action, to re-stamp authority on a world gone mad, to reclaim some broader ownership of the way we live our lives here. This operation is a chance to start doing that. What I now propose is a second week of August operation, exact date TBA. We will spend the next four weeks preparing for Operation Southstone and gearing up for it. Section commanders please stay behind.’

Their eyes were all on him, expecting some final words before dismissal.

‘People, in the first year or so here, we were on the brink of going under. We focused on staying alive from day to day. Well, we did that. Then, we started to concentrate on building a better life and on re-establishing ourselves as a community. We have done that as well.’ Decameron paused and took in the room.

‘Ladies and gentlemen, it’s time to retake some of the wasteland.’