

**ROBERT
McCAMMON**


**THE
BORDER**

The New York Times Bestselling author of Swan Song and Stinger

THE
BORDER

ROBERT McCAMMON

Subterranean Press 2015



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To Uncle Carlos

Last Stan

At Panther Ridg

The boy who was running ran into the rain.

He came suddenly into its stinging shower. Within seconds it became a small storm of torment like the fierce prick of a hundred hot needles. He looked back as he ran and saw through the moving haze the tops of mountains explode in the distance. He saw chunks of rock as big as buildings fly in the diseased air, crash back upon the earth and crack into tumbling fragments. Above the mountains flickered the electric blue lightning that put terror into the heart of the bravest man and made the weaker man fall to his knees.

The boy kept running, into the rain.

The field was wide and long. The field was barren. Its mud began to pull at the boy's shoes. He was wearing dirty Pumas, once white. He couldn't remember where they had come from, or when he'd put them on. He couldn't remember where his dirty jeans had come from, or his grimy dark red shirt that was missing its right sleeve. He couldn't remember much at all.

He knew, though, that he had to run. And he had to hope he would live through this day.

For though his memory flapped like a tattered flag, he knew what was behind him. He knew he was in Colorado. He knew why the mountains, as old as time, were being torn to jagged pieces. He knew what the blue lightning was, and why soon there would be pulses of red flame floating up from the tortured earth to angry sky. They were fighting there. They had found another border to contest. And between them, they would destroy it all.

He ran on, breathing hard, and sweating in the sultry air, as the rain began to hammer down.

The mud took him. It trapped his shoes and made him stumble and down he went into its embrace. It was sticky and hot and got on his face and up his nose. Dark with mud, he struggled up to his knees. Through the curtains of rain, he saw the movements on both sides of him, to left and right the wide barren field, and he knew one army was on the march.

The boy flattened himself in his muddy pool. He lay like the dead, though his heart was very much alive in its pounding and twisting on a root of terror. He wished he could cover himself with the mud, that he could sink into it and be protected by its darkness, but he lay still and curled up like an infant just out of the womb and stunned by life itself.

He had seen them before. Somewhere. His mind was wrecked. His mind had crashed into some event that had left him half-brainless and groping for memory. But to left and right he saw the blurred smears of their presence as they moved across the field like swirls of gray smoke, like formless but deadly ghosts.

He lay still, his hands gripped into the earth as if in fear of being flung into nothingness.

And suddenly he realized one of them had stopped its advance, and in stopping its body caught up with itself and took form, and suddenly one of them was standing only a few feet to his left and was staring at him.

The boy couldn't help but stare back, his face freighted with mud. There was no protection to be found here. There was no protection to be found anywhere. The boy's blue eyes stared into the black, featureless slope of the creature's face, or mask or helmet or whatever it might be. The creature was thin to the point of skeletal, its body about seven feet tall. It was similar to the human body in that it had two arms and two legs. Black-gloved hands with ten fingers. Black boots on human-shaped feet. Whether this was a construction or a real thing born from egg or womb, the boy did not know and could not guess. The black skin-tight suit showed no inch of flesh, and small veins laced the surface, carrying rushes of dark reddish fluid. The creature did not seem to be breathing.

The creature held a weapon. It was black also, but it looked fleshy. It had two barrels, and was connected to the body by the fluid-carrying veins.

The weapon was held down at the creature's side, but aimed at the boy. A finger was on a spike-like pod that might be a trigger.

The boy knew his death was very close.

A vibration keened the air. It was felt rather than heard, and it made the hairs on the back of the boy's neck ripple. It made his skin crawl and his scalp of unruly brown hair tighten, for he knew what was to come without knowing how he knew.

The creature looked behind it, and upward. Other creatures halted their blurred, ghostly motions and became solid. They too looked upward and their weapons raised in unison toward the enemy.

Then the boy heard it, through the noise of falling rain. He turned his head and angled his face up into the downpour, and through the low yellow clouds came the thing that made a noise like the quiet movement of gears in a fine wristwatch or the soft ticking of a time bomb.

It was huge, two hundred feet across in a triangle shape, and mottled with colors like the hide of a prehistoric predator: brown, yellow, and black. It was as thin as a razor and had no ports nor openings. It was all muscle. It glided forward with what the boy thought was an awesome and nearly silent power. Yellow tendrils of disturbed air flowed back from the flared wingtips, and four electric-blue orbs the size of manhole covers pulsed at its belly. As the craft continued to advance slowly and almost silently, one of the creatures on the ground fired its weapon. A double gout of flame that was not exactly flame, but had something white-hot at the center of its two scorching red trails, shot up toward the craft. Before it reached meat or metal—whatever the craft was made of—a blue spark erupted and snuffed out the flames and its two centers of destruction as easily as damp fingers on a matchhead.

Instantly, as the boy watched and shivered in spite of his frozen posture, the creatures turned their weapons on the craft and began to fire...faster and faster, the gouts of alien flame flaring up like dazzling incandescent ropes, hundreds of them, all to be extinguished by the leaping and sizzling blue spark.

The boy knew, without knowing how he knew. His mind echoed with things he could not exact.

hear nor understand. He seemed to have come a long way from where he'd started, though where he had been he did not remember.

But he knew this, though he could not remember his own name or where he'd been running from or to or where his parents were: *The creatures with the weapons...soldiers of the Cyphers.*

The craft above...piloted by the Gorgons.

Names humans had given them. Their real names unknown. Their silence impenetrable.

The blue spark jumped and danced, putting out the white-hot flames with almost dismissive ease. The rain poured down and the yellow clouds swirled. The Cypher soldiers began to lower their ineffective weapons and vibrate again into blurs, and suddenly the boy was alone in the muddy field. The monstrous craft floated above him, its blue orbs pulsing. He felt as small as an insect on a windshield, about to be smashed into pulp. He tensed to jump up and run again, as far as he could go in this mud and downpour, and then the craft drifted on past him and he felt its force diminish as it gained speed. In his mouth there was the taste of mud and something like the tang of running his tongue across rusted metal. He heard a sharp sizzling noise—bacon in a frying pan—and turning his head in the direction of the parting craft he saw bolts of electric-blue energy striking out from the vehicle's underside. Small explosions—bursts of black matter—showed hits on the Cypher soldiers even as they blurred themselves into near-invisibility.

The boy decided it was time to get up and run some more, in another direction.

He staggered to his feet and fled across the field, away from the battle. The rain struck his head and shoulders and the mud tried to pull him down. He fell to his knees once, but when he got up he vowed he would not fall again.

Onward through the rain and across the mud he ran, toward a yellow mist that hung across the horizon. He passed and leaped over smoking craters that held things at their bottoms that were burnt black and twisted like old tree roots. The breath was rasping hard in his lungs, which pained him as if they'd been punched by heavy fists; he coughed up a spool of red blood and kept going.

From the mist before him appeared a dozen or more Cypher soldiers, all thin and black-garbed, material that was not of this earth. They all held the weapons that seemed to be growing from their bodies, and they all wore the black featureless masks that might have been the faces of robots, for a name the boy knew. Before he could change direction he was aware of something coming at him from behind with a metallic noise like piano wires being plucked in a high register. He veered to the left and dove into a fresh crater, while above him incandescent blue spheres of tight fire skimmed over his refuge at tremendous speed and tore into the Cyphers, spinning out whips that looked to be made of flaming barbed-wire. The boy crawled up to the crater's edge to see the Cyphers being ripped to pieces by this new weapon, and though some of the Cyphers shot down a few of the fireballs with their own energy weapons or blurred away into the mist the battle was over in a matter of seconds. Twitching arms and legs lay upon the black-splattered battlefield and the fireballs like burning eyes powered on.

into the yellow mist beyond, seeking more victims.

A movement in the crater with him caught the boy's attention. He felt the hairs rise on the back of his neck, and his heart pounded.

Across from him, a faceless mud-splattered Cypher soldier was reaching for its energy gun which had been torn off its veins and lay shrivelled like dying flesh a few feet away. The black-gloved hands scrabbled to regain the diminished weapon, but could not quite reach it since some other encounter had nearly cut the creature in half. The legs were still twitching, the boots pushing futilely against the ravaged earth. In the body cavity glistened black intestines streaked with yellow and red like the bodies of the grasshoppers the boy remembered, yet did not know how he remembered. He smelled an acrid odor akin to the smell of the liquid the grasshoppers shot out upon rough fingers. Only this was maybe twice as strong. The Cypher lay in a pool of it. The creature still struggled to reach the weapon, but the severed body would not obey.

The boy spoke, in a voice he'd never heard before.

"I thought you were supposed to be so tough," he said.

The faceless creature continued its struggle for the weapon. The boy got up in a crouch, mindful of other soldiers or flying things that might take his head off, and dared to touch the energy gun. It had a sticky feel, like rubber left out too long under a burning sun. The veins had ceased to pump fluid. The weapon was crumpling and collapsing inward on itself even as he watched. The Cypher soldier's spidery hand reached for his ankle, and he feared the grip because he had the quick mental image of being paralyzed with pain. Avoiding the soldier's hand, he stood up and ran again because he knew that sitting still in one place too long was death.

He also knew that he wanted to live. Knew that he *needed* to live, and so he'd better find himself a place of shelter before it was too late.

As he ran the rain thrashed into his face. From his pressured lungs he began to cough and spit up more threads of blood. He asked himself who he was and where he had come from, but to those questions only returned blankness. He had no memory beyond running across this field, as if his mind had been turned off and then on again by a jittery hand on a lightswitch. Father? Mother? Home? Brother or sister? Nothing, not even the shadow of a shadow.

He was hurting. His lungs, heart and stomach, yes, but his bones too. He felt rearranged. He felt as if in that weird old song about the thigh bone being connected to the kneebone and all that shit, his thigh bone was connected to his collarbone and his kneebone to his buttbone. Something about his body was messed up, but he was good to run. For now, that was enough.

The monstrous triangular shape moved above him. He looked up and saw the massive Gorgon craft, mottled like a prehistorical reptile, gliding from the ugly yellow clouds. It was still firing its electric-blue bolts of energy to hit unseen figures on the ground. It was oblivious to him; he was nothing, worth not even a spark of destruction.

Suddenly the bright blue bolts began to flare out to the left and right, seeking other targets. The Gorgon craft might have given a shiver of dread, and in another few seconds the boy saw why.

From both sides came thin ebony missiles maybe twenty feet in length. There were ten of them moving fast and silently. Four of them were hit by the bolts and exploded into flying black ribbon but the remaining six grew claws and teeth as they pierced the meat of the Gorgon ship, and forming into shapes like voracious, glistening spiders, they began to rapidly eat and tear their way through the mottled hide.

Six more of the hungry missiles came at the ship, launched from somewhere beyond sight. Two were shot down, the other four became ebony spider-shapes that winnowed themselves into the alien flesh, if it could be called that. Chunks of the Gorgon ship began to fall away, revealing an interior of purplish-red meat veined with what looked like hexagonal corridors. The missile-spiders continued to claw and chew, faster and faster, as the blue bolts fired crazily in every direction. The boy dodged as an energy bolt sizzled the earth maybe forty feet to his right, but he couldn't pull his gaze away from the hideous feast and the death of a giant.

Surely the Gorgon ship was dying. Its bulk shivered and writhed as the Cypher spiders penetrated deeper into the heart of the mystery. Dark red liquid was pouring out from a dozen wounds. Pieces of the craft fell to the earth and yet still writhed and convulsed. The machine screamed. There was a high-pitched sound that seemed to the boy a cross between fingernails on a blackboard and the sinister rattling of a timber viper. He had to put his hands to his ears, to block the noise out before it overcame him and made his knees buckle. A huge chunk of the craft fell away, spiralling fountains of the dark liquid. Within the cavity, the black spider-shapes were feasting, ripping through the alien meat and the inner corridors with claws and fangs that the boy thought could likely tear through concrete and metal. The Gorgon ship pitched to the right, spilling its insides in great falling sheets of liquid and flesh. Pieces the Cypher-spiders had not fully consumed.

The machine-scream went on and on, as the ship crashed down upon the earth. The spiders swarmed over the twitching hide. The boy turned and fled.

Where there was any safety anymore, he didn't know. The ear-piercing noise ceased. *Score one for the Cyphers*, he thought. He ran through the yellow mist and onward, and suddenly found broken concrete under his feet.

He was in a parking lot. Around him in the thickened air were the rusted and weather-beaten hulks of eight abandoned vehicles. The rain had ceased. Puddles of water filled cracks and craters. A long building of red bricks stood before him, with not an unshattered window remaining. To the left was a sagging goalpost and the weeds of a football field. The bleachers had collapsed. A sign had stayed up in the parking lot, valiant in its declaration of a message from the past.

Ethan Gaines High School read the permanent black letters. And below those, the moveable red ones: Senior Ply A ril 4-6 'The Ch ngeling'

The boy saw blurs approaching from his left, across the football field. A few of the Cypher soldiers stopped and regained their bodily forms for a few seconds before they sped up again. He thought there might be forty or fifty of them, coming like a dark wave. He started to run to the right but even as the impulse hit him he knew he wouldn't have time to escape; they would be on him too soon.

He slid to the concrete and under a smashed pickup truck that used to be black but was now more red with rust and still had a Denver Broncos decal on the remains of the broken rear window.

Dark blurs entered the parking lot. The Cypher soldiers were on the move, from somewhere to somewhere. The boy pressed himself against the cracked concrete. If any of them sensed him here...

Something was coming.

The boy felt it, in a shiver of his skin. He smelled some form of pulsing power in the tainted air. From his hiding place he saw the legs of several of the soldiers materialize, as they stood motionless. They too were feeling this yet-unknown approach.

There was silence but for the dripping of water from the car hulks. Then something passed overhead with a noise like a whisper of wind, and there was a bright flash of blue light that lit up the parking lot and made the boy squint and then whatever it was had gone.

The boy waited, blinking. Spots spun before his eyes. Some of the soldiers blurred out again while others remained in cautious and stationary—and maybe stunned—visibility.

Above the boy, the pickup truck moved.

It gave a shudder that made its rusted seams groan, and the boy heard that same groaning metal echo across the parking lot, and suddenly the underside of the pickup was changing from metal to red and brown scales, and its moldy tires were changing into stubby scaled legs from which green red spikes tipped with gleaming black.

He realized the pickup truck was coming to life.

In a matter of seconds a breathing belly was over his head. He saw the shape over him broaden and thicken, with a noise that was a combination of bones slipping into sockets and metal crackling. It formed itself into flesh.

With a burst of panic he rolled out from under the thing, and found himself on his knees among what was now not a parking lot of abandoned vehicles but a menagerie of creatures from the darkest depth of nightmares.

The boy realized that whatever had passed over and released its energy beam in its eye-stunning blue burst had the power to create life. And the life it had created here, from the rusted and abandoned hulks, were either born from real creatures of the Gorgons' domain, or from the imagination of an alien warlord. Bulky, muscular shapes began to rise up from the concrete. The boy was in their midst among their clawed feet and legs that seethed with red and black spikes. Horned heads with multiple eyes and gaping mouths scanned the battleground, as the Cypher soldiers opened fire. The red coils

otherworldly flame flailed out, striking and burning the newborn and monstrous flesh. The creatures that were hit roared and yowled, shaking the earth, and others rushed forward with tremendous speed upon the soldiers. As the boy watched in stunned horror while the Gorgon creations struck left and right with spiked arms and claws into the mass of soldiers, he noted that one of the thickly-muscle beasts had a Denver Broncos decal on the reddish scales at juncture of shoulders and neck. It appeared to be just underneath the armored flesh, like the faded remnant of an earthly tattoo.

The soldiers fired their weapons, scaled flesh burned and smoking, the creatures crushed and torn apart and trampled the long slim figures in their black uniforms, and intestines that smelled like grasshopper juice flew through the air and splattered where they hit. One monster's triple-horned head with six deepset crimson eyes burst into flame from a Cypher weapon, and the creature rampaged around the parking lot blindly striking out as its craggy face melted like gray wax. The Cyphers were being overwhelmed and crushed beneath the monsters, and some blurred away but a few remained standing their ground and firing into the beasts until they too were ripped to dripping shreds. Some on all fours and some on two legs, the creatures began to give pursuit after the retreating soldiers. Three dying Gorgon beasts lay on the concrete being eaten up by the Cypher flames, and they shrieked and beat futilely at the alien fire and tried to rise up from their impending deaths. One got to its knees, its burning triangular head on a thick stalk of a neck turned, and its ebony eyes found the boy, who crawled backwards away from the thing even as the eyes burned out, the flames rippled across its scales and spikes and it fell back upon the concrete with a gasp of life released.

The boy got up, staggering, and ran again.



It was all he could do to stay upright, but as he entered the haze of yellow mist he knew he could not—*must not*—fall. He could hear the roaring of the monsters behind him, off in the distance, and heard the dirty Pumas nearly flew him off the ground. He was no longer on concrete, but again on a field of mud and weeds. Crumpled and smoking bodies of Cypher soldiers lay around him, where another battle had passed. Score one for the Gorgons, he thought.

He hadn't gone another hundred yards when he knew something was coming up fast behind him.

He was terrified to look back. Terrified to slow down. Terrified, to know he was about to be destroyed in this muddy field.

Whatever it was, he sensed that it was almost upon him.

Then he did look back, to see what was after him, and he was about to juke to the right when a rider on a gray-dappled horse emerged from the mist, reached down and grabbed the boy's arm in a lockgrip. He was pulled off his feet and upward, and a hard human voice growled, "Get up here!"

The boy got up behind the man and held on tightly to his waist, seeing the man was wearing a h

left side a shoulder holster with what looked like an Uzi submachine gun in it. The horse and its two riders swept on across the field, while in the distance the Gorgon monsters roared like a chorus of funeral bells on the last day of the world.

But it was not the last day of the world.

It was a Thursday, the 10th of May. Some may have wished it was the last day of the world, some may have prayed for it to be and wept bitter tears that it would be so, but others had prepared for yet another day to follow this one, and so the boy found himself on horseback, approaching a fortress.

On the road that led up to this Colorado hilltop on the southern edge of Fort Collins was an aged and weather-battered sign that showed the stylized emblem of a prowling panther and the tarnished brass lettering *Panther Ridge Apartments*. At the top of the hill, with a panoramic view of all around were the apartments themselves. There were four buildings constructed of bricks the color of sand with gray-painted balconies and sliding glass doors. Built in 1990 and at one time a desired address for swinging singles, the Panther Ridge Apartments had fallen on hard times since the crash of 2008 and the investment company that owned it had sold it off to another company in the beginning of the downward spiral for maintenance and managers. The boy knew none of this. He saw only four dismal looking buildings surrounded by a fifteen-foot high wall of mortared rocks topped with thick coils of barbed wire. Wooden watchtowers with tarpaper roofs stood behind the wall at east and west, north and south. He couldn't fail to note heavy machine guns set up on pivoting stands at each tower. As the horse and its riders continued up the road to the north, a green signal flag was flown from the south-facing tower. The boy saw a large wooden door covered with metal plates begin to open inward. As it opened wider the horse galloped through and immediately the men and women who had pulled the heavy door open began to push it shut. It was locked by two lengths of squared-off timber manhandled across the door through iron brackets and into grooves in the walls. But by this time the boy was being lifted from the horse by a husky man on the ground who had run up alongside to do just this task. The husky man had a long gray beard and wore leather gloves and held the boy before him like a sack of garbage as he ran deeper into the apartment complex and down a set of stairs. A door was opened, the boy was nearly thrown inside, and the door closed again. The boy heard a key turning in the lock.

He was, as he discovered within a few seconds, imprisoned.

The floor was bare white, scarred linoleum. The walls, painted a yellowish-gray, also bore scars. They looked to the boy, as he sat on the floor and examined his surroundings, like claw marks. And bullet holes here and there, too. The door was reinforced with metal plates, as the front gate had been. The sliding door to the balcony was covered with sheet metal and barbed wire. One small square window allowed in a weak shaft of light. There was no furniture. The light fixtures had been removed but of course there was no electricity so the bare wires hanging down were just reminders of what had been. He saw on the walls and floor what might have been the faint brown remnants of bloodstains.

The boy said, "Okay," just to hear his own voice again.

And it was more than that. *Okay*. If he had made it across that field and out of that parking lot with the Gorgons and Cyphers all around, then he was going to survive. He knew he had a survivor's instinct, though he had no idea who he was or where he'd come from. So...okay. And okay because

least he was with humans, and maybe they were going to stick him in a pot, boil him, and eat him but...well, maybe thinking that way wasn't so *okay*, so he let that go. But at least he was with humans, right? And *okay* because for the moment—just for this moment—he felt safe here in this little apartment prison, and he didn't have to do any more running right now, and he was tired and hurting and it was *okay* just to sit here and wait for what was coming next.

What was coming next was not very long in coming. Within a few minutes the boy heard the key in the lock again. His heartbeat quickened. He tensed and slid himself across the floor to press his back against the wall behind him, and he waited as the door opened and three men came into the dimly illuminated room. One of the men carried an old-timey black doctor's bag and a burning oil lamp which he held toward the boy as he entered. The other two men were armed with submachine guns which they also aimed at the boy.

The door was closed and locked behind them.

“Stand up,” commanded one of the men with a machine gun. “Take off your clothes.”

“What?” the boy asked, still dazed from his run.

“*Up*,” came the rough voice. “And your clothes *off*.”

The boy got to his feet. The man who had spoken to him was the same who had heaved him up upon the horse. This man was maybe forty years old, was of medium build, but obviously strong for his size. He had a hard-lined face with a hawk's beak of a nose and deep-set, wary, dark brown eyes. He looked like he'd never known what a smile felt like. Such a thing might break his face. The man wore faded jeans, brown workboots, a gray shirt with rolled-up sleeves, and on his head was a grimy dark blue baseball cap. He had a brown beard edged with gray. Around his left shoulder and hanging down close at his side was the holster for his very deadly weapon. On his left wrist was a battered-looking watch that had no crystal.

“Go ahead, son,” the man with the doctor's bag urged. He was older, probably in his mid-sixties, was white-haired and clean-shaven, thin and dressed more neatly than either of the others in a blue shirt and faded khakis. He was holding onto whatever he could of his life as it had been. His face maybe had once been friendly and open, but now was strained and tense. The boy noted a holster around his waist with a revolver parked in it, and this man wore a wristwatch that looked to be in fairly good working order.

“Are you going to kill me?” the boy asked, speaking to the elder man.

“If we have to,” replied the hard-faced man. “Get your clothes off. *Now*.”

The third man, thin and sallow and black-bearded, stood aside near the door. The boy figured he was there in position to get a clear line of fire. The boy began to undress, slowly because his bones ached and he felt so weary he could sleep for a hundred years. When he was out of his clothes and the men had dropped around him to the floor, he stood motionlessly while the three men stared at him in the light of the oil lamp.

“Where’d you get all those bruises?” asked the doctor-man, in a quiet voice.

The boy looked down at himself. He hadn’t realized. Across his chest was a massive, ugly black bruise. It covered from shoulder to shoulder. Black bruises were streaked across his sides, his stomach and his thighs. He had no memory of what had caused those injuries, but now he knew why he was aching and he was spitting up blood. Something had hit him, very hard.

“Please turn around,” said the doctor-man. “Let’s see your back.”

The boy did. The black-bearded man at the door gave a low grunt and the hard-faced man spoke in nearly a whisper to the third one.

“My question again,” said the doctor-man. “Where’d the bruises come from?”

“I don’t know,” came the still-stunned answer, as the boy turned to face them again.

“You have an equally large bruise across your back and down your spine. Your contusions look to be very severe. You’ve been through an extremely violent incident...not like falling down some stairs or skinning a knee. I mean...*violent*.” He stepped forward, shining the lamp into the boy’s eyes.

“Careful, doc!” warned the hard-faced man. His Uzi was trained on the boy’s midsection, and did not waver.

“Are you spitting up blood?”

“Yes sir.”

“I’m not surprised. What’s surprising me is that your lungs didn’t burst and that you still can breathe. Your hearing all right?”

“Got a little ringing in my ears. They kind of feel stopped up. That’s all.”

“Hm. Interesting. I think you’ve been through...well, I won’t say right now.” He offered a thin, crinkly smile, which was maybe the best he could do.

“Can I put my clothes back on?”

“Not yet. Hold your arms out to your sides, will you?”

The boy did as he was asked.

The doctor gave his medical bag to the hard-faced man and neared the boy again. He shone the lamp over the boy’s body, and seemed to be looking for something in particular. He frowned as he examined the huge black bruise across the boy’s chest. “You can lower your arms,” he said, and the boy did. Then the doctor reached back and opened the medical bag. From it he brought a hypodermic needle, which he uncapped ready for use. “Left arm, please,” he said.

The boy hesitated. “What’s this for?”

“A saline solution.”

“What’s it *for*?” the boy asked, with a little irritation.

“We’re checking to see,” said the doctor, “whether you’re fully human or not. The saline solution causes a reaction in the alien blood. It heats it up. Then things happen. Left arm, please.”

“I’m human,” the boy said.

“Do what you’re told,” the hard-faced man spoke up. “We don’t want to shoot you for no reason.”

“Okay.” The boy managed a tight smile. He offered his left arm. “Go ahead.”

The needle sank into a vein. The doctor stepped back. Both of the other men were ready with the weapons. The doctor checked the time on his wristwatch. About a minute slipped past. “Dave,” the doctor said to the hard-faced man, “I think he’s clean.”

“Sure about that?”

The doctor stared into the boy’s face. His eyes were blue, nested in wrinkles, but were very clear. “No nodules I can see. No abnormalities, no growths. No reaction to the saline. Let’s give a listen to the heart and take a bp reading.” The doctor retrieved a stethoscope from his bag, checked the boy’s heartbeat and then used a blood pressure cuff. “Normal,” was the conclusion. “Under the circumstances.”

“What about the bruises?”

“Yes,” said the doctor. “What about those.” It was a statement, not a question. “Son, what’s your name?”

The boy hesitated. He was tired and hurting, and he could still taste blood in his mouth. A name. He had none to give. The men were waiting. He decided he’d better offer them something, and he thought of a name he’d recently seen. “Ethan Gaines,” he answered.

“Really?” Dave cocked his head to one side. “Funny about that. One of our lookouts spotted you through her binocs running into that high school parking lot. Funny, that it’s Ethan Gaines High School. Was, I mean. So that’s your name, huh?”

The boy shrugged.

“I think,” the doctor said, “he doesn’t know his name. He’s suffered a very violent concussive event. An explosion of some kind. Might have been caught in a shockwave. Where are your parents?”

“Don’t know,” the boy said. He frowned. “I just seemed to wake up, all of a sudden. I was running. That’s all I remember. I know I’m in Colorado...in Fort Collins, I think? But everything else...” He blinked and looked around the little prison. “What’s this place for? What did you mean about the alien blood heating up?”

“That’s for later,” Dave said. “Right now, we’re the ones asking the questions...like where you came from?”

The boy had reached his limit with Dave. Whether the man was holding an Uzi on him or not, he didn’t care. He took a solid step forward, which made both guns train on him, and he thrust his chest out and his blue eyes glinted with anger and he said, “I *told* you. I don’t remember who I am, or where I came from. All I know is, I was running. From *them*. They were fighting over my head. All around me.” He had to pause to draw a breath into his sore lungs. “I don’t know who *you* people are. I’m really glad you got me out of where I was, but I don’t like guns aimed at me. Either yours or the Cyphers’.” He let that hang for a few seconds, and then he added, “Sir.”

The weapons were lowered. Dave glanced quickly at the doctor, who had stepped to one side and was wearing a small, amused smile.

“Well,” said the doctor. “Ethan, I think you can put on your clothes now. As for who *we* are, I am John Douglas. Was a pediatric surgeon in my previous life. Now, mostly an aspirin-pusher. This is Dave McKane,” he said, motioning toward the hard-faced man, “and Roger Pell.”

“Hi,” said Ethan, to all three of them. He started putting his clothes back on...dirty white socks, underwear that was the worse for wear, muddy jeans, the grimy dark red shirt with the torn-off right sleeve, and the dirt-caked Pumas. He thought to check the pockets of his jeans for anything that might be a clue, but searching them brought up nothing. “I don’t remember these clothes,” he told the men. And he felt something break inside him. It was sudden and quiet, and yet it was like an inner scream. He had been about to say *I don’t remember who bought them for me*, but it was lost and fell away. He trembled and his right hand came up to press against his forehead, to jar loose the memories that were not there, and his eyes burned and his throat closed up and everywhere he turned there seemed to be a wall.

“Hell,” Dave McKane said, “sometimes I forget my own name too.” His voice was quieter now, not so harsh. There was a quaver in it that he killed by clearing his throat. “It’s just the times. Right, Doc?”

“Right,” said John Douglas. He reached out and touched Ethan’s arm; it was the gentle touch of a pediatric surgeon. “The times,” he said, and Ethan blinked away his tears and nodded, because tears would win no battles and right no wrongs.

“She’ll want to see him,” Dave said, speaking to the doc. “If you’re *sure*?”

“I’m sure. Ethan, you can call me JayDee. Okay?”

“Yes sir.”

“All right. Let’s get out of this hole.”

They took him out through the metal-reinforced door and into the yellow-misted light. A half-dozen people—thin, wearing clothes that had been patched many times and washed only a few—were standing around the door, waiting for the little drama within to play out, and they retreated up the stairs as Ethan emerged.

“This way.” JayDee directed Ethan to the left as they reached what had been the lowest building parking lot. The rain had stopped and the sun was hot through the jaundiced clouds. The air smelled of electricity before a thunderstorm. That and the air itself was heavy and humid. There was no hint of a breeze. As Ethan followed the three men across the parking lot, past a disused set of tennis courts and a swimming pool that had debris in it but only a small puddle of rainwater at its deepest end, he saw that people of many different generations were gathered here in the protection of this makeshift fortress. There were women of many ages holding babies and young children, there were old children and teenagers and on up to the elderly, people maybe in their seventies. Some of these people

were working, the strong-backed chopping wood and stacking the lengths in neat piles, others laboring on the outer walls to strengthen places that looked damaged, and doing various other tasks in the fortress community. Most of the inhabitants paused in their work to watch Ethan and the men pass by. Everyone was thin and moved slowly, as if in a bad dream, their expressions blank and hollow-eyed, but they were survivors too. Ethan counted eight horses grazing in a corral on a brown-grassed, rocky hillside up near the highest point. A small wooden barn, surely not original to the apartment complex, stood nearby. With no gasoline available, true horsepower would be the only way to travel.

“Up here,” said JayDee, motioning Ethan up another flight of stairs at the central building. The walls had been painted with graffiti slogans in red, white and blue that proclaimed among other silent shouts *We Will Not Die*, *This World Is Ours*, and *Tomorrow Is Another Day*. Ethan wondered if the people who had painted those slogans were still alive.

He climbed the stairs behind JayDee, with Dave McKane and Roger Pell following him, and on the next level the doctor stopped at a door with the number 227 on it and knocked. Just before he opened something screamed past overhead, so fast it was nearly invisible, just the quickest impression of a yellow-and-brown-blotched triangular shape cutting through the air and then gone, and everyone but Ethan flinched because he was tired of running and if he was going to die today it would be without shrinking from his fate.

The door opened and a slim, pallid-faced man with a mass of curly reddish hair and a ginger-colored beard peered out. He was wearing glasses held together with electrical tape. The lens magnified his gray eyes. He wore a pair of dirty overalls and a brown-checked shirt, and he was holding at his side a clipboard with a pad of yellow paper on which Ethan caught sight of lines of numbers. He had the stub of a much-chewed-upon pencil clenched in the left side of his mouth.

“Afternoon, Gary,” JayDee said. He motioned toward Ethan. “We have a new arrival.”

The man’s magnified eyes studied Ethan. His reddish brows went up. “Fell in some mud?” he asked, and Ethan nodded.

“Someone new?” came a woman’s voice from behind Gary, who wore a pistol in a holster at his waist just as did John Douglas. “Let’s have a look.”

Gary stepped aside. JayDee let Ethan enter the apartment first. There was a woman sitting behind a desk and behind her there was a wall with a large, expressionist painting of wild horses galloping across a field. The glass sliding door that led to the balcony and facing the distant mountains that had exploded behind Ethan not long ago was reinforced with a geometry of duct tape. On the floor was a crimson rug, there were two chairs, a coffee table and a brown sofa. Everything looked like junk shop stuff, but at least it made the place comfortable. Or maybe not. On another wall was a rack of three rifles, one with a scope. A few oil lamps were set about, their wicks burning low. A second woman was sitting in a chair in front of the desk, and before her was another clipboard and a pad of yellow paper with figures written on it. Evidently some kind of meeting had been in progress that involved

number crunching, and as Ethan approached the desk he had the distinct feeling that the numbers were not good.

Both women stood up, as if he were worth the respect. He figured maybe he was, for getting here without being killed by either Gorgon monsters or Cypher soldiers. The woman who was behind the desk was the older of the two. She was dressed in a pale blue blouse and gray pants and around her neck she wore a necklace of turquoise stones with a silver crucifix in the middle. She said, "What do we have here?" Her dark brown eyes narrowed and quickly went to JayDee.

"He's human," the doctor said, answering her unspoken question. But in his voice there was something else. *As far as I can tell*, was what Ethan heard. "One problem, though. He doesn't know his name."

"My name is Ethan Gaines," said the boy, before JayDee could get that out.

"His *history*," the doctor went on. The apartment door had been closed by Gary, after Dave and Roger had come in. The noise of work outside was muffled. "Ethan has no memory of where he came from or where his parents are. He is...shall we say...a mystery."

"Hannah saw him through her binoculars," Dave added. His voice was less gruff but still hard-edged. He removed his baseball cap, showing brown hair that stuck up with multiple cowlicks and had streaks of gray at the temples. "I made the decision to go out after him. Didn't have time to bring it to you or anybody else."

"Brave or crazy, which one is it?" said the woman behind the desk, speaking to Dave with a hint of irritation as if she valued his life greater than a horseback jaunt into the battlefield. Her gaze went to the boy again. "Ethan," she said. "I am Olivia Quintero. I suppose I'm the leader here. At least that's what they tell me. I guess I should say...welcome to Panther Ridge."

Ethan nodded. He figured there were plenty of places worse to be. Like anywhere out there beyond the walls. He took a good long look at Olivia Quintero, who radiated a comforting confidence or a strength of will and purpose. He thought that was why she was the leader here. She looked to be a tall woman, slimly built and likely made more slim by lack of food. But she was sinewy and tough in the way she held herself, her face placid and composed, her forehead high under a crown of short-cropped white hair. Ethan thought she was maybe in her mid-fifties, her skin tone slightly darkened by her Hispanic heritage. Her forehead was lined and there were deeper lines at the corners of her eyes, but otherwise she wore the roads and travels of her life well. She looked like what he thought she must have been before all this happened: a high school principal, but one who had experienced some "stuff" in her own younger years and might let things slide if you explained yourself the right way. Maybe she'd been the principal at Ethan Gaines High, who knew? Or a businesswoman, maybe. Someone who had come up from a poor family and made a fortune selling real estate, the kind of houses that used to look like little castles before there was a need for fortresses. And how he knew this about the little castles he couldn't remember, so he just let it go because no daylight was breaking through his night.

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