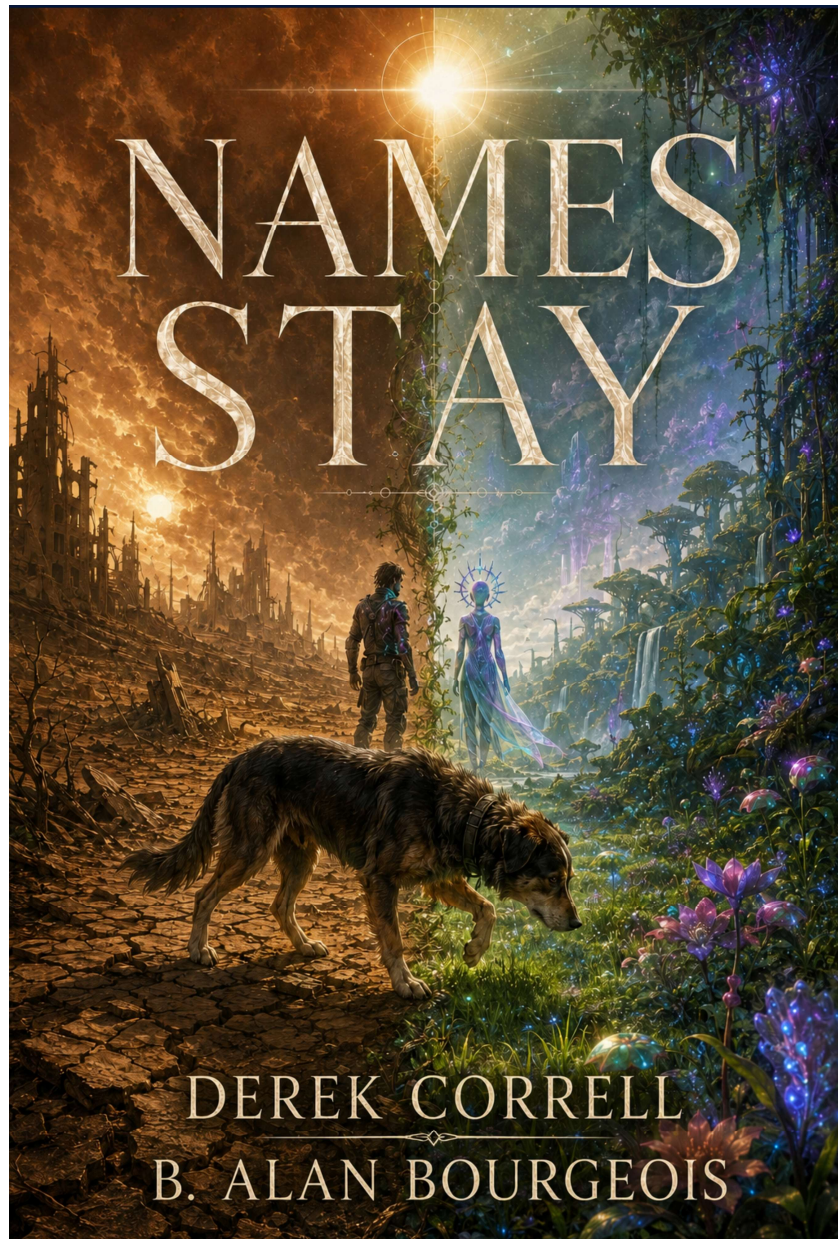




Names Stay

A Sci-Fi Novel

Derek Correll
B. Alan Bourgeois

Copyright © 2026 B. Alan Bourgeois & Derek Correll
All rights reserved.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, organizations, events, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, locations, or organizations is entirely coincidental.

No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, scanning, or otherwise, without prior written permission from the author, except for brief quotations used in reviews, articles, or critical commentary.

This print-proof manuscript has been prepared for review, editing, and final production. It is not intended for resale or public distribution in this form.

Published by Texas Authors Press
(<https://TexasAuthorsPress.com>)
Printed in the United States of America

First Edition

ISBN: 9798182733236

Library of Congress Control Number: To be assigned, if applicable

Contents

Chapter One	
The Twinkie at the End of the World	1
Chapter Two	
The Morning They Began	18
Chapter Three	
The Thing in His Blood	35
Chapter Four	
The Stranger in Color	55
Chapter Five	
The Rule of Doors	73
Chapter Six	
The Dry Lake	102
Chapter Seven	
Red Pumps	125
Chapter Eight	
Echo's Map	145
Chapter Nine	
Pike	158

Chapter Ten	
The Grove Beneath the Green	172
Chapter Eleven	
The Place the Green Could Not Touch	185
Chapter Twelve	
What the Roots Remember	199
Chapter Thirteen	
The Voices Under the Tree	215
Chapter Fourteen	
The First Rebellion of the Green	225
Chapter Fifteen	
What Freedom Costs	237
Chapter Sixteen	
The People Who Came Back Wrong	249
Chapter Seventeen	
The Road to People Who Might Shoot Us	261
Chapter Eighteen	
Calder's Rules	272

Correll/Bourgeois

Chapter Nineteen	
The Messenger at the Gate	284
Chapter Twenty	
The Tower That Heard Stars	297
Chapter Twenty-One	
The Seam	308
Chapter Twenty-Two	
The Man Who Wanted a Weapon	321
Chapter Twenty-Three	
Briar Wells Drinks	332
Chapter Twenty-Four	
The Miracle at Briar Wells	343
Chapter Twenty-Five	
The Council of Thirst	356
Chapter Twenty-Six	
What Kaide Left Behind	366
Chapter Twenty-Seven	
The Girl Who Chose the Door	379
Chapter Twenty-Eight	
When the Miracle Blinks	390

Chapter Twenty-Nine Conditions	404
Chapter Thirty Anchor	416
Chapter Thirty-One When the Wells Turned Silver	429
Chapter Thirty-Two The Harvest Order	440
Chapter Thirty-Three The Town That Walked Away from Water	452
Chapter Thirty-Four The Map of Living Water	464
Chapter Thirty-Five Old Marrow Reservoir	475
Chapter Thirty-Six Mara in the Water	489
Chapter Thirty-Seven Planetary Correction	503

Correll/Bourgeois

Chapter Thirty-Eight The Ship Echo Escaped	516
Chapter Thirty-Nine The Bay of Useful Things	528
Chapter Forty The Command Spine	540
Chapter Forty-One Wide Enough for a World	553
Chapter Forty-Two Echo Cuts the Last Thread	564
Chapter Forty-Three After the Quiet Broke	573
Chapter Forty-Four What the Green Chose	585
Chapter Forty-Five The Door We Keep Opening	596
About the Authors	605

Chapter One

The Twinkie at the End of the World

Zander found the Twinkie inside the glove box of a dead minivan, beneath a stack of expired insurance cards, a melted plastic saint, and three bullets that did not fit any gun he owned.

At first he thought it was a rat.

Not a live one. Live rats had standards. They did not sit still in glove boxes waiting to be discovered by handsome scavengers with questionable morals and excellent cheekbones.

The thing was wrapped in plastic so yellowed it looked archaeological. The logo had faded until only half the letters remained, but Zander knew a miracle when he saw one.

He held it up to the light coming through the cracked windshield.

"Well, well," he said. "A Twinkie for the twink."

Churro, sitting in the passenger seat like he had been invited to drive, perked one torn ear.

"No," Zander said.

Churro whined.

"No. You eat bugs, shoes, and once, for reasons I still don't understand, an entire strip of electrical tape. This is cuisine."

The dog stared at him.

Zander stared back.

"You don't even know what a Twinkie is."

Churro's tail thumped once against the seat.

"Manipulative."

The minivan sat nose-down in a ditch beside what used to be a road. Zander knew it had been a road because there were signs of ambition: cracked asphalt, rusted reflectors, a green metal post with no sign left on it, and a line of dead streetlights stretching into the distance like witnesses who had seen too much and decided to say nothing.

The world had become brown by degrees.

Correll/Bourgeois

That was how Zander thought of it. Not ended. Not exploded. Not burned clean the way old movies used to promise. No dramatic skyfire, no one last broadcast, no heroic speeches, no anthem swelling over the ruins.

Just brown.

Dust on windows. Dust in teeth. Dust packed into the folds of clothes and the lines of hands. Brown grass. Brown water. Brown skies. Brown people with brown eyes watching brown roads for something worse than hunger.

The planet had not died. It had given up trying to look alive.

Zander tore open the Twinkie wrapper with his teeth.

The smell that came out was sweet, stale, and dangerous.

He took a bite.

It crunched.

He paused.

Churro tilted his head.

Zander chewed slowly, then swallowed.

"Texture," he said. "That's called texture."

He ate the rest in two bites before good sense could catch up with him. The last piece stuck to the roof of his mouth like insulation foam. He licked his thumb, pressed it to the wrapper, and gathered crumbs too small to deserve the word.

Churro sighed with the unbearable disappointment of a creature who had never once contributed to a supply run beyond urinating on tires and looking soulful.

"Don't look at me like that," Zander said. "One day I'm eating you, remember?"

Churro yawned.

"That's right. Mock death. Very brave."

He climbed out of the minivan and shouldered his pack, one strap crossing his chest, the other repaired with wire, cloth, and stubbornness. The pack had outlived three knives, two coats, one winter shelter, and a man named Briggs who had tried to steal it and learned Zander slept lighter than he looked.

Zander patted the side pocket to make sure his blade was still there.

It was.

It was always there.

The old razor piece was wrapped in cloth and tucked where his fingers could find it without looking. It was not the best weapon he owned. It was barely a weapon at all. Too short for a fight, too fragile for heavy cutting, too old to be trusted.

He kept it anyway.

Not all survival tools made sense to anyone else.

The morning heat already pressed against the world. Texas heat used to be a joke people made, according to the old ones. Dry heat, wet heat, egg-on-the-sidewalk heat, stupid proud heat. Now it was simply weather with teeth. It came early, stayed late, and made every breath feel borrowed.

Churro hopped down from the minivan, nails clicking against metal, then dropped into the dust.

"Careful," Zander said. "You'll hurt one of your delicate princess paws."

Churro sneezed directly onto his boot.

"Point taken."

They moved north because south had smoke, east had people, and west had a smell Zander did not like.

He trusted smells.

Smell had saved him more often than people had. Spoiled water. Fever. A trap fire. Open sewage. Gun oil. The almost-sweet rot of bodies left under shallow dirt.

People liked to say the end of the world made everyone equal.

People were idiots.

The end of the world made everything honest. That was different.

A rich man could starve. A poor woman could build a kingdom out of scrap. A child could kill you for a can of peaches and cry while doing it. A preacher could trade medicine for ammunition. A mother could give away her last cup of water and die smiling because the person who drank it was her son.

Good and bad had not disappeared.

They had just stopped pretending to dress differently.

Zander preferred dogs.

Dogs lied less.

By midday, the dead road split into three directions. One led toward a low ridge of scrub and concrete drainage pipes. One

Correll/Bourgeois

dipped into a cracked field where nothing moved. The third continued toward the skeleton of a town.

Zander stopped.

Churro stopped with him.

The town was not on any map that mattered. None of the maps mattered much now. Roads vanished. Settlements moved. Rivers dried. Names stayed behind on signs no one obeyed.

Still, from a distance, he could make out a water tower leaning above the rooftops. A church steeple with half its cross missing. The square blocks of old buildings. Something that might have been a motel sign.

Town meant supplies.

Town meant danger.

Town meant people, and people meant questions.

Questions meant trouble.

Zander took the sunglasses from the front pocket of his coat and slid them on.

One lens had a crack through the lower corner. The other was scratched enough to blur the world, which was not always an insult. The frames sat crooked on his nose.

Churro looked up at him.

“What?” Zander asked. “They make me mysterious.”

The dog barked once.

“Exactly. You get it.”

He crouched beside the road and studied the town.

No smoke.

No fresh tracks he could see.

No birds circling, though birds had become rare enough that their absence meant almost nothing.

The wind came from the north, carrying dust, rust, dry rot, and something else.

Zander frowned.

Something clean.

He pulled the sunglasses down.

The town shimmered in the heat.

Beyond it, just past the water tower, he thought he saw a smear of green.

Not brown-green. Not the dull mold color that grew on old pipes or the stubborn gray-green of cactus skin.

Green.

Alive green.

He blinked.

The smear remained.

“Fuck,” he said softly.

Churro’s ears went up.

Zander stood very still.

He had heard rumors two weeks back from a man with no shoes and a rifle made of three different guns. The man had stumbled into a trading camp at dusk, bleeding from one side and laughing like laughter could plug the hole.

Lights in the sky, he had said.

Beautiful people from above.

They make the air cold.

They make the dead ground grow.

They make people scream until they stop being people.

Most of the camp dismissed him as sun-mad. A few gave him water. One woman tried to ask where he had come from, but he started crying when she said the word town. By morning, he was dead, and by noon someone had taken his rifle apart for pieces.

Zander had not believed the story.

Not because it was impossible. Impossible had become a lazy word. Plenty of impossible things happened when there was no one left to explain them.

He had not believed it because hope always came with teeth.

He had learned that early.

Now, standing on the road with old sugar turning sour in his stomach, he looked toward the green and thought of the shoeless man’s face.

Churro growled.

Low.

Not at the town.

At the sky.

Zander looked up.

Nothing but haze.

No lights. No ships. No angels. No gods.

Good.

He hated being rushed into blasphemy.

Correll/Bourgeois

They left the road and moved along the ditch, keeping low where the weeds had gone brittle and sharp. Zander did not head straight into town. He circled. Always circle. People who walked through the front door deserved whatever waited behind it.

The first house they passed had collapsed inward. The roof had given up years ago. Wind had filled the rooms with dust until the furniture became soft hills. Someone had painted KEEP OUT on the front wall in black.

Someone else had painted under it NO THANKS.

Zander liked that.

The second house had bones in the yard.

Animal, he thought at first.

Then he saw the hand.

He kept walking.

The third house had fresh cloth tied to the porch rail.

That stopped him.

It was blue.

Bright blue.

Not faded tarp. Not old denim. Not the gray-blue of dead plastic.

A strip of blue fabric fluttered lightly in a breeze that should not have existed.

Zander touched Churro's collar.

The dog pressed close to his leg.

The air changed another twenty yards forward.

Not dramatically. Not like stepping through a door. More like the world had been holding its breath and finally let some of it out.

Coolness moved over Zander's face.

He froze.

So did Churro.

The dog lifted his nose.

Wind slid beneath Zander's jacket collar, soft as fingers.

For a moment, he forgot to be afraid.

Then he remembered he was good at it.

"Back," he whispered.

Churro did not move.

The dog stared ahead, body rigid, tail down.

Zander followed his gaze.

The green field began at the edge of town.

No transition. No logic. Dead yard, cracked street, broken curb—and then grass. Thick grass, green enough to hurt. It spread between two ruined buildings and beyond them into what had once been a parking lot. Flowers tilted in the breeze. White ones. Yellow ones. Small purple ones clustered near a rusted shopping cart whose wheels had sunk into the soil.

A tree grew through the roof of a gas station.

Not a sapling.

A tree.

Its leaves flickered silver-green in the sun.

Zander's mouth went dry.

"That's new," he said.

Churro whined.

The smell was wrong.

Not bad. That was the problem.

It smelled like damp dirt. Leaves. Water hidden somewhere close. Life, arrogant and sudden.

Zander took one step forward.

Then another.

The grass bent under his boot.

He expected it to crumble into ash. Expected poison gas. Expected teeth.

It was only grass.

He crouched and touched it with two fingers.

Cool.

Wet at the root.

His chest tightened with something he refused to name.

There had been grass when he was little. Not everywhere, not much, but enough. Scraps of it between broken sidewalks.

Stubborn patches behind houses. He remembered lying on his stomach once with his chin on his hands, watching ants crawl along a blade while his mother yelled at someone inside.

Before she left.

Before his father left.

Before Zander became the kind of person who made jokes about eating his dog.

The memory passed through him like a knife turned flat.

He stood too fast.

"Don't drink anything," he told Churro.

Correll/Bourgeois

The dog had already shoved his nose toward a tiny stream running along what used to be the gutter.

“Churro.”

The dog stopped, offended.

“I know. I also enjoy mysterious magic water from murder grass, but we have standards.”

A sound drifted through the town.

Zander turned.

Voices.

Not close, but human.

He crouched and pulled Churro down beside him. The dog obeyed reluctantly, grumbling in his throat.

The voices came from deeper in town, beyond the field. Too many to be raiders. Too quiet to be a fight.

Zander moved along the side of the gas station, staying low beneath the shattered window line. Inside, shelves lay overturned. Old snack wrappers had fused with dust. A dead freezer case sat against the back wall.

He peered around the corner.

The town square opened ahead.

People had gathered there.

Dozens of them.

Maybe more.

They stood in the open street facing the water tower, where the green had spread thickest. Some held tools. Some guns. Some children clung to adults. A few people knelt in the grass, hands pressed into it as if praying to the ground.

At the center of the square rose a mound.

Zander did not understand it at first.

It looked like a low hill covered in new grass and wildflowers. Too smooth. Too deliberate. The kind of thing a town might build if it still believed in memorials.

Then he saw what protruded from the edge where the grass had not fully covered it.

A boot.

Not empty.

Zander stepped back.

His shoulder hit the gas station wall.

Churro looked up at him.

The stories had been true.

Not all of them, maybe. Stories grew in desperate mouths. But enough.

The green was not a miracle.

It was evidence.

A woman in the square began to cry. Not loudly. She knelt near the mound and rocked back and forth, pressing her hands to her face.

An older man stood behind her holding a shotgun with both hands. He was thin, bald, and shaking. The gun's barrel pointed at the ground, but every line of him wanted someone to give him a reason to lift it.

"Where are they?" someone asked.

Zander could not see who spoke.

"They said morning," another voice answered.

Morning.

Zander looked at the sky.

Late afternoon light slanted across the square. The air had that gold-brown thickness that came before evening, when the heat loosened but did not leave. Shadows stretched from the buildings. The water tower creaked softly.

He should leave.

Immediately.

He knew that with a clarity that felt almost pleasant.

Whatever had happened here, it was not done happening.

People were waiting for monsters or gods, and Zander had survived this long by avoiding both.

He backed away.

Churro's paw landed on a piece of glass.

It cracked.

Every head in the square turned.

Zander closed his eyes.

"Shit," he whispered.

The old man lifted the shotgun.

"Who's there?"

Zander considered running. Running was simple. Running had never once required a conversation.

Then Churro stepped out from behind the gas station.

Because Churro was an idiot.

Correll/Bourgeois

“Dog,” a child said.
Several adults relaxed.
Not the man with the shotgun.
Zander stepped out slowly, hands raised just enough to suggest
innocence, not enough to imply surrender.
“Afternoon,” he said.
The old man aimed at his chest.
“Name.”
“Rude way to meet someone.”
The shotgun clicked.
“Zander,” he said. “That’s my dog. He’s not food unless things
get emotionally difficult.”
No one laughed.
Tough crowd.
The crying woman stood. Her face was streaked with dirt and
tears. She looked at Zander like she was trying to decide whether
he was real.
“You came from outside?”
“Generally how arriving works.”
“Did you see them?”
Zander glanced at the mound.
“No.”
A murmur passed through the crowd.
The old man did not lower the gun. “You alone?”
Zander looked at Churro.
“Deeply, according to him.”
The child who had noticed the dog smiled.
The smile made Zander uncomfortable.
Children should not smile at strangers. It suggested a failure in
either education or survival instinct.
A woman with a shaved head and a wrench tucked into her
belt stepped forward. She had broad shoulders, a scar across one
eyebrow, and the tired look of someone who had become
responsible because everyone else was worse at it.
“Put the gun down, Hale,” she said.
The old man’s jaw tightened.
“Hale.”
After a moment, the barrel lowered by inches.
The woman looked at Zander. “You hungry?”

“No,” Zander lied.

His stomach made a sound so dramatic it could have been entered into evidence.

The woman raised one eyebrow.

Zander sighed. “Recently enjoyed a pastry of uncertain age.”

That got half a smile from someone.

The woman said, “We have beans.”

“Luxury.”

“Don’t steal anything and we won’t shoot you.”

“Community values. Nice.”

He should not stay.

He knew this.

But there were too many people watching now, and walking away too quickly made people curious. Curious people followed. Curious people searched packs. Curious people found things they should not find.

Besides, beans.

Zander had done stupider things for worse meals.

The shaved-head woman led him toward what had been a diner. The front windows were gone, replaced with plastic sheets and boards. Inside, a few people worked around a pot set over a stove made from a metal barrel. The smell of beans, smoke, and old grease filled the air.

Churro perked up.

“Absolutely not,” Zander said.

A teenage girl near the stove laughed. “You talk to him like he talks back.”

“He’s rude with his eyes.”

The girl looked at Churro. “He looks sweet.”

“He’s a criminal.”

Churro wagged his tail at her.

“See?” Zander said. “Manipulation.”

The girl gave the dog a strip of something that might have once belonged to a rabbit.

Churro accepted treason immediately.

Zander sat near the wall with his back to it and took the bowl offered to him. He did not eat right away. He watched everyone first.

Habit.

Correll/Bourgeois

There were twenty or so in the diner, more outside. Tired people. Armed people. People who had not slept. A woman with a baby too quiet in her arms. Two men whispering near the door. A boy no older than twelve cleaning dirt from a pistol with a strip of cloth.

No one looked well.

But they looked better than they should.

Cleaner skin. Less coughing. Eyes not as yellowed by bad water.

The air inside the diner was cool.

Zander lifted a spoonful of beans.

They tasted like salt, smoke, and heaven.

He nearly made a sound.

He did not.

He still had dignity, in theory.

The shaved-head woman sat across from him.

"I'm Renn."

"Congratulations."

"You always like this?"

"Alive? I try."

She studied him.

Zander kept eating.

"You really didn't see them?"

He swallowed. "I saw grass. A body mound. People being weird about both."

Renn's expression darkened.

"They came last night."

The diner quieted, though no one looked directly at them.

"Lights first," she said. "Hundreds of them. Not just here. We could see them all across the horizon. Ships, I guess. If that's what they were."

Zander kept his face still.

"They spoke?"

"One did."

Renn's voice changed slightly. Not softened. Tightened.

"Said they'd been watching us. Said the planet was dying. Said they could revive it. Said they needed our cooperation."

"People believed that?"

Renn looked toward the window, where the green field moved in the breeze.

“Look outside.”

Fair.

Zander set the bowl down.

“What happened to the mound?”

No one moved.

The teenage girl stopped stirring the pot.

Renn looked at him for a long moment.

“You should finish eating.”

“I hate suspense.”

“Tomorrow morning they begin again.”

Zander felt the Twinkie turn over in his gut.

“Again.”

Renn nodded once.

“They started with the west road families this morning. Said the process was necessary. Said it would hurt, but only briefly.”

From the back of the room, someone made a small broken sound.

Renn continued anyway.

“They had these instruments. Not guns. Not knives. They touched people with them. Injected something. After that...”

She looked at her hands.

“After that, people changed.”

Zander thought of the shoeless man.

They make people scream until they stop being people.

“They died?”

“No.” Renn looked up. “That would’ve been kinder.”

Outside, a bell rang.

Once.

Every person in the diner froze.

Churro growled.

The bell rang again.

Renn stood so quickly her chair scraped the floor.

Zander reached for his pack.

“Stay inside,” she said.

“Not my strongest skill.”

“Then learn fast.”

Correll/Bourgeois

People moved toward the windows. Toward the door. Toward weapons.

Zander rose and looked through a gap in the plastic sheeting.

At first, he saw only the square.

The mound.

The grass.

The people turning their faces upward.

Then the light changed.

Not brighter.

Cleaner.

A soft lavender glow touched the buildings, the street, the faces of the waiting crowd. Another glow followed, blue-green. Then gold. Then white.

The hum arrived beneath the sound of human breathing.

Low.

Layered.

Melodic enough to be mistaken for mercy.

Churro pressed against Zander's leg, trembling.

Over the water tower, descending from the bruised evening sky, came the ships.

They did not roar.

They sang.

Each vessel carried its own color, its own tone, its own impossible grace. They curved like shells, like seeds, like bones polished by water. Light spilled from them without bulbs or flame. As they lowered into the field beyond the square, the grass bent but did not break.

The crowd outside fell silent.

Someone began praying.

Someone else raised a gun.

Zander could not look away.

A doorway opened in the nearest ship.

A figure appeared in the glow.

Tall.

Pale.

Beautiful in a way that made beauty feel like a threat.

The being descended without steps, feet touching the grass as lightly as dust. Lavender shadows moved across their skin. Their hair was white as bone, soft as silk, threaded faintly with violet.

Their clothes reflected the ship's light until they seemed made from dawn.

They walked toward the crowd.

No hurry.

No fear.

The man with the shotgun—Hale—pushed forward.

“Don’t,” Renn whispered, though he could not hear her.

The being lifted both hands.

“Please,” they said.

Their voice carried through the square and into the diner, clear as water Zander had never tasted.

“Let me explain our purpose.”

The shotgun fired.

The blast cracked the evening open.

The being took the shot square in the chest.

They did not fall.

They barely moved.

Only a small breath left them, almost like disappointment.

Hale lowered the gun.

His hands shook.

The being looked at him with unbearable gentleness.

“We mean no harm,” they said.

Zander felt every hair on his body rise.

Beside him, Churro whimpered.

The being turned their luminous eyes to the crowd.

“We have been monitoring this planet as its young life evolved. We have watched as humanity became central to Earth’s fate. Your world is injured. Your bodies are failing. Your systems have collapsed. We have prepared a restoration that will revive this planet better than it was before.”

A murmur moved through the people.

The being’s eyes shimmered, colors swirling faintly around the pupils.

“But the condition is dire,” they continued. “We must be swift. We must be direct. We will save you and your loved ones from the fate this world has prepared for you.”

A woman outside began sobbing.

Not fear.

Relief.

Correll/Bourgeois

Zander watched her move through the crowd and fall to her knees in front of the being.

"You were brought by our prayers," she cried. "Please. Save us."

The being knelt.

They touched her face gently, lifting it so their eyes met.

"We are no god," they said. "We are celestial beings."

The woman wept harder.

The being stood, tall and radiant above her.

"We will begin when the sun rises," they said. "Please rest.

Much must be done in a short time."

Zander stepped back from the window.

His heart beat once, hard.

Then again.

Renn looked at him.

"What?" she asked.

He grabbed his pack.

Her eyes narrowed. "Where are you going?"

"Away."

"You heard them. They're starting at sunrise."

"Yes," Zander said. "That's the part I understood."

Renn caught his arm.

"They can fix this."

Zander looked at her hand until she let go.

Outside, the grass moved in a wind that had not existed yesterday. Flowers nodded around a mound full of bodies. The ships glowed like answers.

Zander put his sunglasses back on though the light was fading.

"Nothing that beautiful ever wants only one thing," he said.

Churro followed him out the back of the diner.

Behind them, the town watched the sky and waited for salvation.

Ahead, the road into darkness looked ugly, dry, dangerous, and honest.

Zander chose the road.

He always did.

He had made it three streets before the first transformed human stepped from the alley and looked directly at him.

Its skin shone pearl beneath the dusk.

Its veins glowed blue-violet.
Its eyes swirled with impossible color.
And somewhere inside Zander's skull, a voice whispered his
name.

Chapter Two

The Morning They Began

Zander did not move.

That was not bravery.

That was the body making a decision before the brain could get involved.

The transformed person stood at the mouth of the alley ten yards ahead, half-shadowed between two collapsed brick walls. They had once been human. Zander could tell because the shape was still close enough to hurt. Two arms. Two legs. A face arranged in the old familiar order.

But familiarity had been stretched over something else.

Their skin held a pearlescent sheen, faintly lavender where the evening light touched it. Their limbs were too long, not grotesquely, not like something broken, but refined past human proportions. Their fingers hung elegant and still at their sides. Their eyes were the worst part.

Not dead.

Not blank.

Alive with soft, moving color.

Blue, silver, violet, gold.

The colors turned slowly around the pupils like oil catching light on water.

Churro growled beside Zander's leg, low and deep enough that Zander felt it through the sole of his boot.

"Quiet," Zander whispered.

Churro did not quiet.

The transformed person tilted their head.

Zander.

The voice did not come through the air.

It came from inside his skull, clean and soft and wrong.

Zander's stomach dropped.

"Nope," he said.

The transformed person stepped forward.

Zander stepped back.

The thing's gaze sharpened.

Not thing, some inconvenient part of him corrected. Person.

That made it worse.

The person took another step. Their movement was smooth, deliberate, almost beautiful, with none of the stutter and caution that belonged to survivors. No limp. No hunger bend. No favoring one side because an old injury had healed badly. No instinctive glance toward the ground to avoid glass, wire, bone, or nails.

They walked like the world had been made safe for them.

Zander hated them for it.

He hated them more because, for one terrible second, he wanted to know what that felt like.

Behind him, from the square, someone shouted.

"Another one!"

The transformed person's eyes shifted past Zander.

Then back.

Recognition moved across their face.

Or command.

Or both.

Zander did not wait to find out.

"Run," he snapped.

Churro needed no explanation.

They bolted.

Zander cut left through the back of the diner, shoulder slamming into the plastic sheet covering the rear entrance. It ripped free with a sound like wet skin. People screamed inside as he and Churro crashed through a narrow storage room and into the kitchen.

Renn spun toward him, wrench in hand.

"What the hell are you doing?"

"Leaving."

"You brought one in here?"

"I didn't invite it!"

Behind him, the plastic sheet fluttered.

The transformed person appeared in the doorway.

The diner went silent.

For one impossible moment, everyone simply looked.

Correll/Bourgeois

The transformed person had been a woman once, Zander thought. Maybe. It was difficult to tell now, not because they looked genderless, but because the transformation had softened the practical details humans used to sort one another. Age, illness, sex, hunger, fatigue—so much of identity lived in damage. Without it, the face seemed polished out of reach.

Then the teenage girl by the stove whispered, “Mama?”

The transformed person turned their eyes toward her.

The girl moved before anyone could stop her.

Renn lunged. “Sela, no!”

Sela slipped past her.

“Mama?”

The transformed woman lifted one hand.

The gesture was gentle.

The entire room seemed to lean toward it.

Zander felt it then: not a voice this time, but pressure. A warmth at the back of his mind. An invitation. A suggestion to stop running. To be still. To trust.

His hand went numb.

The old scar along his forearm prickled beneath his sleeve.

Churro barked.

The sound cut through the pressure.

Zander grabbed Sela by the back of her shirt and yanked her away just as the transformed woman’s fingers brushed the air where her cheek had been.

Sela screamed at him.

The transformed woman’s calm face shifted.

Only a fraction.

But enough.

Her veins brightened.

Blue-violet light moved beneath the pearl of her skin.

Renn swung the wrench.

It connected with the transformed woman’s shoulder with a sound that should have broken bone.

Nothing broke.

The transformed woman exhaled.

Not pain.

Disappointment.

“Oh, absolutely not,” Zander said.

He shoved Sela toward Renn, grabbed the nearest pan from the stove, and threw it into the transformed woman's face.

Beans exploded.

For one sacred instant, salvation wore dinner.

Zander did not stay to admire it.

He ran through the dining room, Churro scrambling beside him. People shouted. A gun fired somewhere too close. Glass shattered. Zander vaulted over an overturned table and kicked through the front door into the square.

Chaos had bloomed.

The ships glowed beyond the water tower, lighting the grass in colors too beautiful for panic. People ran between buildings. Others stood still, crying or praying or staring as if still deciding whether terror was the correct response.

The Celestials moved among them.

They were not rushing.

That frightened Zander more than speed would have.

Tall figures advanced through the square with terrible grace, their pale lavender-shadowed skin luminous against the dusk. Their white hair flowed as if caught in a wind that touched only them. Their clothing shone, reflecting color from the ships in clean shifting waves. Some wore their natural faces openly: elegant, unearthly, royal in posture, with long tendril-like strands sweeping back from the hairline.

Others looked almost human.

Almost.

That was worse too.

A man raised a rifle and fired at one of them from the steps of the old courthouse. The shot struck the Celestial in the chest. The being paused, looked down at the place the bullet had hit, then lifted one hand.

The man collapsed.

No blood. No wound. He simply dropped, seizing, as light flared briefly under his skin.

A woman near him screamed.

Two Celestials moved in and touched instruments to her throat and forearm.

She fell beside him.

Zander stopped so fast Churro nearly collided with his leg.

Correll/Bourgeois

The instruments were slender, smooth, white-metal things curved like small bones. Not guns. Not needles in any human sense. Something between a wand, a syringe, and a piece of jewelry.

The woman on the ground convulsed.

Her spine bowed.

Her mouth opened.

The sound that came out did not belong in a throat.

Zander looked away too late.

Her fingers lengthened first. Then her arms. Her skin tightened, shimmered, paled. Her jaw shifted with a wet crack. Her veins lit from within. The scream broke apart into gasps, then into a low humming breath that matched the tone of the ships.

When she stood, she was beautiful.

And gone.

Churro pressed against Zander, shaking.

“Yeah,” Zander said. “We’re leaving the nice people.”

Something grabbed his wrist.

Zander turned, blade already half out of his sleeve.

Renn stood there, breathing hard, Sela behind her sobbing into both hands.

“You were right,” Renn said.

Zander blinked. “I need that in writing.”

“Help us get out.”

“No.”

Her face hardened.

“Excuse me?”

“I said no. I am bad at groups. Groups are slow, loud, and sentimental.”

“Children are here.”

“That’s a dirty trick.”

“People will die.”

“People are already doing that.”

Renn grabbed the front of his jacket. “You saw the west road. You saw the mound. You’re still going to run?”

Zander looked past her.

In the center of the square, the first Celestial—the one who had spoken gently of salvation—stood beneath the water tower. She looked like a woman because she had chosen to look like a woman. Zander understood that without knowing why. Not

human. Not female in any way humans meant it. But arranged that way for ease, for comfort, for trust.

Her eyes moved over the town.

People slowed when she looked at them.

Some lowered weapons.

Some wept.

Some walked toward her with faces full of relief.

The Commander raised her hands, and her voice filled the square.

"Please do not run. Fear is natural, but unnecessary. This process will spare you further suffering."

A man near the mound screamed, "You killed them!"

The Commander turned toward him.

"No," she said softly. "We changed them."

Zander felt the sentence slide under his skin.

Renn's grip tightened on his jacket.

The Commander continued. "Your bodies are failing. Your world can no longer sustain you as you are. We offer continuation. Health. Connection. A world restored."

The grass moved around her ankles.

Flowers opened in the dusk.

Zander thought of the boot sticking from the mound.

"Go through the diner," he told Renn. "Back alley. Drainage ditch west of the gas station. Stay low until you hit the old culvert."

Renn stared at him.

"That sounded a lot like helping."

"It's not. It's logistics."

"You coming?"

"Absolutely not."

"Why?"

"Because your people are headed west."

Renn looked confused for half a second.

Then understanding hit.

"You think they started west for a reason."

"I think monsters with a plan rarely forget exits."

Renn looked toward the alley.

A transformed figure stepped onto a roofline in the distance.

Then another.

Blocking the route.

Correll/Bourgeois

Zander cursed.
“Fine,” Renn said. “What way?”
He looked around the square.
North: open field, too much light from the ships.
West: rooftops already watched.
East: main road, likely obvious.
South: collapsed buildings, narrow routes, rubble, and the smell
he had avoided earlier.
He hated being right.
“South.”
Renn followed his gaze. “That way’s unstable.”
“So am I.”
A sound cut through the square.
Not a scream.
A pulse.
The ships shifted tone together, each individual hum folding
into a deeper chord that pressed against Zander’s teeth. The
Celestials lifted their instruments.
The transformed humans turned in unison.
Every one of them.
Toward Zander.
His heart slammed once.
Renn saw it.
“Why are they looking at you?”
“Natural charisma.”
“Zander.”
“I don’t know.”
But that was not true.
Not entirely.
He could feel something.
A thread pulled taut between his skull and the glowing eyes
across the square. Not thought. Not sound. More like recognition
without memory.
The Commander looked directly at him.
Her expression did not change.
But her eyes did.
The colors inside them stirred faster.
There, said the voice in his head.
This time it was not his name.

This time it was command.

Take him.

Zander ran.

Renn shouted behind him, pulling Sela and two others with her. Churro shot ahead, choosing routes through debris like he had been born from wreckage. Zander followed, lungs burning, boots skidding over broken glass and loose brick.

A transformed man appeared from a doorway.

Zander did not slow.

He ducked under the reaching arm and drove his shoulder into the man's ribs.

It was like hitting a tree.

Pain burst through Zander's shoulder.

The transformed man barely shifted.

"Stupid," Zander gasped, stumbling.

Churro launched himself at the man's ankle.

The transformed man looked down.

Not in pain.

In curiosity.

"Churro, no!"

The dog let go and darted back as the man reached for him. Zander grabbed a broken chair leg from the ground and swung for the man's knee. The crack of impact traveled up his arms. This time the leg buckled—not broken, but interrupted.

Human muscle memory, Zander thought.

Maybe whatever was inside still had rules.

He did not stay to test it.

They plunged into the south blocks.

The town changed quickly there. The green had not fully reached this side yet. Dead yards. Collapsed porches. Dust thick enough to soften footsteps. The air warmed again as if the world's old sickness had been waiting behind the buildings.

Renn's group struggled behind him.

Too many.

Always too many.

Sela cried without sound. Renn carried a little boy Zander had not noticed before. An older woman limped. A man with a pistol kept turning around, pointing it at nothing and everything.

They were going to die if he stayed with them.

Correll/Bourgeois

He knew this with the flat certainty of experience.
He also knew he could leave.
That was the worst part.
Leaving was always available. Always waiting. A door inside
him no one else could lock.
Churro stopped at an intersection and barked once.
Left.
Zander followed.
The smell from earlier hit him full in the face.
Not rot.
Chemical.
Sharp, metallic, sweet.
A transport vessel rested in the middle of the next street.
Smaller than the ships in the field, low and smooth and
organic-looking, like a seed pod made of pearl and bone. It gave
off no heat. Instead, the air around it was cold enough that frost
glittered on the dust nearby.
The street around it had changed.
Grass grew in a perfect ring.
Inside that ring lay bodies.
Not mounded. Not buried.
Arranged.
Some human. Some halfway to something else. Some with
limbs twisted by failed transformation, skin split with light, eyes
open and empty.
The older woman behind Renn began to sob.
Zander could not breathe.
A door opened in the vessel.
A Celestial stepped out.
This one did not bother looking kind.
They wore their true form openly: pale luminous skin, tendrils
sweeping back with white hair, long elegant hands, eyes swirling a
sharp green-blue. Their mouth curved slightly when they saw the
humans.
Zander knew that expression.
He had seen it on men who enjoyed having power because it
gave them permission to stop pretending.
“Return to the square,” the Celestial said.
Renn lifted her wrench.

The Celestial looked amused.
Zander grabbed Renn's sleeve. "No."
"We can take one."
"No, we can't."
The Celestial's gaze shifted to him.
The amusement faded.
Recognition again.
Then interest.
They raised the instrument in their hand.
Zander felt the command before they spoke.
Still.
His body locked.
Not completely. Not enough to drop him. But for half a
second, every muscle argued with him.
Churro snarled.
The dog leapt.
The Celestial moved too quickly.
One elegant hand swept out and caught Churro by the scruff.
The dog yelped.
Something in Zander broke loose.
"No!"
His hand found the pistol tucked into his belt.
He fired without aiming.
The shot hit the Celestial's wrist.
Not enough to wound the way it should have.
Enough to surprise.
Churro hit the ground and scrambled away.
The Celestial looked at the bloodless mark on their wrist, then
at Zander.
Their eyes brightened.
"Interesting," they said.
Renn swung the wrench.
It struck the side of the Celestial's head.
This time, the Celestial staggered.
Not because it hurt, Zander thought. Because they had not
expected human stupidity in stereo.
"Go!" he yelled.
Renn shoved the children forward.
The group scattered through the gap between two buildings.

Correll/Bourgeois

Zander ran after Churro.

He got three steps before something cold touched the back of his neck.

A sting.

Small.

Almost delicate.

He slapped at it and felt the end of a filament withdraw from his skin.

The Celestial stood behind him, arm extended, expression no longer amused.

Zander's fingers came away wet with something luminous.

"What," he said, "the actual fuck."

Then his legs vanished.

Not physically.

They were still there, which he considered rude because they were no longer accepting instructions.

He dropped hard onto one knee.

Churro barked wildly somewhere ahead.

Renn shouted his name.

Zander tried to stand.

His body folded instead.

Cold spread from the injection point down his spine, branching into his ribs, his arms, his throat. It was not like poison. Poison burned or cramped or made the world tilt. This was precise. Exploratory. A thousand tiny fingers opening doors inside him that had never been meant to open.

The Celestial stepped closer.

"The serum has entered," they said.

Zander pushed both palms against the street.

"Tell it," he gasped, "I'm not home."

The Celestial crouched in front of him.

Up close, they smelled like rain on stone and something floral that had never grown on Earth.

"You are not like the others."

Zander laughed once, breathless and bitter.

"Been hearing that since childhood."

Pain hit.

Real pain.

His back arched.

Every scar on his arms seemed to wake at once. His bones vibrated. His muscles clenched so hard his teeth struck together. Light flashed under his skin, then vanished, then flashed again.

The Celestial watched with scientific focus.

“Conversion is initiating.”

Zander tried to reach for his blade.

His hand shook too violently.

A voice screamed inside his head.

Not his.

Not the transformed.

A woman.

No, not a woman. A person. A mind pressed so hard against his that pain became language.

Run.

Images slammed through him.

White walls curved like the inside of a shell.

Hands pinning down wrists.

Needles.

Hundreds of thin tubes under skin.

A mouth trying to scream around something inserted behind the teeth.

Eyes above him, beautiful and merciless.

Run, the voice said again.

Zander tasted blood.

The Celestial’s head tilted.

“You are receiving.”

“Lucky me.”

The Celestial reached for him.

Churro came out of nowhere and bit their calf.

Blessed, stupid, suicidal dog.

The Celestial hissed—not pain, but irritation.

Zander moved.

He did not decide to move. Something in his body seized the opening and used it. His hand shot to his blade, cut across the strap of the Celestial’s instrument, and knocked it from their grip.

His motion was too fast.

Too clean.

Not his.

Correll/Bourgeois

He rolled, grabbed the instrument, and smashed it against the street.

It shattered with a bright, ringing crack.

The Celestial recoiled as if the sound hurt more than the bullet.

Zander staggered upright.

The world pulsed.

Every edge glowed.

He could see veins in leaves, heat in stone, fear in Renn's face half a block away. He could hear the ships, the transformed, the Celestial in front of him, Churro's heart, his own blood, and beneath all of it a vast murmur of minds pressing toward him.

Too much.

Too much.

Too much.

Renn appeared at his side.

"Can you run?"

"No."

She grabbed him under the arm.

"Lie better."

They ran.

Or Renn ran.

Zander mostly collided with the idea of running and hoped his feet stayed involved.

The Celestial did not follow immediately.

Maybe the broken instrument mattered.

Maybe the serum did.

Maybe they wanted to see what would happen.

Zander did not care.

The south edge of town fell into rubble where a row of old apartment buildings had collapsed into one another. Narrow gaps opened between concrete slabs and rusted beams. Churro squeezed through first. Renn pushed Sela after him, then the boy, then the older woman, then the pistol man.

Zander heard the hum behind them deepen.

"They're coming," he said.

"How many?"

"All of them."

Renn looked at him.

"I think."

“That is not helpful.”

“My skull is currently hosting a committee.”

She shoved him toward the gap. “Move.”

The space between slabs was barely wide enough. Concrete scraped his shoulders. His pack caught twice. Something sharp tore through his jacket and into his side. The cut closed before he finished cursing.

That stopped him more than the pain would have.

He touched the torn fabric.

No blood.

Or not enough.

“Oh,” he said.

The skin under his fingers knit itself together, hot and wrong.

Renn looked back. “Zander!”

He crawled forward.

They emerged into a drainage channel south of town, half-choked with dust and dead weeds. Beyond it lay scrubland and the broken line of the old highway.

Night had nearly fallen.

Behind them, the town glowed.

Beautiful lights painted the sky.

Screams rose beneath them.

Renn bent over, hands on knees, gasping.

The children huddled together. The older woman prayed under her breath. The pistol man had lost his pistol somewhere and seemed unsure whether that made him safer.

Churro pressed against Zander’s legs, whining.

Zander tried to pet him.

His hand trembled too badly.

Blue-violet light flickered beneath the skin of his fingers.

Renn saw it.

Everyone saw it.

The group went still.

The little boy began to cry.

Zander pulled his hand back and shoved it into his coat pocket.

“Don’t,” he said.

Renn straightened slowly.

“What did they do to you?”

Correll/Bourgeois

Zander smiled because the alternative was panic, and panic was undignified unless there was alcohol.

“Made improvements, apparently.”

His knees buckled.

Renn reached for him.

Churro barked.

Zander hit the ground before either could help.

The sky turned sideways.

Then white.

Then black.

Then not black at all.

He was somewhere else.

Cold light.

Curved walls.

A body on a table.

No.

His body?

No.

Someone else’s.

Wrists pinned. Tubes under skin. A throat raw from screaming.

A voice sobbed inside him.

Please.

Zander tried to pull away, but there was nowhere to go. The vision held him. Or the memory. Or whatever cruel new subscription service his brain had signed up for without consent.

A Celestial leaned over the table.

Beautiful face.

Lavender shadowed skin.

White hair.

Eyes swirling with color.

“Again,” the Celestial said.

Pain exploded.

Zander screamed.

In the drainage ditch, his body convulsed.

Churro barked and barked and barked.

Renn’s voice shouted from far away.

“Hold him down!”

“No!” someone yelled. “Don’t touch him!”

Zander opened his eyes.

For one second, he saw the ditch, the ruined town, the survivors backing away.
Then he saw the table again.
Then the ditch.
Then the table.
A mind brushed his.
Not the collective.
Not the Commander.
The same voice from the vision, small and fierce beneath the pain.
If you can hear me, run.
Zander tried to answer.
He did not know how.
His thoughts scattered like birds.
The voice pressed closer.
They will take you apart.
Something moved at the far end of the ditch.
Renn turned.
Three transformed humans stood on the ridge above them, glowing softly in the dark.
Behind them, a Celestial lifted one hand.
The survivors screamed.
Renn grabbed the children.
Zander tried to rise.
His veins lit bright enough to paint the dust beneath him.
The transformed stared down.
The Celestial's voice slipped into his skull like a blade sliding home.
Come back.
Zander bared his teeth.
"No," he whispered.
The light under his skin flared.
The ditch filled with color.
For a heartbeat, every transformed human on the ridge froze.
Zander felt them.
Not as bodies.
As doors.
Behind each door, someone beat their fists against silence.
A man crying.

Correll/Bourgeois

A girl praying.
A mother screaming without sound.
Sela's mother.
Zander did not know what he did next.
He only knew that something inside him reached back.
The transformed woman staggered.
Her hand went to her chest.
Her eyes changed.
For half a second, the swirl broke.
Human brown looked out through the impossible color.
"Sela?" she whispered.
Then the Celestial struck her across the face.
The connection snapped.
Zander collapsed onto his side, retching.
Renn stared at him with horror.
And hope.
That was worse.
"Get away from me," Zander said.
She did not move.
"Get away!"
His voice cracked through the ditch.
Churro whined and pressed his head beneath Zander's shaking hand.
Renn looked from Zander to the transformed figures on the ridge.
Then she lifted the little boy into her arms.
"We need to go."
"Smartest thing anyone's said all night," Zander muttered.
This time, when Renn helped him stand, he let her.
Not because he trusted her.
Because his legs were traitors, his blood was glowing, and there was a chorus of stolen minds whispering at the edge of his own.
They fled south into the dark.
Behind them, the town continued to bloom.