

:: CHAPTER 1 ::

Colt McAlister burst from a bank of clouds with his arms pinned to his sides for maximum speed. The wind pounded his cheeks, sending waves across his skin as he clenched his jaw to keep from swallowing more insects. The aviator goggles kept his eyes from drying out, but he'd forgotten to wear his scarf. Or maybe he needed a mask. Either way, there was nothing worse than swallowing a moth, especially the big ones that got stuck in his throat.

The jet pack strapped to his back was an antique from the Second World War, and it shook his body from his toes to his teeth, but it didn't matter. The thrill of flying was like nothing else. Roller coasters. Bungee jumping. Cliff diving. Even surfing. None of it compared to roaring through the sky without a safety net.

The sun peeked out from behind the Superstition Mountains, casting the morning in a strange haze as an October wind blew across the desert. Colt could see his breath whenever he exhaled, but he ignored the cold and arched his shoulders, throwing his head back as he shot straight up. Lost in the moment, Colt let the world and all its worries fade away. Up there, problems had a way

of disappearing. There were no thoughts of alien invasions, secret mind-control programs, or his parents, who had been murdered just a few short weeks ago.

At times he missed them so intensely that the simple act of breathing became impossible. He would go to his room, turn off the lights, and crawl into bed, wishing he could be with them again—even if it meant dying. In those empty moments, life felt meaningless. Hopeless.

“I’m just about set up.” The voice that crackled through his earpiece belonged to Danielle Salazar, who was on the ground setting up the obstacle course. She was a video game expert, computer hacker, and one of Colt’s best friends. They were born days apart, and even though they weren’t related by blood, he thought of her as the sister he never had.

People who didn’t know them just figured they were dating. After all, they didn’t look anything like siblings. His mop of hair was so blond it looked white in the summer, and his eyes were the kind of blue that made people think he wore colored contacts. Everything about Danielle was dark. Her hair. Eyes. Skin. Colt could admit that she was beautiful, but date her? Not in this lifetime.

“I’ll be right there.” He pulled up and hovered in place, distracted by a pair of hawks flying in circles. Their dance was beautiful, effortless, and he could have watched them for hours, but the older model jet packs didn’t have reliable fuel gauges. It read that he had less than seven minutes remaining, which was enough time to run the obstacle course at least once, but there was no way to know for sure. Still, he needed the practice. Yesterday’s effort had been a disaster.

He turned and headed back to the ground where Danielle was

waiting near his grandpa's 1946 Chevy pickup with the chrome grill and whitewall tires. The 1974 Toyota Land Cruiser that his parents bought for his sixteenth birthday was in storage back in San Diego.

The exhaust from his jet pack sent a swirl of dust and sand rolling across the desert as he touched down. Landing was still awkward, and he stumbled before he regained his footing, but at least he didn't roll his ankle or run into a cactus.

"All right," Danielle said. She was wearing a thick jacket wreathed in some kind of fake fur, and vapors from the cold escaped from between her lips as she entered a sequence of commands into her tablet computer. "The targets are all set up, so as soon as Oz gets here—if he gets here—we can start."

Oz Romero was perpetually late. It didn't matter if he was going to a class, doctor's appointment, church, or movie. Timeliness and Oz simply didn't mix. Most of the time it didn't matter, but this morning Colt had forced himself out of bed at five thirty. If he had to be on time, he expected the same from Oz.

Colt flipped his goggles up over his helmet as he watched the gravel road. He wanted to give Oz the benefit of the doubt. Maybe he was having engine trouble, or he'd stopped to help someone change a flat tire. Or maybe he was just late, like always. "Where is he?"

"He won't answer his phone, which means he's probably still asleep."

"What do you want to do?"

"I don't know," Danielle said. "I mean, we're out here, and everything is set up. You might as well run the course. If he doesn't show up by the time you have to refuel, we can head back."

She was about to climb into the cab and sit next to the heater

when a black Jeep crested a hill. Dust plumed and oversized tires crunched across the desert floor, leaving a massive trail in the Jeep's wake. At the last possible moment, Oz pulled off the road and parked between a saguaro cactus and Grandpa's pickup.

"You're late," Danielle said with a hand on her hip.

Oz shrugged and cut the engine before he gulped down the last of a protein shake and wiped his mouth with the back of his sleeve. "Sorry." It wasn't much of an apology. Usually he would have made some outlandish excuse and then laughed it off.

He hopped out of the Jeep, his eyes distant. He looked tired, or was it depressed? Either way, it wasn't normal. Oz was typically upbeat, whether the occasion called for it or not.

"What's wrong? Were you up all night hunting zombies again?" Colt asked, referring to Zombie Extermination Squad, a video game that the three of them played together more often than they cared to admit.

Oz looked at him and frowned, as though trying to gauge if he was serious. "You heard about the incident, right?"

Colt hadn't, but that wasn't unusual. Oz had access to information the rest of the world didn't know existed. His dad was the director of an organization called CHAOS—Central Headquarters Against the Occult and Supernatural. They were a bit like the CIA or the FBI, but instead of going after drug cartels or spying on the Russians, they protected the world from nightmares like bioengineered monsters, alien life forms, and sparkling vampires.

"Can you give us a hint?" Colt asked. The way things had been going lately, he half expected Oz to tell him that Godzilla had been spotted off the shores of Tokyo.

"Turn on the radio and you'll see." Oz slipped into a jumpsuit that he had pulled out of his duffel bag. It didn't look like it was

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going to fit his six-foot-four frame or his enormous shoulders, but he managed to squeeze in and zip it up before he slipped on a pair of size fifteen boots.

Danielle turned the key in the ignition of the pickup, and static blasted through the speakers as she tried to find a news station.

“. . . thousands are seeking refuge, shutting down roads and freeways leading from Cedar Rapids and surrounding communities despite the combined efforts of local law enforcement and the National Guard. Already airports in Des Moines, Minneapolis, Chicago, and Kansas City have been overrun with people looking to get as far away from the reactor core as possible.”

“Reactor core?” Colt asked. “What happened?”

“They’re telling everyone that there was a leak at a nuclear power plant, but that’s just a cover,” Oz said.

“For what?” Danielle asked. After all, a meltdown at a reactor could be catastrophic, but if that was just a story, the truth had to be devastating.

“They think someone released a virus.”

“What, like the bird flu or something?” Colt asked.

Oz shook his head. “Worse. And it’s spreading fast.”

:: CHAPTER 2 ::

Oz quickly told them that the first known case of the virus had been documented two weeks prior in a remote village outside of Bangkok. An old woman contracted a fever, and by nightfall her skin was covered in boils. Breathing became increasingly difficult, and within forty-eight hours she was dead. Three others got sick before government authorities were notified, and once that happened the village was quarantined. If the rumors were true, at least a dozen infected people had been shot and their bodies burned.

Without a corpse there was no way to run an autopsy, but days later a similar case surfaced in Veracruz, a port city on the Gulf of Mexico. Seven employees at a nuclear facility ended up with the same boils, and they were dead inside two days. A third instance occurred on a Navajo reservation near Page, Arizona. And now, just that morning, more than twenty people were infected just outside of Cedar Rapids. Most of them worked at the Duane Arnold Energy Center, the only nuclear power plant in Iowa.

Military officials had set up checkpoints to test everyone before they were allowed to leave the contaminated zone. The

infected were led away by men in hazmat suits as armed soldiers wearing gas masks stood by to ensure there were no riots.

“My dad thinks it’s a biological attack,” Oz said. “I guess it makes sense. We shut down the gateways before the Thule could send their warships through, so now they have to try something more creative if they want to wipe us out.”

“But there’s a cure, right?” Colt said.

“Not exactly, but they’re working on it.”

“So what happens when the virus hits a major city like New York or Los Angeles?”

Oz put his enormous hand on Colt’s shoulder. “You better pray that it doesn’t,” he said. “Because once that happens, we won’t be able to contain it.”

As he watched Oz strap on his jet pack, Colt was stricken by a terrible thought. He and Oz were supposed to transfer to the CHAOS Military Academy in a few days, but now it seemed meaningless. Fighting aliens was one thing, but how was humanity supposed to wage war against a virus that killed people within forty-eight hours? It’s not like you could shoot it or anything. Besides, even if someone found a cure, there was no way pharmaceutical companies could manufacture enough of the antidote for everyone—at least not soon enough.

“Relax,” Oz said, as though reading Colt’s mind. “The good guys always win. Besides, we have bigger things to worry about.”

“Like what?”

“Making sure you actually finish the obstacle course.” Oz smiled, and for a fleeting moment everything felt almost normal.

Almost, because Colt knew that “normal” was never going to describe his life again. Recently he had learned that a group of influential politicians and military personnel wanted to remove

Oz's dad as the director of CHAOS. And ridiculous as it sounded, Colt was on the short list of people they were looking at to replace him, despite the fact that he was only sixteen. There was nothing normal about it. More than anything, he just hoped that it didn't ruin his relationship with Oz.

Since they weren't going to finish the semester at Chandler High School, the boys had been excused from class for the past three weeks. But instead of sitting around and watching television or playing video games, they spent their time training for the academy. That meant stretching, running, lifting weights, target practice, and a lot of sparring. Oz had taught Colt bits of Krav Maga, Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu, boxing, and even some wrestling techniques.

He had a shooting range at his house, and Colt was making good progress, considering he had never held a firearm before. Hitting a stationary target with both feet on the ground was hard enough; trying to shoot it while wearing a jet pack and going over eighty miles per hour through the air was just short of impossible.

Tuesday was their second day running the obstacle course. Colt had been humiliated during the first go-round, and he was determined to perform better. He checked his gauges and the connections on his fuel tank, and a few moments later he was rocketing through the clouds with Oz at his side.

Colt looked like a throwback to the 1940s in his olive green fatigues, leather bomber jacket, and oversized aviator goggles. None of his gear offered much in the way of protection, but he thought the flight suits were too restrictive. Oz, on the other hand, looked like he had just stepped out of the future. His helmet covered his entire face, making him look more machine than man, and the armored jumpsuit resembled a military-grade

motorcross uniform. It was made out of fibers that were supposedly bullet-resistant, like Kevlar, only stronger.

“Who’s going first?” Danielle asked, her voice crackling through the comlink as she watched them from below.

“That would be me!” The exhaust from Oz’s rocket burned bright as he disappeared into a bank of clouds.

Danielle had set up ten targets at random intervals across the desert floor. Once activated, the metal discs projected holograms that could look like anything. Today she had programmed ten six-armed aliens called Thule, each of them snarling, their lips curled to reveal crooked teeth.

“Watch and learn, McAlister.” Oz dived and Danielle started her stopwatch.

From where Colt watched, it looked like Oz was going to crash before he leveled at about thirty feet and pulled out a pistol that hung at his hip. The Tesla 6000 Electrostatic Repulsor had been retrofitted as a training weapon, so it shot light rays instead of energy blasts.

Oz had the uncanny knack of making the impossible look mundane, and he hit the first three targets in eighteen seconds without so much as slowing down. He hit a fourth that was partially hidden behind a cactus, and a fifth that was gnashing its teeth on a rocky embankment.

“How many did you hit yesterday?” Oz asked as he spun the repulsor on his finger.

Before Colt could answer, Danielle pulled the statistics up on her tablet computer. “He ran the course five times and hit seven targets, which means his accuracy rating is at just over 14 percent.”

“Thanks,” Colt said.

“Don’t mention it.”

Distracted, Oz flew too close to the sixth hologram. It reached out, and at the last possible moment Oz swiveled his hips, avoiding contact that would have led to a penalty. Then, as though it was as natural as walking, he rolled over so that he was lying on his back, raised the repulsor, and shot. Direct hit. The hologram flickered and disappeared. The last four holograms fell in succession, giving Oz another perfect score.

“Your turn.”