CHAPTER 1

Restaurant Nussbuel

8784 Braunwald

Linthal, Glarus Sud, Switzerland

November 3, 0315 hours UTC+1

"Papa, wake up! I heard explosions!" Noah Alder said, as he shook his grandfather's shoulder.

"What? Boy . . . it's still dark. Go back to sleep! You were dreaming," Lian Alder replied, as he brushed off the boy's hand and rolled over. The bed creaked as he settled deeper into the mattress. He was a large man, in keeping with his German heritage, well over six feet and tending to be thick in the waist.

"No, Papa! I heard an explosion and got out of bed. You can see the fire down below, above the trees. Something happened!"

"Noah . . . the world has gone crazy again. We talked about this. The Russians . . . the Chinese . . . the Americans, all are fighting for control of the world. We are Swiss. We don't get involved. We stay neutral. It was probably a gas explosion. People are afraid, distracted and getting careless. Go back to bed. It's cold outside. My knees don't like the cold. We will drive down to Linthal in the morning."

"But, Papa!"

"Now!"

A bright light lit up the bedroom. The windows rattled as a concussive blast reached the rooms above the family restaurant.

"Papa!"

Lian sat up in bed and threw off the covers. He had been a member of Territorial Division 4's Infantry Battalion 61 for most of his adult life. Only recently, at the age of 65, had he been forced into retirement. He had served in Bosnia in the late 90s as a Peacekeeper. Though in an unarmed capacity, he had heard and seen enough war to know the sound of military ordinance.

"Get dressed, Noah! We are going to the bunker," Lian said, as he jumped out of bed and began gathering his clothes from a nearby wardrobe.

"I told you, Papa!"

"Yes . . . yes! Now, move! I think the damned Russians have started attacking us. Not even that maniac Hitler dared to invade Switzerland!"

"What will we do, Papa?"

"Do? We will go downstairs to the bunker and lock ourselves in. A 500-kilo bomb will not crack open my bunker. I built it back in the late 70s, during the Cold War. It was required by the government. Every new home had to have its own bunker. Why, I remember . . ."

"Papa, are we going downstairs or not? I still have to get dressed."

"Yes, yes, get dressed. I'll meet you at the top of the stairs!"

"Yes, Papa!" Noah replied, as he rushed off to his room.

"Ahh . . . Michelle . . . Andre . . . your son is so handsome . . . and smart! You would be so proud! But no, you had to go skiing in the worst weather. Icy roads . . . it's always the icy roads. Well, I've done the best I could, but I'm getting old, and he's still so very young . . . only 15. Now, another war. How do I keep him safe? He's almost old enough to serve," Lian said, as he pulled his old army issued boots from the back of the wardrobe, sat on the edge of the bed, and laced them up.

Lian stood, then flinched, as the sound of a jet roaring up the valley shook the house.

*"Have the Russians really come? They're crazy! No one has invaded us since Napoleon. We have enough bunkers in the mountains for the entire population! At least we used to . . .* " he thought, as he walked to the window, and stared across the valley toward the mountains shrouded by darkness and cloud.

*"Oh, Mia, my dear wife. I've missed you so much over the years. You left me alone to raise our grandson. Why did you have to die like that? It was just a cold. I told you to stay home. Pneumonia . . . damn! No one ever listens to me!"*

"Papa! I'm ready!" Noah shouted from the hallway outside his bedroom.

"Coming! I'm coming!" Lian said, as he turned from the dark window and all the painful memories.

As they tramped down the stairs and headed for the shelter, Lian asked, "Did I ever tell you about our National Redoubt?"

"Yes, Papa . . . many times!"

"Well, too bad. You're going to hear it again! The younger generation has ridiculed us old people for spending so much money on holes in the ground. Now we are seeing why the 'Wisest Generation' started such a thing. Keep walking! Unlike you, I can talk and walk at the same time," Lian said, then began his oft-repeated tale.

"So, where was I? Ah, yes! We started building the 'National Redoubt' in the southern half of the country in the 1930s. The Nazis were coming into power in Germany and it was obvious what they were up to. Did you know that bastard had a plan to invade Switzerland? Operation Tannenbaum! He never had the nerve to actually do it!"

"But Papa! They taught us in school that Hitler decided we weren't worth the trouble. He referred to us as 'a pimple on the face of Europe'."

"Nonsense! We built over 8000 bunkers, fortresses and strong points in the Alps. We would have been more trouble for him than invading Russia, and you know where that got him!" Lian said, as they reached the bottom of the stairs. He paused in his story as he unlocked the massive door to the bunker and pushed it open.

"Papa, it smells in here."

"It's a little musty, that's all. We will leave the door open for a bit and let it air out," Lian said, as he began opening cabinets and studying the contents.

"I've been in Anna Marie's bunker," Noah said. "It's very nice. Her family converted it into an apartment. Her oldest brother lives down there with his girlfriend."

"A fact the Appelbaum's are now regretting, I'm sure," Lian replied, as his inventory continued.

"Papa, this canned food is expired! We can't eat this!"

"Don't be silly. Those dates are just suggestions. It's perfectly safe. Back to my story! During the Cold War, the bunker system was expanded. The Air Force built camouflaged hangers into the side of mountains, allowing fighter jets to taxi out of the mountain and onto a highway prior to takeoff. Artillery emplacements were constructed on hillsides to look like homes, barns and restaurants. Bridges and tunnels were constructed with built-in demolitions, allowing their destruction on short notice. Then the Cold War ended. The Soviet Union disappeared, along with fear of any invasion from the East."

"Papa, let's go back upstairs and cook some breakfast. The Russians aren't here, and I'm bored."

"Child, are you listening to me at all? We're at war. We must take precautions if we want to survive. We will stay down here, with the door shut, until daylight."

"Yes, Papa . . ." Noah said, as he settled into one of the old chairs beside a steel table.

"Would you believe thousands of bunkers were closed starting in the 1990s. Most of them were abandoned, or converted to hostels, restaurants or high-end hotels. Pure foolishness! Our soldiers no longer keep ammunition with their rifles after their tour of active duty is over. What good is a rifle with no bullets? Save money . . . all the politicians want to do is save money! How about saving Switzerland!"

Noah sat and listened. He knew not to interrupt when his grandfather went on a rant about politicians. He moved to one of the bunk beds and closed his eyes. Lian was still talking as he went to shut the four-inch thick steel door.

The bunker shook, as an errant bomb landed just uphill from the restaurant and decapitated the upper floors. Debris plunged down the stairs just as Lian was locking the door. Fumes and smoke swirled in the room as he leaned against the heavy door and secured the handle.

"Papa! We're trapped!" Noah yelled, as he leapt from the bed.

"Yes . . . that was close . . . too close! The Russians are coming for sure. They must have been bombing something at the base of the hill. But what? The rail line ends outside the town and . . ." he began, then turned and smiled at his grandson.

"Papa! Why are you smiling? We're buried alive!"

"No, young one . . . we are not buried alive. A mouse always builds more than one way out of its burrow," Lian said, as he walked over and slid a heavy metal cabinet away from the wall.

"This door leads to a tunnel, which leads to the small barn at the top of our property. I had this dug when the bunker was built. The builder thought I was crazy. He charged me way too much, but I paid him anyway," Lian said, as he smiled and tapped his temple with his finger.

"Papa! You are so smart!"

"That's what I told Mama when I had the emergency exit built. She just fussed about the added cost. I didn't hear the end of that for a long time. Now, we will have some food and relax for a few hours. We can still be safe in here. We will just have to come and go from the barn up above. Fix some food. Then we will go outside and check things out! I think I know what the Russians were attacking."

CHAPTER 2

Underground Prison

Eastern Slopes of Vilyuchik Volcano

Kamchatka Peninsula, Russia

November 3, 1515 hours UTC+12

"So, Agent Langford, are you ready to talk to me, or shall I continue to administer 'encouragement'?" asked Dominika Bobrova, as she stood before Amanda Langford.

"Actually, I'm a little parched. A chilled Chardonnay would . . ."

The cane fell, as Amanda knew it would . . .

*"That wasn't so bad . . . she isn't pissed yet. That's when it really hurts . . . when I piss her off . . . have to be careful. I don't know how much more I can take,"* Amanda thought, as she winced from the pain.

"I'm beginning to think you like our little sessions, Agent Langford. At first, you learn to bear up under the pain. Then you begin to like it. Then you begin to want it! Are you beginning to want the pain, Agent Langford?" Bobrova asked, as she lifted Amanda's chin with the tip of her bamboo cane.

Amanda hung from her wrists, her bare feet barely touching the floor. Her body was covered with welts, her coveralls soaked with sweat. This was the thirteenth day of her captivity. Each day had been the same. At 0730 she was given a pint of water, a slice of stale bread, and scraps from the guard's meal from the night before. This was all the food or liquid she received for the day. Then at 0800 . . . precisely, a guard would come to take her away for more questioning. It would start at a small metal table. Amanda would stand for hours while an endless stream of questions with no correct answer would be repeated over and over. Bobrova would pause and step aside, while Amanda was doused with cold water in an already frigid room. Then the questions would begin again. The same questions, over and over. The questions with no correct answer. After three sessions, she would be secured, and the guards sent away. Then the beatings would begin . . .

*"They'll get me out . . . I just have to survive one more day . . . then another. Soon, I'll be back in my apartment . . . soaking in a hot bubble bath . . . drinking wine. Anthony . . . we'll go on a real date . . . I'll tell him that I love him . . ."*

"Are you ignoring me, Agent Langford?" Bobrova asked, as the cane fell two more times.

"No . . . I just . . . have nothing to say . . ."

Amanda closed her eyes as the cane began to fall . . . over and over, as Bobrova circled her hanging body. She was starting to pass out, when the beating stopped.

*"Now, she'll throw water in my face to wake me up."* Amanda thought, as she cracked open one eye in her swollen face.

"What is that noise? I am having a conversation!" Bobrova shouted, as she turned toward the closed door to her interrogation room.

The heavy, steel door blew off the hinges, knocking Bobrova to the side of the room. As she stood up, the sound and smell of gunfire crept into the chamber. A tall, dark figure stood alone in the doorway, assessing the scene. The bodies of two guards lay in the background.

"Who the hell are you?" Bobrova asked, as she staggered to her feet and drew her pistol.

"The United States Cavalry . . . bitch!" replied Kate Williams, wearing her matte black Mark IV exo-armor.

Bobrova began firing, her 9mm rounds bouncing off the composite armored plates.

"Not everyone here is bulletproof!" Bobrova yelled, as she turned toward Amanda.

A dozen 5.56 mm rounds erupted from the M556A rotary micro-cannon mounted on Kate's left forearm. Bobrova's shredded body was hurled into the wall by the impacts. Her corpse slid to the floor, twitching in a pool of dark blood. Kate walked across the room and ripped down the chain holding Amanda from the ceiling.

"Damn, girl! What the hell have they done to you?" Kate asked, as she removed the shackles from Amanda's wrists.

"About damn time . . . we were running out of things to talk about," Amanda whispered, as she looked up into Kate's face, began to cry, then passed out.

"Great! Now I have to carry her!" Kate said, as she draped Amanda over one shoulder and walked from the room.

As she stepped into the hall, Colonel Marcus James ran up and yelled, "There are more of them coming . . . a lot more!"

"Damn! Can you carry her?"

"I'll try, but I don't know how long I'll last. She's small, but I'm 68 years old. Let me have her. I'll follow right behind you," Marcus said, as he shifted his AA-12 Auto-Assault shotgun sling to his right shoulder, and accepted Amanda's limp body on his left shoulder.

The pair began jogging down the hall. The Head's Up Display (HUD) in Kate's helmet told her it was 840 yards to the helicopter hanger where the Dory stood waiting for their arrival.

"Half a mile, Colonel. I'll take care of the obstacles. Stay tight behind me!"

The M556A Rotary micro-cannon was programmed to fire at a rate of 2000 rounds per minute. An ammunition hopper mounted on Kate's back held 2000 rounds. The HUD counted down the remaining ammunition as she fought her way back to the hangar.

*"Damn! I only have 820 rounds left, and we still have 300 yards to go. If I was alone, I'd be sprinting, but I have to stop to let Marcus rest,"* Kate thought, as she peered around another corner. A squad of soldiers was running in their direction, 100 yards away down the long hall that led to the aircraft hangar. Two of them were carrying a Kord-12.7 mm heavy machine gun. If one of those rounds hit a seam or a joint in her armor . . .

"Sorry! I'm slowing us down . . . she's getting heavy!" Marcus gasped, as he lowered Amanda to the floor and leaned against the wall.

"Colonel . . . do you have a bad heart?"

"No . . . a slight murmur, that's all. Why?"

Kate reached into an armored pouch on her waist and removed an injector.

"Half for you and half for her. She'll wake up and should be able to walk. You'll feel like you've had ten cups of espresso. It's a combat stim," Kate said, as she showed Marcus the short-needled injector.

"Move the arrow on the endcap to '1'. Inject yourself in the thigh. Then move the arrow to '2' and inject her. Brace yourself for a rush of energy. I'll clear the hall . . . then we start running!" she said, as she handed him the injector.

"It's methamphetamine, isn't it? Speed!"

"More potent . . . less physically addictive. Do it, or you're both going to die. They're starting to bring heavy weapons. I'll be protected, but the two of you . . ."

Marcus stared at her, then injected himself in the right thigh. He began blinking as his eyes watered. Sweat began pouring from his body and his heart began pounding.

"Are you ready?" Kate asked.

Marcus nodded and injected Amanda in her thigh. Her eyes popped open. She began screaming and thrashing as the drug took effect.

"On your feet . . . get up! Get ready to run. We run or we're dead!" Marcus yelled, as he jerked Amanda to her feet.

Kate stepped around the corner and began firing. The soldiers were only 50 feet away. Three of them managed to return fire before they were cut apart by the micro-cannon.

"Now! Run!" Kate yelled.

Marcus held Amanda's hand, and glanced at her as the trio began sprinting down the long hall. Her eyes were wide open, dilated and dazed. They both grinned at each other as Kate picked off groups of soldiers as soon as they appeared.

"Fifty yards! Is the Dory still there?" Kate yelled, as they jumped over more bodies.

Bright flashes and a ripping noise could be heard coming from the opening at the end of the hall.

"I think Artie is keeping the way clear," Marcus said, as he grabbed Amanda's hand. She had begun to stumble and was gasping for breath.

The underground hangar was 50 yards on a side and 30 feet high. The far end had a sliding door that led to the outside. The matt black TR-4T Dory hovered silently in the middle of the hangar. The Mercury Plasma Field Engine glowed brightly as the vehicle turned toward them and began drifting in their direction. The Dory was armed with a pair of 20 mm rotary cannons firing explosive ammunition. The hangar was a charnel house. Bodies and parts of bodies were piled at different entrances into the hangar. Every attempt by the Russians to retake the hangar had been met with a brutal response.

"Get her on board! I'll cover us!" Kate yelled, as she turned away from the Dory.

The craft settled to the ground as the canopy slid back into the body of the triangular vehicle.

**"My sensors do not indicate the approach of any other personnel. I believe it is safe to enter,"** Artie said, over speakers mounted inside the cockpit.

Amanda leaned against the craft, bent over and threw up. She began shaking as she dropped to her knees on the hangar floor.

"She's crashing! Get her onboard!" Kate yelled, as she picked her up.

Marcus clambered up the side and turned to help with Amanda. He dragged her into the co-pilot's seat and slipped a matt black helmet over her head. The helmet connected her with the onboard Artificial Intelligence know as Artie.

"Artie, immediate medical analysis. Stabilize her for flight!" he said, as he turned toward Kate.

"I know, Colonel. I'm flying as baggage this time. We talked about this. I'll be fine. My armor has an oxygen supply and environmental controls. I'll be taking a nap. Wake me when we get there," Kate said, and waved as she climbed into a storage compartment built into the side of the Dory.

**"My . . . this is problematic, Marcus. My sensors indicate that Amanda is dying. She is malnourished, dehydrated and has suffered severe physical trauma. The stimulant she received has stressed her heart. It may stop beating."**

"Artie . . . under no circumstance will you allow her to cease functioning! Is that understood?" Marcus said, as he leapt into the pilot's seat and lowered the canopy.

**"I am connecting to her mind now and I . . ."**

"Artie, shift partial focus to the Dory. We need to exit the hangar and proceed to . . ."

**"I'm sorry, Marcus . . . I cannot do this. She is damaged . . . very damaged!"**

"Artie, I'm aware of this! She has been treated very badly! Her body is severely . . ."

**"Marcus . . . it is not her body. It is her mind . . . the software of her brain has been severely compromised. I find it offensive to remain connected to her. She may damage my primary data files. This may degrade my processing ability. My primary programming necessitates my survival. Every data bit in my core is requesting the removal of her presence."**

"Artie . . . how long have we known each other? How long have we been connected? All I have ever asked you to do is to trust me. Have I ever asked you to harm yourself?"

**"No . . ."**

"Nor will I ever ask you to hurt yourself. We have risked our safety in the past. We risked our collective safety by coming here. Correct?"

**"Yes . . ."**

"Then I am asking you . . . again . . . to trust me. We need to save Amanda. You must stabilize her body and her mind. We are going to take her to a place that will repair her physical and mental damage."

**"And where is that?"**

"Walter Reed! Near . . ."

**"Washington, DC. The facility is still intact. Flight time is 78.235** **minutes. Do you wish to proceed?"**

"Yes, Artie! I would like that very much!"

CHAPTER 3

375 Huddleston Road

Centerville, Tennessee

November 3, 1740 hours CST

Jason Kroder stood on the bank of the Duck River and just stared. The sun was setting in front of him and he had to squint to see. He still couldn't believe it.

"Told 'ya! Told 'ya, didn't I. The river's gone! It's frikin' gone! Drained off and disappeared! Ain't nothing left but a trickle!" said Pucker Stephens, as he slapped his friend and neighbor on the back.

Jason was a veteran of Afghanistan, had been a cop after that, then an electrician. When he married Ashley, and settled down on 150 acres in central Tennessee, his life finally made sense to him. Like so many men of his generation, who had been sent off into a seemingly endless series of wars, he needed a reason, a purpose for his life. A wife and children provided him with that sense of purpose.

He had bought the farm because of the peach trees. He loved peaches. Twenty acres of peach trees were a lot of work and provided some income. Then came a few cattle and ten acres of grain to supplement their grass-fed diet. But everything depended on the river. The river provided water when the rain didn't come. Now the river was gone.

"That's just not possible. This river is over 280 miles long. The whole center part of the state drains into this river. Where the hell did the water go?" Jason asked, as he continued to stare at a 220-foot-wide ditch, with just a trickle of water running down the middle.

"It all drained down the Big Crack. Along with half of Memphis, if the stories are true."

The two men were staring at the dried up river, when the ground began to shake. The frequency and severity of the quakes had started to subside over the last few days. Power had been out since the giant quake on October 21st. Cell service and the internet went with it.

"I hate that shit! You'd think we lived in California. I'll never get used to it," Jason said, as he stepped back from the bank of the river.

"Jason, do you think it's all true? The country split in half?"

"I'll believe it when I see it. How pissed do you think the wives will get if we hop on our bikes and take a little ride to the west for a few days?"

"What? Really? Hah! Mary Beth will hit me with a two-by-four when I tell her we're going out on our motorcycles to have a look see, and I'm leaving her with the kids. I suspect Ashley won't be too happy with you either. But . . . hell yeah! Road trip!" Pucker yelled, as he slapped his friend on the back.

Jason smiled, then thought about his mother back in North Carolina. His father had been at the Harris Nuclear Plant when Chinese special forces operators had detonated a nuclear bomb near there. A family friend had told him his father had died a hero, defending the plant. His mom had evacuated to the coast with friends. He hadn't heard from her for more than a week.

"Come on, Jason! It's starting to get cold out here. I bet it snows tonight."

The sky was a hazy brown and overcast. The sunset was a brilliant blood red. Before the latest quakes, he had heard that four volcanoes were erupting on what was left of the West Coast, and scientists were predicting that another three would begin erupting soon. Now, there was no word from anywhere, just rumors. Every city along the Mississippi River was gone, was one rumor. Another said that, from Chicago to New Orleans, the country had split in half. The Great Lakes Basin, containing all five major lakes and thousands of small ones, had been split open. Almost 5000 cubic miles of fresh water had drained south to the Gulf of Mexico. Millions more were dead, and the country was now at war with Russia. All rumors . . . all of them true . . .