

## Prologue: Paradise Lost

My name is Nikolaj Federick. I have walked this earth for 97 years—far too long a time. Sadly, I am amongst the few still alive who knew the earth before... all this. Reader, it may be hard to imagine, but there once was a time when people slept without wondering if they'd wake the next morning. Children played out in the sun, and no, they weren't given guns or blades to protect themselves from wicked men. When we hungered, we bought food at stores. There was plenty. In fact, we gluttoned ourselves on the excess, throwing away things people literally kill for now. And above all else, I can still recall a time when people could still trust their own souls. We never had to prepare ourselves each day to murder someone we loved should they succumb to the dark will of The Sickness.

Those days are long past.

What you are reading now is the last will and testament of a broken man who has lost everything. What little I acquired in this world is not worthy of bequeathing even to the rats, and more painfully, I have no other friends or family left to receive my inheritance. Everyone I ever loved is now dead. Some of them left this world like cowards. Others heroically fought to their last dying breath. And some of my most beloved companions... met a fate worse death. Now I'm afraid it's my turn.

I will not live to see my 98<sup>th</sup> birthday. Even now as I write this, I can feel the fire creeping into my thoughts. My brother once tried to describe it to me some 30 years ago—the rage. It consumes you, makes you crazy. I am not ashamed to say that I refused my brother the first time he begged me to take his life... or the 100<sup>th</sup> time for that matter. We had been so close for so long. Even when the world around us incinerated into nuclear ash, we clung to each other ever closer. But once he asked me to take his life, an ocean fell between us. Our competing wills turned into a violent riptide that sucked us both under and filled our lungs with misery and contempt. He hated me for prolonging his agony. And I hated him—yes—I hated him for even asking. I thought him weak and selfish. I remember telling him there was nothing in this world that he could feel worth ransoming his own life.

Now I know better.

Reader, weep for those who beg for release, but do not cast judgment, for theirs is an unimaginable pain. You cannot comprehend what The Sickness takes from you. Colors fade. Food loses its taste. The disease crawls under your skin and makes you claw at yourself, opening black wounds that puss and never heal. It drains you of your soul and fills you brimming with a desire to ravage every man, woman, and child that you see. The shame of your own thoughts is more than enough to pray for death's embrace.

So before I lose command over my own thoughts and actions, I'm writing down the only thing in my possession that's of any value—my knowledge of the past and present. I pray that the words I put here to paper will somehow aid you. I need to believe that the 97 years that I put into this miserable existence had some purpose, that it was more than just a century of pointless suffering. And though the horrors of this land seem impossible to face, I beg you—do not lose heart. There is strength left in the blood of our kind. I truly believe this broken world can still be mended. Perhaps by you. Yes. You could change everything. Heed my words and use this knowledge to break the cycle. Otherwise, your generation will surely be the last in the dishonored lineage of our species.

## How it all ended, or began?

The downfall of man began roughly 40 years ago in the ancient hills of Israel—Megiddo to be exact. This infamous landmark hosted countless battles over its long and torrid history. In 15th century B.C., the Egyptians fought a bloody battle against the Canaanites on this land. Roughly 800 years later, the Egyptians found themselves again shedding blood at Megiddo, this time against the forces of Judea. And even during WWI, British forces engaged the Ottoman empire at this mount.

Since the earliest recollections of human history, men have flocked to this place to bleed and die—and for what? Greed. Pride. Political oppression. Both good and evil men came to Megiddo for different reasons, but they all died together for the same lost causes. Those unfortunate souls poured out their lives as a sacrifice to Megiddo until the land grew fat with the blood of the dead. Still, there were those who always believed that the past atrocities committed at Megiddo were nothing compared to the holocaust to come. They prophesized that the final conflict between the forces of good and evil would be fought at that mount—one last battle to determine the fate of every soul on earth.

Perhaps they were right.

In the final years of the modern age, another battle of significance took place at Megiddo. The circumstances of this conflict, however, remain shrouded in mystery to this day. In fact, there is no concrete evidence that anything happened at all, save for a short, two-minute video leaked to the internet—a clip that caught the interest and imagination of the entire world for years to come. The video was recorded by a female scientist of Egyptian descent alongside a US military bodyguard (both identities unknown) while climbing the steep hillside of Megiddo. The woman's small camera documented a blood-caked path with weapons scattered everywhere: grenades, assault rifles, medieval swords and shields. And while the blood and discarded weaponry suggested that a vicious battle had taken place, there was not a single body to be found anywhere. Had Megiddo swallowed up the dead? Did someone come and collect the corpses? The circumstances of the event grew more dubious with each passing moment.

Once the scientist reached the top of the hill, she trained her camera on the most unsettling part of the documentation—a horrible black cross planted squarely in the heart of the Megiddo ruins. Ask anyone who's ever seen this clip and the first thing they'll talk about is the haunting image of that cross amidst all the blood. The earth beneath was split in twain as if the black edifice had been hurled like into the ground like a javelin. The cold and unyielding monument was some 20 feet in height, smooth as glass and black as the darkest night. Some people called it humanity's tombstone; we just didn't realize we were dead yet.

In just under 24 hours, the video entitled *Event Zero* received over 30 million hits online. People couldn't stop talking about it, and the more they talked about it, the more they allowed the creeping doom of that cross into their lives. *Event Zero* was like a bad nightmare shared by the entire world. It caused fears so palpable that no one could escape them.

In a desperate effort to calm the masses, political leaders from around the globe publicly denounced the video as an elaborate hoax. Their words carried little weight. It took almost no time before the United Nations dispatched troops to secure and investigate the grounds of Megiddo. Israeli reporters soon announced that the United States had sent an entire battalion to the region, and just days later, China, Russia, and several other world superpowers had deployed troops to Megiddo as well. Within two weeks, an international military base had been assembled around the notorious mount. The hill itself was enclosed within a massive, bomb-proof warehouse with multiple security checkpoints within a ten-mile radius. Giant, chain-linked fences and AA guns

surrounded the perimeter with 24/7 patrols conducted by heavily armed guards. It was soon concluded by political pundits and war analysts alike that Megiddo had become the most secured location in the entire world. This did nothing but aggravate our fears, and yet, government officials still had the audacity to insist that we were all just overreacting.

The world went mad with questions... Who was that scientist? That soldier? Who made that cross? Does the US military know what's happening? Was the discovery an accident? Is the UN keeping something out of Megiddo? ...Something in? Who posted the Event Zero video to the internet?

## The Fallout

Scientists called them radiation fissures—unexplainable surges of radioactive phenomena. I've never seen one myself, but I know people who've witnessed them firsthand. They say they're like watching the sky spontaneously combust. To this day, we still have absolutely no idea what causes them.

Just three days after the Event Zero video was posted to the internet, the first radiation fissure struck Atlanta, Georgia with catastrophic results. Over the next several months, fissures would erupt in 85 different locations around the world. They struck anywhere and everywhere: in the hearts of major metropolises, rural farms, over oceans and uninhabited deserts. Anyone within miles of these inexplicable events suffered from severe and sometimes lethal doses of radiation poisoning. Transformative

The initial speculation was that an unidentified terrorist group had just coordinated the most sophisticated terror strike in the history of the modern age. However, many of us found it hard to believe that a terror cell—no matter how clever or insidious—would waste so much energy on zero population areas just to mislead the public. Another popular conspiracy was that the United States had recently engaged in a covert nuclear war with one or more enemies. These claims were even less substantiated; while nukes could certainly cause the resulting fallout, these areas didn't show the physical devastation consistent with the detonation of nuclear weapons. This was something entirely different—a phenomena that had never occurred on earth before.

Hospitals soon became overwhelmed with patients suffering from Acute Radiation Sickness. In response, district shelters were built and quickly overpopulated with displaced citizens whose homes had to be evacuated after the mysterious fallout. When these places reached capacity, the sick and homeless poured out into the streets. They begged for help but their cries fell on deaf ears. The world governments said and did nothing. They instead watched in fascination as if we were all part of some lab experiment that had to run its course. We began to recognize the truly fragile condition of our so-called civilization. So naive we had been to think that our way of life stood on concrete foundations. In truth, everything we thought we knew rested atop a powder keg just waiting for a spark. And once these radiation fissures lit the fuse, we came to know the true meaning of fear. Terror congealed in our veins and it slowly fermented into something dark and empowering.

The backlash erupted from every corner of the globe. Angry mobs stormed the homes of government officials, hanging entire families in the streets and torching their estates to the ground. Many countries fell into civil war as furious citizens formed their own militias and led insurrections against the reigning powers. There was blood in the streets, a complete breakdown of social order. No one could escape the hatred spiraling out of control like a malignant cancer. Even people who once led happy lives—loved by their families and respected by their peers—took to the streets with poisoned minds. They shambled along like zombies lost in a haze of dark thoughts. When approached, they'd unleash what could only be described as primeval rage—a furious tide of fists

and teeth. If someone crossed their paths, they'd punch and bite and rip and gnash until their victims were torn into fleshy bags of meat and blood. Our world fell into a living nightmare, every bit as bleak and forbidding as Event Zero. With our civilization collapsing into radioactive decay, we lost all hope that peace would someday restore us. The joys of life and the promises of tomorrow were stripped from us and crucified to the Black Cross of Megiddo.

## **The Nuclear Cataclysm**

No one knows how it began. All I know is that few were left to see it end. By the time scientists discovered the deadly correlation between these radiation fissures and the worldwide epidemic of rage, the Armageddon clock had already struck its final hour. The condition scientists had labeled "The Sickness" had already tainted the minds of already unstable world leaders. Armed with nuclear vengeance, the first warhead was launched, triggering a worldwide exchange that burned all civilization to the ground. Just under a thousand nukes in total detonated across the face of the earth, scarring it irreparably. Another world war ensued, but those battles paled in comparison to the initial devastation. Some nations collapsed entirely while others continued to fight without direction or purpose. Soldiers took to the battlefield like whipped dogs lashing out in fear and confusion as the world around them went up in flames. Our communication infrastructures were completely silenced by fissures and radioactive blasts. We went without cell phones, satellites, internet, long-range radio, etc. The isolation broke the back of modern civilization. Even our most refined societies quickly degenerated into warring bands of brigands, thieves, and murderers.

The Nuclear Cataclysm is universally considered the last chapter of the earth as we knew it. While humankind would somehow endure this initial catastrophe, the horror of the next age would be so profound that many survivors would come to envy the dead.

## **Rise of the Mortis-horde**

Every living creature on earth suffers from The Sickness. No exceptions. But then again, I don't have to remind you, do I? Surely you already know well what it's like to wake up every morning and choke down the wrath creeping up your throat. That evil inside you... that's The Sickness looking to have you for its puppet. At all costs, master it. For those who lack the resolve to fight its rage will fall prey to the cold embrace of The Sickness. They get turned into demons wrapped in the flesh of men. It is the mortis-horde that I am now speaking of.

We are all like reeds bending in the winds of The Sickness; it causes us to sometimes lash out at our loved ones and get wrapped up in our own fears and insecurities. However, when the winds blow long and heavy, some of the reeds break, and that is when the real terror begins. Those who are completely consumed by The Sickness are said to have fallen into The Black Dream, the final and most debilitating stage of the disease. Henceforth, those individuals are known as mortis fiends—the living dead. In truth, this has nothing to do with anything physical or biological; mortis fiends are very much "alive" as far as science is concerned. The reason they're considered undead is because The Black Dream completely separates them from their own humanity. From the moment they first enter this dream-like torpor, all the memories they once cherished are lost forever. Fiends are stripped of everything but the rage of The Sickness. It turns them into vessels of wrath—violent monsters without reason or moral restraint. It happened to my brother. It's happening to me right now.

Over time, mortis-fiends come to even forget their own languages. They instead take up a strange tongue that linguists today call Deathspeak—a hybrid of old Latin and some other spidery language that's entirely unrecognizable. They're eventually rendered incapable of communicating with anyone except those who have also been purchased by The Black Dream. This malevolent

kinship aligns the fiends together under a single banner known as the mortis-horde, and together, they share but one purpose: to rid this planet of all life. Yes, there are still bad people in this world, and yes, there are dangerous beasts that lurk in the shadows, but the mortis-horde is the true face of evil. They are your mortal enemies above all others. Never forget it.

Like jackals, the mortis-horde scoured the earth for those of us who continued to resist the dark temptations of The Sickness. Decimated by the Nuclear Cataclysm, the standing armies that remained in this world were incapable of combatting this new threat. Even when a victory was taken over the horde, The Sickness would find a way to creep into the very ranks of the victors, destroying them from within. The horde could not be stopped, so the rest of us were left with two options: face the horde and die or recoil and flee. Yes, we shamed ourselves, but all life today draws breath from our cowardice.

## Surviving Hell

As a living survivor of the Nuclear Cataclysm, I can tell you that we were nothing more than shadows of our former selves. With our past destroyed and no perceivable future before us, survival became the only law of the land. Fear drove many to unthinkable acts of depravity. They stole. They killed. They ransomed every inch of their humanities until they were just as cold and disturbed as those who had succumbed to The Sickness. For some, the living nightmare became too much to bear; they chose suicide as an escape. Others did the truly unthinkable—they willingly opened their arms to the numbing embrace of the mortis-horde. So desperate for release, they took to The Black Dream knowing full well that they'd never wake again.

Thankfully, not all of us were made of such fragile resolve. Instead of slitting our throats in final surrender, we instead retreated to the hidden places of the world to wait out the tides of darkness. We were determined to ensure the survival of our species no matter the cost. It is a promise now four decades into the making.

In order to defy what seemed an inevitable fate, many people around the world formed small packs and walled themselves up in safe and reclusive places. Some took refuge in caves while others barricaded themselves in malls, grocery stores, bomb shelters, and anywhere else that offered supplies and shelter. I, my brother, and several others took refuge in a library nestled on the outskirts of a once-sleepy town now crawling with empty cadavers thirsting for blood. We learned to grow crops on narrow rooftops. We lured vermin and other tiny creatures into our hiding place for meat. Most importantly, we taught ourselves to defend our new home and family from enemies. Millions of people around the world did the same. These survival groups called "live cells" became the seeds of our new civilizations.

Live cells (sometimes called "Houses") often consisted of anywhere from five to twenty complete strangers living together under the common purpose of survival. Many people had become loners and orphans after the Nuclear Cataclysm, and therefore, these live cells became like a second family to many of us. Over time, the bonds that we developed with our "cell-mates" eventually rivaled any allegiance we had once felt for our families or countries. Cells developed their own traditions, rituals, and customs. Looking back, it wouldn't be unfair to say that many Houses resembled cults. We were isolated communities with our own bonding rituals, misinformation, and even a certain degree of brainwashing. We tried our best to return a sense of normalcy to our lives, sometimes working to block out the outside world entirely. Unfortunately, no matter how much we tried to flee reality, we never truly forgot that we were prisoners to the cells that protected us, and the mortis-horde was our jailor.

A live cell could survive almost anywhere in the world provided that it met three obligations: it fed its people, kept enemies at bay, and ensured the psychic health of its members. Live cells that

ran out of food either starved or forced its members to creep out into the Dystopia in search of more supplies—a death sentence. Other cells failed to keep a low profile, became overpopulated, or lacked the courage to fight for their lives; they had their hearts torn out by the bloodthirsty mobs of the horde.

But of these three tenets, the most frightening one to abide was the third—failing to keep a beloved cell-mate from slipping into The Black Dream. Everyone knew that everyone was poisoned by the fallout, and therefore it became imperative to watch for manifesting symptoms of The Sickness within the cell. A single person succumbing to the power of The Black Dream could spell ruin for the entire House. Our only recourse was to amputate the infection by either slaughtering or excommunicating those who exhibited any signs of the disease. It was cruel, yes, but unless you've witnessed firsthand what happens when the infection is left to fester, please stay your judgment. Have you heard of a dead cell? That's what you get when The Sickness possesses every single cell-mate. Death would be more kind, for these victims remain trapped in that place to linger like ghosts. They drink up all the rage and sadness and fear and despair until they swell up and become monstrous in both body and spirit. Then one day an unlucky explorer opens the crypt and all that pent-up evil pours out into the world in a torrent of wild, bloody gulps.

## The Dystopia

The face of the planet has been forever warped by the fallout. Coastal cities like Boston, Dublin, and Tokyo (just to name a few) have been wiped off the map, sunk by melted icecaps. Other capital cities were blasted into oblivion back when our frenzied leaders traded nuclear punches. These capitals were once the crowning glory of our species. Their lights shined in the darkness like white-hot beacons and their skyscrapers reached up like massive arms to heaven. Now these towers have collapsed upon themselves—tombstones marking the gravesites of a billion unhappy ghosts.

The catastrophic climate change has done more than just sink the coasts. Scorching heat waves have torched verdant jungles into fiery wastelands. The once fertile valleys of the earth no longer produce a harvest; only nuclear poison now sprouts from the ground. Entire regions accustomed to long summer days have been cast into the perpetual dark of nuclear winter. In these places, it rains ash and death. The fallout beat the land into submission and forced its transformation into something unrecognizable. This is why we now call our earth the Dystopia and its wretched inhabitants Dystopians. These dark places have become reflections of our greatest failure. They are both our punishment and atonement.

But I will say this... the Dystopia is not without twisted beauty. The same fallout that demolished three-fourths of the globe ironically placed a healing hand on the rest. Radiation cut deep into the earth, but the scars actually made the land stronger. Grasslands have exploded without warning into twisted forests so thick they're like impassable mazes. There are deserts that have flooded into crystalline lakes and the gutted remains of many cities have become overgrown with brush and wildlife. The urban sprawls and the other eyesores of industry have been swallowed up by the fury of the Dystopia and replaced with rapidly evolving (mutating) wildlife. With the demise of our "modern" civilizations, the land is quickly replenishing its lost resources and ridding itself of the pollution that we daily vomited into the sky and the earth and the sea.

To be sure, humankind did not survive the last great war alone. In the first ten years after the Nuclear Cataclysm, I saw a grand total of five animals: a dog, three birds, and a wolf with a broken leg that dragged itself to the edge of a highway and then died. I thought the Animal Kingdom had been wiped off the globe, but while many creatures did become extinct in the grim aftermath of the Nuclear Cataclysm, countless new species were miraculously born from its radioactive womb. To

be more accurate, the fallout literally transformed many “common” creatures into highly adaptive (and oftentimes dangerous) beasts capable of withstanding the new age.

It is an alien world. Before the Nuclear Cataclysm, every inch of the earth had been discovered, trespassed, and violated. We took everything from the land and left it nothing—no secrets, no mysteries, no magic. But now? For those of us who actually lived before Event Zero, this new world seems absolutely impossible, like something out of our most fantastical dreams or nightmares. It is truly a new world waiting to be rediscovered.

## Gifts of the Fallout

But more than the earth or the abominable creatures that stalk the land, it is our species—humankind—that’s been altered most by the power of the fallout. Most Dystopians are like myself; we’re regular people working together to survive The Sickness and this new world order. Yet there are others—champions we call them—who have had extraordinary potential unlocked within them. Radiation seems to be the key to their powers. I’ve seen with my own eyes women who can lift and hurl cars. I’ve watched men fly and move objects with their minds. I’ve witnessed the magic of sorcerers—yes! Real magic! I’ve encountered half-men, half-machine hybrids that can morph their very flesh into weapons and produce electricity through sheer force of will. Werewolves! Giants! I have even seen people rise from the dead.

We have a name for these strange powers—Gifts of the Fallout. I myself never manifested such abilities, but perhaps you have. If so, let me say this: you are both humankind’s greatest asset and most hated enemy. Heed this warning if you carry the tremendous responsibility of a so-called “gift,” these powers may seem like a blessing, but trust me, they usher death to the prideful and foolhardy. Each time a person channels one of these special powers, he poisons his flesh with radiation. Therefore, you must be judicious when calling forth these unique abilities. Each day, The Black Dreams claims the life of another fool drunk off his own power. Gifts of the Fallout may seem like the road to salvation, but unless you’re extraordinarily careful, you’ll soon learn that they’re just another road leading to the gaping maw of The Sickness. And yet, we shall need more people like you with supernatural potential if we are ever to wrench this world from the death-grip of the mortis-horde. When these champions work together, they make a powerful coalition against evil. When vanity, greed, and The Sickness slip into the cracks of these fragile alliances, the mortis horde just sits back and watches these so-called heroes destroy our hope of redemption.

## The Reclamation

I know I will not live to see the day when the mortis horde is vanquished once and for all, but at least I lived to witness and play my part (albeit insignificant) in the birth of The Reclamation movement. Ah, let me put that word to paper once more—*Reclamation*. Drink up every last drop of that word; it is our oasis. Right now we can only sip its potential, but I pray that one day the entire world will be cleansed in its healing waters. I pray for the Reclamation to wash away The Sickness and drown the horde once and for all.

Bless your poor soul if you know nothing of the Reclamation, because that means you know nothing of hope. To you, the Dystopia is forever, its misery unchanging. The Reclamation is our crusade to reclaim this earth in the name of humanity. It was never our destiny to live out our days in the unnoticed peripheries of this planet. Seeded in each man’s heart is an insatiable desire for connection, to be part of something greater than ourselves. Yet for decades we have cowered in our live cells like skulking ghosts; we let ourselves become mindless automatons programmed with a solitary purpose: survive. 40 years later, we have come to the realization that life without the freedom to live is truly no life at all.

The Reclamation is an ideal embedded in the heart of every survivor who cannot find contentment in the quiet shame of a live cell. It's about recovering lost knowledge and technology. It's about rebuilding cities and cultures and re-exploring the four corners of the earth. It's about slaying our own ignorance through education, art, philosophy and the other pillars of a restored civilization. The Reclamation is here, it is now, and it demands that the mortis horde pays for its crimes, pound for pound, with its own flesh and blood. Of course we can never return to how things were before the Nuclear Cataclysm. Those days are lost forever, choked out by a blanket of radioactive filth. Yet the Reclamation offers hope that a better tomorrow is on the horizon.

If you listen close, you can hear its resounding call echo in every corner of the Dystopia. Its hope is whispered from live cell to live cell, gaining momentum with each breath. After years of hibernation, we are at last brushing away the cobwebs from our spirits. The Reclamation has given many Dystopians the courage to step out of their Houses—some for the first time in their lives—and carve out a piece of the Dystopia just for themselves. We have all become pioneers; we're building holdfasts and farms, outposts and walled cities. I am told there are entire territories called havens that span for miles. The people living in these havens are guarded by disciplined armies (often consisting of those who possess Gifts of the Fallout) who meet the mortis-horde out on the field of battle with equal wrath. Know this: the mortis-horde is at last afraid. You can smell it on them. They realize now that exterminating our species will not come easily; it will involve a great war that I promise will not be won so easily. Hope is the new pandemic sweeping the globe. Perhaps it's the only true cure to The Sickness. As long as we do not crucify ourselves with insurrections and bloody civil wars, and provided that our gifted champions use their powers to preserve the innocent, our kind shall one day taste absolute victory.

## **My End. Your Beginning.**

So there it is. My only asset in this world is now yours. Do with it what you will. I cannot say this knowledge will save you, but to go without it is surely suicide. My only advice to you is simple: do as much good as you can for as long as you possibly can. The moment you let evil slip into your heart, The Sickness will come for you like it does everyone else. It will swallow you up; that's a certainty. Then you'll spend the rest of your life serving out its death sentence through offerings of blood until you're at last put down like the animal you've become. When that day comes—and if there is a God it will—all you can hope is that your good works outweighed the bad.

I see it in my dreams now—The Black Cross of Megiddo. At first it slipped into my nightmares only once every few years, but now I see it every time I close my eyes. It calls to me. The Cross knows I'm weak and frail and almost broken. Surely by the time you find and read these notes, I'll be like the rest of those demons shambling around and howling in agony. If you should find me, wake me from The Black Dream. A swift blow to my head or heart should do the trick. Better yet, maybe you could venture to Israel and rip that foul cross out of the earth for all time. Over the last decades our buildings have fallen. Our armies have fallen. Our civilization have fallen. Almost nothing from the old world survived... except for the Black Cross. I think we are all crucified to it—each in our own way. Perhaps it will only topple once the mortis-horde is slain and a cure is at last found for The Sickness. Or maybe it is in fact the tombstone of humanity and we are just delaying the inevitable.

## Epilogue: Event Zero

It was a prank. At least that's what we both said. "Just another disturbing YouTube video gone viral." My friend James emailed me the link to this video one night along with a message that read: "Check this out. Creepy shit." He claimed he found it while doing a little research which meant he was porn-surfing.

It looked so harmless at the time.

The next day at school, we tried to laugh about what we'd seen. James mocked the poor video quality and I ridiculed the gross overacting. But even then, our jokes were hesitant and uncomfortable. All teenagers think they're invincible, and so did we, but this video... it found a chink in our armor—our first taste of all the bitterness to come. When we talked about the clip, neither James or I realized then that we only ever spoke about it in hushed whispers. I guess we were afraid—subconsciously I'm sure—of who or what might hear us. The secret we stumbled across that night refused to let us just walk away. We became its possession—its noose tightening around our throats.

If I could do it all over again, I wouldn't have watched it. Not that night. At least then I could have enjoyed a couple more months of the mindless routine that was my life, appreciated the simplicity of each day and the luxuries of our culture. But what is seen cannot be unseen.

I suppose that I'm somewhat fortunate that today the video is no longer our secret to bear alone. Practically everyone still alive has seen it. The "Event Zero" video as it's now called depicts how it all started. Before the Sickness, before the wars, before the mortis-horde, before all the tears and the blood, before everything, there was this video posted to the internet as a dark portent of our future. In retrospect, the signs were so clear, but how could we have known? We lived in an age of murderous skepticism. As children, we were taught to slay the obvious myths of our youth like Santa Clause and the Tooth Fairy. Once we matured into adults, we found the strength to overcome the grander fictions of the world: god, the human soul, the existence of absolutes like 'good' and 'evil'. Freed from moral superstition, we lived our lives as we wanted, and therefore, found ourselves woefully unprepared for the trials to come. Perhaps absolutes like good and evil don't exist, but I now know that absolute hate does. It's a palpable thing that sleeps in the human heart and must never be disturbed. After years of living in this hell, I've seen exactly what every single one of us is capable of with even just a little encouragement.

Yes. I can still recall every last detail of that video. I haven't watched the damn thing in over forty years, but the images are always with me, seared into the back of my retinas so that even in my sleep I see blood. But more terrible than any given second of that video was the way the whole thing made me feel—the visceral response it invoked. I remember my face getting closer and closer to the computer screen, entranced by the beautiful horror of it all. Then suddenly, I felt something—that cross I think—reach into my chest and pull something out. I don't know what. I just know that whatever it was, I never got it back.

I remember how the video shook violently, shifting in and out of focus, as the scientist pointed her camera in wide arcs in an attempt to document everything around her. It reminded me of the first time I watched *The Blair Witch Project*—I felt nauseous. Crunchy static poured out of my speakers, garbling most of the sound, but you could definitely still hear the young scientist mumbling, "Oh my god... oh my god... oh my god..."

The blasted landscape under surveillance was supposedly Megiddo, a hill in what used to be Israel. In ancient times, Megiddo had been the host site of countless battles. Connecting the lands of Egypt and Assyria, several invaluable trade routes crossed at this location, and many people lost their lives in a desperate bid to claim the land for themselves. Megiddo is also recognized in

Christian myth as the fabled site for the final conflict between God and Satan. So much past. So much future.

It was dawn, or maybe dusk. Honestly, it was impossible to tell. The video felt like it was filmed on another planet in an alternate universe—set apart from time, of anything rational. In this land, anything was possible, and that was so unsettling to me. From the distant horizon, the sun poured orange and purple light over Megiddo; the rays were a dark hue, stripped of purity. A cold light, for sure. The clouds above were shredded like a pillow, its stuffing scattered across the sky. Dark and gray, the clouds were frozen in place as if to block out the heavens for all time. An uneasy stillness hung over this patch of earth, interrupted only by a serpentine wind that twisted up and around the scientist, blowing her hair into her face, whispering static into the camera. Some people claim to have heard words in the wind—ancient Latin—softly warning her to get away, to leave.

As she trudged up a narrow path that led to the top of the hill, the young scientist noted all of the strange 'artifacts' that littered the grounds: AK-47s, Israeli rifles, Berettas, rocket-propelled grenades. One would have thought that the Israeli army had been in a firefight with one of their many enemies of the state, but there were countless weapons of antiquity as well. The scientist picked up a longsword which she estimated to be about 800 years old, yet sharp as the day it was made. There were shields and holy symbols that no historian would be able to identify. It was like some lost-Atlantis culture had lived, fought, and died right there in the cradle of civilization without anyone ever knowing.

"What happened here?" muttered the scientist under her breath.

With each new step, the scientist's boots made a sick, sucking sound as they lifted out of the mushy earth below. She pointed the camera at the ground to show that it was caked in almost six inches of a black and crimson substance. Maybe blood? From the fight? Megiddo had tasted so much blood over the years, perhaps it couldn't drink any more. But while the weapons seemed to indicate that a fierce battle had recently been waged, there were no bodies anywhere. Not one. The discarded weapons made it appear as if a massive battle had taken place between phantoms.

Another biting wind swept past the scientist, another inexorable cry from beyond.

"Do you smell that?" growled a man's voice from behind the camera. The scientist whirled around to capture the face of a soldier in his late 30s, gristly and stern. He wore military garbs, a US army beret, and carried an M-16 in his hands. His voice was gruff and lined with discomfort.

"Yes. It's sulfur," replied the scientist. "Highly abnormal."

And at that moment, I too could smell the nauseating stench. Right there in my bedroom on the other side of the world. Sulfur and rotten meat. At the time, I wrote this off to the power of suggestion, but many years later, I talked to a group of survivors that claim to have experienced the very same thing. That can't just be a coincidence. There is something supernatural about that place, so much so that it can manifest its doom through sight alone.

At last they reached the top of Megiddo where the ruins of an ancient city-state remained. The wind immediately ceased, its warnings ignored. The scientist took a few steps forward before releasing an audible gasp when she found it. Planted in the rubble of that dead city was a black cross, 20 feet in height, erected like a dark memorial to the secret battle waged there. It stood quiet and threatening, in perfect stasis with the dead sky.

I felt my blood run cold. My temples pounded like a war-drum until the nausea forced me to keel over and vomit. I think I wept—yes. I felt this sudden and inexplicable sense of loss, like everything I loved in this life had just been tainted somehow. The image of the black cross split my heart open, releasing the floodgates of a thousand evil thoughts and agonizing emotions; they poured out of me in uncontrollable waves. I screamed and cried and begged for someone to save

me. From what? I didn't know at the time. But I wanted to die. Right then and there. I know that for a fact. One minute I'm eating a bowl of cereal at my computer and checking my email, the next moment I'm ready to commit suicide. Had I been near a knife, a gun, a razor, anything, I would have gladly put myself down like a wounded animal. It was like my future had somehow just been raped by the clandestine nature of that black edifice. I felt truly and utterly alone. Powerless.

And yet somehow, between choking sobs, I managed to pull myself back into my seat and finish the video. I had come too far to stop now. I had to complete this rite of passage.

Sweaty and short of breath, I grinded my teeth as the scientist reached out a trembling hand to touch the cross. As her fingers pressed against its surface, the video distorted wildly and a surge of static boomed through my speakers. Pulling her hand away, she commented about its smooth, marble surface and that it was literally frozen to the touch. My fingers tingled and went numb. She began to postulate about who constructed the cross and for what purpose, her voice quivering with both excitement and horror.

If you've never seen the video, let me quickly sum up its dramatic conclusion. A shadow rises up from behind the scientist and soldier, and if you freeze the video just right, it looks like you can almost make out a face in the grim reflection of the cross. The soldier spins on his heels and fires his weapon, the jingling of shell casings mix with the roaring gunfire. The scientist screams and drops her camera to the ground. The last image that you see in the video before the screen goes dark is a sideways view of the cross, looming like a demon over the world. The ground around the strange monument was black and corrosive, like the cross had injected its cancer into the heart of the earth. Finally, the camera gets kicked and the video comes to an end.

Omega eventually got so many hits and created such a worldwide panic that several world leaders even made public statements confirming that the video was indeed a hoax. And still, UN security forces descended on Megiddo, set up roadblocks, knocked out satellite feeds, and essentially made that small hill in Israel disappear from the modern world in a flash of obfuscation. Journalists reported that military patrols traced a five-mile perimeter around the site and that the entire state of Israel had become a no-fly zone. Politicians refused to entertain questions on Omega. They insisted that the media was creating a frenzy over a confirmed joke, but the number of secret meetings and private conferences between world leaders continued grew by the day. In the coming years, we would all come to know the truth, the terrible purpose of Event Zero—harbinger of the Sickness.

And to this day, I still see that black cross. Inside hospitals. In front of office buildings. On top of churches. Anywhere The Sickness has struck or is getting ready to strike, I see that Megiddo cross drilled into the earth like a stake through the heart of the last good day on earth.

Do I believe in God now? No. I still don't. I'm not sure anyone can see the things I've seen or do the things I've done and still think there's some reason for all this, some divine plan that'll save us. But I will say this much, if 'god' does exist, I guarantee you that he no longer believes in us either.