

Rapid | Durena Burns

It's not the alarm clock that awakens Carter. It's the screams. She can't tell whether they're from a man, woman, or child. The screams are intermittent, happening often enough that Carter is on high alert even while she sleeps. The screams are so habitual that they break through her subconscious like a drill chipping its way through concrete.

The clock on the rickety stand near the bed reads 6:01. The sunlight passes through the blinds, illuminating the room. Carter likes to be ready when it's light out. It's not safe to travel in the dark. Who knows who or *what* may be creeping in the shadows? It's dangerous anytime, but especially at night.

She sits up in bed, grabbing a pocket-sized picture from the stand. It's a photograph of her son and granddaughter. Carter keeps it as both a reminder and a good luck charm. She wishes she could be reunited with her family, to ensure that all she has experienced is a bad dream. She places the picture in her wallet.

Carter grabs her clock, shoving it inside her backpack. Wariness is visible in her hazel eyes as she heads to the washroom to clean and dress herself. She views, through the broken mirror, the long scar on her cheek. She combs her brunette bangs and ponytail with her fingers. She eats her last ration and clasps a watch on her left wrist. Carter hoists her rangbow on one shoulder and her backpack on the other. A "rangbow" is a cross between a boomerang and a crossbow. She grunts as she takes their weight. She's 5'11 and is muscled up to 187 pounds.

Another scream—this one closer—causes her to hurry. Carter exits the house and cautiously walks on the gravel pathway, away from the gurgles.

The small, red sun is slightly above the horizon; the

temperature is warm. Carter is glad she doesn't have to take out a jacket yet. If she were to stop now, there's a chance that she'd be attacked. It's happened before. Carter needs to make it to the exchange marketplace before the first sundown.

Entering a wasteland, Carter sees the remains of a once-functioning town. Plant life is scattered on lawns of dilapidated buildings with their leaves blackened like they're charred. Carcasses of animals are stacked together. These "animals" can adapt to all climates. One of the most recognizable species looks like rodents; they're the size of ponies and only eat other "animals." Fires are spread throughout small sections, their flames dancing in the air. Garbage is tossed in piles across pathways. When it's hot outside, the smell is overpowering. It reminds Carter of a woman named Mrs. Barber and her daughter. Mrs. Barber had lost her husband but survived for a while with her little girl. The toddler had this odor, a mixture of feces and cheese, when Mrs. Barber hadn't changed her in weeks.

The exchange marketplace is where survivors trade goods. The goods can be synthesized foods and drinks, clothes, weapons, luggage, or essentials. The "luxury" items include walkietalkies, clocks, jewelry, Vaseline, paper, pain meds, candy, and communicators. Communicators are the successors of cell phones, only the devices are as small as fingernails. The tops of them have one button that pulls up a start menu and pop apps in holographic forms.

Carter waits for familiar patrons. A crowd bustles past her and she sees her chance until a couple of the people are pulverized by a visible shockwave. Carter's face is sprayed with blood and visceral tissue. Panic ensues as people try to evade the series of strikes. Carter hunches down, making herself as small as possible. She hears the breaking of objects and a horde of folks either running into stands or each other.

The attack ceases as quickly as it starts. Seven-foot, robotic hazmat suits appear and order the remaining survivors in a straight line. The Hazmats aren't one of *them*. They normally don't use the Hazmats' advanced

technology, but some can camouflage within their environment. *They've* also evolved to mimic near-human appearances and mannerisms. Carter goes lower, moving in a crab-like crawl. She tries to hold up her heavy belongings so that they won't scrape against the ground. Carter almost makes it behind a warehouse before her rangbow knocks on the ground.

Part of the building is hit with a strike, causing pieces of metal to be obliterated. Some of these pieces fall on Carter's back, causing her to lose her rangbow. Another strike rings out and she's nearly killed, the shockwave inches from her head. The static of it has her hair sticking up. She takes advantage of the momentum and skids to the other side of the warehouse using the specks on the ground. She hits her head on one of the awnings as she stands up, listening for the Hazmats.

Her sigh of relief wanes as the tip of a sword is pointed at her throat. A teen girl with a small afro holds the weapon. Carter puts her hands up, cursing herself for dropping her rangbow. She isn't sure how this girl got the drop on her. Carter hadn't heard nor sensed her.

"Hey," Carter gulps. "I mean no harm. I was trying to get away from the Hazmats." She must look like quite the sight—with blood and grain caked on her, her hair sticking up, and what she's sure is a huge knot on her forehead.

"How do I know that?" the girl jeers with an unfamiliar accent, her sepia eyes narrowing. Carter takes note of the other's appearance. The girl's a hue lighter than her eyes and she has on a blue romper. "You could be one of *them*."

"I promise you I'm not. I'm human," assures Carter. "I'm unarmed."

"You're one of the Hazmats."

"The Hazmats are rarely out of their suits in public. Whoa—hey!" Carter exclaims as the teen grabs her backpack and dumps the contents. "I said I was

unarmed!"

"Trusting strangers is a death sentence." The girl ransacks through the supplies, tossing one of the bottles away.

"You see that I don't have a weapon on me. If I were dangerous, I would've tried to kill you by now." If possible, the other's eyes narrow even more. "How old are you anyway?"

"None of your business."

The aches on Carter's forehead and back are becoming worse. "You look like a kid."

"I'm *not* a kid."

A raindrop falls on Carter's nose and then slides down to her chin. She looks at her watch again. It's an hour and 14 minutes now. The sun is getting lower and it's getting colder.

"I'm Carter. What's your name?" The girl looks at her suspiciously. As much pain as Carter's in, this makes her smile. "I guess I can call you 'kid' then."

"I'm not a kid," the girl grumbles before she sighs. "It's Zawn." She lowers the sword.

Carter sticks out her hand for a shake. She slowly drops it when Zawn gives her hand a cold stare.

Drops are falling. Carter looks at Zawn in concern. "You don't have a jacket?"

Zawn peers at her uncovered arms. "The wetness doesn't bother me," she says gruffly.

"It's chilly out," says Carter, taking off her jacket and putting it over Zawn's shoulders.

Zawn's eyes widen, looking back and forth between the older woman and the jacket. "Why'd you do that?"

"Because you shouldn't be without one," says Carter. She peers at the clouds. "Are you with anybody? If not, you can come with me. Someone your age shouldn't be alone."

"I can take care of myself," Zawn scoffs, sheathing her weapon before handing the jacket back to Carter.

"Keep it." Zawn eyes her briefly and then starts walking the other way, looking back every so often. Once the girl's out of sight, Carter bends down to pick up her supplies. She clicks her tongue when she sees that her alarm clock is broken. She's still on the defense as she listens for danger. She should've kept the girl with her. *Besides, she owes me a new clock.*

After picking up her empty bottle, Carter finds her rangbow. She lets out a hiss, hauling the weapon over her shoulder. Carter treads to the front door of the warehouse. The stench hits her hard, causing her to gag. She decides not to explore the inside of the building. 30 minutes.

Carter thinks about the first time she saw one of *them*. They weren't as humanoid as *they* are now. She had split up from her group by then. She'd hidden behind a wall and had witnessed one of *them* hobble towards injured people. *Their* skin was so translucent and hung off their bones like liquefying gum. *They* had huge skulls, purple eyes, slender builds, and were taller than humans. *They* had no distinct smell from what Carter remembers and wore no clothes at the time.

As she continues walking, she takes out another blanket and an empty bottle. She puts the blanket over her head and uses the bottle to capture the rain. She needs to find shelter, fast. Not only because of the potential dangers but also because she's hurt and cold.

20 minutes. The sun will set soon.

Carter hears a bang that causes her to turn around. She's swift as she pulls her rangbow off her shoulder and aims, her half-full bottle now strapped to her leg. She keeps her mouth shut to prevent her teeth from chattering. It's difficult for Carter to make out anything as the haze from the rain is obstructing her view. 10 minutes.

Another banging sound from her right prompts Carter to spin back around and aim. Her stance loosens as she catches the outline of a construction site. In one of the areas, four corners of drywall are placed in a square. Carter scouts the perimeter and is satisfied that neither *they* nor people are nearby. After she finds where the portable restrooms are, she huddles inside the small structure. Her watch reads 9:05.

At 11:47, Carter is lying on the muddy ground in pain. Her blanket is still too damp to be comfortable. She's on her side with her knees against her chest in the corner, away from the heavy rain. She's shivering from the elements, tired and not feeling well. Carter is at her most vulnerable and if an enemy were to find her, she has little strength to defend herself. Sunrise isn't due for another 14 minutes.

The oceans are a deep purple, almost black like the water is ashamed of itself and is keeping its secrets hidden. She tends to avoid them, unsure whether they're lethal.

She leaves the construction site at 12:13 after a quick wash-up. What Carter wants to do is find a better place to sleep and retrieve food. The red sun is out and the rain is dwindling, but the temperature is still cold. Carter makes her way to an alley.

Near its end, Carter thinks she sees a heap of clothes. It takes her seconds to realize that it's a small child. Carter

doesn't say a word until she's right behind the child, peering at the back of some shaggy hair and a long, white shirt.

"Hey," says Carter quietly to not startle the child or bring attention to herself. "Are you okay, little one?"

She gasps and jumps back after the child turns toward her. From what Carter can tell, the child's a boy. His head is a normal size for a toddler, but his skin is fair and loose. His eyes are amethyst. The boy isn't frightened of Carter, but he does start to camouflage into the brick wall behind him. The only reason Carter knows he still there is because his eyes flash. Carter has never seen one of *them* so close nor so young before. She wonders if the boy hasn't yet evolved or if he is one of the regressed ones.

Once she's sure that the child isn't going to attack or eat her, Carter asks, "Can you understand me?" The boy becomes visible and tilts his head. He begins speaking in another tongue, the sounds musical and with multiple ticks. The words are impossible for a human to replicate.

The boy comes closer, puckering his lips and trying to touch Carter's bottle. The sounds he makes seem to switch to more of a whine. His four fingers wrap around Carter's leg with an urgent tug. At first, Carter stands still, thinking that the child is about to eat her. His fingers tug again and that's when Carter catches on. "You thirsty?" she asks, aware that the boy may not know what she's saying. Carter finds herself uncapping the bottle. "You're lucky I was able to get fresh water."

The boy releases a happy sound and snatches the bottle from her hands. Carter is put out by the child's behavior but tells herself that human toddlers can act the same way. He drinks with enthusiasm, sucking into the bottle even after the water's gone. Carter is ready to protest but then thinks against it. The child didn't attack her, so she could be courteous enough to not complain.

The boy hands back the bottle. As he does, he uses his palm to rub Carter's leg. She wonders if the gesture means "thank you." Carter has an awful thought of using

her rangbow on the boy, but just as suddenly thinks against this. Despite the child being one of *them*, she would've been cruel to harm him. She thinks of the innocence of her son and grandchild when they were babies, how their warmth and unconditional love had stolen her heart. And that's what the boy is: innocent. Carter watches as the child camouflages. She hopes he remains undetected by the Hazmats.

Glancing at her watch—12:43—Carter walks out of the alleyway. She rolls up her sleeves as the temperature becomes warmer. After a few more strides, dizziness overwhelms her and she stumbles. Black spots appear in Carter's eyes and she feels herself falling. She doesn't know when she hits the ground, but she does know when a shadow blocks the sun from her vision.

Her son gives her a physical picture of him and his daughter before they separate, as holographic images tend to be more of a distraction.

When she comes to, Carter feels a cushion underneath her and realizes she's on a mattress. She also realizes that she's in a room filled with swords and axes on the walls. Sitting on the floor beside her with crossed legs is Zawn. The girl has her fists below her chin and is staring at Carter. Startled, Carter lifts herself and thinks it's strange that she's feeling much better. She touches her forehead and is amazed that her bump is gone.

"Where am I?" asks Carter.

Zawn is quiet for a long time. Eventually, she answers, "You're in a bunker."

"How'd I get here?" the older woman asks, looking around the room. "How could you move me? I'm like double your weight." And it's true. Zawn is skinny, like how Carter would imagine a living stick would be. "You must

have gotten help." The girl shrugs in response.

"Sure," Zawn says nonchalantly.

Carter is uncertain about how truthful Zawn is being with her, but she pushes the doubt aside for now. "Well, in any case, thank you."

Zawn shrugs again and tosses a small bottle at Carter. "For your hurts," she clarifies.

"I'm good for now," says Carter. "The people that helped you, are they trustworthy?"

"You can't trust anyone."

Carter is so taken aback by the venom in Zawn's voice that she leans away from the girl. Zawn abruptly stands up and walks over to where a door is located. Before she leaves, the girl says, "Check the container. There's nourishment inside."

On the other side of the mattress, there is indeed a container with rations. Carter eats them faster than necessary and has a moment of sickness. The feeling passes and she slows down. She looks at her watch again and it reads 12:52. She had to have been out for at least 24 hours, if not longer. Carter asks Zawn after she returns how long she had been unconscious.

Zawn seems bewildered by the question until her eyes light up in recognition. "Oh, about seventy-two hours."

"That long?"

"It took a while for your body to regulate." *Regulate?* Carter repeats in her mind. Zawn makes it a routine to leave the room every few hours from then on. Carter in the meantime begins to do pushups and sit-ups to keep her muscles firm. She has no idea where her backpack or rangbow is. When she asks the girl, the other says that she'll give them back once Carter is "formidable" again. One of the times Zawn enters the room, she has a pouch of

communicators with her.

"Where'd you get these?" Carter inquires, grabbing a handful of them. "I stole 'em," Zawn says. The girl is wearing an orange romper. "Most are broken."

"Did your posse help you?"

Zawn tilts her head. "What's a 'posse'?"

"Well, it's an informal way of saying a group of people working together."

"Fine, yes," Zawn says with a dismissive wave of her hand.

After being cooped up in the room for what feels like forever, Carter starts to question why she can't leave. The door has been locked each time she tried to open it. She's also curious about why Zawn is the only person Carter ever sees. When Carter mentions this, she isn't sure whether to be surprised by Zawn's attitude.

"You want to leave so that you can tell t—the Hazmats where we are!" Zawn hisses.

"I wouldn't tell anybody," Carter objects. "I feel like a prisoner here." The girl grits her teeth before turning away from Carter. Zawn's shoulders begin to move up and down. The older of the two realizes that Zawn is breathing hard.

The teen turns back around. "I'll go with you then."

"Okay, good."

Carter doesn't try to argue. If anything, she's glad that she can keep a close watch on the girl. Zawn leaves the room to retrieve Carter's backpack and rangbow. Zawn grabs a bag and two swords to carry herself.

"You need help with those?" asks Carter, motioning towards Zawn's weapons.

"I'm stronger than I look," the younger says. There is a smugness to her voice.

Carter puts her hand over her eyes as she and Zawn depart from the bunker.

As they begin walking, Carter says, "Y'know, I have no reason to trust you either." Zawn tilts her head again. She doesn't reply, but she does nod.

A scream ahead puts the two on guard. They both accelerate their movements and the girl's eyes narrow. The temperature is warm and rising. Zawn's nose wrinkles in disgust as a wave of death hits them.

"You have what you need at the bunker," says Zawn after they had been traveling for an hour. "We should go back."

"I need a new clock."

"Clock?" Zawn reiterates in mild confusion.

"Yeah, you broke mine." They come across a shelter, a decent-sized lodge with a stucco exterior and barred shutters. The foliage on the lawn is onyx and there's a pile of rotting food on the side.

"We should go separate ways and scout," Zawn whispers. Carter wipes sweat from her forehead. "Shouldn't we stick together?" she whispers back.

"No," says Zawn before heading towards the back of the lodge. Carter doesn't even get a chance to respond. *She's gonna get herself killed.*

As Carter maneuvers on her hands and knees, she sees a grubby-looking man sitting on a sofa through the cracks in the foundation. His eyes find hers instantly. The man grabs a ranged weapon on the table next to him. He aims and pulls an arrow straight at Carter. Carter shouts as the arrow embeds in her hand and she begins to bleed. The man summons others from inside the lodge, at least four

other people. Carter runs to the other side, her rangbow at the ready as she peeks around the corner. Screams, rips of skin, and breaking of bones seem to echo from inside. Carter feels beads of sweat, more from her nerves than the heat. *They're inside!*

Carter is scared, but she can't abandon Zawn now. She bends down near the cracks, trying to see if Zawn's inside. The same man is on the floor, whimpering and holding his mutilated arm. A scream of his is cut short as Carter witnesses a sword striking him.

Carter waits a long time to even make another move. She whispers after a prolonged silence "Zawn?" She can feel her heart thumping when there's no reply.

The rustling of bushes has her spinning around with her rangbow aimed. Zawn appears from the other corner with a black-haired young man. The girl has him captive, holding the edge of her sword against his neck. He has his hands up in surrender.

Zawn's the only one covered in blood and dirt. "The blood's not mine," the girl says, seeming to answer the unasked question.

"Did you see *them*?"

"I didn't see the Hazmats—"

"No, I meant *them*."

Something streaks in Zawn's eyes and she frowns. "I found *him*." She tightens her hold on the guy, her sword nicking his skin. Carter pushes her rangbow aside and checks the young man's clothes and bag. She finds four daggers and places them inside her backpack. The guy starts to protest but Zawn's hissing shuts him up.

"Let him go," Carter says. "He's no threat to us."

Zawn glares at the older woman. "You're stupid. It's incredible how you've survived."

"You're rude," Carter retorts, not taking real offense.
 "And I can say the same about you."

Zawn lowers her weapon, pushing the guy from her. She says to him, "Leave or you die." The guy doesn't have to be told twice, scurrying away. Zawn and Carter watch him until they can't see him anymore. Zawn then motions to the older woman's hand. "You're hurt."

The girl steers Carter inside the lodge, not acknowledging what Carter had said before. Instead, Zawn crushes the pain meds she had taken out of her bag. She makes a paste and covers Carter's wound with it.

There are seven exoplanets colonized by humans...

Zawn presses for them to move on again, not wanting to stay in the same place. Zawn doesn't seem to acknowledge Carter unless the girl is being authoritative or hostile.

At a particular time in the sunlight, the duo walks toward the marketplace, about a mile off. It's so hot that the pungency outside is affecting them. Zawn's purple romper is cut at the knees and Carter has her sleeves and pants rolled up.

"Why are we traveling when it's *this* hot?" Carter complains. "It's not a good idea to be out in this climate. Let's stop for a bit and cool down, okay kid?"

"Then you stop," Zawn says. "I'll keep going."

"We shouldn't separate," Carter disagrees. "We're better together."

Zawn ignores her and starts to walk ahead. She abruptly stops and shouts at Carter, but the warning comes too late. The two are now surrounded by *them* as *they* had

been camouflaged. Carter falls to the ground as one of *them* leaps over her hunched form. Carter attempts to grab her *rainbow*, but she feels a jerk on her backpack. She realizes that another one of *them* is tearing into her backpack. Carter shouts as she's hauled up by *their* strength. *These* are more advanced than some others, with multitudes of skin color, and are about the same height as humans. Just as one is preparing to jump on Carter and rip her to pieces, Zawn covers the older woman's body, taking the brunt of the attack. Carter feels horrible pain and realizes that the girl is impaled with *their* sharp teeth and is bleeding violet fluids. *Their* teeth are also sharp enough to puncture Carter's stomach. Carter thinks she might be dying, especially when peace settles over her. She sees Zawn's eyes flash purple before darkness embraces her.

Carter, her son, and her granddaughter are known as the second multi-generations to arrive in the habitable zone of the Andromeda Galaxy. Carter was raised on one of the *Markers*, ark spaceships used to colonize exoplanets. Carter had to witness her great-grandparents, her grandparents, and even her parents die without ever seeing their new destination. The first of the multi-generations to arrive was way before Carter's time. The voyages initially began as scavenger expeditions.

The civilians on the *Markers* are divided into groups of five. Carter and her family are separated. Her son gives her a physical picture of him and his daughter before they part, as holographic images tend to be more of a distraction. There are seven exoplanets colonized by humans—Carter is selected to live on the one closest to a red star. Unlike the exoplanet where Carter resides, her family must have dwellings underground for half a year modeled by the original Earth's time. Her family's new home still has more of a likeness to Earth than Carter's. Where Carter lives, the weather's sporadic, and instead of a 24-hour day, it's a six-hour day. There are so-called "oceans," but they're scarce and the plants aren't the same colors as Carter remembers them on the ship. The oceans are a deep purple, almost black like the water is ashamed of itself and is keeping its secrets hidden. She

tends to avoid them, unsure whether they're lethal.

The Hazmats are specialized people who are equipped with technology to study, identify, and experiment on *them*. These people also keep civilians in line, by any means necessary. For the longest time, Carter and others referred to *them* as aliens until it became apparent that the humans were the aliens. Carter has theorized that the reason she and so many other folks were divided into groups is because of their value. It seems like she's expendable for characteristics unknown to her. The Superiors of the ark had to have known the dangers of coming to these exoplanets. This is the main thought Carter has as she opens her eyes and sees that she's lying down in a familiar bunker. Instead of Zawn beside her though, it's the little boy from before. He looks like he has aged three years, his skin tighter and having more of a tint to it.

"Hey there, little guy," Carter says carefully.

"H'llo," he says without the ticks. He almost sounds human.

"Learned English, huh?"

"A little," the boy says. "Zawn teach."

"Speaking of Zawn," Carter mutters, her voice hoarse. "Where is she?"

The boy stands and then hobbles to the corner of the room where Zawn's bag is. He rummages in it before taking out a communicator. Carter can tell that he's sending a message to someone, noticing that the boy has evolved to have five fingers on each hand.

Carter is relieved as she sees Zawn enter the room, perfectly fine. She is adorned in a yellow romper this time. Zawn's right hand is clasped with a communicator and her left hand has a clock—Carter's alarm clock. It's fixed.

"You're one of *them*," the older woman blurts out. Zawn's eyes widen before she glares. "You saved me,"

Carter says in a flat tone. *Why?*

Zawn answers as though she read the other's mind. She says, "I followed you."

"You followed me?"

Zawn has the communicator on top of the clock, placing both on the floor. "Yes," she speaks to herself in her native tongue before continuing. "After you gave me your jacket."

"That changed your mind about humans?"

"No. I changed my mind about *you* after you helped one of our young."

With as few words as possible, Zawn explains that Carter giving the boy water and letting him live was an act the girl would've never expected from a human. She camouflaged herself and trailed after Carter. When the older woman had fainted, Zawn found her and carried her back to the bunker.

"I thought about eating you several times," admits Zawn unabashedly, but all Carter does is laugh. It's not like she wasn't as guilty in her thoughts about the boy. She winces when an ache comes to her torso. She wonders about the extent of Zawn's abilities. Will her torso look like it has a horrific wound?

"But you didn't," Carter points out. "How'd you heal me?"

"I'm able to heal myself without scars, but you were already dead. I almost couldn't bring you back. It takes a lot out of me." *I had died?* Carter shuts her eyes, sorrow emerging. She feels tears behind her eyelids, mixed emotions battling inside her.

"What do your...friends think about you helping me?" asks Carter.

"They don't know," says Zawn. "I got away and hid until they were gone."

Carter looks at Zawn briefly before looking at the boy. "What's your name?"

"Jay."

Carter half smiles. "Thanks for watching over me, Jay." The boy just nods, focused more on fiddling with the communicators.

Zawn walks over to Carter and bends down. The girl then hands the picture of Carter's family to her.

Carter's eyes water again as she caresses the photo with her index finger. It's intact. The older woman then looks at Zawn. There are so many things she wants to say, so many things left unsaid. Carter wants to apologize to the girl for humans taking her planet, wants to learn more about Zawn's species and how *they*'ve adapted to humans and human languages, wants to know how *they* can evolve so fast, wants to understand *their* abilities, wants to make it up to Zawn...

"Thanks, kid," Carter whispers. The usual hardness in Zawn's eyes softens just a little.