

SHIMMER

JOHN PASSARELLA

(Continued...)

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CHAPTER 2

Of all the rooms in the latest Walker house, the kitchen looked the most lived in. With every move, boxes for the common areas received top priority. Liana took charge of the kitchen, while Ambrose spent the early days after a move setting up the computer network. The others, Logan included, tended to pitch in where needed, unpacking their personal belongings when time allowed. Lately, the moves had become more frequent. Not a good sign. Living out of a series of boxes had become a way of life, which was one reason Logan enjoyed the kitchen. Though it was two o'clock in the morning, sitting in the kitchen with the others granted Logan the illusion that he was part of a normal family... until he tuned in the content of their conversations. Nothing normal there, by any stretch of the imagination.

"You notified the police?" Ambrose Walker asked as he filled three of four mugs from a freshly brewed pot of coffee. Liana had requested herbal tea and the kettle had yet to whistle its readiness. Ambrose wore a plaid bathrobe over flannel pajamas and shuffled across the tile floor in worn bedroom slippers.

"Anonymous call from a pay phone," Barrett replied from his position leaning against the kitchen doorjamb, arms across his chest. He glanced down skeptically at the mug of black, unsweetened coffee Ambrose offered him, until the old man assured him it was decaf.

Ambrose placed a mug in front of Logan, then returned to the stove for his own, which he set beside the stack of newspapers he'd been skimming when the trio returned to the house. Logan noticed the abundance of liver spots on the old man's hands, as well as the slight trembling. More from fatigue than fear, Logan guessed, but the trembling might also be symptomatic of some undiagnosed illness. Ambrose had discontinued regular medical checkups long before Logan was born. At his advanced age, he'd begun to think of himself as ultimately indestructible.

"And you left no evidence of your presence behind?"

"None of us touched the car," Barrett said. "The road was deserted. I doubt anyone saw us. But..."

"But what?"

"I can't help thinking..."

The tea kettle began to whistle.

Liana patted Ambrose's shoulder as she stepped past him. "Please sit still and rest," she said. "I'll make my own tea."

"I'm not completely decrepit, you know," he said, running a hand through his rumpled nest of gray hair. His bushy eyebrows gathered together to form a dramatic frown, belied by the gleam of amusement in his eyes.

"Of course you aren't," Liana said. "And neither am I. I'll get this."

"If you insist, my dear," Ambrose said. He took his seat at the oak table and, after emptying three sugar packets in his coffee and stirring, took a tentative sip, pursed his lips and nodded. "Go on, Barrett."

"It's possible we could have found some valuable piece of evidence inside the car..." Barrett glanced at Liana and Logan with a hint of accusation. Abandoning the car untouched had been their call.

Logan spun the black and white lazy Susan and snatched sugar and creamer packets from the sectional containers to prepare his coffee. He all but ignored Barrett. Liana made her tea and returned to the table, also choosing not to defend the decision.

"Best to be careful at this early stage, Barrett," Ambrose explained, scratching the patchy stubble on his jaw. He often forgot to shave until someone joked about his unkempt appearance. He looked old enough to be Logan's grandfather, but he was older than that. *Much* older. Whenever Logan tried to pin down Ambrose's exact age, the old man always managed to deflect the question. No matter how old Ambrose was, his mind was still sharp, at least when focused on a

problem. At other times, his forgetfulness was legendary. Ambrose, however, did not consider those lapses cause for concern. “As long as I recall what’s important,” he often said. “I’ll tolerate no complaints about my poor memory.”

“Early stage?”

Ambrose placed a hand on the mound of newspapers. “I’ve been reading up on Hadenford and I’ve found no evidence of unnatural activity. I am inclined to believe Logan brought us here in time to witness the first breach.” Ambrose directed an approving gaze at Logan.

“Right,” Logan said dejectedly. “Witness.”

“Observation is crucial, Logan,” Ambrose said. “It helps dictate our response.” Logan gave a perfunctory nod. “Now you’re sure this was a rift appearance and not a full crossing?”

Logan stifled a yawn. It had been a long day, after a long week. “I don’t think anything crossed.”

Barrett jumped on Logan’s indecisiveness. “So you can’t be sure?”

Logan refused to take the bait. He sipped his coffee as if hoping for a kick from the decaffeinated brew. “If something crossed, it took off like a bat out of hell.”

“Whatever killed those people,” Liana said, “was much larger than a bat.”

“And based upon your description of the scene,” Ambrose said, “its methods are certainly thorough.”

“Maybe there’s a reference in the journals,” Liana suggested.

“Possibly,” Ambrose said. “But I’ve read each of them numerous times...” He shook his head. “I would have remembered something as brutal as what you describe.”

Debatable, Logan thought. One could never be sure where the gaps in Ambrose’s memory might manifest. If years—or decades—had passed since Ambrose read a journal entry about an incident similar to tonight’s attack, Logan doubted the old man would recall the details now; the information would have seemed, if not unimportant at the time, certainly unworthy of retention.

One of Ambrose’s long term projects was to scan the old Walker journals into one master database, allowing keyword searches in various categories, including manifestations, methods, and vulnerabilities. Unfortunately, the bulk of those journals were in longhand, many in foreign languages, and a few in forgotten languages. Converting the mass of journals into online content required a prodigious, multi-

pronged effort. For now, they had to muddle through the old-fashioned way.

“Logan, you noticed a shadow pass over the car?”

“I thought it was a shadow at the time. Obviously I was wrong.”

“Describe what you saw.”

“The car seemed black for a moment. Right afterward, the driver lost control. The rift must have passed through the interior of the car.”

“But you were unaffected,” Ambrose said, scratching his jaw again. “So the rift is mobile. And a black rift at that.”

“It was fleeting,” Liana said. “I barely noticed it.”

“Fleeting, maybe,” Barrett said, “but it lasted long enough to pulp two human bodies.”

“We should be thankful nothing crossed.”

Barrett disagreed. “If something *had* crossed, I could have done something, taken it out, put an end to this.” He looked down at his clenched fist. “Now we have no idea when or where it will strike next.”

“Don’t be so sure, Barrett,” Ambrose said with a knowing grin. “You forget we have Logan on our side. It is quite possible we *will* know.” He stood up, shoved his hands into the pockets of his bathrobe and gave them a nod. “And when that time comes, we must be prepared—and well rested. I strongly suggest you all get some sleep.”

Liana started to collect the mugs, but Ambrose caught her forearm. “I’d like a word with Logan.”

With an understanding nod, Liana gave him a peck on his stubbly cheek and left the kitchen. Barrett shrugged and followed her through the dining room to the stairs. Logan avoided the old man’s gaze as they rinsed out mugs and stacked them in the dishwasher. “Barrett is certainly eager,” Ambrose commented.

“He’s never faced anything like this.”

Ambrose raised both bushy eyebrows. “And you have?”

Logan laughed dryly. “Maybe not, but I sense what’s coming.”

“We will defeat this, Logan.”

“Is that your whole pep talk?”

“I’m old,” Ambrose said, chuckling. “Why waste words?”

“You really believe we’ll beat this... whatever it is?”

“What choice do we have but to believe? The alternative is hopelessness. I choose not to live without hope.”

“That’s what I’m worried about,” Logan said. “The not living part.”

“*Semper spes est,*” Ambrose said in Latin. “*Anima spes est.*” *There is always hope. Life is hope.* Ambrose frowned. “Caution is warranted, certainly,” he added. “But we must stand against this. Is that not who we are?”

“And how sane is that? There are hardly any Walkers left.” Logan hadn’t seen his mother in over a year. And to this day, nobody could tell him the fate of his father. Uncles, aunts, cousins... their numbers continued to dwindle. They fought a war of attrition, with no allies. Ambrose often said, “The less the outside world knows about us, the more successful we are.” But who would remember the Walkers when they were all gone? It was damn hard not to live with hopelessness.

“*Facimus quem nobis faciendum est,*” Ambrose said. *We do what we must.*

Another familiar refrain. Logan’s childhood response was always, “Why?” To which, Ambrose would shrug and say, “*Quod nemo alius est.*” After a moment, when Logan refused to take the bait, Ambrose asked, “And why is that, Logan?”

“Because there is no one else.”

“Good,” Ambrose said, grinning. “You learn. But, next time, let’s keep it in Latin, okay?” Logan smiled, nodded. “Now, accompany me upstairs.”

Logan followed him up to the bedroom designated as the Walker war room. In the dark, lights glowing red, green or amber delineated the silhouettes of the row of humming computer towers. Network activity lights flickered like an electronic pulse. The shadows vanished as Ambrose flicked on the overhead lights.

On the far wall, taped to a freestanding cork bulletin board that blocked the double windows, was a large map of the Hadenford area. The wall opposite the phalanx of computers accommodated bookshelves bursting with Walker journals and other ancient reference tomes. Fifteen feet of room-space spanned the centuries, symbolically bridging the gap between past and future. Logan figured he and the old man fulfilled similar roles within the Walker family. “Where are the rest of the books?”

“Downstairs,” Ambrose said. “In my office-cum-library. Still in boxes. And more yet in the basement. The most important books are here, though, ready for us.” Deciding which books were most important was a judgment call and bit of a guessing game. More often than not, the books in the war room simply were those that had been most useful in the last several decades, or centuries.

Ambrose walked over to the large map, plucked a red pushpin from a section of uncovered corkboard, and handed it to Logan. "Place this where the rift manifested."

Logan turned his attention to the map, tracing the Hadenford streets with his index finger, closing in on the location where the white Mustang had seemed to blink black. "If you want to boost my morale," he said, "you could start by telling me what's happened to the rest of the Walkers." Logan found the spot and shoved the pin through the map, seating the point into the cork behind it: the first Hadenford incident.

Ambrose frowned. "I doubt that information would boost your morale."

"Humor me."

Ambrose sighed. "What has happened to them, you ask? Many things."

"Such as?"

"Many choose not to have children," Ambrose said. "Naturally, our numbers decrease."

"When I was young, I remember lots of relatives," Logan said. "That wasn't all that long ago, especially for... someone of your advanced age."

"No," Ambrose said. "You are right. But remember this, what matters most is how we live our lives, not how they end. Or when."

"In other words, Walkers tend to die young."

"What we do is important, Logan. Always remember that. And remember that there are other Walkers... out there, ready to join us should the need arise. Barrett came to us from California. There are more like him who will come."

"But so many are gone."

"Some—your mother, for instance—we have lost but may find again. Outsiders we have yet to find, or they us. The family is widespread, always changing."

"Except for you."

"Apparently, I am the exception that proves the rule. But the world will not easily be rid of the Walker line. This, you will see. Tomorrow I'll send out a call to bring in our reserves."

They stood in silence for a while, staring at the map, as if the answers to their problems might suddenly appear. But one pushpin hardly made a pattern. At this point, they were clueless.

"What's it mean?" Logan asked at last. "A black rift?"

“Night, perhaps,” Ambrose said. “Maybe nothing more than night.”

“We both know it’s not that simple.”

The old man ran a hand through his unkempt hair. Logan thought Ambrose had never seemed so old before. “I suspect not, Logan. As always, you see the truth of these events. We face a great... challenge. Yes?”

“Challenge?” Logan said with a grim smile. “Interesting euphemism for waking nightmare.”

Ambrose patted Logan’s shoulder. “Get some sleep, Logan. You must rest for the first day in your new school.”

“How rested will I be after several hours of heart-stopping nightmares?”

“Even your nightmares are valuable to us.”

“That’s comforting,” Logan said. *Good to know my gradual descent into insanity serves the greater good.*

“Goodnight, Logan.”

“Goodnight.”

Ambrose repeated his Latin pep talk. “*Semper spes est.*”
There is always hope.

Logan wished he could believe that.

After a pit stop in the hall bathroom, Logan retired to his bedroom and slipped between the unpacked boxes standing sentinel duty around his bed. He stripped down to his underwear and flopped down on top of the blankets, forearm draped across his eyes as if to ward off the coming visions. Not that it would help. Nothing ever helped.

Across the U-shaped hallway, he heard Barrett in the gym, grunting as he pounded the heavy bag with fists and feet. Barrett had to exercise to unwind, releasing all that coiled energy before surrendering to sleep. Logan felt drained by the anxiety of his premonitions. Barrett longed to strike the first blow in this new war, but for Logan the battle had already begun.

Exhausted, he slipped down into the familiar, screaming darkness.