

Chapter 1: Bad Things Come in Threes

The Freeholds, Central Colorado Mountains

July 16, 12 Years After Impact (A.I.)

Michael Whitebear bolted up in bed, heart pounding, head swiveling, eyes darting around the room. What? Stark memories, welcome as a bloated corpse, assaulted him--artillery, gouts of flame, bodies, the stench...

Crack, boom! He flinched as the bedroom windows rattled and torrents of rain hammered against them, then expelled a long, shuddering breath as reality shoved his nightmares back inside. Just a storm, he thought, as thunder echoed overhead.

He raised his right hand to brush away beads of sweat from his forehead and for the first time noticed the pistol. He couldn't even remember grabbing it. Lips twisting into a self-amused smile he laid the .357 back on the bed stand. Better to have it and not need it...

Slipping back beneath the covers he snuggled up to his wife, Ellen, whose sleep-warmth thawed his chill. Closing his eyes, he took a few deep breaths and tried to fool himself into believing he could get back to sleep.

He raised an eyelid and focused a gold-tinted, brown eye on the backlit clock that shared the bed stand with the gun, a reading lamp and a glass of water. 4:17 a.m.

Ellen stirred and mumbled, "Everything all right?"

"Yeah," he lied. No sense upsetting her. But like a dog at the back door, wartime ghosts clawed at his mind. What the hell was wrong with him? Jumping at shadows and thunder like a little kid. He hadn't spooked like this in years.

He counted lightning bolts and listened to peals of thunder as the storm passed over and moved off into the distance, but no matter how hard he tried to relax his mind wouldn't let go.

Glaciers formed and spread across the continent. Mountain ranges eroded one grain at a time. He glanced at the clock again. 5:22 a.m.

Okay. Enough.

Michael slid out of bed and pulled on a pair of jeans, then opened the patio door and stepped out onto the redwood deck that overlooked the valley of the Freeholds. The rain-damp wood chilled his bare feet. Goose bumps tingled his arms and back. Ink-blot clouds dotted the clearing sky. A horned owl hooted from the depths of the forest, a bleak, lonely sound, until it was answered from across the valley. Light from a waning crescent moon revealed a glistening mist hovering over the river. He waited, feeling the ebb of night.

Pink dawn-glow outlined the peaks of the Tarryall Mountains. A chickadee called from the aspen behind him. Rain-washed air smelled of pine forest, damp earth and freshly cut hay.

He closed his eyes and breathed deeply, rhythmically, sweeping the cobwebs of fear from his mind. It was just a dream, a bad dream that left a stain on his morning.

BOOM!

Michael hit the deck so hard splinters stabbed him. No dream, that. He lunged to his feet and back through the bedroom door screaming, "Ellen! Hit the alarm! We're under attack!"

Without breaking stride he vaulted the bed, grabbed his .357, snatched an Uzi from the gun-rack and bolted back out onto the deck. The alarm blared as the door slammed behind him.

He jumped down the deck stairs and into the saddle of his trail bike. A quick kick-start, a twist of the throttle and he was fishtailing out of his driveway, spewing gravel as he headed for the hangar and the tiny plane housed there. Through squinted, wind-whipped eyes, he saw other men and women firing up motorcycles and saddling horses. The militia was forming with a speed that showed they knew their lives and homes hung on minutes.

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The Pegasus ultralight, painted like an old P-40, complete with shark's teeth, screamed through the air as Michael flew for the Haley ranch in the southern Freeholds and the columns of smoke roiling upward through the morning sky. Skimming the treetops he urged the tiny, ultralight plane to greater speed. Six minutes had passed since the first explosion and there had been others. We weren't ready for this, he thought. We've grown complacent. He wanted more speed but the throttle was wide open. Almost there dammit, almost there.

He peeled over Twin Eagle ridge and snapped up the scene at a glance--flaming houses, scattered bodies, hundreds of men swarming around the burning buildings like ants on a corpse. His breath caught and his knuckles whitened around the joystick. God, there were so many of them. The Freeholds hadn't faced such a large attack in years! He reached for his radio to report in, then stopped. No comms. The last big storm had wiped out several repeater stations.

A cannon roared and a section of wall erupted, scattering debris in a wide circle. The roof of a homestead collapsed, showering sparks and tongues of orange flame. Don Haley and his wife, Marsha, shoved their little girls out of the burning building. He and Marsha sprawled protectively across their daughters, bodies twitching as bullets slammed into them.

Sour bile rose in Michael's throat, but he never slowed. If he did he'd have time to think about what he was doing and right now he only had time for one thought. Behind him his wife was marshaling the Militia while their son and the kids they'd adopted were being herded into the Community Center along with hundreds of other frightened children. The invaders in front of him were already regrouping to head that way. If they got through The Narrows before the militia arrived...

He clenched his teeth and dove, shoved the Uzi out the open cockpit and pulled the trigger, stitching a line of death through the heart of a group below.

Raiders hugged the ground as the Pegasus streaked by mere inches above them. A wheel brace struck a man in the head and Michael struggled for control, but he never stopped firing. Bodies jerked and twitched as slugs from the Uzi smashed them. Gaping mouths and wide-eyed stares followed the plane as it rose, banked and--Oh-My-God--headed back at them.

They scattered like quail, dashing madly for the trees, only a few recovering enough to shoot back.

Michael inserted a fresh clip and switched the Uzi to his left hand so he could target the largest group of raiders. With his right hand on the joystick and the Uzi braced against a cockpit strut he poured a burst into a cluster of men silhouetted against the Haley's burning homestead. Bullets thwacked through his plane. He flinched as one tugged at the hem of his jeans.

They were getting the hang of this.

He snatched a deep breath, held it and pulled up into the column of smoke rising from the house. They can't shoot what they can't see. Smoke-blinded eyes stung and watered and hot ash singed his hair before he broke through into clean air. He blinked twice and wiped his eyes to clear his vision--and there it was: the cannon. The Goddammed cannon.

The sight was a red cape to a bull. Michael's eyes blazed gold. He screamed defiance and swooped like a hawk onto prey. He started shooting. Seven shots...eight...and the gun clicked empty. He glared at it, threw it behind him and pulled the .357 from his belt.

An officer with a bushy black mustache and gleaming Captain's bars killed the first raider who broke and ran. The others around the cannon heeded the warning, stood fast and shot back, some resting their rifles on the howitzer to steady their aim.

Six shots left. Eight soldiers. Damn!

Michael aimed carefully as he dove on them. Every blade of grass, every muzzle flash, every squint-eyed, clenched-teeth expression stood out in exaggerated detail as he entered their rain of fire. He squeezed the trigger gently. His bullet struck a man in the chest, knocking him back into the cannon. The body slid to the ground leaving a crimson smear on the shiny bright barrel. The .357 bucked a second time and another man fell. Michael fired again and again until the hammer fell on an empty chamber, then tossed the pistol behind his seat with the Uzi.

He jerked back on the stick and veered into the sky. In the distance he saw Freeholders on horses and motorcycles pouring through The Narrows toward the enemy. Banking around, he dove at the raiders again. He was out of bullets but they didn't know that. All that mattered was to keep them ducking until the Militia could arrive. Zigging and zagging, he whipped the Pegasus across the meadow, flying so low the tall grass whooshed against the plane's wingtips. The Captain's mustached face appeared in front of him and Michael's landing gear smashed it to a pulp.

Yes!

He was climbing to clear the aspen that lined the meadow when the Pegasus jerked violently, slapped by a giant fly swatter. The shotgun blast tore a hole through his left wing and sent a pellet burning into Michael's thigh. The wing, already weakened by bullet holes, folded, its aluminum skin and tubing collapsing like a crushed kite.

SHIT!

Michael fought the controls as the little plane cart-wheeled into the forest.

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Ellen Whitebear and Jim Cantrell burst through the trees sliding their horses to a halt in the small clearing at the base of an enormous spruce. Their faces were battle-grimed and Ellen's golden blonde hair was singed. Jim's left arm was in a sling, the left side of his face puffy with purple bruises. Gunshots popped like firecrackers off in the distance, but the invaders were fleeing and Ellen could finally spare time to look for Michael.

Pieces of airplane formed a trail that led down from the top of the tree to the twisted pile of metal on the ground below. Michael stood, weak and shaken, propping himself up against the wreckage. Blood ran down his head, soaking into his graying beard. He held his left arm tightly against his side as if his ribs were bothering him. His nose was broken, already swollen shut and his breath whistled slightly through pain-clenched teeth. His deep-set eyes were already bruising into livid shiners. Dark blood trickled down from his nose mingling with brighter blood from a split lip. Assorted cuts on his shoulders and chest seeped, obscuring numerous old scars. More dark red blood welled from his left thigh, soaking his tattered jeans.

Jim Cantrell veered away from Ellen, watching the surrounding forest for signs of the enemy. Gunshots still sounded as the Militia mopped up the invaders.

"Hi, honey," Michael said with a lopsided grin, as Ellen vaulted from the saddle.

“Hi, honey?” Ellen’s face reflected the emotional gauntlet she was running--relief, worry, fear and anger. “Hi, honey?” her voice rose. “You could have been KILLED! You thoughtless...” She choked up. Tears welled in her eyes but she forced them back. She was President of the United Freeholds, a woman who had led cavalry charges and faced machine gun fire. Bullets didn’t frighten her as much as her own husband’s cavalier courage. And when she got scared she got mad. “Don’t EVER do that again.” Her voice broke as she stepped toward him. “Don’t...ever...”

Michael braced himself against the ruins of the Pegasus as she hugged him. What was he supposed to do? Wait around while that cannon pounded other homesteads? And he was alive, wasn’t he? He glanced up gratefully at the spruce boughs that had cushioned the crash. Women! Hell, he was fine--just a little beat up. He took a step and passed out.

Ellen caught him and eased him gently to the ground, cradling his head on her lap and wiping blood from his forehead. Damn him! He was so careless with his own life when others were at risk. She couldn’t bear the thought that someday his headlong plunges into danger might take him from her. Then what would she do? Didn’t he realize she needed his strength as much as he needed her cool head. Men!

Michael’s lips curved into a slight smile as Ellen dabbed blood from his nose; for his mind was back in the old days, before The Dying Time, when a man living in Colorado didn’t have to kill others to defend his home.

The Freeholds was just a small settlement then, its people devoted to living a self-sufficient life, producing their own power, growing their own food, preparing for what they believed to be the hard times to come. Though most thought they were prepping for an economic collapse or an EMP or some other end of the world event, none foresaw the magnitude of the catastrophic asteroid impact.

Their post-industrial homesteads were unique enough to serve as the focus of a National Geographic television documentary on alternative lifestyles. That publicity almost proved to be their undoing, for after the asteroid strike destroyed the foundations of civilization they were invaded by hordes of people who looked upon the Freeholds as their last hope. Their passive solar homes, off-grid power supply and subsistence gardens had gone from being oddities to prizes that tempted good men and vicious outlaws alike to attack them.

They formed a militia and mapped out a defense they believed covered every approach to their valley. Their greatest fear was that some day a really large, well-organized army would overrun them and destroy all they had rebuilt. So far that hadn’t happened; but it was now obvious they could still be surprised, that there could be occasional lapses in their level of alertness and that...

“Ugh,” Michael grunted and opened his eyes slowly. A blurred image swam into focus. Ellen leaned back from cleaning his head wound--a nasty gash that needed stitches.

“How do you feel?” she asked. Michael read the concern in her eyes and voice. He felt like a doormat for a herd of elephants. Everything hurt!

“Better--I think.” He shifted, grimacing as pain stabbed him from his cracked ribs.

Ellen helped him sit up and went back to tending his wounds. He saw they were still in the clearing. Jim’s tall, lean form standing guard, pacing the perimeter. Distant gunshots echoed from farther down the valley. Aaron Goldstein buzzed by overhead in the Freeholds gyrocopter, scouting out the enemy.

“How’re we doing?” Michael asked, wincing as Ellen dug a large splinter out of his back. Jim Cantrell, his lifelong friend stopped pacing and snapped, “They’re whipped.”

Michael raised his eyebrows at Jim's angry tone. Surely a man he'd known since he was ten would understand. They'd been through this before, but Jim looked like a balloon about to pop.

Michael flinched as Ellen's fingers probed his damaged ribs. "Spit it out before it poisons you."

"Okay," Jim agreed, dark brown eyes flashing. He pointed a finger at Michael and said, "Man, you're a prize idiot. Staging a one man ambush against a battalion." Jim shook his head in disbelief. "That kind of stupidity will get you killed and you damn well know it. I don't suppose you stopped to think what Ellen and the kids would do without you, did you?"

Michael frowned.

"What?" Jim asked.

But before Michael could respond, Ellen said. "He was thinking about us when he attacked them."

Michael sighed and closed his eyes. She understood--usually did, after she calmed down.

"I still think..." Jim began, then broke off and brought up his AR-15 as he spun toward a sound in the woods. Ellen grabbed one of her pistols and slapped the other into Michael's outstretched palm.

Brush cracked and Dan Osaka, the tall, one-eyed, former Air Force Academy cadet, propelled a captive into the clearing. The prisoner stumbled over a broken branch and fell.

A smile formed when Dan saw Michael, but his voice was dead serious. "I caught this scumbag hiding near the Haley place. They're all dead. May take us a day or two to finish mopping up around here. We've routed most of these bastards, but we've got a real problem."

Michael and Ellen exchanged a quick, worried glance.

"Tell her what you told me," Dan said, glowering at the man sprawled on the ground before him.

"P...Private Carmichael, Royal Army," said the frightened soldier, glancing quickly from face to face.

Ellen's eyes widened slightly. Royal Army?

Dan read her look perfectly. He shrugged. "That's what he says--that he's a soldier in the army of some king. From what I've seen of his buddies they're all in uniform and well armed, so it could be true."

Jim's lips compressed in a thin line. Ellen's brow furrowed and a shadow settled on her face. Her greatest fear...

Michael took her free hand and gave it a gentle squeeze. His back popped as he sat up straight. In the depths of his brown eyes a golden flame flickered to life.

