



THE LOST PARADISE

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We buried another stillborn baby today, bringing the total to five so far this moon cycle. I hear winter is beginning to set in up in Eden, and that's only a week's journey north of us here in Hope. The time of the white death is beginning again, and I'm not sure we've stocked up enough meat and supplies to last this one out. So many people are going to die. It makes me wonder sometimes what the point of living is.

Hope...we live in Hope, the one thing that so few of us have anymore—I wonder if anyone would consider that ironic. Five infants dead in the span of a single moon cycle, and that's not even the worst part: they came out of the womb deformed. It was unnatural. And they weren't the first.

Three moon cycles ago, Luke and Sara Green had a baby. They said it was a boy, but I couldn't take my eyes off the scales on its arms and the claws on its feet long enough to check the gender. It lived, but not for long—but it didn't die because of sickness or anything like that. Luke said Sara was nursing the child and... well, the way Luke tells it, the baby attacked and almost killed her.

Now, I've known Luke for a long time, and can't remember one time he's lied to me, but a child attacking its mother is a hard tale to swallow. Luke says he did what needed to be done to protect his wife—and I can't say as I blame him. I didn't ask for the specifics of what he did.

All I know for certain is they didn't mark the grave.

Old lady Harrington has started her preachin' again. She says the deaths and deformities are all signs of the end. Some people are starting to believe the crazy bitch, too. Some of the more "rational" council members are tellin' me that as the leader of this town, it's my duty to do something about it.

"Put her and anyone else who's talkin' nonsense out, Duncan," they say. I think they're all fucking buzzards looking for the next carcass to feed on. I can't sit here and say I agree with Marissa Harrington and her radical views, but I won't put her or anyone else outside these gates just for speakin' their mind.

You don't put entire families out into the wilderness unless things get violent. At least that's how it's always been in Hope. That's how we've always lived. Strength, unity, and perseverance: these ideals have been the cornerstone of this community from the beginning. That's how we've survived.

Until now.

The truth, whether I like it or not, is that this very well could be the end of the road for the human race. Not because some old woman says it's so. Not because it's happening in Hope. Because it's happening everywhere.

I've heard rumors from all parts of the United Combine—stories from as far south as Crater City and from all the way up in Eden, north of the dreaded Sea-Tac Spawning Pits, and they're all the same.

People are beginning to mutate.

Folks are starting to get scared. I hear that some are even starting to leave the protection of the U.C. to fend for themselves, or

worse, swear allegiance to the Purity Corp. The one thing we don't need is more people latching onto that racist clan's twisted cause. The Purity Corp is already the single most powerful clan outside the United Combine; they lay claim to every hill, tree, river, and rock between the great river and the Sea-Tac Spawning Pits, calling the region the "Pure Lands."

Of course that just shows how twisted they really are. The so-called "Pure Lands" happen to be the most perverse, corrupted, radiated stretch of wilderness in the Northwest, aside from the Ghost Wastes of Umatilla to the east.

The elders say that before the Fall, there were military bases in the area once known as Puget Sound. Great metal ships of war—designed to float both on and under the water—were anchored in the natural harbors of Puget Sound to guard against enemies to the west, beyond the great poisoned sea. They were all destroyed by great spears of fire that obliterated everything.

My great-grandfather said the fiery spears were called "nuclear bombs." My friend Joe "Walks-the-Path" Smith says they were "gourds of ash," dropped by the Great Spirit in a final shaking of the world. Joe belongs to a tribe of people who call themselves the Chinook Indians.

One day I asked Joe what "Indian" meant. He said he didn't know; it was a term white people gave his ancestors a long time ago, when people still cared about the color of a person's skin. I said the Purity Corp still cares about skin color, and Joe told me the Purists aren't people; they're something else now.

I think Joe's right.

When I was young, my mother taught me to read and write. I was luckier than most, I suppose. I expect it's one of the reasons I was put in charge of Hope—I'm one of the few people who knows how to run the place. My mom tried to teach me math and other things you can't find in books or learning disks anymore, but I didn't learn much. She died of pneumonia when I was just a boy.

One of the things my mother did teach me, however, was that history is important. She used to say it was important to remember what happened in the past, and even more important to write down the things that took place in the present. Mom said it was of great consequence for the future.

I think I understand what she was trying to tell me. History can teach us things about our past, so that we don't repeat the mistakes of our ancestors. At least that's the idea, isn't it? Mom seemed to think so.

I've decided to write a journal. I'm going to try and piece together the past and tell what I know of the present, so maybe, some time in the future, someone will read it and show it to others. And, in reading this journal, maybe people will try to figure out a way to keep from stepping down the path we currently walk.

Or maybe they'll just use it for toilet paper. I don't know. But I'm going to write it anyway.

- Duncan Clark