

THE GREAT AWAKENING II:I: THE ARRIVAL: 4 MAY 2020

Brigadier General Thomas Landry, United States Air Force, stood in his office looking at the many and various certificates on his wall. His commission from President George H. W. Bush, his flight certificates, his diplomas, his congratulatory letter from President George W. Bush on his promotion to general, pictures of him with his F-117 in the Gulf War (the first one, in 1991), at the tender age of twenty-three.

He'd been a young general at only forty-six years old. After he'd promoted himself out of combat flying, he'd proceeded into special operations warfare, specifically biological warfare response. This was only a year or so after 9/11, and he'd thus assumed an extremely important position. His first challenge had been responding to anthrax threats, none of which had turned out to be anthrax. He had, however, gotten a lot of experience in setting up good quarantine procedures and assembling quick responses.

Landry reflected back upon what he termed, then and now, his crash-course in biological warfare. The United States had formally shut down its biological warfare program in 1969; however, between its foundation during the second world war and that time, it had been an extremely successful program. Indeed, in the second world war the British, who had much more experience with such things than the Americans did, actually contracted with the American program for mass production of things like botulinum toxin (among the deadliest substances known to man) and anthrax bacteria. American scientists had successfully weaponized diseases as diverse as botulism, anthrax, and even a few viral diseases, one of which was a hemorrhagic fever like the one that was currently plaguing southern Mexico and northern Guatemala.

He had already been briefed by the Mexican government about the progress of the epidemic. It was alarmingly quick and frighteningly deadly, even for hemorrhagic fevers (which included diseases like Ebola and Marburg). Patient zero had fairly easily been identified in a tiny village in rural Chiapas.

And now there had been a proven vector into the continental United States. That needed to be contained. Now.

His experience made him uniquely suited to help contain

the sudden violent outbreak of this strange new plague in Mexico, and he had been asked by the President to take command of the effort. It was a great honor, one that he hoped he would be able to rise to meet.

Already the National Guards from Texas, Arizona, New Mexico, and California had been mobilized, and the first C-5As full of fully armed guardsmen, equipped with full biowar kit, was heading toward the border. All flights from the effected regions of Mexico and Guatemala had been refused entry into American airspace; Landry intended, within the next hour, to get all flights from anywhere in the Americas south of the Rio Grande, along with any flights from countries that hadn't enacted similar safety measures, stopped entirely. So far, there had been no outbreaks north of the border with Mexico, and Landry wanted to keep it that way.

The media had been prohibited from entering Chiapas, Oaxaca, and bordering states in Mexico, as well as Guatemala entirely; they were reporting only that an unusually strong outbreak of a virus which appeared to be related to Ebola had occurred, and that these regions were therefore quarantined by their governments. The truth, Landry had just learned from Mexican liaisons, was worse than that. Much worse. They weren't being dishonest or whitewashing to save somebody's political reputation—for once, Landry reflected with some scorn—but simply didn't have any further information. Hopefully, they wouldn't get it because they wouldn't need it; the infection would be isolated, and nobody else would get sick.

Landry took a deep breath and ran his hand over his face, looking again at the picture of the young major beside his airplane in Bosnia, smiling happily with his crew, totally unaware that in only a few days he'd be on the ground behind Serbian lines, his plane destroyed, without a meal for six days, scrambling in the leaves in the woods for a few acorns to fill his stomach and dodging Serb patrols. He had been filled with a sort of low-grade utter terror those six days, the sort that comes just short of panic but which still completely consumes one's being. He had been clammy, always sweaty but cold, never catching his breath, never able to sleep, always on the brink of despair.

He didn't panic—thank God he hadn't panicked—but he'd been able to think of little but his fear those six awful days, even when he tried his mightiest to think about survival and escape. Now, looking at that picture, he knew his terror again, that decade-old fear that sank into his mind and chilled his heart.

Chiapas was dead. Literally, dead; aerial photographers were unable to find a single living soul in the entire state. Indoors there were some tantalizing hints of heat when viewed with infrared, but it was too hard to tell; the Mexicans sure as hell weren't going down there, risking further infection to see if that warm body was a survivor or just a body that hadn't cooled down yet, or one laying next to an oven that had been left on. It had taken about a week to be completely killed, but two days had been enough to induce utter chaos. Riots and bloodshed had been rampant; an entire brigade of the Mexican army had been killed there in the stampede of dead and dying sick. The capital city, Tuxtla Gutiérrez, along with big towns like San Cristóbal de las Casas and Tapachula, had hospitals, of course; the army had gone to protect these buildings particularly, and the crowds had gone after them particularly, too. Why they thought the hospitals would have anything to help them was beyond Landry—they'd filled up well beyond capacity the first day, the sick in all the beds, between the beds, on the floors, in the hallways, in the bathrooms, for God's sake, in the bathrooms they'd been laid out to die—but thought it they did, and they eventually stormed their way through a company or more of fully armed and shielded soldiers to get inside, whereupon they proceeded to tear it apart. Most of them died inside, where, Landry was told, the bodies were piled up two and three deep; huge groups had died outside before ever getting in. Some had tried to flee, dying in their cars and carts on the roads; the roadblocks set up by the army had, it seemed, at least succeeded in stopping fleeing vehicles. But the bottom line was that the entire state, well over four million people, was dead, and several others, along with Guatemala, were following suit.

That old terror from Bosnia, the faithful companion of his six nightmarish days on the ground, was settling in on his heart again. Landry shook his head and turned to his desk, reaching down for the bottom right drawer; as he did so, he heard a knock, and cursed softly to himself before saying loudly, "Come."

It was Jim Ringman, an old friend of Landry's since flight school just before the Gulf War. Ringman had washed out and gone on to other things—it turned out his reflexes were a bit too slow—but he was a full bird colonel at this stage and was delighted to have been assigned as Landry's aide several years earlier. Ringman was in full-dress uniform—"Class As" in the jargon—with his cap under his arm. He saluted, his whole appearance and demeanor very crisp and sharp.

"General Landry, sir." Landry nodded his head and gave a very perfunctory return salute. The military bravado was for the benefit of the mostly civilian team now apparently assem-

bled within ear- and eyeshot of his office door; typically they were much looser with one another, and Landry had little inclination at the moment for the heel-clicking and the "at-eases."

"Colonel," he replied. "At ease. Close the door." Ringman closed the door and immediately relaxed into his normal self, still giving Landry the respect due to him as a superior officer but returning to his normal familiarity and comfort.

"General," he said, "the team's assembled." Landry nodded his head, turning back to his wall and looking at that picture of thirty-two-year-old Tommy Landry, oblivious to what lay ahead.

"I figured," he replied. "Is that all of them?" Ringman shook his head.

"No, sir. We've got the director of the CDC"—Landry snorted; the director was a political appointee of the president, and Landry had little patience for political grandstanding—"General Giordano, Admiral Thompson, and Commandant Reilly." Landry's eyes went up; Giordano and Thompson were there for the Army and Navy respectively, and he himself was there for the Air Force; he had not been expecting the Commandant of the Marine Corps himself. "We also have a number of doctors and scientists. They tell me we're waiting for one more, a Dr. Krone, who's supposed to be big shit with hemorrhagic fevers." Landry laughed shortly.

"Always could trust you to give it to me straight, Jimmy," he said. "'Big shit.' I like that." After another moment, he turned around and went back to his drawer, opening it up and pulling out a small pint bottle containing a yellow-brownish liquid. He held it up. "Jim? Like old times?" Ringman couldn't help but smile and put his cap down on Landry's desk, stepping around and settling down in a chair.

"Like old times, Tommy," he said. "There's nothing like bourbon on a day like this." Landry took out two glasses and put one down in front of each of them, unscrewing the top.

"Nothing at all," he agreed. "Nothing at all." He poured, and they both drank, savoring the taste for a moment; finally, Landry put his glass down and said to Ringman, "So aside from our still absent big shit, how do these labcoats seem to you?" As military men, he and Ringman shared a concomitant respect and dislike for academics and scientists. They respected their intelligence but disliked their lack of integration into the military system. Ringman shrugged.

"Well enough," he replied. "They know their shit, that's for sure and for certain. You should hear them talking out there. I've been in this division four years and I still can't figure what they're going on about." Ringman was from North Carolina, a small town in the Piedmont; when he got comfortable, especially when he was drinking, his accent came out from the hiding place he had carefully constructed for it nearly two decades ago in Colorado Springs. It was coming out now. Landry nodded.

"Good. We need that, now more than ever." He laughed. "You know, Jimmy, we grew up terrified of Russian nukes. We've fought wars against tinpot dictators over half the world.

Then we got afraid of rogue nukes. And now, the really credible threat to America's security is some virus that turned up in a corn field in southern Mexico. Ain't that a bitch?" Landry was from Louisiana, and his accent occasionally peeked out from behind its wall, as well. Ringman held up his glass and drained the rest of it.

"That's a bitch," he agreed. "I'd rather have the Russians. 't least we could shoot them back." Landry drained his own glass and stood, taking his Class A jacket off the back of his chair and throwing it around his shoulders, running his arm

up the sleeve.

"Yeah, 't least we could shoot them back." He shook his head and looked back at young Major Landry again, then turned and held out his hand. "Colonel." Ringman nodded and stood up, as well, taking up his cap and tucking it under his arm according to regs.

"General." He went to the door, and Landry followed behind him, his heart beating with that cold near-panic that he remembered so well.

But the bourbon warmed it up. At least a little.

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