

**After**

Part One

Book one of

**The Phoenix Curse**

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**By D.R. Johnson**

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## DEDICATION

For Sierra, my lovely daughter, who helped me find something I lost long ago.

My inspiration.

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to think this is the beginning of a wondrous journey. Not only a journey for Ali and Joss, but a new chapter in my life. I am happy to have each and every one of you with me as I set out on my new endeavors.

This is the story of how the first book, *After* of *The Phoenix Curse* trilogy, came to be.

I was a bit of a book nerd back in high school. Always reading. Always writing. I even had unsupported dreams of becoming a writer someday. Here and there I would jot something down, mostly a little bit of prose or poetry, nothing substantial. When the attack in Florida happened, my friends all joked about zombies. That night, I was lying in bed unable to sleep, and I hopped out of bed to write down what eventually became the intro to the trilogy.

Then, last year about mid-October, I stumbled on to something called National November Writing Month (NaNoWriMo for short). For those of you who have never heard of it, it is a challenge to write 50,000 words during the month of November. There are only a few stipulations. One, the book has to be a work of fiction, and two, it has to be a brand-new book.

I had never written anything this big before, but just recently, my daughter had started writing on her own. She asked me for my ideas on her stories, and I started editing her work. While doing that, my passion for writing that I thought long dead rose again to the surface.

I decided to try the NaNoWriMo challenge.

I have many books that I have started, maybe gotten as much as 10,000 to 20,000 words into them over the course of many years, but I needed something fresh. Without having any outline at all for what I was about to start, I fell back to the little blurb I had written over the summer. As I started writing, the characters blossomed, and the story started writing itself.

I succeeded in winning the NaNoWriMo challenge with five days left to spare, and I kept going. On March 25, 2013, I finished the first draft of my first book at a little over 130,000 words. The feeling of accomplishment was indescribable. Not only did I complete the NaNoWriMo challenge, but I finally crossed the finish line in a life goal that I thought I would never achieve.

And I kept going.

Book 2, *Dreamland*, has already been started, and I am well underway into that story line as well as continuing to edit the other 2 parts of *After*. I cannot promise a timeline at the moment, although I wish I could. I still put in forty hours a week at my day job, and add in the unpredictability of life in general, any timeline I give truly is a shot in the dark.

But now that I know that I can do it, I will keep going.

I have to thank my beautiful, inspirational daughter. I don't think that I ever would have lifted the metaphorical pen again if it had not been for her. Her spirit is indomitable, and despite any setback she's ever come across, she has faced it down and charged right through it. I cherish her as my daughter and as my friend. It was from her strength that I drew the courage to try again.

My husband's role in this was no small part, either. He tolerated my midnight ravings, and always listened as I bounced ideas off him. He was my beta reader, editor and, most importantly, he supported me. This book would not be what it is now without him.

Now, I'd like to invite you all to join me on my blog for all the latest updates on *The Phoenix Curse* as well as my new projects I have lined up on the horizon.

<http://drjpublishing.blogspot.com>

<http://www.thephoenixcurse.com>

If you enjoy the book, please remember to stop by Amazon and leave a review.

Thank you all!

## PROLOGUE

It's after...

I can't give you an exact date, but I know I'm heading into the fifth winter since the world tumbled into chaos. I was only eighteen when it started. Young. Irresponsible. Selfish. The traits every child had by right as they floundered into adulthood. At least until everything was stripped away.

I can still remember what started it all. It was a hot summer morning when an article popped up on my news feed that piqued my interest.

*Zombie Attack in Florida!*

Who could resist clicking *that* link? Not to mention, it was from the Washington Post, a news source that even I recognized as creditable.

After quickly scanning the article and finding out the attack was drug induced, my curiosity died, but the details of the attack were still chilling. The 'zombie' had been high on a new drug called *bath salts* and apparently decided he was hungry enough to chow down on the most convenient meal he could get his hands on. That just so happened to be the face of the nearest homeless man.

Drugs are bad, m'kay?

As disturbing as that image is, that wasn't the most bizarre thing I read in that article. To me, the worst part was reading how the cop tried to stop the face-eater. I imagine he started off by saying something along these lines;

"Excuse me, good sir. Could you refrain from eating this gentleman's face?"

Or maybe he went with something a bit more commonplace and just yelled 'FREEZE!' The details weren't very clear on that. What *was* dear was the fact that he shot the guy and only got growled at for his trouble. Then our zombie went right back to munchin'. A bullet in his stomach barely fazed him! The second bullet the cop put in his head certainly proved more of an inconvenience. He may not have felt pain, but that killed him. He was for real dead after that. None of that *undead* bullshit.

The article was just a flash in the pan that quickly faded away.

Then came that fateful December and the doomsayers were saying what they will. Surprisingly enough, the Mayans had it right, but the world didn't end in volcanoes and earthquakes and hurricanes.

No. It turned out to be us all along. We wanted so badly to believe in something that we ended up pulling the trigger on ourselves.

It started with more face-eaters popping up around Christmas, and the media informed us it was all linked to the bath salts drug again. Only it wasn't bath salts. Maybe it was a virus, or an outbreak of some kind, but those first face-eaters were our warning before everything went to hell. Most of us weren't even paying attention to the beginning of the end.

By New Year, there was no recovering from the infestation. Before the news stations went down, they'd finally decided to stop feeding us the bath salt bullshit. They told us to stay in our houses. Lock the doors. Load the guns.

Five years ago, the end of days arrived.





*The Phoenix Curse - After*

Part One

## CHAPTER 1 - ALI

My heart thundered in my chest, racing so fast I thought it might explode. I gasped for breath to quench my aching lungs as they burned for air, the deprivation a result of panicked flight.

*How did they get in?*

My limbs felt numb and disjointed, like I was trying to control hands that weren't mine.

"Go!" I yelled. Tears ran unheeded down my cheeks. My father was standing there in the dark hallway, a forlorn look on his face, refusing to leave with the rest of the group. "Get them safe!"

*Nowhere is safe.*

He yelled something back, but I couldn't make it out over the growls and screams of the diseased. Smoke and steam obscured my vision, and by the time it cleared, he was gone.

I wiped the tears and sweat from my face as I pulled out what was left of my bullets.

*Thirteen.*

The last time I was able to get a good visual, there were easily twenty of those things out there. That number could have grown since then.

"You're mine," I said solemnly as I pulled one bullet out and dropped it in my pocket.

I loaded my father's revolver, a beautiful piece of workmanship that would soon be entombed with me. I sniffed, but held back my sobs. I had a job to keep me focused, and damn me if I didn't give them enough time to get away.

Dodging another burst of steam from the broken water pipe, I ran to the door my father had been standing at. The hallway on the other side was empty.

Good.

I dosed the door and pushed the old oak desk in front of it. It was heavy and took longer than I would have liked, but I could feel my strength dwindling. Already, the sweat was drying on me as the fever set in.

Turning to the door on the other side of the small room, I could see the barricade was holding... barely.

The door rattled and shook and the wood started to splinter at the handle.

I could see them through the glass panel that ran halfway down the side of the door. By some miracle, the glass was holding, but I was about to change that.

The balding freak at the front was getting crushed by those behind him, but that didn't stop him from hissing and clawing at the glass. It looked like his nose had been busted up pretty bad judging by the amount of blood that gushed from it. It splattered everywhere, and through the red smears, his eyes fixed on me as I moved in front of the window.

He raged and screamed, dawing at the glass to get to me. He hated me, and nothing short of death would stop him.

I leveled the revolver between his unnatural red eyes and ended his frenzy.

The glass shattered in a rain of shards, and the freak's body was pushed forward by the press behind him. I didn't think it would fit through the window frame, but I heard bones cracking as they gave way. I watched the macabre scene as the torso flopped lifelessly into my half of the room, dangling at an awkward angle as the bottom half remained trapped on the other side.

Now that the glass barrier was gone, their bloodlust renewed. I cringed as their screams of rage assaulted me, no longer buffeted by the glass.

Stepping doser, my boots crunched on the broken glass, and I took aim again. Two fell in quick succession.

I had to wait for the rest to push the bodies out of the way and find their way to the window. It wasn't worth risking a bullet if I wasn't positive it would be a kill shot. I didn't have to wait long.

I emptied the gun, and found my hands shaking terribly when I reloaded. Frowning at the wound on my arm, I saw the red welts had spread considerably. The bite was getting worse very quickly. I wasn't sure how much time I had left, but I had the feeling it wasn't much. My fingers felt numb and fuzzy. Two bullets fell and rolled across the floor, only to fall down the drain in the middle of the room.

"Dammit!"

I ground my teeth together as I took aim again, the last four shots going fast. The deadbolt no longer held the door closed against the pressure behind it. The only thing holding the door was a hastily made barricade. There was a groan as the metal locker started to give way, and I knew it wouldn't be long.

I retreated to the supply doset, pulling the door closed behind me. The darkness made me shiver. They would never be able to figure out how to open the door, but they'd never leave either. Given enough time, they'd eventually break through.

*No way out.*

Didn't matter, I was dead already. I pulled out the last bullet and clenched it tightly in my palm.

*One way out.*

From beyond the doset door, there was a loud crack, followed by a crash as the barricade gave way. Despite knowing it would happen, I couldn't suppress the scream I let out as beating hands fell against the door, scratching and clawing at it to get to me.

I broke down, unable to hold onto my composure any longer. The fever dragged my weakened body to the floor. The sound only seemed to incite them more, but at least it was keeping them here instead of going after my father and the others.

There was a small stream of light coming in from the bottom of the door. It was just enough to see by so I could finish my last task.

I sat up, and fought a huge wave of dizziness. Leaning against the metal shelving, I waited for it to pass, but my strength didn't return. It was never going too. I pulled the revolver into my lap.

*It's so heavy now.*

My fingers were useless as I tried to dump the empty casings, and everything dattered to the floor. Even over the cacophony of moans on the other side of the door, I heard the cylinder land and roll away into the darkness.

I groaned, laying down against the concrete floor and reached into the void to find the lost cylinder, the other hand still clutching the last bullet.

The void swallowed me.

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I gasped awake, covered in a film of sweat. The cool morning air was chilling as it dried the sheen.

It was just a dream of a memory. A memory turned into a nightmare. Moaning slightly, I covered my head with the blankets and burrowed into the bed, still shivering.

Closing my eyes again, I invoked the good memories to combat the bad. I recalled my father's laughter and my mother's singing, thinking back to a time we were all together and happy. A time before the divorce ripped us a country apart. The old times, before the world turned.

I wondered again, for the thousandth time, if my father had made it out of that school. Those thoughts led down a dark path, though. A path I couldn't afford to let my mind wander down. I had searched for months, followed trails that led me in the wrong directions and never managed to find any evidence he was dead or alive.

I eventually accepted the inevitable and moved on.

Now, it might be some time in late September, maybe even early October, but there was no way I could know for sure. I could feel the ache of loneliness growing deep in the pit of my stomach. It was a longing to have someone to talk to, to travel with, and share stories and ideas with.

I swallowed it down. I knew it was better to be alone. Better to be alone than watch someone I love get ripped apart. I couldn't go through that again.

I let the thoughts die away as I reluctantly stretched to work the stiffness out of my muscles. After finally abandoning the sanctuary of my bed, I looked down on the world from my second story window. For roughly three months, I had called this little neighborhood home and had spent a good amount of time spying on its inhabitants.

They were all there, milling about like listless cattle. They were always there. I had heard them called many different names. Face-eaters, walkers, demons, infected, and even zombies.

Unlike the traditional undead zombies, as was the fad that was rampant before the infestation, these things weren't dead. They still breathed and still bled, but all humanity was left behind when they turned. To me, they were just freaks. No other name fit better in my mind.

My breath fogged the glass as I watched them. The balding beasts shuffled around each other with no real purpose. Some of them would walk from one end of the street to the other, just to turn around and walk back in the other direction. Others were a bit more ambitious, walking around the entire block but never changing direction. They were forever walking in circles, wearing away the soles of their shoes in their endless loop.

A few carried tools they had used in their normal life. There was one that wore what I assumed to be gardener's clothes and dragged a rake behind him. Another one wore what was left of a suit, complete with a tie, and he toted around his briefcase. A lot of the women held their purses, or what was left of them anyway. I had been here so long I could recognize most of them now by sight.

*My neighbors.*

Maybe it was time to move on.

I wasn't able to stomach watching them for more than a few minutes anymore. I turned away from the window to get started on my morning ritual; taking inventory and planning out my day.

I went through the same motions every morning without fail, even though I hadn't been mobile since before the heat of the summer set in.

I was taking quite the chance living in this house. Even if the freaks were docile towards me, there might come a day when that would change without warning. For right now, the freaks offered protection from those out there that were still unaffected by the disease.

Some of the people that were uninfected seemed less than human. Losing the foundation of society changed people. It let the monster inside come out. The people like that were just as deadly to me, if not more, than those freaks outside.

I spread the blankets over my bed and smoothed out the wrinkles, making it look clean and tidy. The notion was ridiculous in this day and age, but this house, this whole neighborhood, had hardly been damaged, and at least I could return to a semblance of normality and daily routine while I stayed here.

Grabbing my packs, I set them out on the bed. First, I tossed up my sturdy hiker's backpack that I'd recently pulled out of one of those old supercenter department stores. It was nice and new, unlike my well-worn belt pack that I'd removed from a dead GI back in the early days. I'd had that belt pack for so long it was like it was a part of me now. I dropped it on the bed, ignoring it for the time being and starting with the big pack.

Going through the contents systematically, I set everything out on the bed in proper order so I could get a quick visual if anything was missing. I knew nothing would be. Not now. Not in the relative safety of this little utopia I'd stumbled on, but regardless, I faithfully repeated my ritual on a daily basis.

The pack probably weighed about twenty pounds now. I knew it was going to take some time getting used to the weight when I decided to move on again, so I tried to make sure I didn't over-stuff anything. That would also cause the zippers to break and the fabric to wear out early. Never knowing when I'd come across a good pack again, I took care of the ones I had.

Starting with the blankets and spare clothing, I set them out on the bed first and followed that with my many different containers for food and water. I had one container dedicated to eating utensils, including a new can opener I'd found in this house. It was much better than the old rusty one I traded out for it.

My extra bullets and a few small games, which included a deck of cards and a few dice, were set in their place next. The containers full of miscellaneous things came last. These were just a small treasure trove of things I thought might come in handy at some point. Once I got my visual on everything, I meticulously repacked the bag and moved on to the belt pouch.

The items in my belt pouch were much more personal. Anytime I was on the move, even for a brief scouting run, I strapped the pouch on. Although it seemed unlikely that I wouldn't be able to make it back to the house, I wasn't willing to take that chance. Always err on the side of caution.

Some of the contents of my belt pouch included an old Swiss army knife, a hairbrush, a toothbrush, and my old broken MP3 player. I also kept a notepad and a collection of pens and pencils in the pouch, although I didn't write much down anymore.

In the smaller side pocket, held shut by a tiny zipper, was where I kept a locket that had a picture of my mother in it and a ring my father had given me on a Christmas Eve ages ago. I only unzipped the pocket to get a visual. There was no need for me to lay these out on display.

Finally, I pulled out the little stuffed kitten that Seth had given me. I always saved this one for last, and I only pulled it out for a second today. It was black with bright green eyes, and it wore a lacey ribbon around its neck that had yellowed from age. Smiling sadly, I pet the little head with my thumb before tucking it safely away again.

The next on my list were the extra backpacks I had stumbled across here and there. I decided it would be a good idea to collect them. This was much lighter, but something that would definitely be going with me. Essentially, it was nothing more than one big backpack full of smaller packs, pouches and containers. I figured it was better to have extra and not need them, than need one and not have it.

Once done with the packs, I moved on to my ever-important weaponry. I slept with these near me almost one-hundred percent of the time. My dad's old revolver had a special place under my pillow. I was so thankful he had taken the time to teach me how to shoot before we were separated. Out of the many things he taught me, this was one of the most appreciated.

The next on my list was my most preferred weapon, my large Bowie knife. For protection, I had slept with this blade for so long it was hard for me to sleep without the feel of the hilt in my hand. Of course I kept it in its sheath during the night. No reason to accidentally slice my ear off while I was sleeping, but it was convenient if I needed it. Also, using the knife meant no reloading, no noisy discharge, and no running out of ammo. That's a short list of important benefits.

I kept my holsters on the bedside table. They were made of sturdy leather, and I had one for both my knife and gun, along with a smaller sheath I normally wore strapped around my thigh. That sheath carried another blade, more like a dagger. It wasn't as big as the Bowie knife, but shaped differently. I could cut from either side with that one, so it was a good backup.

The last weapon I carried was a small skinning knife that I kept inside my boot. Can't say that I would be fighting anything big with that little thing, but it might come in handy in a pinch. Be prepared.

At least I was secluded enough here that I didn't have to fear anyone stealing. The freaks didn't steal. They no longer had a use for the material things in life, but I forced myself to keep up my watchful habits as if I was out in the open. I couldn't let myself forget what it would be like out there when I started traveling again.

I looked over my food supply. I only brought enough food to the bedroom to last for a few days. Everything else I stored in the kitchen, just like back in the good old days. It might have been a ridiculous practice, but I held on to everything I could consider normal. It kept me sane.

I finally decided it was time to remove the barricade from the door. I had never gone more than four days without leaving my room, but if I didn't go out today, I would break my record.

Normally, the heat of the summer alone was enough to drive me down in search of a cooler place to hide while the afternoons sweltered away. The thermostat in the lower part of the house would sometimes read 105 when the sun was creeping down from its peak. I hoped this cool morning was a sign that this hellish summer was coming to an end.

Sometimes I regretted I had chosen to spend the summer here instead of moving north to a cooler climate. I was aware I had that choice every day to move north, it wasn't as if there was anything, or anyone, to stop me from going, but the truth was I just didn't want to leave this neighborhood. My initial reasons for staying here were absurd, but now I had grown used to my daily routine and didn't want to disrupt the norm.

I came across these neighborhoods from time to time, although I had never stayed in one for more than a couple weeks. This one had running water and electricity at odd intervals, which was a blessing I didn't want to question. If I tried really hard, I could pretend that everything outside my little house was just a dream. I was aware that was a dangerous line of thinking, though. If I let myself walk down that path, I might end up wandering out there with the freaks. Or maybe taking one in as a pet just so I could have someone, *something*, alive I could talk to.

No. It was too dangerous to think that way. My stay here was coming to an end. The loneliness was there to help flush me out of the city, but, more than that, there was a gnawing at my mind now. It took me a little while to figure out what that disconcerting feeling was that always seemed to be haunting me lately. It was like an annoying gnat always buzzing around my head that I couldn't shoo away.

I wanted answers.

Over the past five years, I'd traveled with quite a few survivors and never met anyone else like me. I was someone that the freaks ignored. I was someone that had been bitten and yet I lived on, uninfected.

I needed answers.

~ ~ ~ ~

I dressed, taking care of what articles of clothing I chose to wear. It was cool now but would warm up soon, and the excursion would raise my body temperature. I decided the double tank tops I had slept in would do. I slipped on a pair of baggy jeans that I had actually found here in the downstairs bedroom, and then finished up with my heavy hiking boots. I was very attached to this pair of boots. I'd had them long enough to be considered well worn-in and they had a good few months of travel before they would be entering the realm of wearing out.

After belting on my blades and slinging one of the empty backpacks over my shoulder, I cautiously left my room. Old houses creaked all the time and this one was no exception. I remained alert for anything that might be out of the ordinary. At least it wasn't a windy day out today.

As I counted out my wait at the top of the stairs, I listened and watched for shadows moving on the lower walls. Nothing.

Descending the stairs, I continued to move cautiously out of habit. The threat of having company at this point was slim. The freaks never made much noise themselves, as they had all lost the ability to communicate when they turned, but they were still noisy due to their clumsiness.

This house had been dean when I found it. It had remained untouched in the middle of the ruined neighborhood. All the doors had been locked and the windows unbroken. It was pristine, at least until I climbed to the second floor and broke into one of those windows myself.

Luckily, I had found an extra set of keys in a kitchen drawer. I liked to lock up while I was out on my little savaging runs. I was almost completely sure that there was no one here to break in, and even if there was someone else in Dallas, the likelihood of them finding me was barely worth considering. Being able to lock my doors just made me feel better.

Per my routine, I made a quick sweep of all the rooms on the lower floor, saving the kitchen for last. All was dear, as expected.

Peering out the glass window in the door, I made sure the back yard looked dear. Once satisfied that everything looked exactly as I remembered, I opened the door and stepped out into the sunlight.

There was a pool in the back yard, and this one was, thankfully, drained of water. I walked to the edge to see the normal gang of freaks milling around inside. At my last count, there had only been five, but now they'd added a new member. Milling around in the deep end was a teenage boy in a torn red shirt, bloodstained from an attack. That meant he was a wanderer. None of the other freaks here had been turned by bite. Whatever had turned the Dallas population had been airborne.

The newcomer was very young, maybe thirteen or fourteen at the most, and looked to still have a full head of hair. He was probably one of the youngest freaks I'd seen yet, and judging by his appearance, hadn't been turned that long ago. There was one merciful thing about this curse. You never saw a child freak. Children that became infected normally died within hours. Their little bodies couldn't handle being turned into these monsters.

The freaks in the pool might be able to find their way out, but I'd never seen them try. Only four had been in there when I first got here, and the most I'd ever seen them do was turn in my direction if they noticed me. I figured the boy's traveling days were over now.

It had been disturbing at first, having the freaks right outside my door, so why would I pick *this* house out of all the houses Dallas has to offer? It's not that simple. There are matters of dilapidation I have to consider, as well as finding a house far enough away from a *deathpool* that I didn't find myself gagging constantly. It was all about location.

*Location, location, location.*

It seemed every yard in Texas had a pool, and the pools that actually still had water in them were the worst. When the freaks fell in, they drowned. The bodies bloated, rotted, and turned the water into a murky, chunky sludge. Then there's the smell... Oh god, the unbearable smell. Not much smelled pretty in this world anymore, but a fresh deathpool would knock you on your ass.

I shook my head thinking about it. Turning from the pool, I decided to get on with my day.

Normally, I enjoyed exploring the neighborhood to see what I could scavenge. About five miles away, there was an old supercenter grocery store that was a goldmine of items. However, the trail of freaks I picked up from pushing a shopping cart that distance was unnerving. I only did that once.

After that episode, I chose to exploit the nearby houses instead. It was easy to get to them and back home without drawing a lot of attention. Making shorter trips and filling one pack at a time kept me busy most days. Also, unlike the other cities that people had easy access to, these houses hadn't been stripped and vandalized. They all looked to be missing the loving care and upkeep of our former lives, but windows weren't broken and doors weren't opened, so their precious contents hadn't been exposed to Mother Nature. All I had to contend with was a little dust, mold, and mildew.

There was a house about a block over I wanted to revisit. I had been there a few weeks ago, and remembered seeing some books I wasn't able to take with me at the time. With the lack of electricity-fueled entrainment, books had become a decent commodity in the smaller settlements. I could use them as trade goods when I moved on.

Usually the freaks ignored me if I could avoid them. If I kept a ten-foot distance between us, and moved slowly, sometimes they would never even notice me. They still didn't do much if they *did* notice me, but their curious stares were bad enough. It was disconcerting to look into those red eyes. I knew they saw something, but any human thought behind those eyes was gone. The only thing that motivated them was food and rage.

The initial hopes that these things would starve and die away had faded within the first year. What was left of humanity had assumed they were using us for food, but that wasn't exactly the case. Of course, if they were hungry when



they caught someone uninfected, they didn't let that meat go to waste, but we couldn't figure out what they were using as a food source when humans weren't available.

I heard rumors from other survivors, but my little stint here in Texas had really been eye-opening. For starters, it looked like the freak population had slimmed down as a whole, but they weren't starving by any means. When I noticed they were hungry, which seemed to me that didn't happen often, they would eat anything they could get their hands on. Trash. Animals that foolishly wandered too close. Each other. Themselves.

It was disgusting, and I'd witnessed it all with my own eyes. Even the freaks in my pool had scars where they'd taken bites out of each other. Once I got over my initial disgust, I paid a little bit more attention to the wounds. I was in utter shock to see how quickly they actually healed. If a freak was trapped by itself and had to take a bite out of its own arm for sustenance, they would regenerate within a week. That was plenty of time for them to heal up before they'd take another bite.

I did realize that I might possess some of this insanely powerful regeneration, but the closest I got to testing it was pressing the blade to my skin. I just couldn't bring myself to draw blood. I also still ate on a daily basis, although they were small, rationed meals, and I still felt pain. Another difference I clung to was my full head of red hair, where most freaks looked to be going bald.

Up to this point, I had never really had an interest in the characteristics I shared with the freaks. Now it was gnawing at me, and I couldn't shake it. At least I didn't share their rage.

Whatever it was that differentiated the freaks from the rest of humanity was something they could sense, and it angered them beyond any madness I'd ever witnessed. They would attack the instant they sensed anyone not like them, and their growls incited others nearby to join them until they became a swarm. It was commonly referred to as a *frenzy*, like they were sharks or piranhas. I guess it fit.

They were fast, they didn't tire, and they felt no pain. How could humanity stand up against these self-sustaining beasts? Some days, I remembered thinking it was only a matter of time before we were all gone. Our biggest weapon against them was their own stupidity and single mindedness.

And maybe me. I only hoped I wasn't the only one.

I knew I was in a town called Grand Prairie. I could see the Dallas skyscrapers from the neighborhood I was in. From what I could tell once I made it past the barricades circling the outer city, this whole area had been virtually untouched by humans since the New Year's Day when everything went to shit. I couldn't imagine anyone even trying to come in here, at least not this deep anyway. The milling freaks were too thick.

This is what made it safe for someone like me. I didn't want to be surprised by someone else showing up in the middle of my stomping grounds. The possibility that there were others out there like me hadn't escaped me. On one hand, they could be just as evil and consumed by darkness that they made the freaks look sane, and on the other hand... Hope.

The thought ate at me and ate at me. It urged me to move on, and search for the answers to my questions, but I didn't trust most of the other people I came across. At least the freaks weren't malicious. They didn't rape and steal.

I trudged through the overgrowth from backyard to backyard, hopping fences as I went and doing my best to avoid the yards with deathpools. I couldn't use the actual roads since most of them were so overcrowded with freaks it was

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