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**AUTUMN FORGE**

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## SAINTE-AGATHE-DES-MONTS, PQ, UNA

A creature sits on the northern bank of a stream. The snow, gray and ill, comes to the edge of the water. The creature, a yearling, lays out on its chest and laps up water from the stream. Then it uses its one, good front leg and its face to push itself back up onto its three normal legs. The fourth is nothing more than an undeveloped hoof dangling hopelessly out of a misconnected shoulder. The deformity would surely have meant death for the yearling if it had been born to this earth four years ago or more, but the herd of white tail deer in this region of the Laurentian Mountains had been decimated in the weeks following the opening of the Third World War. Miraculously, this yearling's mother had been nesting with child under a rock formation on the north face of a mountain and only received a limited dose of radiation. It was enough to poison and ultimately kill her first foal later that winter. But she would live to mate again, giving birth to the yearling. The irradiated flora she ate during her 200 or so days of gestation causing the significant birth defects. With the dominant males of the herd being stunted and sickened by the effects of radiation, there were no bulls to cast the mongoloid yearling aside. Predators had been equally thinned by the man-made catastrophe and consequently no serious threat to the herd, such as it was, existed.

Dmitri pulled away from the sight and rose from his position behind a log to stretch his back. He had spent the better part of the day stalking all manner of wildlife, waiting to find the healthiest possible prey. The earth had started to rebound after some thirty months of nuclear winter. There were sprouts of flora starting to push through the layers of gray fallout and dead undergrowth. Most of the trees were dormant, if not dead from the greatly diminished sunlight. The radiation

levels had diminished to livable levels throughout the world and those that had survived World War III were emerging from their three years of hibernation.

Wildlife had suffered the most in the months and years that followed nuclear Armageddon. Exposed and unprotected, the animals that somehow managed to survive the abuses of thermonuclear detonations would be poisoned by the fallout. As the food-chain was disrupted, the animals that could adapt the fastest would somehow find a way to exist. Herbivores that relied on the leafy, green plants of the forest's undergrowth would eat the bark of dormant trees, helping kill them off more quickly. Or they would forage around for mushrooms, truffles, fallen fruit rotting in the peat, bugs. Anything they could digest was fair game. As the choices became more and more scarce, many animals that never hunted before began to pursue smaller creatures as prey. Sickly, mongoloid rodents quickly became easy targets for deer, moose and elk who found their herds starving.

The radiation that had penetrated the food chain entered the animals and plants at every level. In the rivers and streams, ponds and lakes fish were starting particularly susceptible to the effects of radiation. The industries of North America had long demanded power, and for 100 years or so, the American land mass provided energy to industry in the form of coal. By the 1950's, the United States was punching holes throughout the landscape to bring millions of tons of coal to the surface to be burned for power. Nearly every power plant, every factory relied on burning coal in some way, shape or form. Industry didn't care that burning coal released toxins into the air. The billowing, black smoke churning out of smokestacks clawing at the sky wasn't viewed as a problem by mid-century American titans. It was just a cost of being the biggest, strongest, most capable producer of everything. It wasn't until the 1970's that American scientists were able to convince the leaders of the free world that industry was doing a fantastic job of destroying

everything natural. Great bodies of water, down to the tiniest streams were now measuring toxic levels of mercury and lead. Fish were unsafe to eat. Whole lakes were considered “dead” by ecologists. When the fallout started to rain down over lakes and streams and rivers and ponds already saturated near biological death, the ecosystems were ready vessels for radioactive absorption. The radioactive isotopes clung to microscopic organisms in the water. The fish ingested the toxic food and quickly passed the altered DNA to their progeny. Within a handful of lifecycles, whole populations of fish were unrecognizable from their bloodlines.

Back on dry land, the same mutation and transition was taking place at a much slower pace. Longer lifecycles, longer gestation periods meant that it took a few years for the effects to show up in land creatures. It was nearly impossible for anyone to have noticed that Four-Toed salamanders had begun appearing with eight or ten toes per foot, or sometimes with six or eight legs. But when beavers started to appear without tails, or foxes with two head, or white-tail deer with badly deformed legs, the changes were impossible to miss.

It's not like Dmitri wouldn't shoot at the mongoloid creatures, he would absolutely kill any creature that was so badly deformed that it was merciful to put an end to its suffering. It was the humane thing to do. Put those poor beasts, the children of the madness of man that never asked to be brought to life, out of their torment. It was the horrible marriage of man's destructive power and nature's unwavering fight to survive that brought these horrific creatures to life. And so it was. Dmitri saw that the yearling was challenged by its lame, malformed leg, but it did not appear to be suffering so much. Still, there was enough evidence that contamination had entered its bloodline and so it was not healthy enough to eat, not sick enough to euthanize. No, it would be better to allow it to exist so that some other link in the food chain could make a meal of it.

And so, Dmitri lay in wait a little longer. He had much success stalking prey at the water's edge. There were many animals that came to the stream to drink and he knew that eventually a mature, healthy bull would come to lap up the crystal-cool water. Back at the cabin, Christine and little Pyotr—his mother called him Petey, had plenty of sustenance, but the dried meat was beginning to run low and it was wise for Dmitri to go ahead and hunt for some more meat. Protein was important for a little boy, and with no dairy in their diets, meat offered the most.

Dmitri had killed three animals by dusk. An adolescent doe in fairly good health, a gopher—also in reasonably good health and a terribly deformed lynx. The lynx was a surprise to see in the daytime hours. That was the first sign that the wildcat was not well. Through the sight, Dmitri could see there was something not right about the cat's head. It was misshapen. Not at all symmetrical. Normally he would aim for a head shot, instant death for any suffering animal, but his curiosity got the better of him and he took aim at the cat's chest. Blood sprayed the trees behind the cat as the .308 cartridge ripped through the hollow chest of the starving animal. When Dmitri rose from his perch to investigate the kill, he let out a little prayer to no particular god at all. His morbid curiosity rewarded when he reached the lifeless mass of flesh, bone and fur. It looked plain enough lying dead on its right side, but Dmitri knew his eyes had not lied, there was more to this story. With the muzzle of his Winchester he flipped the lynx. There, on the right side of its head a second face protruded from below the ear of the lynx. Smaller, not fully developed, but a face all the same. And in the upper right arm, the claws of a small, useless paw erupted from the fur in what looked to be a perpetually infected evulsion. The eyes of the primary face of the lynx were clouded and sickly, completely incapable of vision.

Dmitri shook his head as he walked away from the carcass. A year or so ago, he would have been utterly sickened by the grotesque mongoloid, but by now he had killed dozens of such creatures.

Their presence made all the more disturbing by their freakish resilience in the face of such cruel odds. One couldn't help but wonder if humans were seeing such birth defects. Little Pyotr certainly looked healthy. But could there be some congenital defect lurking beneath his pale skin? Some kind of a mutation, the result of gestating in the belly of a survivor of nuclear holocaust? It was every parent's nightmare.

Dmitri went back to his original perch after investigating the lynx and set about packing things up for the day. The two healthy beasts would give his little family plenty of nourishment for a couple of weeks. They'd have fresh meat the next few days and dry the rest for jerky. It was the best way to preserve it. To conserve fuel, Dmitri had been running the generator about four hours a day—just enough to chill the refrigerator a bit, circulate the air in the cabin, catch up on information, maybe charge the car batteries, if needed.

## HINTERSHELLENBERG, LIECHTENSTEIN

The Soviet Union had poured men and machine into East Germany as World War III began. Troops flooded West Germany as the Eastern Bloc pushed NATO out of Germany in what would be the central battleground of the conventional war. Like Flanders field had sixty-five years before, Germany played host to other aggressors. It was the board on which the game of world-denomination was played. For the United States and her allies, the key was not to defend West Germany so much as to use the land as the battleground by which to protect the rest of free Europe, much to the dismay of Chancellor Helmut Kohl.

The Soviet Union's willingness to expose their soldiers to radiation was the decisive factor in the Battle for German Reunification. Soviet tactics included the preemptive detonation of battlefield tactical nuclear munitions. The same battlefield nukes that Khrushchev deployed in Cuba were being used to render the battlefields of Germany 'hot'. To their credit, the American government acted quickly to try and even the playing field. The Army leadership did not want to go back to the tactical nuclear weapon playbook. It was a concept that the United States had dismissed in 1971 when they started mothballing the M-28 and M-29 Davy Crockett tactical nukes. Atomic watermelons, as the soldiers that manned the Davy Crocketts liked to call them, were not good weapons. They weren't accurate, they weren't terribly overwhelming, and they had a nasty habit of dispersing radiation everywhere—including back on American troops. A phenomenon similar to what the combatants of World War I had observed when deploying gas. So, the military leaders went to America's powerhouse chemical and nuclear companies to try and get radiation-resistant gear for the majority of the surviving military. Companies like DuPont, Westinghouse, Dow and 3M pieced together R&D teams from their tattered corporations. With the might of the federal

government behind it, the best scientists were pressed into service in make-shift labs and underground facilities that had weathered the USSR's nuclear engagement.

The goal was simple—find a way to protect American soldiers from radiation, biologic and chemical attacks. Make it cheap. Make it fast. Make a lot of whatever it was; protective gear, medication, neutralization tech. Find a solution and find it fast. And much like in the Second World War, the federal government would be bankrolling whatever concepts seemed most promising.

What won out was DuPont's Tyvek material with a special coating created by pharmaceutical company Eli Lilly and sewn into a protective coverall by General Dynamics. Lilly had the good fortune of being located in Indianapolis, a low-priority target for the Soviets. DuPont's operations in Delaware had been heavily damaged by missile attacks, but they owned the patent on Tyvek and Tychem materials and weren't about to hand over the technology gratis.

On the battlefield, the Tyvek proved a good solution for engagement zones with elevated radiation levels. NATO soldiers that were issued the Tyvek battle dress were handling radiation well, though Soviet bullets were still lethal. And though the Wausau Pact soldiers were less protected than their NATO counterparts, the Soviet strategy was to keep enormous waves of men pressing the West. With NATO troops held back until the protective suits had been issued en masse, the Soviets had quickly placed themselves in advantageous positions throughout the German theater and managed to hold those positions after the Americans had regained their footing and engaged in a more robust defense of Europe.

The Tyvek suits had come too late to provide the West with a tactical advantage. The Soviets had ejected NATO from their bases in West Germany. The Americans and their allies were pushed

back and out of Germany completely within nine months of the first East German-Soviet advance. The Hammer and Compass would ultimately be hoisted over the reunited German state and the Americans and NATO would take up positions in the countries to the west and south. The Central Army Group command, known to the NATO allies as CENTAG, had been forced to retreat and reorganize in Liechtenstein despite one hundred and twenty-five years of neutrality.

The Liechtensteiners weren't being pulled into the war as combatants so much as their country was being commandeered. Like in one of those cop movies from the 1960's—NATO had basically taken control of Vaduz and any other municipalities in Liechtenstein. The small principality's safety from nuclear attacks had been assured by its neutrality but when the conventional war commenced in earnest, all bets were off. The Yugoslavs made a run across northern Italy for Switzerland, to seize the Nazi gold and any other negotiable commodities they could, ignoring the country's non-aggression through two world wars and countless other skirmishes. A common misconception is that the Swiss have no military. The Yugoslav army counted on there being little resistance as they crossed the Alps, and they were right—the Italians and Americans had moved their troops north to help defend West Germany. What they had not figured on was a well-trained, proud Swiss military that was prepared to defend their home. The Swiss had long required all young men in good health to serve a compulsory term in the defense forces, many of which retained reserve status, training with their units frequently, to retain a state of readiness. The Yugoslavs ran into a ferocious alpine fortress in the form of Switzerland. The Liechtensteiners, on the other hand, had no such military force. Their national police, though thoroughly professional and trained by Interpol in the most modern police tactics, were nothing more than a well-organized police force.

The NATO forces weren't viewed as invaders, anyway. President George H.W. Bush had actually asked Prince Franz Joseph II, the Prince of Liechtenstein permission to allow the NATO forces to enter the country. The prince consulted the Prime Minister, Hans Brunhart but ultimately overrode the liberal leader's objections, fearing that remaining neutral or even siding with the Soviet Bloc would ultimately lead to a plundering of the country's wealth, like Switzerland heavily associated to banking. The new American president assured His Serene Highness that it was the intention of the United States and her allies to protect the sovereignty of all European nations and defend the rights of all people of Europe to self-determine their leadership. In return for these assurances, NATO would be given the opportunity to "lease" infrastructure in the form of office buildings, telecommunications, and energy production from Liechtenstein.

Virtually every state-owned building in Vaduz was now occupied by NATO commanders. The principality had turned over control of the country to a military tribunal comprised of the American CENTAG commander, Brigadier General Bobby Farris; French Lieutenant General Robert Caillouet and the Liechtensteiner Prime Minister. The state and municipal government offices were shut down and their buildings occupied by NATO. The whole of the 25 km-wide nation had been turned into an enormous military command complex.

Near the historic Princely Liechtenstein Tattoo, the Seventh Signal Brigade had taken up residence. Utilizing the mountainous terrain, the electricians and radiomen had set up the links to other European brigades and maintained open channels of communication back to NATO Headquarters in Brussels and American leadership, back in Raven Rock, PA. Major David Irwin commanded the Seventh since the East Germans overran their position on the Fulda Gap, forcing the Major to organize a hasty retreat to the south. Now entering their second year in Hinterschellenberg, his

troops had been reinforced and his equipment updated. The Seventh was feeling quite stable in their position as the battle lines had settled and the conventional warfare continued.

The residents of Liechtenstein had entered a sort of stasis when the NATO forces entered the country. No longer able to pursue their business and commerce—not that there was any commerce, they came to rely on the rations provided by NATO. The small, family farms around the country still operated and the military allowed them to trade with the locals, a concession meant to give the Liechtensteiners the sense that they were still very much in control of their own country. Fresh milk and produce were always a reassurance in time of war. But for the city dwellers, the urbanites that worked in international banking and trade, their jobs were rendered obsolete by the involuntary imposition of martial law. Technicians and tradesmen still found work, contracted by NATO to maintain the smooth operation of needed infrastructure, but white-collar workers found themselves pursuing a sort of general hiatus.

The Seventh had been one of the earliest companies engaged in conventional warfare against the invading East Germans. While the 3<sup>rd</sup> Infantry did most of the actual fighting, supporting the Seventh's work and protecting the signal corps while they kept the channels of communication open, it was the engineers and signal corpsmen that suffered the heaviest casualties. Wire cutters and wrenches didn't make good weapons. The East Germans had been well trained and directed to focus their initial aggression on the communication points, heavily wounding NATO's ability to efficiently coordinate their defenses. But now, with the playing field leveled, and Major Irwin's company safely operating out of Liechtenstein, NATO felt they had regained a level of operational control in the European theater.

## INDIANAPOLIS, IN, UNA

As the weeks turned into months below the Greenbrier, the President of the United States and the members of Congress that had sheltered below the resort had begun the task of reorganizing the tattered remains of North America. Most of the United States' major cities had sustained catastrophic destruction. New York, Boston, Atlanta were virtually unrecognizable. Washington was little more than a modern-day Pompeii. What few buildings remained were deemed unsafe. Los Angeles, San Francisco, Seattle and Denver were equally hobbled.

The major cities of Canada had managed to fare the nuclear warfare far better than their southern counterparts. Toronto did take some damage, as did Calgary, but not the sort of complete destruction that much of the American urban areas had. The problem in Canada wasn't so much the physical damage directly effected by the Soviet bombs, but the dramatic drop in climate brought on by nuclear winter. The temperatures across the Canadian Plains barely rose to 0° Celsius in the summer months. Winter wheat was growing sporadically through summer months and nothing grew in the winter. Canada quickly ran low on rations and the Parliament began to predict mass starvation across the country.

Pierre Trudeau first contacted the other Commonwealth nations for aid, hoping that some of the countries less affected by the ravages of two years of winter could help feed his country of 25 million. What Canada lacked in food, she more than made up for in petroleum and it was the hope of Trudeau's advisors that they would be able to trade oil for food. But logistics proved to be too great an impediment and Canada soon had to look back to their American friends for help.

George Bush knew the value of the Canadian oil, having served as a naval aviator during the last World War. America's ability to feed itself had been wounded, but not mortally so. The South and Southwest were still producing a sustainable level of food and could afford to share it with their northern neighbors. Furthermore, Bush recognized quickly that most of the American institutions of capitalism had been destroyed by the war. Businesses and companies still existed, as did trade—to a degree, but the economic engines of American capitalism were gone. No stock markets. No centralized monetary system. Things were being bartered and traded. Cash was virtually meaningless as currency lost its value. Hard currency, in the form of precious metals and jewels held more importance and could be negotiated, despite a lack of a commodity marketplace. People were trading their grandmother's engagement rings for heating oil and food. Recognizing that there was no practical place in the degraded society for consumerism and capitalism, the United States leadership gave in and struck a deal with Canada. A joint capitol would be created. A coalition government. Canada would provide the new United North America with expertise in Western socialism, setting up a medical system and welfare programs. The United States would provide military strength and the technology and production to protect the new nation. The Midwestern city of Indianapolis, Indiana would serve as the new seat of government.

Indianapolis was a second-tier city located in the north-central section of the United States interior. Prior to World War III, Indianapolis had aspirations of growing into a "big city". With a population of just under three-quarters of a million people, Indianapolis was the twelfth largest city in America before the war. Now it was estimated she was the largest city to not have been successfully bombed. As the state capital of Indiana prior to the war, she had a sizeable network of government office buildings and systems already in place. Her central location provided the "Circle City" with good access to railroads and highways in every direction. She had also been an

important center of manufacturing before the Reagan recession before the war, so many of her boarded-up factories could be quickly reopened.

Washington and Ottawa would both be kept as the symbolic “capitals” of the two territories, but Indianapolis was installed as the administrative capital for United North America. The newly completed Hoosier Dome would provide the conference facilities for the Unification Congress, where Canadian and American lawmakers met to iron out the details of the coalition. The Indiana State House would ultimately become the Capitol and home to the legislative branch of the Congressional Parliament of United North America.

The Governor of Indiana, ever-loyal Republican Robert Orr, offered the Governor’s Mansion to President Bush, but it was decided that it would make more sense to transform the mansion into the new Indiana State House. The Secret Service and Army Corps of Engineers set about transforming a private home on Indianapolis’s posh North Meridian Street into the new Presidential Mansion. Other homes in the area were quickly commandeered to serve as homes and offices for the Representatives and Ministers of all the states and provinces of United North America. The North Meridian corridor was closed off to regular traffic and designated a protected thoroughfare, open only to authorized personnel. A trend that was taking place all over UNA—the areas around military posts, government buildings and sensitive properties were cordoned off, with access restricted to only the most essential people. The government was engaged in two key activities; keeping the people of UNA healthy and alive, and defeating the Soviet Union in World War III. If something did not fall into one of those two functions, the government did not want to waste time, money or manpower on it.

Agencies across both former governments of Canada and the United States shifted their focus to suit the needs of the new country. In the former United States, the EPA went from enacting and enforcing environmental law to serving as the primary agency in charge of monitoring radiation levels in civilian areas. The EPA would check farm land for contamination. Measure the depth of fallout versus the existing topsoil. In industrial areas, the EPA would investigate the sites of former factories, checking for chemical contamination in the soil and environments around the factories. Mid-twentieth century factories around the former United States seemed to all be located next to bodies of water. American companies from the start of the industrial revolution had had a love affair with rivers, streams and lakes. Early in the industrial age, rivers could provide energy and later, as the twentieth century took hold and America grew into an industrial power, the rivers and streams provided a fast, cheap place to release production process waste.

There was a belief in industrial circles that water, long considered nature's best diluent, would neutralize any chemicals, regardless of the volume of pollutant you poured into a body of water. It was only very recently, in the late 1960's and early 1970's that the American government bothered to pay attention to commercial dumping. When the Cuyahoga River caught fire and Lake Erie was declared "dead" the federal government was forced to start paying attention. Of course, this flew in the face of the conservatives that were in control of the government. Long a friend to business and proponents Laissez-faire economics, the conservatives believed that businesses would do the "right thing" on their own, if the consumers demanded it. There was never a need to put regulations in place because a free market was a self-correcting, self-regulating system. So, after decades of turning a blind eye to industry squatting at the shores of every body of water in the country and taking an enormous, steaming shit in every community's yard, the people of

America demanded the government put in place some regulations. And so was born the EPA, despite President Nixon and the Republicans' best efforts to avoid regulating industry.

Now, ten years after creating the EPA to monitor industrial pollution, it was retasked to find the aftermath of industrial disregard combined with nuclear war. Places like Union County, New Jersey were completely condemned by the EPA. They had determined that the near-direct hit that North Jersey took in the opening salvos of the war had destroyed a huge number of industrial sites along the Rahway River. The release of toxins, ranging from petrochemicals at the oil refineries to mercury from manufacturing plants inland had poisoned the water table and soil beyond any practical recovery. It was a story told over and over as the EPA made its way across the country inspecting the livability of the land around waterways and industrial clusters. The land was too toxic to grow any consumable agriculture. The water was too toxic to eat any of the fish. The wild vegetation so toxic that any wildlife that was feeding off it was too toxic to hunt and eat.

The problem with a region being condemned is that there is usually a large human population nearby. The government had nowhere to move a city the size of Des Moines. What do you do with 150,000 starving people? What do you do when there aren't five or ten population centers like that, but hundreds? How do you transport them when much of the infrastructure has been damaged? Where do you find the buses, trains and planes to move them? Where do you move them to and where will they live when they get there?

The answer is you don't move 150,000 starving people. You don't move 25 million starving people. You try to feed them. The Canadian Agri-Food Ministry would ultimately become the new USA Department of Agri-Food and Nutrition. They would be in charge of utilizing land the EPA deemed "Within Satisfactory Limits of Toxic and Radioactive Contamination" for the

production of food for all of UNA. Small, family farms still operated—unless the EPA had actually condemned the region they were in. But even then, the EPA could not force a farm to stop producing, they could only restrict the harvest to personal use. In other words, a family farm in a condemned region could produce all the food they wanted, but only for personal consumption—they could not sell or trade their harvest. A small farm outside of contaminated regions was free to grow, sell, trade anything they wanted. Of course, the Department of Agriculture had recommendations for small farms and offered the convenience of purchasing that produce directly, as long as it was what they had recommended. They were trying to make sure that the citizens of the UNA were getting variation in their diets and optimizing nutrition.

Environmentalists in Indianapolis and Ottawa were constantly working on strategies to manage the needs of the UNA. Teams were scouring the countryside, looking for crops that had adapted or survived the long nuclear winter. When they found strains of consumable produce and livestock, they quickly set about producing seedstock and distributing it to be sown. The United States and Canada had long been considered the world's most productive farmlands. The UNA, on the other hand was struggling to keep up with the demand for food. There was much land that could not be used to produce safe food and a good amount of the land that was not considered contaminated beyond usefulness wasn't much good for growing anything. It was either not practical because of the post winter climate or had never been workable in the first place. There were some new regions that had become farmable through the changes in climate—the Mojave, for example, had experienced enough rain over the last two years to change its designation from desert to semi-arid and even subtropical in some parts. The problem now was the soil in that region had existed as sand for millennia, they would need to bring in top soil to be turned in with the sand to make the land productive.