
THE COLLAPSE

JOLYON HALLOWS

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The Collapse

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For Sandra

PART 1

CONSEQUENCES

1

DARIUS

Darius lay face down, pressed through weeds that had crumbled the asphalt of what had once been a parking lot. *Make yourself small—even smaller than you are.* With luck, the weeds would hide his slight frame from the eyes of the Peaks and from his death, his slow agonizing death, should just one of them spot him from a perch somewhere high in the towers that surrounded him.

The towers. The tuneless wind whipping through forty or fifty stories of windows that time and vandals had shattered haunted him whenever he entered the city. It was always different in pitch or intensity, but it never yielded to silence. The rooms it poured through were empty now, the corridors deserted, the contents looted. Some ductwork remained, exposed when the wind ripped down the ceiling tiles, crashing them onto the floors only to be swept by the ever-present gale out the windows onto the streets below, streets that were vacant except for desultory Peak patrols.

In the instant before he threw himself into the weeds, Darius glimpsed a flash of light from high up on a tower. Was it the barrel of a Peak immobilizer or just a remnant of glass that had fused to its frame and caught the light of the moon?

The moon. He had argued against this raid. The moon would be full, its light bathing the ruins of the city. A raid tonight was risky. But although his attacks on the Peaks had given him a reputation for bravery and ferocity, his youth denied him a vote in the decisions of the resistance council. Most days, they would have listened to his words, weighed his warning, but today, opportunity was stronger.

Darius had planned this attack almost a year ago. It would destroy the buildings that gave the Peaks shelter, killing dozens as they slept in the illusion of safety. The council had approved his plan, waiting for the right time. The right time was tonight. The Coordinator had alerted them that a contingent of senior Peak commanders was arriving. Peak soldiers were valid targets, but their commanders, like fall wheat, ripe

for the blades of the scythes, were too valuable to ignore, too tempting for their deaths to be deterred by moonlight. Besides, the skies were cloudy, the moon would be obscured. And if Darius had lost his nerve, there were others eager to carry out the attack, less seasoned, less proven, but more daring.

Darius agreed to the attack. Not just because he could not refuse the council, but because this was his plan. He was the best choice to carry it out. And in his heart, the appeal of dead Peak commanders was like the sweet tart taste of fresh raspberries picked from the vines that lined the cart tracks in the early summer, their juice the colour of Peak blood.

Earlier in the evening, he had slipped into the city along the river and hidden the pouch he would use to make his escape. With his backpack laden with explosives, detonators, and timers, he slunk beneath the cloud-darkened sky up the hill to the compound. A chain-link fence, eight feet high, towered over the bodies of field mice and gophers charred when they came too close to the surge of electricity that enveloped the steel net. The stench of rotting flesh playing off the drone of the electric current brutalized a barrier just as effective as the fence itself. Up a slope to his right squatted three gasoline tanks used to fuel the Peak rovers, the only powered vehicles allowed. The five buildings within the compound were illuminated by floodlights that lit their walls and the grounds around with a glare that rivalled the noon-day sun.

The administration building was the biggest, its brick and glass bulk dominating the compound. Behind it sat two barracks housing fifty Peaks each, a mess hall and training centre between them. The fifth building, squat and windowless, was the detention centre. The few who survived it reported cells too small to lie down, too low to stand up. Chambers that had never known the sun, stained with blood, replete with barbed wire whips for flaying flesh, pliers for drawing out teeth and nails, for crushing testicles and nipples, awls for thrusting into eyes and ears. Darius had spoken to some of those who had been released. Their common wish was that they could have died. Tonight, for those suffering in the foul cells, that wish would be granted.

He made his way up the hill to a spot just above the fuel tanks where, two years earlier, Alain dug a tunnel. Darius wondered if he could be as strong as Alain. The man had taken a week to die but had never revealed the location or even the existence of his handiwork.

Darius shoved aside the jumble of weeds and blackberry brambles

that obscured the mouth of the tunnel. Beneath layers of leaves, the upper ones crumbling under his fingers, the lower congealed into the ooze and stench of decay, he uncovered the rock that concealed the entrance. He rolled it to one side and crawled through, pushing his backpack before him to clear the path, clogged with a fetid mix of dead field mice, dead insects, and dead earth. The tunnel was narrow. He forced his way through, the reek of rot clogging his lungs. He reached the end, solid dirt blocking his way. Alain hadn't pushed the tunnel through to the compound; the risk of its being discovered was too great. Darius pulled a flattened stick from his backpack and dug at the dirt. Inch by inch, he moved forward until he was once more pushing through weeds.

He struggled his way through the final barricade of vegetation. His face blackened by wood ash, he pushed himself through the thickness of the brambles into a dark zone, untouched by the floodlights. From his backpack, he slipped out packages of explosives, attached a charge to the underside of each fuel tank, and ran a wire from the charges to a timer.

His last charge was an incendiary explosive that needed to go off above the cluster of buildings downhill from him. It would ignite the flow of gasoline running from the ruptured tanks, creating an inferno of flames that would cascade down the hill. He spotted an ideal place. The contours of the ground would funnel the fuel down to it, and the river of fire would spread out, enveloping all five buildings. But the spot was in the middle of the glare of the floodlights, visible to the Peak guards. Even if they were dulled by boredom, he dared not enter their view.

From his backpack, he pulled out a toy wagon. The wood was stained the same colour as the ground, thick wheels holding the box. He tied the explosive into the wagon, connected it to the timer, and pointed it downhill, playing out a line of cord as it lurched forward.

It fell to its side. Alert for Peak guards, he eased the line back, dragging the wagon toward him until he could right it and release it once more. Again, he inched the wagon down the hill. Again, it toppled. His third time worked. The wagon stayed upright until it came to rest at the spot he had chosen, just up the hill from the administration building and the barracks.

He set the timer, a clockwork mechanism that Harold had made his life's work to fashion ever since an explosion had shattered his legs. It was crude, but Harold's timers were more accurate than anything

anyone else had been able to develop.

Darius eased his way back through the tunnel and replaced the dead branches and creepers that hid the entrance. The inferno would carry up the hill to the tanks and devour the bushes around the tunnel, but he couldn't risk that some random Peak patrol would spot its mouth and raise the alarm before his explosives detonated.

Crouching in the darkness, he slipped away from the compound along the deserted streets, slinking to the sides in the protection of the towers, toward the river where he had hidden his escape pack.

And the moon burst upon him.

Lying flattened in the weeds, shards of asphalt like a bed of knives slicing into him, he calculated his options. His internal clock told him he had about twenty minutes before the charges went off. He might have been able to slip along a street unnoticed by a dozing guard, but after the inferno of the explosion, no guard would be dozing. His only hope was that this flood of moonlight was errant, that the clouds, like the scum that covered the brackish waters of the ponds near his home, would rally and converge on the gap that wind had torn open, sealing it, inviting cool darkness to descend. But the clouds had vanished. Only a few scattered patches intruded on the sky with its moon and its universe of stars.

He could not stay here nor could he leave. Either option meant death—probably meant death. What were his best odds? In this light, he would almost certainly be spotted if he moved. The Peaks were on their guard against the resistance. If they even glimpsed him, they would flatten him with an immobilizer. On the other hand, once the blast went off, perhaps the fire and the destruction and the screams of death would draw the outlying Peaks to their compound. Maybe that would give him the chance to escape while they were panicking, wondering what to do, awaiting orders. Neither choice was appealing but staying until the blasts came and slipping away in the confusion seemed the better chance. Ignoring the pain from the biting edges of shattered asphalt cutting into his chest, he pressed himself even deeper into the weeds.

A change came. The world darkened. A coolness. He turned his face sideways, opened one eye in a tight slit, and peeked at the moon. A cloud covered it. Insubstantial, temporary, but the slight darkness changed the odds.

He eased himself up and slid his way to the shadow of the nearest tower. He dared not run. That risked attracting attention. Planning his

route, he slunk along in the shelter of buildings, looking for intersections that gave him the least exposure. He slipped along the streets past cracks in the pavement where weeds and a scattering of shrubs were reclaiming their natural space. He crawled around the ruins of the elevated walkways, crumbled heaps of metal and glass that once connected the towers and carried streams of people blind to the events that were about to end their lives. He climbed over fallen girders from buildings that were giving up their fight against wind, rain, and time. When he had to sprint across a street, he made no attempt at evasive running. He had never heard of it. The Peak immobilizers emitted a field that didn't require accuracy. The only way he would know if one hit him was when he awoke on a slab in the detention centre. Or maybe he'd become one of the Vanished. One who had never existed.

He reached the remnants of a park, reclaimed by trees, weeds, and vines. In its shelter, he scrambled down a hill to the concrete support for a bridge. A lower deck across the river had collapsed years ago, but the upper deck still carried a straggle of oxcarts, horses, peasant wagons going to a threadbare market, and the occasional Peak rover on its way to the dirt farms to extract tithes or, from young girls, other forms of tribute.

He retrieved his escape pouch from its hiding place and pulled out a rubber wet suit. It had been patched in places where the rubber was thinning, but it was still serviceable. He pulled the suit on and slipped into the river, the glacier-fed water causing him to gasp. The landing was two hours away, but this was not his first escape from the city. He could last that long.

He moved into the middle of the river where the channel was deeper, the flow faster. His internal clock ticked down. He looked toward the glow of lights from the compound. Nothing. If the charges failed, the Peaks would find them, would find the tunnel. The effort of years and the sacrifice of scores of resistance fighters would be wasted. But it was impossible that all the charges would fail. *Give it time*, he berated himself.

The rushing of the water blocked out the sound of the explosions, but the riverbank around him flared, bathing the trees near the shore, illuminating the night sky. Blowing up the fuel tanks wouldn't be visible from this distance but igniting the fuel as it poured into the buildings, setting ablaze the wood walls, the dry beams, the tarred roofs, the screaming, twisting bodies, would be. In the rushing water, Darius couldn't hear the blasts, but they echoed off the hills around him into

the dirt huts of the peasants. He knew these people. They would pull their worn blankets closer, resigned that tomorrow, retribution would come, but tonight there was sleep.

The current carried him downstream, past a sign he had seen many times before. The sign had been painted, although the words were just stains on the wood where the paint had once been. He had always intended to ask someone what it meant. It read "Calgary Freight Yards." Curious. He had heard of freight, he knew what yards were, but the combination made no sense to him.

2

TODD BAXTER

From the patio of Todd Baxter's twenty-fifth-floor apartment, frozen breath wreathing his face, the lights of Calgary spread farther than he could see. Seven construction cranes were decorated in Christmas colours, an inflated Santa perched on one, plastic reindeer rising from the end of another. Even in the night, some of the cranes twisted as if they were corkscrews extracting new towers from the frozen prairie earth. The malls had just closed creating a mini rush hour, headlights and taillights pulsing along the streets to the rhythm of the traffic signals.

A prick of heat stung his hand. His cigarette had burned to the filter, still a pure white. He flicked the butt over the patio and watched the ember disappear toward the snow-covered lawn. He didn't smoke, but stepping outside for a puff allowed him a break, an excuse to be by himself, especially in the winter when nobody else would want to join him. He slid back the French door and pushed his way past the drapes into his apartment.

The warmth embraced him, reminded him how cold he could get even from the few minutes one cigarette would take to burn. Four faces stared at him.

"You're nuts," said Ross Candale, one of his closest friends. "You're going to freeze your balls off."

"Hardly." Ellen Sangster laughed. To some, she was his girlfriend, although they had decided long ago that their occasional nights together were just camaraderie. "His balls are the only things he covers up."

"He didn't cover his head. Proves he knows what's important." Bert Tallman, another friend, chuckled.

The fourth man scowled. "This is precisely the type of idiocy I'd have expected you to avoid." His name was Warren Fraleigh, and he was not a friend. He was shorter than Baxter by several inches, his face a permanent pinch as if some brain defect had robbed him of the ability

to smile.

Baxter poured himself a drink from a decanter of scotch and took a swallow, allowing the liquid to slide into him, to warm him. "What do you mean?"

"This. This is your home. Why do you have to go out on the balcony in sub-zero weather to have a smoke? You've bought into the political correctness crap that smoking indoors is bad."

Baxter shrugged. "I smoke on the balcony because I don't like the smell of cigarettes on my furniture or in the house. Besides, as you said, it's my home. What I do in it shouldn't concern you."

Fraleigh scowled. "Coming here was a complete waste of my time. I expected some cooperation. Some common ground. After all, your organization has similar goals to mine. I thought we'd be able to work together."

"Our organization? I told you when you phoned. We're not an organization, just a group of friends who decided to take some action. As for common ground, if you thought that, we failed to present our ideas effectively."

Fraleigh stood, his face tight. "Change is coming. You can either be part of it or be flattened by it. If you choose wrong, it won't be anything to laugh about." He strode out, slamming the door behind him.

"Pleasant fellow, wasn't he?" Candale said.

Baxter frowned. "When I was on the balcony, I counted seven construction cranes."

"So the city's growing?"

"Really? A year ago, there were seventeen. And of those that are left, two sites have shut down and just haven't bothered to remove the cranes."

Candale nodded. "And the remaining five are in financial trouble."

Bert Tallman sighed. "I'm afraid that jerk is right. Change is coming. We're going to have to figure out how to deal with it."

Candale said, "Hey, it's getting late. I've got an early meeting. Gotta go. See you guys next week?"

Tallman said, "Sure. I'll go with you. Ellen, you coming?"

Sangster said, "I think I'll have another drink if that's okay with you, Todd."

"Fine with me."

The other two looked at one another. Candale said, "What are you going to have for breakfast?"

Tallman laughed. "Maybe they'll just live on the fruits of their love."

Baxter threw a cushion at them. “Don’t slam the door behind you.”

TWO WEEKS EARLIER, Todd Baxter faced a television camera, a reporter he’d always thought of as taller sticking a microphone in his face. “Mr. Baxter, why are you opposed to the disciplining of Professor Wainwright?”

“Professor Wainwright took a principled stand against protestors. He’d arranged for a lecture by Ronald Davis, but the university cancelled it when a handful of students objected.”

“But Davis’s book is controversial. It’s critical of Indigenous people who, after all, suffer some of the worst conditions in the country.”

“Yes, it’s controversial, but that’s no reason to censor it. The points Davis raises are worth discussing, not dismissing.”

“But wouldn’t you agree that Davis’s book advocates discrimination against natives?”

“Nobody who’s read the book could conclude that. There are many native leaders who applaud some of the things he says.”

The reporter asked, “And you. Why do you approve of Davis’s book?”

Baxter sighed. “Why is it that any time anyone stands up for free speech, he’s assumed to support whatever cause is being censored? I like some of what Davis says and I think he’s wrong on others. But that’s not the issue. The issue is that in a free society, anyone should be able to say whatever he wants.”

“Even if what they say hurts someone’s feelings or ignites anger? According to some Indigenous leaders, Davis is a racist. Shouldn’t a caring society be sensitive to their concerns?”

“Look, the early feminists hurt a lot of feelings when they insisted on the right to vote. Blacks who insisted on their freedom outraged slaveholders. Gays angered a lot of people when they demanded the right to marry. Change doesn’t happen without someone objecting. As far as we’re concerned, anger and hurt feelings don’t justify censorship.”

“So you would allow Davis to speak on the campus?”

Baxter said, “There are two issues here. One is the right of any campus organization to invite anyone to give a talk on any subject. The second is that university professors have the right to support such speakers and to object when they face censorship. That’s Professor Wainwright’s position. Disciplining him because he spoke out in favour of Davis’s right to speak is offensive. Doing so on a university

campus, a place where ideas are supposed to be debated, is obscene.”

“The university has replied that since Professor Wainwright has tenure, they can’t fire him, but they’re within their rights to relieve him of his teaching responsibilities. How do you respond to that?”

“Yes, they have the right to discipline him. They are his employer. What outrages us is the reason. The university administration caved in to a bunch of rabble-rousers.”

The reporter asked, “So is it fair to say you’d like him not to be disciplined?”

“Yes, and the presentation by Ronald Davis to proceed. That’s the only reasonable outcome in a society that claims to support free speech.”

The reporter turned back to the camera. “That was Todd Baxter, spokesperson for a group of activists concerned about the disciplining of a university instructor who supported the right of a racist to spew his hatred on campus. Back to you.” The camera cut off, missing Baxter’s interjection.

“Well, Todd, you gave it your best shot.” Ellen Sangster gave him a punch on his shoulder. Like the others in the group, she was in her early thirties, a professional. She was operations manager for a transport company—at ease whether she was dealing with truck drivers or company executives.

“Lot of good it did. Look, guys, give me your critiques. What could I have said that would have changed things?”

Bert Tallman, whose five-and-a-half feet belied his name and made him the butt of jokes from Baxter and Candale, both six feet, said, “I don’t know if you could have. That reporter wasn’t going to give you any slack. Did you see her interview of the protestors?”

Baxter nodded. “A puff piece if there ever was one.”

Candale said, “Todd, Bert’s right. Don’t beat yourself up because you had to face someone with an agenda. After all, she has years interviewing people she wants to sabotage.”

Baxter sighed. “I’m not beating myself up. I just think sometimes I’m a hothead. Maybe one of you would have been more persuasive.”

Sangster said, “Oh, crap, Todd. We named you our spokesman because you’re good at presentations. If anyone could have handled that interview, it was you. At least you came away looking principled. I think the rest of us would have tried to strangle that ditz with her own microphone cable.”

Baxter laughed. “That occurred to me. But getting five-to-ten for

assault isn't my life plan."

THE FOUR HAD become involved a week earlier when they met for pizza at Baxter's home—a Friday evening tradition. The cancellation of Ronald Davis's talk and the reprimand of Professor Wainwright had made the news for several days. The television broadcasts featured an angry mob carrying makeshift signs, chanting, and beating on drums. A news clip showed a slightly out-of-focus Professor Wainwright saying, "A university's responsibility is to encourage dialogue, to foster disagreement. Unpopular ideas should be debated, not squelched because they offend some group." Another clip, sharp and clear, showed a university administrator saying, "The university's responsibility is to protect its students from aggression. Just as we don't tolerate rape, we don't tolerate verbal offenses."

"As if their fragile psyches would collapse if they were even made aware of ideas they don't approve of," Candale said with a snort.

Sangster said, "I have to admire Wainwright. He's not backing down."

"Well," Tallman said, "he does have tenure. They can't fire him."

Baxter said, "No, but they can make his life miserable." He sighed. "Why is it that throughout history, defenders of free speech suffered while censors flourished?"

"You have to ask? Any words beyond pass the salt offend somebody. And today, the standard response to hearing things you don't like is to demand that the government do something about it."

Tallman said, "Hold on. Here's a news story." They turned to the television set where an announcer said, "We have breaking news. We've just learned that Professor William Wainwright, who has defended the racist views of Ronald Davis, has been formally disciplined by the university. Alan Dorchester is standing by. Alan?"

"Yes, Joanne, the university has just announced that Professor Wainwright has been relieved of his teaching and research responsibilities. Here's what the dean of the department had to say."

The camera focused on a man in a turtle-neck sweater. "We felt we had no choice but to relieve Professor Wainwright of his influence at the university. Here, our goal is to foster an environment of inclusiveness where none of our students feel threatened by attitudes that, frankly, are inconsistent with those of a progressive society."

The reporter said, "But I understand Professor Wainwright has tenure. How is it possible to dismiss him?"

“We haven’t dismissed him. We have relieved him of his teaching duties, and we have reassigned his research staff to instructors who are more sensitive to the standards we try to maintain. We would not fire him. We’re not vindictive, although Professor Wainwright’s actions certainly are not in keeping with our goals of civility.”

“So there you have it, Joanne. Professor Wainwright has not been fired, but he no longer teaches or has responsibility for graduate students here.”

Candale slammed his fist against a table. “Those bastards. I hate it when bureaucrats cave in to a few idiots.”

Baxter said, “I’m with you, Ross. But nowadays it seems that any time anyone complains, the apologies can’t come fast enough.”

Tallman said, “Yeah, like that car commercial that showed a woman slapping her date.”

“I missed that one. What happened?”

“The woman thought he was ogling another woman when what he was ogling was the car parked at the curb. She slapped him. The confused look on his face was priceless.”

“Somebody complained?”

“Of course. And instead of saying suck it up, the car company changed the commercial.”

“Well,” Candale said, “I’m not sure I’d be happy with a commercial that approved of violence.”

“Violence? Give me a break. Besides, my point is that the company was so quick to pull the ad when they received only a handful of complaints.”

Baxter looked at Sangster. “Ellen, you haven’t said much. What’s your take on this Wainwright thing?”

She sighed. “I studied under Professor Wainwright. He was one of the most enjoyable instructors I had. He loved his subject matter, teaching, interacting with his students. To strip him of that would be torture for him. Damn, somebody ought to do something.”

The room went silent. Baxter said, “Well, we’re somebody.”

Sangster contacted people who had been in Wainwright’s courses. The overwhelming theme was anger at the university and an eagerness to support the professor with a protest of their own. They formed into committees—recruitment, permits, publicity, crowd control—and they organized a march from the Student Union Building to Wainwright’s office. Part way through their planning, someone said, “We’ll need a spokesperson. Any suggestions?”

When all heads turned his way, Baxter said, "Oh, no. I'm not the right person to become a talking head."

"Why not?" Tallman asked. "It hasn't stopped you before."

"Besides," Candale said, "you know how to use PowerPoint."

"What the hell does that have to do with anything?"

Candale shrugged. "I admire PowerPoint people."

Sangster said, "Todd, I think you are the right person. You come across well. Unlike shorty here."

Tallman said, "Hey, I have feelings too."

"Yeah, but they don't last long."

Sangster said, "Come on, Todd. After all, you're the one who pointed out that we're somebody. You got us started." She called out, "All hail to the chief."

The chorus filled the room until Baxter held up his hands. "Okay, okay. I'll do it. But maybe you could use a more culturally sensitive chant? Chief?"

The protest in support of Professor Wainwright also made the news, although the focus seemed to be on the counter-protestors. Campus security was able to keep the two groups apart, their conflict confined to shouted insults. Of course, the protest accomplished nothing. The dean came on television to say, "The university does not give in to demands from random protestors." When a reporter pointed out that's just what they had already done, he replied, "The actions taken against Professor Wainwright had nothing to do with the protests. He was relieved of his responsibilities because of his counter-productive attitude toward the university."

That ended Todd Baxter's foray into protest until a week later when he got a call. "Mr. Baxter, my name is Warren Fraleigh. I've noted your actions on behalf of William Wainwright. I think we have common ground. I'd like to meet with your organization to explore mutual interests. When would be convenient to you?"

Baxter protested that they weren't an organization, just a few outraged friends, but Warren Fraleigh persisted. So on one of their Fridays, he arrived at Todd Baxter's home. His angry departure was a relief. And an omen.