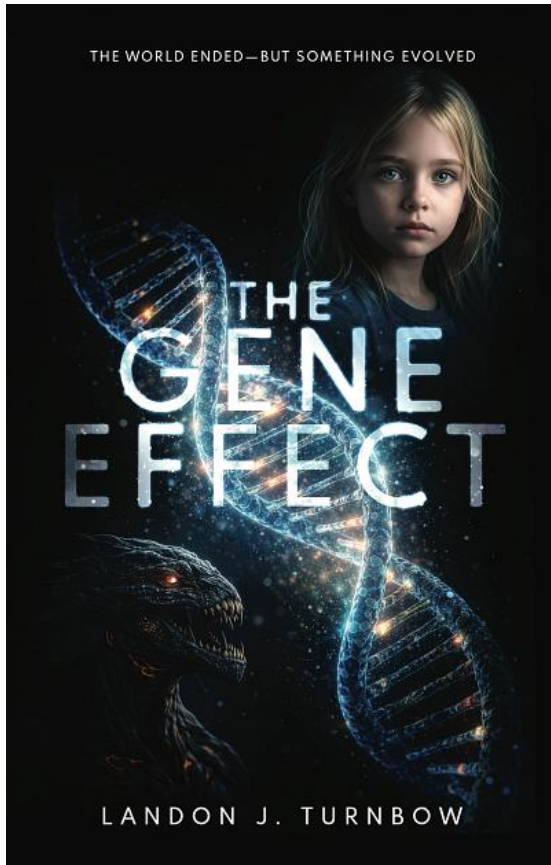




Decades after civilization falls, survivors face evolving creatures born from secret genetic experiments. When a child's death exposes the truth, Daniel leads a desperate fight for humanity's future.

The Gene Effect
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THE WORLD ENDED—BUT SOMETHING EVOLVED



THE GENE EFFECT

LANDON J. TURNBOW

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Print ISBN: 978-1-961268-01-2

Ebook ISBN: 979-8-88532-561-5

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Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., Trenton, Georgia.

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BookLocker.com, Inc.

2026

First Edition

Prologue

In the years before the Last Great War, humankind continued its tenuous existence with a tension and uncertainty not felt in a century. Not since the first atomic bombs of the mid-twentieth century had the world been so uncertain of how world events would unfold. Husbands and wives went to work and raised families, children went to school, and the great weapons of destruction that would change the order of things sat idly by. Everyone knew deep down that a drastic change was soon to come. Peace never lasted long. The inevitable was on their doorstep, waiting patiently, like a great beast slowly stalking its prey.

The resulting lack of a steady food supply and clean water for the growing world population led to greed. This greed in turn led to more people taking what was needed by force when necessary. World leaders eventually abandoned all efforts at peace and reasoning between the nations; and turned their greatest weapons upon each other in their struggle for global dominance and self-preservation. Yet, through the uncertainty and second guessing of what would finally bring humankind to the brink of extinction, none of the eight billion inhabitants could have guessed how the end would eventually come.

In the blink of an eye the face of the world changed. Cities became craters, forests burned, and the survivors were left to scavenge food and clean water in a poisoned landscape.

Technology withered into legend, and small, fenced villages became humanity's last refuge.

Before long, a new breed of human struck fear in those survivors. A breed that had been created in secrecy to serve its masters, at the same time both superior, and inferior to humans. These new un-humans, as they came to be called, would mean life or death for the race that had ruled the planet for thousands of years. This new threat, one that had been the brainchild of some of the most brilliant geneticists during the Last Great War, would be unlike anything man had ever conceived.

To survive, humans would have to quickly adapt and use every bit of knowledge they could muster to survive. Those who were alone quickly became victims of the un-humans, while those who stayed in groups, though their chances were still poor, could hope to at least have some sense of protection through numbers. They quickly formed small villages in hopes of affording themselves a better chance of survival. Someday, the now lost civilizations of the world would be restored to their former glory. Someday, humanity would no longer be forced to live in fear each day. But how do you adapt and defend against an enemy that moves like a whisper in the night?

It would take a miracle to save humanity. Or just maybe, the innate abilities that every person was imbued with at birth would finally resurface. But how do you tap into something that progressed from common knowledge, to legend, to myth over the centuries?

Chapter One

Michael woke with a start. The feeling of being watched was stronger than ever. It was early morning and the lack of light confirmed that the sun had not yet risen. At some point during the night he had finally slept, leaving his meager fire to burn itself out. Now all that remained were a few faintly glowing embers. He could barely make out the outline to the entrance of the cave where he had bunked down for the night. Stirring the embers of the fire with a stick, he groped around in the darkness with his other hand for more wood to bring life back into the fire. The air was not cold, so he didn't need the fire for warmth. It did, however, provide some protection as far as keeping the un-humans, and other scavengers, at bay.

Were it not for the constant haze that still covered the sky most of the time, Michael felt certain that the stars would have shone brightly. Some nights the clouds were thin enough to allow some light through; enough to make out barely visible shadows, but nothing more. How long had it been since the Great War? Thirty-five years? Forty? He no longer knew. Time did not have much meaning these days, only light and darkness.

Michael still remembered how vast a clear, star-studded sky looked. The moon too was something he missed. It was still there of course, just hidden behind the curtain of a perpetually cloudy sky; just as the sun was a faintly glowing orb in the sky

during the day. Had he not been constantly on the run these last few weeks, he might have noticed that the sky was gradually beginning to clear. With each passing day, more sunlight broke through the greyness that the world had been for as long as he could remember. Had he stayed at the village instead of being so quick to volunteer for this crazy suicide run, the uneasy feeling he currently had would not be so pronounced. He could always turn back; say there was nothing to find but endless overgrowth.

But no, he couldn't do that. His pride and independent nature would not allow it. Michael had survived alone for this long. His survivalist skills and independent nature had certainly come in handy after the world had changed all those long years ago. Why should he seek the safety of the group now? After all, safety really was relative, and he had only joined the village after being alone for so long out of necessity; not because he enjoyed being around others. Sure, there was safety in numbers, but when you lived most of your life alone as he had, anything but solitude was just inconvenient.

Nerves already on edge and cursing himself for allowing his fire to go out during the night, Michael froze when a pair of dots appeared at the entrance to the cave. Glowing yellow, they hovered near the ground, unblinking, watching. After a few moments, they gradually inched higher. Michael knew it could only be one thing and was grateful that he had been able to get the fire going again. Had he been more attentive to his surroundings like he normally was, instead of getting lost in his own thoughts, he would have heard the thing with eyes coming

before the eyes appeared out of the darkness. Then a thought came to him unbidden.

That's odd. I've never heard of an un-human hunting by itself. Maybe I have a chance after all.

Not taking his eyes from the glowing yellow orbs at the cave entrance, Michael reached over to pull a burning stick from the fire and slowly rose from a crouch, pulling his hunting knife from its sheath as he stood. The top of the cave was only a few inches above his head and extended back for a dozen meters or so.

Maybe I can draw it in and finish this quickly.

Carefully, and without a sound, he backed deeper into the cave. He had gone only a few steps when the eyes suddenly winked out. Michael stopped, holding his breath, not wanting to get his hopes up that the un-human had lost interest and simply wandered off. Slowly he took a step forward, crouching slightly, the small torch in one hand, hunting knife in the other. He would have given anything for a gun. But he had traded it for food months ago. He had run out of bullets several weeks prior to that exchange and had only hung onto the gun because his father had given it to him on his eighteenth birthday. It didn't matter; bullets were impossible to find now, and no one ventured into the old cities anymore. Those that did brave the death traps that those cities had become were almost never seen again.

Michael froze as two pairs of eyes appeared at the entrance, swiftly followed by half a dozen more. He broke out in a sweat, and his mouth was suddenly very dry. He could feel a scream building up in his throat, threatening to break loose. Not a battle

cry. The fear of being trapped in a cave with only one way in or out was taking over too quickly for that. The torch he was holding flickered from a slight breeze coming from the entrance as he stood frozen, unsure of what to do, even though in the back of his mind he knew this was the end. His mind frantically urged him to do something, anything, to protect himself and face this threat as he had innumerable times before.

The un-humans began to creep closer. Michael screamed louder than he ever had in his life as he forced his legs to propel his stubborn limbs forward. Too bad no one would ever hear him to come and help.

Before he could draw in enough breath to scream again, they were on him. Struggling was useless, but he fought frantically anyway. He would take a few of them to hell with him tonight. Michael waved the torch about and slashed wildly with his knife as the un-humans ran to him. Screaming in pain as razor sharp teeth sank into his forearm, he thrust his arm against the cave wall as he tried to dislodge his attacker. He heard the crunch of the un-human's skull as it smashed against the wall of the cave. As he spun around to face the other un-humans, blood dripping from his fingertips onto the floor, they lunged at him as one. Teeth and claws gnashed at his chest while he struggled to somehow rid himself of the crushing weight of his attackers.

After several long moments of struggling, the fighting ceased. The remaining light from the fire Michael had rekindled only a few minutes ago lit up the growing pool of blood on the cave floor. A brief gust of wind stirred the flames before

extinguishing the fire forever. Save for the sounds of feeding, the night was quiet again.

The sun rose on yet another day of survival, beams of light struggling to pierce the gloomy blanket of clouds that served as the sky. Another day of fighting against the environment for what little food could be coaxed from the ground. Another day of wishing the world could be what it once had been. Now those days were a distant memory; a memory of a time when a person did not have to worry whether they would live from day to day, or whether they were being silently hunted.

Today was the kind of day to dream of the things her parents were always telling her stories about. Dreams of happy families taking trips to fun places to play that she could only envision in her imagination; or of catching lightning bugs after dark without worry of being attacked. On the other hand, it was also a day that was unusually still and quiet. No breeze blew to cool the air of what was sure to be yet another exceedingly warm day.

Nichole stopped, straining to hear any other sound save for her own labored breathing, her chestnut hair cascading around her shoulders. She had ventured outside of the village walls again; alone. Like any other child who gets bored with the conversations of adults, she was easily distracted. Chasing after a small lizard, she had not been paying attention to where she was going. Her father was always telling her how important it was not to go outside the walls alone. If she got caught, Nichole knew she would be in a lot of trouble.

But the sun is already up, she thought. There's nothing to worry about and I'll be back before anyone notices I'm gone.

The sun, even filtered as it was through the cloud cover, was quickly warming the air; and the lizard had been too quick for her to catch anyway. She had hoped it would tire before she did. After all, it was just a little lizard, and she was a big girl now that she was eight years old.

With a small sigh, Nichole turned and began walking back towards the village. She had wandered further than she realized. The gate to the village was eighty yards away. She had almost crossed the entire length of the clearing that separated the safety of the village from the woods beyond.

Something made a sound in the brush behind her before she had gone more than a few steps. She stopped, instantly alert and not wanting to turn around for fear of what might be hiding unseen in the undergrowth. Her curiosity made her turn anyway. Before Nichole could turn completely around, something jumped out with a growl, scaring her so badly she stumbled and fell to the ground.

Covering her head with her arms she began crying. "Please don't eat me!" she screamed.

"Eat you? You're too scrawny and wouldn't taste good anyway, big baby," a voice said, laughing.

Nichole looked up, struggling to hold back the tears welling up in her light blue eyes. Her mother always told her that Nichole's eyes reminded her of the color that the sky used to be before humankind nearly wiped itself out. Nichole's mother had been a child herself, barely older than Nichole was now, when

the world had changed, and she could still remember how vibrant the sky looked on a cloudless day.

“You big meany!” she screamed, quickly getting up, her small hands bunched into fists. Her older brother Bobby stood there, still laughing with a smug ‘gotcha’ look on his round face. He was three years older than Nichole and enjoyed playing pranks and teasing her like any other big brother.

“I’m going to tell dad when I get home,” Nichole said. She turned and began walking away in the direction of the village.

“Oh, come on Nikki,” Bobby replied, using the name everyone called her for short. “I’m sorry. I couldn’t resist. Besides, if you tell on me how are you going to explain why you were out here by yourself? You know you’re not supposed to leave the village walls alone.”

Nichole stopped. “I didn’t think of that,” she said, her lower lip protruding in a pout that all little girls have perfected from an early age.

“Come on,” Bobby said. “I’ll walk back with you, and I promise not to tell if you promise not to. Just be quiet so we can sneak past the lookouts.” He stepped out of the brush, walking towards her.

Before he had gone more than a couple of steps, a grey arm reached out and clamped around his ankle. Sharp fingernails dug into his skin as it tightened its iron grip. Bobby shouted in surprise as he looked down at the hand painfully gripping his ankle.

“Run!” he yelled, as the arm yanked his feet out from under him. He hit the ground face first; hard enough to knock the air

out of his lungs with a whoosh. Blood began flowing freely from his now shattered nose. Nichole stood frozen in place.

“Run!” he screamed again, gasping for breath, as he was quickly pulled into the brush.

Suddenly he was gone, and a split second later a blood-curdling scream ripped through the still air. Nichole turned and ran as fast as her small feet could carry her, tears streaming down her dirty face.

She ran into the village, past rows of neatly kept small log houses. Bursting through the door of her family’s home, she stood sobbing and gasping for breath. Michelle dropped the shirt she was mending and ran to her. Noticing the tears streaking her dirty face, she pulled Nichole closer, stroking her now tangled hair.

“Nikki, baby, what’s wrong?” she asked, pushing just far enough away to look into her daughter’s eyes. “What happened?” Nichole just shook her head, still in shock from the sound of her brothers’ screams.

“What’s going on?” her father, Brent, asked as he walked through the doorway. He had been outside feeding the animals as Nichole had raced by and into the house. “Has Bobby come home yet? I could use his help.”

Nichole began crying even harder. “B-b-b-obby...h-he’s gone!” she wailed, burying her head in her mother’s shoulder.

“Gone where?” Brent asked warily.

“It’s my fault he’s gone. I was outside the wall chasing a lizard and he jumped out and scared me,” she replied, tears carving small lines in her dirty face as her mother continued to stroke her hair.

Brent's face turned red. "You were outside the wall? Alone? How many times have I..."

"They took him!" Nichole screamed, stopping him in mid-sentence. "They dragged him through the bushes and now he's gone!"

"Who did Nikki? Who took Bobby?" Michelle asked, her alarm growing.

"The bogeymen," she replied.

Brent looked at Michelle in confusion. "What is she talking about?" he asked her, frustrated.

"The un-humans," she mouthed. Bogeymen was the term Nichole used for the night creatures that everyone feared. The creatures that had plagued them for far too long.

"Oh no," he said, his face now ashen as the reality of what his daughter said sunk in.

Seeing her father's downcast expression, Nichole wailed even harder.

The members of the Council of Seven sat in a circle around a large oak table. Their voices could be heard outside of the council chamber as each member tried to be heard over the others. Daniel raised both of his long, muscular arms, beseeching the others to be quiet. Finally, since the voices would not be still, he arose, his shoulder-length brown hair cascading around his collar and fixed each person with an intent glare in turn. As his eyes met those of his fellow council members, their outbursts dwindled.

Daniel cut an imposing figure. Slightly over six feet in height and heavily muscled from his work as a blacksmith, there were few men in the village who would not shrink away when fixed by a glare from his steel-grey eyes. Though his build gave the illusion of a rough and hard man, he had a patient and calm countenance about him. Those who knew him closely knew Daniel was slow to anger. He let out a sigh before beginning.

“Gentlemen, please. There is much to be discussed and little time for bickering. We are all in agreement that there is a threat closing in. Now we must decide how to act before the un-humans become even bolder and we are overrun.”

Nichole’s father, Brent, had approached the Council of Seven earlier in the day and relayed what he had learned from his daughter. Knowing that they could do nothing to save Bobby without placing the rest of the village in danger, he had nonetheless begged them to act. Now, since an un-human had been seen so close to the village and during the day no less, they had no choice but to prepare for the worst.

Trevor stood slowly, his joints creaking as he rose. As the eldest in the group, he was well respected, since he had lived through the Great War and knew more than anyone of how life had been before the un-humans. His wisdom and knowledge of mankind’s history was one of the key factors that had helped their village to survive for so long. His knowledge of the un-humans was also unnervingly broad, but all had respect enough not to ask how he had come by this knowledge, as his detailed description of those early days was the stuff of nightmares. Unknown to everyone else, the memories of his youth haunted Trevor relentlessly. He often would not willingly give up some

of the darker memories, instead choosing to change the subject when pushed for too many details, as if the memories caused him great consternation and were too painful to recount.

“It’s obvious that they have adapted yet again and are now venturing out during the day,” he said. “Yet, they continue to remain under cover and have not yet tried to venture into direct sunlight. Nonetheless, it is only a matter of time before we will have to post watches both night and day. The only weapons we have now are our minds and what we can make. It has been a long time since there has been ammunition for guns, and most of the heavier weaponry was destroyed by time and the war before any of you were born. We must find another way to defend our village and ensure our survival for future generations.”

“Does anyone have any suggestions?” Daniel asked.

Voices rose as the council members again spoke out and tried to be heard over one another. “Enough!” Daniel shouted. The voices quieted as quickly as they had risen. “Speak one at a time. Everyone will be heard. James, do you have any ideas?”

James rose to his feet. A man of average build, he had been a member of the council for less than a year, less time than the other members. But in that time, he had gained their respect for his quick thinking under pressure.

“They move much quicker than we do, so we can’t outrun them. They move like the wind but surely, they leave footprints or a trail of some sort. What if we track them back to their lairs?” he replied.

“And what do we do then?” Noel asked. “Invade their lair? We’ll be slaughtered. We don’t even have any idea as to how

long we would have to track them, or how extensive their lairs are.”

“With enough people it could be done,” James replied. “We know that they’re afraid of fire and they’re almost blind in the light. Send two groups. One group guards the entrance when it’s found, and the other group smokes them out with fire. When they come out, we attack. They’ll be too disoriented from the smoke and fear of the fire to know what hit them.”

“And how do we defend ourselves in such close quarters where we will have limited visibility?” Noel asked snidely.

Several of the others mumbled agreement with his reasoning. Noel flopped back into his chair, a self-satisfying grin on his face. Of average height, Noel compensated for his thin frame with an overbearing and in-your-face attitude.

“What we need,” Trevor said quietly, “is real firepower.”

Everyone turned to look at Trevor. “Hear me out before you say anything,” he said. “Most of you are too young to remember the way the world used to be. Before the war, you could get pistols and rifles, as well as ammunition, from anywhere. But there were also other weapons, bigger and deadlier weapons. Items used by trained men of war that were much more powerful and effective.”

“You’re talking about using the same weapons that destroyed most of the world!” Noel protested, waving his arms.

“Not exactly,” Trevor replied. “You’re thinking of the missiles and nuclear bombs and such. I’m talking smaller arms. Things a person can carry with them and use more readily that weren’t available to the common person. Things like grenades

and mines. All very affective if you know how to use them properly.”

“Most of these weapons you’re talking about have not been seen, or used, since the war ended. How do you know that there are any remaining?” James asked.

A small smile crept across Trevor’s worn and weathered face. “Before the war, armies and governments had stockpiles of these weapons. Not just the large-scale weapons that destroyed everything, but also rifles and small side-arms. Many of the more, shall we say, eccentric, people had several in their homes that they bought from weapons dealers. Military bases also had large supplies of these weapons. Caches were hidden and kept safe so that if all-out war broke loose, soldiers could re-supply easily. I know where one such base is, although it will take several days to get there.”

“How do you know there are any of these weapons left?” Daniel asked.

“I don’t,” Trevor replied, his voice a whisper. “Just as I also don’t know if the base is even still standing. But don’t you think it would be worth the risk to save our village? Especially since now the un-humans have adapted well enough to lose at least some sensitivity to light?”

Everyone except Noel nodded their agreement. It appeared that for the moment, no risk was too high to keep the village safe. Daniel looked at each member of the council in turn. They all knew that those who volunteered to make the trip would probably not survive. It would be a dangerous and slow trek, and they would need to carry whatever supplies with them that might be needed. They also knew that such a journey might just

be their only chance. Perhaps after a night's sleep they would be able to determine how many in the village would be willing to risk their lives on such a dangerous effort.

The threat of the un-humans was everywhere, and there was no guarantee that the journey would be successful, or that anyone would return alive. Daniel looked at Noel, waiting for him to make an argument against anyone going on the journey. They had been at odds ever since Daniel had been selected over Noel to lead the council several years previously. When a previous council member had died on a supply run a new council member had needed to be elected.

Noel had chosen to put himself forward for the seat out of his own innate need to play a dominant role. Others had nominated Daniel for precisely the opposite reason; he only wanted what was best for the village, not for what he could get out of the role personally. The enmity had begun almost immediately as Daniel was put forth as a candidate, and then only strengthened when Daniel was chosen over him to serve a full six-year term and later rose as leader of the council. Noel had eventually won a seat during the next election upon Daniel's elevation to council leader, but Noel's anger at losing to Daniel previously had nevertheless grown with time. His selfish and self-serving attitude would not allow the past to be forgotten.

They held each other's gaze for several moments. Daniel could tell Noel was weighing the options of some argument and how it could benefit him the most. Since he was not going to raise an issue, at least not yet, Daniel continued.

“Well, I guess we’ll need volunteers,” Daniel said. “Spread the word throughout the village. We’ll give everyone a night to think about what we’ve discussed and re-convene in the morning.”

Daniel locked eyes with Trevor momentarily as he thought about everything the elder council member had said. He trusted Trevor, the only person to ever be voted as a life-long member of the village council; but he couldn’t help but feel that there was something important the old man was keeping from them.

Chapter Two

The next morning, the Council of Seven held a gathering in the center of the village. All of the men stood in attendance knowing full well what was going to be asked of them. Each of them was just as eager as the rest to put an end to the threat from the un-humans. Some shifted nervously while others stood idly chatting. The tension in the air was palpable.

Daniel stepped away from the other council members and, raising his hands, called for attention. The gathered crowd quickly grew silent, patiently waiting to hear what he would say.

“You all know why we have called you here this morning,” he began, loud enough for the two hundred villagers to hear. Several villagers in the group nodded in agreement. Daniel, with his commanding appearance, had the undivided attention of every person in the crowd.

“I will make this quick and to the point. One of our children was taken yesterday by the un-humans and, unfortunately, we all know what that means. They are getting brazen in their attacks and are no longer confined only to the darkness. They have adapted and have begun to appear during the day, so we too must adapt. We have no choice but to go on the offensive and try to stop them before more of our children are lost. We

must act to preserve the safety of our village for ourselves and those that come after us.

“How do we do that?” someone from the crowd asked.

“I’ll explain everything if you’ll just be patient,” Daniel replied, unperturbed at the interruption. He paused a moment to gather his thoughts before continuing.

“We know where there may be weapons, weapons stored at a military base from before the war that we can use to help defend ourselves. There’s no guarantee that these weapons are still there, or if they even still work after all these years. Likewise, there is no guarantee that those who choose to go will survive to return. The journey will be dangerous and difficult, especially since the area where this facility is located is dangerous even at the best of times. Chances are there are probably some groups of un-humans along the way. We’re not demanding that any of you make the journey. It is entirely voluntary and whoever goes does so of his own free will.”

A middle-aged man pushed his way towards the front. “Why should we risk more lives? We would be safer to stay here where we can better defend ourselves.” Several men murmured their agreement. “Do we even know how far this place is?”

“No, we don’t know how far this base is or its exact location. And honestly, we don’t even know if it’s still there. As for risking lives, I feel, as do the other council members, that to ensure our future and the future of our children, a few must make the necessary effort. Again, I say to you that this is strictly voluntary. No one is forcing you to go. We do not ask this of you lightly. I understand your hesitation and your concerns.

Because of this I have decided, and the council has agreed, that I will be one of those to make the journey.”

Gasps could be heard throughout the gathered crowd. It was accepted that council members weren’t expected to go on missions; they served the village by coordinating day-to-day tasks and ensuring the rules were followed. For Daniel to willingly go on a mission, especially one of such vital importance and personal risk, took everyone by surprise. None of the Council of Seven had ever done such a thing.

The crowd parted as a man made his way to the front and stood before Daniel. He was carrying a large pack full of supplies in one hand; with the other he held the reins of a light brown colored horse that carried bulging saddlebags. It was Brent, Nichole and Bobby’s father. A tight smile creased his features as he met Daniel’s gaze. He turned, grim faced, to the others, as his eyes began to water.

“Those monsters took my boy!” he bellowed. “I’ll do whatever it takes to make them pay and ensure that not another child is taken from us! My life is in Daniel’s hands, and I have every bit of faith that we’ll find what we need to help defend ourselves. Is there anyone else who will join us?” he asked.

The silence was nerve wracking as those gathered looked at each other, wondering who else would step forth. Each person seemed lost in their own thoughts, weighing the dangers to life and limb. Slowly two others stepped forward. One, a tall, muscular man with blonde hair, approached them.

“I’ll go,” he said.

The other man, only slightly shorter and with the same wavy blonde hair, obviously the larger man's brother, also approached.

"I'm coming too," he said.

Daniel nodded his head to each of them in appreciation. He recognized them both; it was Jarrod and Jeff. Both were good men and had no family left to speak of save for each other. Their brotherly bond was such that where one ventured, the other was not far behind. They were dependable and would be good company to have along.

"Is there anyone else?" Daniel asked the crowd. "Will anyone else join us?"

The others in the crowd remained silent; not wanting to commit to a task that they were sure would end in tragedy. When it was clear that no one else would volunteer, Trevor hobbled forward to stand next to Daniel. He thought surely more would have opted to volunteer. But fear was a powerful force, especially fear of the unknown. If these four were the only ones willing to make the journey, then they would have to do. Three times their number would have been much better and would have given Trevor more hope that the odds of success would be in their favor.

"If there are no others who wish to make this journey, then why don't we let these four fine, brave gentlemen make their preparations. The sooner action is taken, the sooner we can live without fear. We of the Council of Seven thank you for your willingness to embark on this dangerous task," he said, turning to each volunteer in turn.

With that the crowd began to disperse. A few people muttered their thanks and wished the men good luck as they walked by. In a matter of moments, Daniel, Brent, Trevor, Jarrod, and Jeff were alone. Daniel let out a sigh as he turned to Trevor.

"I had hoped there would be more volunteers willing to go," he said.

Trevor patted him on the shoulder. "You'll be fine. True, there is greater strength in numbers, but lacking the larger group we had hoped for, at least you have the advantage of the knowledge of what you may be facing."

Trevor turned to the two brothers. "Now, who might these two brave souls be?" he asked.

The larger man stuck his hand out. Trevor clasped it with frail hands, and the man gave a quick but firm shake.

"Jarrod, sir" he said, his face firm and emotionless. "This is my brother Jeff."

Jeff stepped forward. He said, "Pleased to meet you, sir."

"No, no, that won't do. That won't do at all," Trevor replied, grinning. "Please, just call me Trevor; everyone else does," he added, taking Jeff's hand. "I recognize your names, but please forgive an old man for not recognizing your faces. Memories are fleeting as you age. I'm pleased you both decided to go with Daniel and Brent."

"We're tired of living in fear of those blasted creatures," Jarrod said. "It's about time we did something about it and put an end to them."

Trevor appraised him for a moment as he stroked his stubbly chin. Jarrod was direct and to the point; firm in what he

wanted to do. From the corner of his vision, he saw Daniel nod his head slightly.

“You have a bright fire in your heart. That’s good, but you will need more than that to survive the journey that lies ahead. Have you ever fought an un-human before?”

Both men shook their heads no. Trevor waved his hands in the air in dismissal.

“Well, you’ll learn soon enough I’ll venture. Best get what supplies you need. I’m sure Daniel here will be ready to leave soon.”

“We’ll be ready in a few moments,” Jarrod said. They turned and walked off, talking quietly amongst themselves.

A young boy, about ten years old with light brown hair and slightly short for his age approached them, struggling with a pack that was much too large for a boy his size. He stopped, face red with exertion but determined, and dropped the bag to the ground. After he had caught his breath, he looked up at Daniel towering above him. Looking at the two it was plain that the boy would be the exact image of his father when he grew up.

“Here you go dad. Momma packed you some food and water skins and a bed roll,” he said.

Daniel reached down and affectionately patted his son’s head, lightly ruffling his hair.

“Thank you, Jonathan,” he replied as he knelt and kissed the young boy on the brow. “You be good while I’m away. Mind your mother and protect her. You’ll have to mind the shop while I’m away also. You’ve been a quick learner, and I know you’ll make me proud.”

Jonathan beamed at his father's praise. Daniel had been teaching him the art of blacksmithing for a little over a year now. He had taken to it like a natural and though he was small, Jonathan had proven to be exceptionally skilled at it.

"I know I can count on you," Daniel said. "Have you saddled the horse yet?"

Jonathan smiled. "Yes, sir," he replied.

"Good. I've already said goodbye to your mother, so you better get on back. It's about time for us to leave," he said, giving his only child one last hug.

"Be careful dad," Jonathan said, his voice catching, as he tried to hide his sadness at his father's decision to go. Daniel smiled as Jonathan turned and ran off. A short distance away he stopped and turned back around. With a small wave he took off again.

"Why do I have the feeling I may not see them again," he said in a whisper.

It was midday by the time the small group was gathered to begin their long journey. Now that each of the men had their horses saddled and packs with supplies ready, several of the villagers stopped long enough in their tasks to watch them leave. Some waved farewell while others spoke words of encouragement meant to ease their own fears more than those of the men. It was as if the entire village felt that they would be losing four more able-bodied men.

Walking towards the gates with them, Trevor slipped an old cylindrical tube into Daniel's hand. He looked down at the tube,

dropping back from the others just enough so they would be out of earshot.

“What’s this?” he asked, looking puzzled.

“It’s a map I had with me when I first arrived here,” Trevor replied, his eyes glinting like small diamonds at some distant memory. “The location of the military base is marked on it. Look for the small area on the map that’s greyed out. There’s another marking showing the general location of where our village is in relation to it. It may not be exact, but it should get you close. As you can imagine, when the world went to hell, I was in a rush to get to safety before it grew dark, so it’s not marked as accurately as I would have preferred. However, it will be of more help to you than if you just wandered around in the general direction.”

“You have always been full of surprises old man,” Daniel said light-heartedly. His smile showed his heartfelt appreciation for his friend’s parting gift.

“Well now, we all have our little secrets, don’t we,” Trevor winked as Daniel led his horse through the gates. “Godspeed,” he said. Then he turned and shambled back to the safety of the village walls. As he walked, a tear escaping his eye, he said a silent prayer for their safety.

The others had stopped at the edge of the clearing outside the walls, waiting for Daniel to finish whatever business he had with Trevor. As he approached, they looked about nervously, waiting to find out in what direction they would ride. It was several hours still before nightfall, but after what had happened

to Bobby the day before, their nerves were on edge and they were alert for any threat, seen or un-seen.

Jeff cleared his throat. "I guess this is it," he said as Daniel approached. "Which way do we go from here?"

Daniel knelt on the ground as he removed the map from the tube that Trevor had handed to him as a parting gift. He unrolled it and found some small stones to place on each of the corners to keep it in place. The others gathered around him to study the map.

"This map shows where the base is that we're trying to reach, and a rough guess as to where the village is in relation to it, here," he said pointing to a location near the bottom of the map. "The base is right in this area here." He pointed to another point further up and to the right. "Since we can only safely travel during the day, at least for now, it will take some time to reach it. Half of the day is already gone, so we can't expect to get too far. If we can stay in a straight line and go northeast, we should run right into it."

"That may be a problem," Brent said. "There have been very few exploratory excursions over the last several years. No telling what kind of dangers may be out there hiding in the overgrowth. The few people who tried to find out never came back."

Though no one spoke of it, they all knew Brent was referring to Michael's doomed trek more than two years before to find a less vulnerable, and more accommodating, area to relocate the village. Michael's knowledge of the wilderness and ability to survive in even the harshest conditions had been unparalleled. Everyone had expected him to return after a few

weeks. But after two months had passed, and Michael still hadn't returned, they had been forced to accept that his skill and luck had finally run out.

Daniel rose, rolling the map back up and placing it in his pack. "Well, that could mean one of two things. More than likely the un-humans caught him. The other possibility, however slim, is that he managed to find another village where he could be safe but were unwilling to try making it back to let anyone know about it."

"I find that hard to believe," Jarrod said. "There are no safe places anymore."

"You're right," Daniel replied. "That's why we must watch each other's backs out here. Each of us will have to keep a lookout. When we stop for the night, we'll take turns keeping watch. If we're careful and alert, then we can survive."

"We might as well get started," Brent said. "The more we stand around, the more time we'll lose before it gets dark. We'll need to find shelter before then."

Daniel mounted his horse, and they headed out in a northeasterly direction. It wouldn't be long before the advantage of being out in the open would disappear. A couple of decades earlier, when the village had first been established, the inhabitants had spent several months clearing the land around the village. They had used the wood to build their homes and the walls that surrounded their small community. Now there was a flat area circling the entire village that extended out for about a quarter of a mile. This had turned out to be one of the few places where the soil had remained uncontaminated from the nuclear fallout of the Great War.

Though the soil was only capable of supporting a few crops, the area also served the added purpose of keeping any surprises from getting too close without being seen. Of course, this was before the threat of the un-humans had spread to their doorstep.

Now at night, fires were kept burning close to the village walls to scare off any un-humans curious enough to get too close. An archer was kept at each fire for added protection and to warn the sentries posted along the ramparts should any un-human approach. So far, it had been enough to keep the village safe. But if the un-humans had adapted, which they now feared to be the case, then all these precautions would no longer be enough. It was up to Brent, Daniel, Jarrod, and Jeff to find a better means of protection, and if possible, a better location to keep the villagers safe and prosperous.

Tense, and wary of everything around them, the men rode through the clearing, coming to the outer edge of the trees and undergrowth that had managed to survive the fallout of the war. Their approach came much quicker than any of them had hoped for. It was now inevitable. Once they crossed the threshold there would be no turning back. Each one of them knew it would have to be all or nothing. To turn back now would be to acknowledge defeat before they had even started.

With Daniel in the lead, they took one last look back at their home before continuing into the trees to begin what could be their final journey. No path was visible since not a single person had left the village in several months. In that brief time, the native vegetation had quickly reclaimed all but the most frequented game trails.

The woods were quiet as the canopy of foliage closed in around them. Oak, Spruce, Birch, and other trees grew close together here, and in a few short months, the leaves of the Ash trees towering overhead would change to bright oranges and yellows in color; before the first frost of winter gently cast them to the ground, adding to the thick carpet of fallen leaves from past winters. The occasional crunch of a twig under hoof was the only sound they heard in the still air as they rode.

They rode slowly, leaning forward in their saddles when needed to avoid the countless low-hanging branches. The lower branches, many of them now dead to make way for new growth higher up, gently pulled at their clothing as they passed by. It was peaceful here, yet also eerily disquieting.

Through no small miracle, some portions of the planet, such as this place, had not suffered from the effects of the bombs that had been detonated almost fifty years earlier. Of course, all of the large cities where most of the population had lived at the time had been completely wiped out. Now, they were little more than remnants of their previous selves. Once tall and majestic skyscrapers were now bent and rusted steel skeletons; a grim reminder of a once thriving civilization. Like the fall of Ancient Rome, all great civilizations were destined for destruction; either self-induced, or by the hands of their neighbors.

Homes that were burnt or had long ago crumbled into a pile of rubbish, now served as dens and sanctuaries for various animals, or were overgrown with plant life. Only the foolhardy would dare to venture near such desolate sights. Even if they made it into one of the cities, it would not be long before they would begin to suffer the effects of the radiation that still

lingered after these long decades. Fortunately, their route would take them well clear of any previously inhabited areas.

As far as anyone knew, the military bases had also been wiped out. With such large caches of weapons and explosives, nuclear bombs were not necessary to destroy them. All it took was a few well-placed missiles to breach the armories. Still, it was believed that any facilities that had remained had long ago been looted and that nothing of value remained.

If they could find a safe place, a place less vulnerable than the open ground where the village now stood, then perhaps they could persuade the others to move. A place where the soil was rich and had a regular water supply would support better crops. They currently had a decent water supply, with only a small amount of contamination. Not enough to sicken anyone noticeably, but certainly enough that the water was not clear, and they still had to boil and filter it for cooking.

Since the war, the weather patterns had also been unpredictable, and rain was not consistent from year to year. As a result, they had been forced to dig wells and storage tanks for water. With any luck, there would be someplace where the water would at least not be as contaminated, and they would have a steady supply.

All these thoughts were on Daniel's mind as he led the others through the trees and brush. The sun was sinking lower and soon darkness would be upon them. Before long, the trees began to thin, and the overgrown brush gave way to a less dense area.

"Let's pick the pace up some. I would like to find some shelter before it gets completely dark," he said.

The men gave heel to horse, increasing their pace to a trot. None of the others wanted to be caught in the open after dark either. It was bad enough that they would have to make do with a short day. A night of sleeping with one eye open was not their idea of getting a good night's rest.

As the sky began to turn to shades of oranges, yellows, and reds, Jarrod pointed in the distance off to the left. "I think I see an alcove over there," he said. "It looks fairly close, and we should be able to make it before the sun goes down."

The small group stopped to look. "Seems just as good a place as any," Daniel replied, before nudging his horse in the direction of the alcove.

The alcove Jarrod had spotted turned out to be about a third of the way up the side of a small mountain. There was no clear path, but the group had little difficulty ascending the gentle slope to where it lay. A few yards below the entrance there was a large, flat outcropping ringed with trees that would serve well to shelter the horses for the night. They tethered the horses to a couple of trees and ascended the last few yards to inspect the cave.

Just large enough for the four men to walk in side by side, it extended back into the mountain about forty feet. The walls and floor were dry and smooth, and several bones were scattered about. Halfway into the cave, a ring of stones surrounded the remains of a fire from the past. A granite overhang extended a few feet outward. The view from this vantage point was spectacular.

Brent could just make out the small clearing of the village in the distance. Jarrod and Jeff volunteered to look for any game

that might be close by to supply dinner while everyone shed their packs. Jarrod picked up his bow and quiver of arrows as the two brothers left Daniel and Brent to wait.

Deciding it was better to stay in pairs, Brent and Daniel both searched just outside of the alcove for anything that would make good kindling. Fortunately, the hillside supplied plenty of dead wood without having to roam too far. Once back inside, they began arranging the wood for a cook fire to prepare whatever game the brothers would return with. Before long they were startled by a shout from below. Daniel and Brent looked at each other before going to the entrance to have a look.

Jeff came hurrying up the slope with a wide grin on his face. "Jarrod will be right up," he said.

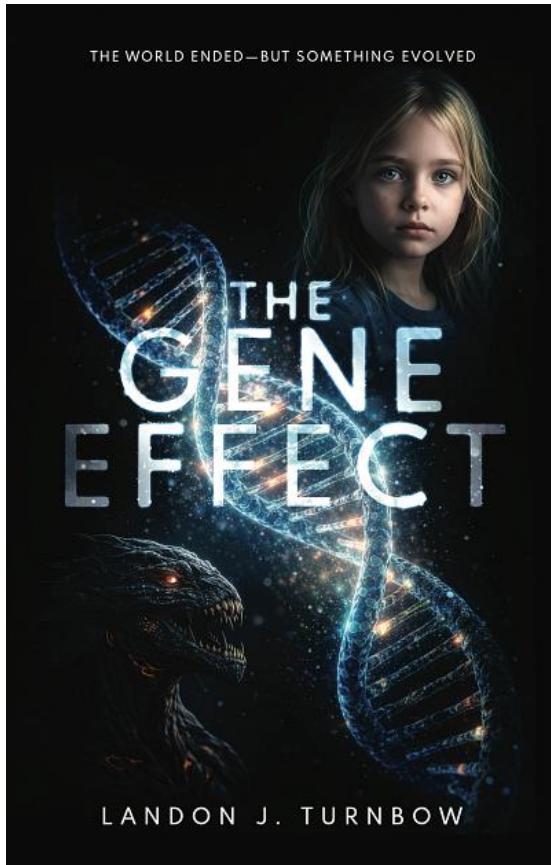
Daniel looked back down the slope. Jarrod was carefully making his way up with an animal slung across his broad shoulders. Brent climbed down to help him. On the way up Jarrod relayed how they had heard a noise in the brush while wandering around. Jarrod caught a glimpse of movement and released an arrow, fearing it could be one of the un-humans. Fortunately, it had only been a lone deer grazing. Now, they would have fresh meat to dine on tonight and plenty to last for a while.

Jarrod dropped the deer just outside the alcove. After cleaning it and cutting off the meat, he threw the rest of the carcass down the slope. Brent had made a spit out of small branches over the fire, and they draped portions of the venison on it to cook. The rest of the meat was put close to the fire to help smoke it and dry it out. They had each brought plenty of supplies, several flasks of water each, biscuits, dried fruit and

vegetables, and nuts to last for a couple of weeks, but it never hurt to have some fresh meat to supplement their diet. The smell of the meat made everyone hungrier as it slowly cooked, the fire sizzling occasionally as the fat juices dripped down and onto the fire.

They ate in silence once the meat had cooked enough, each man listening for any sounds that were out of the ordinary. As they finished, Daniel broke the silence to assign watch duties. He would take the first shift and then they would switch off every four hours. Wiping the grease from the meal onto his pant leg, he rose and pulled a knife from his pack. Then, reaching to grab his bow and quiver, he walked outside and positioned himself at the edge of the alcove. The others quickly bedded down and were asleep in a matter of moments.

Daniel listened as the sounds from the others died down and the night grew quiet. The air was warm and still. In the darkness, Daniel positioned himself to watch for any signs of movement, hoping that at least for this night, all would be calm.



Decades after civilization falls, survivors face evolving creatures born from secret genetic experiments. When a child's death exposes the truth, Daniel leads a desperate fight for humanity's future.

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