The Twenty-Nine

By J.M. Richardson

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Chapter 1

Page 14

His heart felt as if it would leap from his chest and his breathing was labored and raspy. Only a few minutes into the advance, he was already exhausted, but the rush of combat kept him sharp and focused. He lifted his weapon above his head, parallel to the ground, and without lifting his head he squeezed the trigger, releasing short bursts and hoping he was thinning out the enemy personnel.

In his head, he weighed the feelings of compassion for fellow man and the extreme hatred he had for these traitors. It did not matter now. He was deep into the battle lines and he had to survive. More importantly, he had to do his duty and further the objective. He knew he had to get up and move again. He again fired a few short bursts before lifting himself to his feet and readying himself to move forward to the garbage dumpster about seventy-five yards in front of him. This was going to be a tough one. This one might get him killed, but he had to try because someone needed to.

He was blind. He could not see. What was this? Was it some sort of new weapon—a flash-bang of sorts? Yet everyone was blinded, at least momentarily. The gunfire stopped as every soldier from either side dropped his rifle, and instinctively covered his eyes, rubbing and shielding them from a flash that seemed to last forever, yet was only momentary.

Derek suddenly felt a rush of wind that pushed him back a few feet, but not to the ground. Kyle felt his body slammed into the stucco façade of the store as if someone pushed him. Men all over the killing field fell over and lay squirming on the ground in disorientation, but not hurt. Was this the Valkyrie of Germanic lore? Had the angels of death come to collect their souls and cart them off to the afterlife?

As quickly as the first rush of air forced its way across the strip mall, breaking windows and pushing grown men to the ground, another

wind reversed the direction, pushing over any remaining on their feet, or those who had just pulled themselves from the ground.

Every man tried to pull himself together; to find his equilibrium, regain his balance, and begin to finally see colors and shapes, rather than just white nothing. And as this sight began to come back slowly and the men stood tall, they all looked at one another in confusion. One man, and then another sharply turned his attention to the southern sky to witness a spectacle that neither of them, nor their grandparents ever thought that they would see in their lifetimes.

The cloud of dust, debris, and smoke billowing in the distance was filled with fire within and was shaped into its iconic mushroom form by the rush of oxygen fueling the intense heat that was undoubtedly incinerating downtown Dallas a mere fifteen miles away. It stood miles tall, its menacing shape and sound stood hulking over the Metroplex like an angry giant ready to squash and destroy all buildings and people in the vicinity.

No one spoke. Men from both armies stood side-by-side only looking in amazement at the giant and briefly at one another. Their differences became secondary and mundane. Their cause was dwarfed by this new monster. It was huge and it was violent.

The questions began rolling though their heads. Why did this happen? We're all equally shocked, so if neither side did it, then who? How many people are dead? And how did it come to this?