

*Shadow Outpost One*

Her eyes ached. Dry and irritated from eighteen hours of no sleep.

If she closed them, she might fall asleep. Then, she wouldn't see it coming.

*Don't go to sleep. Don't go to sleep. Ugh! If I survive this, I'm sleeping for a month.*

*And I'll shoot the first person who knocks on my door asking if I want to join their campaign, their religion, their whatever. The pizza delivery person gets a pass though.*

Using her left hand, she whacked her fingers against her cheek. Moving the hand to the other side of her face and reversing it, she did the same to her right cheek.

Hot and sweaty from running, trying to stay one room ahead, she pressed her back against the concrete wall of the base; its coldness gripped her spine, reaching through her thermal shirt, jolting her nerves awake.

The bunker's overhead metal-framed lights shone as bright as daylight but added no warmth to the grey-on-grey government room. The back-up generator provided power throughout this drab Alaskan outpost. But it too started sounding exhausted after two straight day's work with no rest and no one to look after it.

The generator vibrated underfoot; but at times she heard it cough and sputter before churning on. Each time it sputtered, the lights flickered. She'd freeze in place, snatch the high-beam flashlight from the clip on her belt and spin in place, shining it in every direction and on every surface at once.

The lids of her eyes began to lower. She snapped them open, blinking hard and fast.

“One. Two. Three. Four.”

If she could keep her mind moving, she had a chance.

As she counted, she raised her left arm and glanced at her watch. 2:00 a.m.

*Or 0200 hours, as that jerk of a colonel would correct me, if he were still alive.*

She groaned, letting her head fall back against the wall and her arm drop without care.

She should have cared.

Heavy with weariness, her arm flopped down. Her knuckles banged against the concrete wall. Pain shot up her arm as a dull *crack* echoed through the room.

Her lips drew in chilled air as her lungs heaved in and out. She brought her arm up and cradled her injured left hand in her right as she slid to the floor. Landing hard on her butt, she bit her lip, trapping the pain-filled cry. The last thing she wanted to do was announce her location.

*Six more hours. Why me? Why did I have to draw this stupid assignment?*

Shaking her head from side to side, she cried, dry and silent.

*I told that idiot Colonel to radio Anchorage right when we found it.*

*‘There’s no one alive aboard that craft. My men can handle this,’ he said.*

*Eight Airmen, a cook and me, a biologist sent to investigate an unknown substance oozing out of an unidentified craft that crash landed five miles away from a solitary outpost twenty-six hours ago.*

*Yeah, he handled it. Dimwit!*

*Three men dead within eight hours of bringing that substance into the outpost. Two more dead once we realized it became more animated in low-level light. In the dark, it came to life fully.*

*Finally, the Colonel radioed Elmendorf, too late, of course.*

She moved her middle and index fingers. That only brought on more shooting pain in her hand. She opened her mouth in silent frustration, when the vibration under her butt stopped.

*Crap!*

The overhead lights flickered...once...twice, then winked out for good. The room wrapped itself around her like a heavy, ink-black curtain; the floor underneath her and the wall against her back became ten degrees colder in less than two seconds.

Since the lights had been on for twenty hours straight, her eyes would not adjust.

*Dang it! Dang it! Dang it!*

As her breath came in ragged, whisper-quiet gasps, she sat motionless, cradling her injured left hand, listening for the slightest rustle which would let her know it was here.

Clipped to her left hip, her flashlight. To her right, the .45 revolver the Colonel had given her.

Her mind replayed that scene.

*They heard the cook's agonizing screams while she and the Colonel stood in his office arguing about what to do next. Racing to the mess hall hoping to corner the entity, they joined the remaining soldiers running too, weapons ready. Two guards in front flung open the swinging doors, bracing them with their bodies. Going down on one knee, they positioned their guns,*

*heads on a swivel searching for their target. But it was back in the kitchen. The cook's screams told them that. The Colonel ordered his men forward. Even so, they all moved with measured pacing. By the time they reached the kitchen doors, the screams had stopped. Blood covered everything. But that didn't unnerve them. They searched for the cook. No limbs, no clothes, no body. While they searched the kitchen, the entity circled around and came up behind them. The men spun around and fired on it. With one hand, the Colonel yanked one of his guns from its holster, moved his hand to catch the gun's barrel and extended the handle to her. With a jerk of his head toward the back of the kitchen, he shouted, 'Run!' She grabbed the gun and ran. When the guns stopped screaming, it was the men's turn. She made it halfway down the back hall before she realized two things: one, there was now silence; and two, she had no idea where to go.*

At last, her eyes adjusted. But she hesitated as to which item she should reach for—the flashlight or the gun.

*Six more hours?* She shook her head.

*Maybe not even six seconds.*

A soft rustling reached her ears from the doorway across the room. It didn't matter that the door was closed. The entity moved like a shadow; doors meant nothing to it.

Another rustle, closer this time.

She set her jaw, trying to swallow her pain as well as her fear.

Her eyes caught a shift in the inky darkness, ten feet away from her.

One weapon would stop it, for a time.

One weapon would end her pain, fear and exhaustion.

Back braced against the wall, her good hand moved swift and low.

*I'll finally be able to sleep.*

Inside the cold concrete office, which had been the Colonel's, no one but her and the entity knew which one of them screamed.

THE END