

The Ruin Saga – Volume 1: Ruin

Chapter 1

Norman Creek was hunting. Through the rifle's scope the streets below him were magnified tenfold. Pale, late-afternoon light fell upon the tarmac and his prey.

His pulse quickened, and his throat grew tighter, but a deep breath saw to his nerves and calmed his trigger finger. Adjusting his position upon a high ridge with creeping increments, he settled into a recess in the scree. His muscles ached, but the discomfort was dull, without edge. The sharp pinches of pebbles against his skin seemed a thousand miles distant. He only felt hunger, a maddening beast growling in his gut, driving him forwards.

Allison and Lucian were perched on either side of him, ready. Their quarry was close.

Below, a thick mist prowled the streets. Ringing silence filled the air, stark and naked. Rivers of cars lined the roadside, rusted skeletons, often crushed together into mangled balls of twisted metal. Bearing down on them were the remains of houses, office blocks and shopping centres. All crumbling, all faded, mere shadows.

Most buildings stood without roofs, hatless. The slate tiles and supporting beams had collapsed and sent upper floors crashing to the dirt long ago. Possessions were scattered in the rubble: lamps, telephones, pots and pans, the occasional sofa.

Norman paid none of it any attention. Things had always been this way, ever since the End. And those old enough to remember the Old World were growing fewer. He only had eyes for the dark figure milling at the intersection below the ridge.

Amidst decayed bricks and mortar echoed the steady clip-clop of hooves on concrete, those of a foraging stag busying itself with a clump of grass thrusting through the tarmac.

The old Red had been gorging himself. His bulk was distended almost a foot, bulging and round. But he was no picture of health. His aged body was decrepit, and the herd had long moved on; his tired legs were no match for the spring in their step.

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He gave a low grumble, chewing his pulpy meal, oblivious. As Norman squeezed the trigger, the stag snorted a plume of morning vapour with an attitude that could have been weariness and turned to face his death.

A low whine filled the air, followed by a wet splattering sound. A plume of red matter soared from the side of the stag's head, spewing against the cracked window of a burned-out Prius. Stiffening in a sudden spasm, it sank to the pavement, twitching and jerking in a spreading pool of crimson.

The gunshot's roar reverberated against walls, trees and stones, rolling out across the landscape, but its might went unappreciated. There was scarcely anything left alive to recoil from the racket. The sound died away after only a few diminishing echoes to be replaced by the same deep quiet as before.

In the distance, a bird chirped in the English spring morning. The door of a nearby fast-food restaurant blew in the wind, jostling against the wall behind it. Otherwise, the world was silent and the town lifeless once more, just as it had all been for almost forty years.

Norman lowered the rifle and checked his companions. Lucian, wrinkled and squat, was already climbing over the ridge, sending a cascade of stones rolling end over end towards the junction, taking soil and grass with them. Norman clambered over the ridge's lip and followed, descending towards his prize, stopping only to help Allison to her feet. She rose in a cloud of dust, her usual squeamishness hidden behind a disciplined mask.

They fell into step with Lucian without a word and made for the stag, peppering the street with rubble. Once the ridge levelled out, Norman took a deep breath, working the knots of tension from his shoulders. His senses slowly came to life again. He'd been so focused on the stag that he'd forgotten the distant roar of the North Sea and the salty air clinging to the back of his throat.

They crept low and fast, skittering over uneven ground. A sharp gale blew through the streets, lifting some of the mist for a moment, giving them a view of the coast and the remains of Margate. The quaint little town had once catered to seafront tourists, but it was a far cry from its heyday now. Seagulls still took flight from towering white cliffs nearby, diving to catch fish from the surging waves, but that alone remained unchanged.

The wilderness had retaken much of the land since the End. The relics of the Old World had been overgrown and smothered by grasses, vines, and moss, painting the grey and white stonework a speckled green. The wiry trunks of sapling trees thrust their way through foundations, crumbling concrete and tearing plaster. By now, no surface remained untouched by the encroaching foliage.

Though the fallen stag lay only twenty yards from the base of the rise, it took them almost a minute to reach it. Every movement was calculated, necessary. They maintained their rigid stances until they stood over the corpse, and then stood for a further minute in silence, turning in a wide arc to survey the town's many shadows.

Once satisfied that they were alone, their wariness evaporated.

Allison Rutherford's cherub-round face contorted. "I miss beef," she said.

Lucian grunted. "You ain't going to see another cow for a long time—if you ever see one."

"They can't all be gone."

"They bloody well can. Same thing happened with the sheep, Allie, before your time."

Norman watched without saying a word, but couldn't prevent his stomach from rumbling at the thought of steak.

They had all grown thin of late. Most had fared far worse, and by comparison they had enjoyed a luxurious diet. Yet it was becoming ever more difficult to ignore their pronounced

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cheekbones, their pallid skin, or the manner in which their clothes hung in loose folds around their waists.

Norman glanced down at his hands, filthy and stiff with dried detritus, protruding from grimed sleeves. His fingertips were numb to the coastal breeze, oblivious to its caress. There was no denying it. He was falling apart.

Allie was still looking at the stag resentfully. "It's not the same," she muttered.

"It's food," Lucian said. "Be thankful you have some."

She looked down at him with distaste. Although of average height, she stood almost a head taller than him. Yet her gaze was laced with respect. "All the same, I'd rather not butcher an animal in the street."

Lucian shared no such qualms, and with a flick of his wrist drew a knife across the stag's hide, exposing the crimson tissue beneath. Blood oozed from the open wound.

"I don't know about you," he said, "but I can't wait to get back. What do you think?"

Norman nodded and bent to help. "Let's get it done. We're sitting ducks," he said, trying to ignore how weak and clumsy his own voice sounded. The mud on his face cracked as his cheeks tightened with lines of concentration. Cutting with broad strokes into tendon and gristle, he set about removing the stag's hindquarters.

If they didn't eat they would grow careless, and their efforts to remain hidden over the last few days would have been in vain.

The road was soon deep rouge and their hands became slick with gore, but they were quick and cut with expert care, never wasteful. The carcass deflated as they removed the liver, kidneys and the flesh of the upper limbs, but apart from their incisions, the stag didn't look brutalised.

Harry Manners

The three of them pulled out ragged sacks from their trousers, letting the sea breeze blow them open. They stowed the meat, binding the sacks in knots that were given loving attention lest anything escape. Then they stood and looked about, wary once more.

To have their prize stolen now would be too great a loss, especially today.

Watchful of the looming hills, they took up the sacks and fled the bloodied junction, darting over the wreckage of the Old World, into roadside mist.

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“Do we have everything?” Norman said. He hefted one of the bags of meat onto his mount’s back, struggling under its weight. The stallion snorted and shuffled, restless, but took the load. He patted its muzzle, despite himself eyeing the rippling lean meat of its shoulders.

If we didn’t have to forage so far from home just to scrape by, you’d be only so much stew, he thought. And, if things don’t pick up, that’s exactly where you’ll end up.

Allie was hunched over a small pile of yellowed paper, crouched atop a large, smooth stone. She rifled through the pages, muttering to herself, pointing from each sheet to a corresponding bag or package, ticking things off.

A small fire crackled in the centre of their makeshift campsite. Lucian was boiling some water in a billycan suspended from three sticks wedged at opposing angles. The clearing was shielded from view by a thick shrubbery on one side and by the sheer edge of a large cliff on the other, forty feet from where they sat. Three horses were tied at the edge of the clearing, chewing away at the sparse grains in the bags hanging from their snouts.

Allie looked up and shook her head. “Heather needs more supplies. Bandages and sutures, mostly, but we can’t afford to go over to the chemist. It’s on the other side of town. Besides, Ray said that it was picked clean a few weeks ago. Somebody must have passed through. But we definitely need more food.”

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“We’ll go back tonight and come for the food tomorrow,” Lucian said.

“There is no food,” Allison said, and the pages tumbled from her hands.

“It’s a bad year, that’s all.”

“We’ve had bad years before. This is different,” Allison muttered. She pulled an ugly face. “We can’t keep doing this. All we’re doing is moving up the coast and taking all that we can carry. That’s not a survival tactic, it’s just buying time.”

“We’re alive.”

“There won’t be enough for anybody else. They’re starving as it is, and here we are swooping in and taking it all for ourselves.”

Lucian was quiet for a moment. “We don’t have a choice,” he said.

“We can’t keep it up all year.” She turned to Norman. “What should we do?”

Norman started. “What?” he said.

“What should we do?” she demanded.

Lucian also looked over, but his stare lacked the deference of Allison’s. The two of them watched and waited for a reply while Norman shifted uncomfortably.

“Why ask me?” he said.

Allison looked taken aback. “It’s your job,” she said. “You’ll lead when Alex is gone. Lead all of us. It’s in all the stories.”

“I know the stories!”

“So, what should we do?”

“It’s not my job to make decisions.”

“It will be, one day.”

Norman drew his coat closer about him. “Not yet,” he said.

“Soup’s up,” Lucian said, lifting the billycan and pouring three portions into cups of ancient steel. “I had to get the water from the stream. If you swallow it fast enough you won’t taste the mud.”

Norman took his ration and walked around the edge of the camp, making final checks.

This would make the third supply run of the fortnight. An ordinary year usually saw a group being sent monthly for razors or clothing, but this year they needed food, and lots of it.

There were many mouths to feed.

He drained his soup and turned the cup skyward, coaxing out the last few drops. It tasted of grit and rotting plant matter, but it was warm. For that, he had learned to be grateful.

The ferns ended at the tree line, and he emerged onto a patch of grass lining the cliff edge. Behind him, Allie and Lucian stamped out the fire, each of their footsteps meeting the ground with a sharp crackle of dead leaves. He watched them break the sticks that had held the billycan and throw them into the underbrush. They then set about hauling the last of the sacks from the ground.

Norman looked at the sea, hundreds of feet below. The air was fresh out in the open and untarnished by the smell of horse manure or unwashed bodies. The chilled sea breeze brushed his hair away from his dirt-stricken face, ruffling his stiff clothes.

The grass was long and scattered with rough brambles, peppered by a handful of vibrant, vivid flowers. He hadn’t seen such things for countless weeks. He took a deep breath, absorbing a momentary peace.

It would be some time before he’d get another chance.

Looking out at the rugged, rubble-strewn landscape, it was hard to believe that human beings had once reigned supreme.

Norman had never seen it with his own eyes—at twenty-nine, he hadn’t even been born when the lights had still burned. Forty years before, the Old World had ended. Now, so much

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time had passed that most were too young to know how things had once been. All they had were the elders' stories—stories of power, of knowledge, of bustling billions.

They said the planet had been silenced in a single instant. That towns, cities—entire countries, even—had been emptied without warning. That less than one in a thousand lives had been spared, the rest cut short in the space of a single second when the vast majority of the world's population had, quite suddenly, vanished without a trace. Left behind, the few scattered survivors had been faced with a struggle for survival, bewildered and alone.

Now, after forty years, just when everything had been on the verge of recovering, famine had arrived. And it was taking its toll.

The world, or what was left of it, was fading.

What had for so long been green and wild was now brittle and wilting, starved of life. Instead of continuing its merciless advance, retaking arable land and smothering the remains of the world's towns and cities, vegetation lay limp on the ground, drying in the sun. Stems cracked open in the heat and creepers rolled in the wind, crumbling to dust underfoot.

The previous autumn had brought with it a plague that had levelled forests and great fields of wheat alike. What the last of the world's farmers had worked to cultivate over the decades since the End had been felled in mere weeks—had become blackened and rotten before hungry eyes. Only the grasses, a few species of trees and the hardiest of shrubs had been unaffected, none of which bore sustenance. Nobody knew why the underbrush and forests had been spared and continued to flourish, lush and thick. It was another mystery, another danger, another worry.

In a world already reeling from disaster, the population had been sparse and scattered, numbering in the thousands only, but still people had starved. What had been a trifling hunger in early winter had by New Year almost become a death knell for the human race. No end to the spreading devastation had lain in sight.

That had been months ago. Summer was now on the horizon, and the crisis had passed its zenith. In its wake it had left the world emptier and darker.

Decades before, there had been bustling metropolises, surging channels of traffic and airwaves alive with voices. After the End, there had been whispers, a shadow of civilisation that had endured for over a generation.

Now there was only a deep silence.

Norman sighed and turned away from the sea, retreating back into the shade. As soon as he faced the forest once more, he realised that something was wrong. At the same time, the horses became agitated, stomping and whinnying, pulling at their tethers. They trampled some of the sacks at their feet, spilling their contents onto the ground.

Lucian and Allie leapt away from the flurry of hooves. They landed without a single rustle, and silence fell over them as they crouched low to the ground. They dashed to the trunk of an old elm, snatching their weapons from a notch in its gnarled roots.

At once the horses quietened and stopped midstomp, their whinnies caught in their throats. They snuffled and milled, turning back and forth, straining against their tethers and watching their masters.

Men, woman and beasts waited in silence, until muscles ached and sweat broke out on the backs of their necks. Somewhere high above, a crow cawed and took flight. The sound of movement was carried on the wind, off to their right. Something was pushing through dense shrubbery not sixty feet from them. It was moving through towards the junction, towards the stag's corpse.

Norman, Allie and Lucian tracked the noise with pricked ears for over a minute before it died without warning, to be replaced by an anguished groan.

Norman shuddered as the hairs on his neck stood on end despite the stifling heat of the campsite. But it wasn't until a second source of rustling emanated from the opposite

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direction, followed by yet more groaning, that the beginnings of fear stirred in his gut. The noise carried and echoed in the forest, warped by the breeze into a ghostly wail.

Lucian gestured to the horses, then to the small path they had cleared, leading away from the camp and along the edge of the cliff.

The groaning had once again been replaced by the sound of movement. But it was pitiful now, a mere rustle, and grew no closer. Then from the distance came a single pained cry, deafening in the strained hush. For a moment there was silence, save for the chattering of a flock of passing gulls and the booming of the waves far below.

And then another cry answered, far louder and nearer than the first, emanating from just a few yards away—beyond the screening of ash and elm that shielded the campsite from view.

Norman took a steadying breath, glancing at the horses, and then looked to Allie and Lucian. He raised his hands, moving them in a deft series of predetermined signals:

What do you see?

After a pause, they both signed back:

Nothing.

Norman cursed.

Which way?

Lucian replied:

Straight ahead.

Norman stared into the trees until his eyes ached from the strain, but he too could see nothing. Despite the slithering fear in his gut, he began to inch towards the trees, followed closely by Lucian, with Allie creeping at the rear. Now even the tiny and unavoidable noises that he produced seemed amplified, and each one made him wince with dread.

The groaning came again, and this time it was very close—only feet away. They froze in the underbrush and listened until it came again, so near that it sent them flinching backwards, solid as a gale.

Once again, despite his apprehension, Norman found himself moving forward. Lucian's harshly whispered warning did nothing to slow his pace, and together the three of them advanced on the source of the noise.

When Norman heard the groan a final time, he gasped. It had come from directly below him. He looked into the ferns at his feet and saw somebody staring up at him through a screen of underbrush.

It was a man, or at least had been. His body was deathly pale, so emaciated that his face was no more than a skull clothed in skin, his ribs protruding at an extreme angle.

The three of them looked down at him as he met their gaze. A tiny groan escaped his throat. He reached forward with skeletal fingers but could scarcely manage a few inches from the ground. "Please," he said. His voice was tiny, defeated. "P-Please...help us."

Another groan rang out from behind them. Norman whirled to see another deflated body, prone beside the trunk of a nearby tree, too ruined for its gender to be discernible. Then he saw the others—over a dozen people strewn across the ground. Some lay still, putrefying, but others called out, reaching for the newcomers.

In the distance, he could hear the whimpers and groans of many more. Norman backed away from them, unspeaking.

"Please," the man below him repeated. He was still trying to reach for them, but could no longer lift his hand from the ground.

Norman turned to the other two:

Let's go.

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Allison's young, rounded face softened. This time signing was unnecessary. Her response was obvious from her eyes alone:

We can't.

Lucian and Norman exchanged a glance, and Lucian gave him the tiniest of nods. Together, they took Allie by the shoulders. She began thrashing against them, tears seeping from her eyes, but she couldn't have weighed more than a hundred and twenty pounds, and so they dragged her away from the bodies without hindrance. Their silent struggle raged as they walked, fighting back towards the horses. Soon, Allison's waving arms were accompanied by a stifled gargle in her throat.

They dragged her nonetheless, leaving gouges in the ground as they went, hushing her with warning glances and fingers mashed against their lips.

Her protests lessened as they neared the horses and she was pushed up onto the back of her mare. She then abandoned the pursuit and took to haughty silence, but her eyes remained trained in the direction of the helpless creatures. She pointed to the floor, where split packages of food lay tangled around the horses' hooves.

Norman climbed onto his own mount's saddle and answered with shaking hands:

Leave it.

He took hold of his reins, ignoring the self-hatred that welled up in the pit of his stomach. He wanted nothing more than to rush back to the fallen and drag them to safety, but their supplies would do no good for so many mouths, and the people in the clearing were already past the point of no return.

He lingered a moment to close his eyes and take a breath, and then kicked at the horse's sides. With a snort the steed burst from the tree line, racing out over the fields that bordered the cliff, with Lucian and Allie's mounts thundering along behind.

The bags strapped to Norman's saddle jostled, their contents threatening to bounce free and fall out of sight. Norman did his best to close those nearest to his hands, but had limited opportunity, snatching wild grabs only when the ground was even enough. He saw several pieces of fruit spiral away into the grass, each worth more than its weight in gold.

The wind streamed against his face as Lucian and Allie pulled up beside him. Once abreast one another, they hurried along the edge of the cliff. The ground ahead soon levelled and cleared of foliage, carpeted only by yellow grass cropped short by the stag's former harem, which scattered in a blur of fur and hooves. It was getting late. Fading light was dancing on the waves near the horizon.

Looking left for a moment, Norman saw Lucian's silver-haired figure bouncing atop his equally silver stallion. He was pointing behind them, bellowing something made incomprehensible by the whistling wind.

Norman looked over his shoulder. The forest beneath the tree line was dark and thrown out of focus by their galloping pace, but he could still see the black shapes amongst the shadows, edging out into the field.

The emaciated people were crawling in pursuit of their fleeing chance of salvation. From a distance it was difficult to make out any detail, but nonetheless Norman felt a chill run down his spine.

He cursed, turning to face the road ahead. He could feel Allie's gaze burning into his temple, but didn't dare look at her. Instead, he tugged on his reins and steered his mount until they rode parallel to a small stream, and headed home.