

An excerpt from the novel LIMINAL STATES by Zack Parsons.

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Chapter Two

Polly Foster remained catatonic for days, lost in the phosphene world of blue fungus. Her nightmares twisted the heaps of dead strangers into her children, long- ago Max and Cecelia, abandoned with her sister, lost to the crush of time and multiplication, never to be touched again. She first perceived reality again from outside her body, a blue-tinged world of nurses coming and going, the Pit Security representative, a lawyer from Bishop Unlimited.

She emerged slowly, dazed, greeted with legal documents that she signed against the objections of her doctor. Nausea and headaches lingered, the medication they gave her for detox made her itch, but she was otherwise physically fine.

A very nice type three with a smart suit and her hair up in a little bun informed Polly she was reassigned. Something had happened; no one clearly explained it, not the type three, not the HR representative on the telephone, not the lawyers. She heard pieces of the story. There was a fire in the unit In Bad Tower. The grow op was destroyed—something about spilled gasoline and an unsecured weapon.

“They’re gone,” said the lawyer. “Your team is gone. Jensen’s men too.”

It didn’t make sense. How could they disappear in a fire? Wouldn’t they just come back? There were no answers to the metaphysical questions, but the flakes on the TV news blamed her. She was “the focus of a continuing investigation into what went wrong at Tower Thirteen.”

Someone in the company had leaked the information to the press that she was in charge of the operation, the sole survivor, an incompetent named Pollen Foster. It was her unsecured weapon. Her decision not to take care of the gasoline spill. They even had her photograph from crash training. Her frozen smile seemed mocking in the harsh light of tragedy.

She was released from the hospital. Home felt rearranged, as if the floor plan had been reversed, as if she’d burst through a back wall and entered her apartment all wrong. She met Mrs. Valdez in the hall the next morning. The old woman smiled and said something nice. A fat tabby cat arched its back and rubbed against the woman’s stocky leg. Polly couldn’t stand to hear the kindness. Didn’t want to talk to a flake.

Rapid Response had no use for her. They flushed her down to Corrections Emergence. It was a place where careers went to die. Misfits shepherding zeroed dupes back into an unfamiliar world, coaching them through the gap caused by their sentence, and turning them back into productive members of society.

She despised the corrections job and clashed with her coworkers and supervisors. They were defeated by their low-impact world. She was a bird caged with rats. They shifted her to dealing with the long-term corrections cases. Ten years, twenty years, and more. Idiots zeroed in the '70s who had never seen a pocket phone or one of the Chinese computers businessmen carried. Revolutionaries and Communists from the '60s, emerging young and bleary-eyed, not understanding their war was long-lost.

Every day, every case, Polly wanted out. She was willing to walk Creep town busting pickpockets and hookers, handle riot control, work the walls. The dispassion with which each boss rejected her requests only inspired more contentious letters and phone calls. She returned to an apartment she could no longer afford, outside the cordon in a flake neighborhood; she hurried past Mrs. Valdez waiting in the hall, and she dreamed each night of the blue flames surrounding her, the dead bodies of children breaking open in her hands, crumbling into the dust of the spores.

The exterior elevator ascended the Bishop Unlimited spire's slope through a wall of lingering pollution. Gray ceiling became gray floor, muffling the sound of the world below so that all Wesley Bishop heard was the cool hiss of the elevator air conditioning. He was alone in the car, agitated by another restless night. He wore a robe of white silk, lambskin zori, sunglasses, and the stink of chlorine in his hair. He wanted nothing more than to escape to the serenity of the rookery.

There would be no respite. Bethany was waiting at the summit of the spire, watching him approach through the windows. He imagined her chastening words. He waved, but she did not return the gesture.

She was a striking woman, possessing a long, narrow nose and a wide mouth with razor lips that matched her elongated figure. Her strangeness suited her couture, Bathymere heels clicking on the Grecian tiles, rippling as she moved beside him in her black Ooseaco business chic with its Fibonacci swirl of white and gold embroidery curling from the sheaf neckline down to the hem of her asymmetrical skirt.

"What is it?" he asked.

She said nothing. By his sidelong glance he observed the subtle tightening of her lips, the curl of her brow, and he knew she was especially cross. They climbed the stairs to the garden, rising into the blue-green shafts of sunlight. Beneath the acres of tinted glass, a narrow littoral of pinewood decking

faced an immaculate sea of white sand. Tenders dressed in traditional black samugi rose from benches and assembled along the perimeter of the garden. They bowed to Wesley in unison, rakes at shoulders.

Wesley kicked aside his sandals and shed his robe onto the boardwalk. Nude, he crossed the deck and descended the few steps into the garden, pausing as he always did to wriggle his toes in the cool white sands before marching through the manicured desert. Bethany followed him, carrying her heels pinched in one hand, her other occupied with a bound ledger.

Each step they took sowed disharmony in the garden and disturbed the concentric ripples radiating out from the Oscura rock sculptures. The largest of these sculptures, a rough obelisk carved from volcanic rock, was built with material exposed to the earliest atomic tests. It produced measurable radiation. Wesley had no doubt his droll predecessors had waved Geiger counters over it to amuse guests.

They reached the dais at the garden's focal point, and Wesley settled into the plush caterpillar of a massage chair. He was as unashamed of his nudity as Bethany was unimpressed. She stood over him, blocking his light long enough to be a nuisance.

"And here you are, literally darkening my day," he said. "What is it you want?"

She folded her legs and sat, but did not rest, in the chair beside him.

"You have been avoiding Milo." She opened the ledger. "He's made nine calls and visited twice."

"Perhaps a letter next time?"

"The United Nations team you agreed to entertain will arrive in six days. To my knowledge you have made no arrangements for them. Milo is quite upset that you have not given him instructions."

"I hoped he would figure it out himself." Wesley availed himself of the nearby bar. He scooped a handful of ice cubes into a rectangular glass and doused them in Pernod. He sipped through a straw and caught sight of Bethany's disapproving glare. "It's after ten."

"Patrice told me you were frolicking in the Pool until three in the morning," she said. "We've had this talk before. Your self-destructive behavior is your business. I only care that you are doing your duty as the head of this company. If you're avoiding Milo, you're not doing your job."

Wesley pointedly drained the glass before replying.

"Fine." He tossed the glass over the railing of the dais. The tenders scurried to pick up the glass and each individual ice cube and comb away the marks left in the sand. He waited for them to retreat back to the deck. "Let's start with these phone calls I've been receiving from half the middle-managers in the Pit. There was something on my desk, something about a type three from one of the Rapid Response teams Milo decided to liquidate. Foster, I think it was. She wants a transfer from—where was it?"

"Corrections Emergence."

"Yes, that. Transfer her to the Gardeners' authority. I want her to be our liaison to the United Nations team. Tell Milo to give her whatever she needs—cars or whatever—and prepare her a believable itinerary."

"That does not sound wise," said Bethany. "I hesitate to speak for Milo, but this woman knows about how the fungus cannibalizes normal humans and is ingested as a drug by the duplicates."

"So do you," said Wesley, "and you're not even a duplicate."

"My point is that she has damning information. Why place her in the midst of international inspectors?"

"Because I want Milo to kill them all," he said, and he stretched back into the massage chair. "This will be so much more convenient if they are in the same place at the same time. I don't care where or how he does it, so long as it is believably accidental and absolutely inescapable. I can't fathom why he left her alive at all."

"If you kill the UN team, there will be a cloud of suspicion. The Russians and the Chinese won't stand for it, and your domestic enemies will be empowered."

Wesley shrugged.

"They will send another team," said Bethany.

"And perhaps the second time Berezin will think better than to bully me."

Polly stood beneath the buzzing fluorescents of Mr. Kim's Quick Grocery, searching for something to fill her pantry. The basket over her arm, like the shelves, was nearly empty. She found a few expired boxes of pasta and canned corn, tamarind candies, Mexican sodas, and a bottle of ketchup. Mr. Kim's son watched her shopping from behind his counter. The candy and cigarette displays were empty; the rack for the easily-pocketed flasks of booze was barren.

It was nearly curfew, and Mr. Kim's son wanted Polly to leave. He wanted her to leave always. He hated dupes. She didn't know why, but most flakes had good reasons. Personal reasons.

Salted beef strips. A Korean pickled meat. A bag of rice that was ridiculously overpriced.

"That it?" he asked, staring as she slid the basket across the counter.

It wasn't. She bought cat food. All they had. Paid in cash and didn't complain when Mr. Kim's son shorted her two dollars.

She left the shop and began the walk home. At a busy intersection she caught a glimpse of her reflection in a car window and realized she was grinning like an idiot. One of the Gardeners wanted to meet with her about her transfer requests. One more day of Corrections Emergence and she would be returned to duty of some kind—she was sure of it. Her life would be back on the path she had planned.

She veered away from the busy street, avoiding the congestion of a police action that was blocking traffic. LAPD cruisers and black SWAT trucks surrounded a flophouse. Whoever was inside was lucky it was the police instead of the National Guard.

Polly's neighborhood was old: white fences matched the drooping white leaves of the dying palm trees. The bungalow apartments were emptying out as the fear of the spores drove out tenants. More broken windows and gang tags, fewer lights in the darkness.

Mrs. Valdez was still there and awake. Her TV spilled flickering blue through the curtains of the second-floor window. Polly passed through the gate and ascended the stairs, carpet baked with the smell of cigarettes, past her own apartment, to the door of her one and only friendly neighbor. She knocked lightly, then heard the heavysset Mrs. Valdez rise from her recliner and tread over to the door.

The door opened without hesitation, and Mrs. Valdez greeted Polly in her housecoat and fluffy white slippers. She was stout and ill-formed, with too much hair on her face and too many moles and little bits of skin, a hunched posture, thick legs, and a smell that hovered between shampoo and cat urine. A gold crucifix dangled above the dark valley of her cleavage. Mrs. Valdez matched her unloveliness with a particularly potent blend of friendliness and generosity.

"Polly," said Mrs. Valdez, "it is so good to see you. But late. You should be in bed. Did you eat? You need to eat. I made some broth. I could thaw a chicken."

"I brought you some groceries." Polly hefted the paper bag toward Mrs. Valdez.

"Oh, come in." Mrs. Valdez shuffled aside and held open the door. "You're so nice to me."

Polly tended to avoid the stout old woman. The occasional smile or hello in the hallway of the apartment, coming or going quickly, was apparently enough to make an impression on Mrs. Valdez. Polly was a "nice girl."

Polly entered the knitted preciousness of Mrs. Valdez's cramped apartment, redolent with cat smells, past meals, and the faint flower of an overwhelmed air-freshener. The warm yellow of antique lamplight was sucked into the gloomy sponge of mementos. Every wall was a shrine to her family; bright photographs of grand-nieces and nephews, handsome men in military uniforms, women in wedding gowns, an older photograph posed in an orange grove, extending all the way back through Mrs. Valdez's lifetime to a gauzy picture of a man and a woman, expressions flat, their features painted with false color. Her parents.

No such clear lineage existed for Polly. No ever-growing list of family members. At least not ones she chose to recognize.

As she stepped inside, it was as clear as ever to her that Mrs. Valdez did not leave her apartment. Complex systems, of movement and storage, had accumulated around her daily rhythms. She raised a thick leg over a stack of old magazines that nearly tripped Polly up, leaned sideways to shut off the television, and swiveled her hip at just the right moment to avoid a tea table piled with brightly-colored plastic toys.

“Do you want some coffee? I make you some coffee.” Mrs. Valdez brought her into the kitchen. The walls were decorated with images of saints, the Holy Mother, and Presidente Salazar, the last president before Mexico’s partition. The old woman found a clean kettle and cleared space on the stove to begin boiling water. She spooned instant coffee into teacups.

Polly unloaded the paper bag of groceries into a cupboard.

“You can put the cat food here,” Mrs. Valdez said, pointing to the table. “Señor Romeo get out, but he be back. I leave the window open for him.”

“Your cat is gone?” Polly stacked the cat food into towers of tins.

“Yes.” Mrs. Valdez nodded gravely. “He go away sometime when the siren made the sound and scared him. He does not like loud noises. I hate sirens too.”

“They keep you safe.” Polly finished emptying the bag and folded it up. “Do you know what to do when you hear them?”

“Have to stay inside.”

“That’s right. And close your window. There are dangerous things in the air when the sirens make that sound.”

“On the radio the man said that you put poison in the air to kill people. He said that the Army needs to come and shoot you. I don’t know. You’re a good girl, Polly. You didn’t do the poison, right?”

The kettle began to boil, and Mrs. Valdez waddled back to the stove. Polly knew the sort of man on the radio that Mrs. Valdez was talking about: one of those political talkers who spewed nothing but invective. Some, like Gordon Savage, were openly advocating a military action, demanding blood vengeance against the duplicates. Their counterparts on television, slightly muted in tone, had a similar effect.

“No,” said Polly. “I didn’t put the poison into the air.”

But Polly knew something that would drive the talkers to new heights of anger. She knew where the dupes in places like Bad Tower were getting the raw ingredients for their drugs.

“That is what I say to my son.” Mrs. Valdez slid a coffee in front of Polly and shoveled in a healthy spoonful of sugar. “He is with the Army up north. On the big cannons in the Hollywood hill. He says like the man on the radio, but I tell him he listen too much to the radio. And the news.”

“You heard about me?” Polly sipped the coffee.

“No.” Mrs. Valdez clapped her hands together. “I heard man on news say your name, something about a fire, and I say no. I turn him off. They lie all the time.”

“It’s okay,” said Polly.

“No, they lie and make up stories. I will not watch him anymore. Put on channel three instead.”

Mrs. Valdez took a long sip of coffee and then asked, “I watch baseball. Do you like baseball? I don’t remember. My nephew plays baseball.”

Polly knew about Chico Castro. It was a long story she’d heard before, about how he was called up to play for the LA Bombers and ruined his career riding in a car with a hard-drinking friend. The one-car accident had left Chico unable to play. Polly didn’t mind hearing it again. She smiled at all the right spots and shook her head sympathetically when Mrs. Valdez grew emotional. The story ended, as Polly knew, with a miraculous tale of a lottery ticket bought with Chico’s last dollar.

“It was only the smaller prize,” Mrs. Valdez finished, “and he took it back to Algodones. Now he has a wife, six kids, and he has four bathrooms in his house. And a boat. I will go ride on it someday.”

Polly returned to her apartment and crawled into bed, her stomach full of bad coffee and thawed chicken poached in broth. She felt plugged back in. Someone had taken the time to connect her back to the world and convince her, in a small way, that not every story had an unhappy ending.

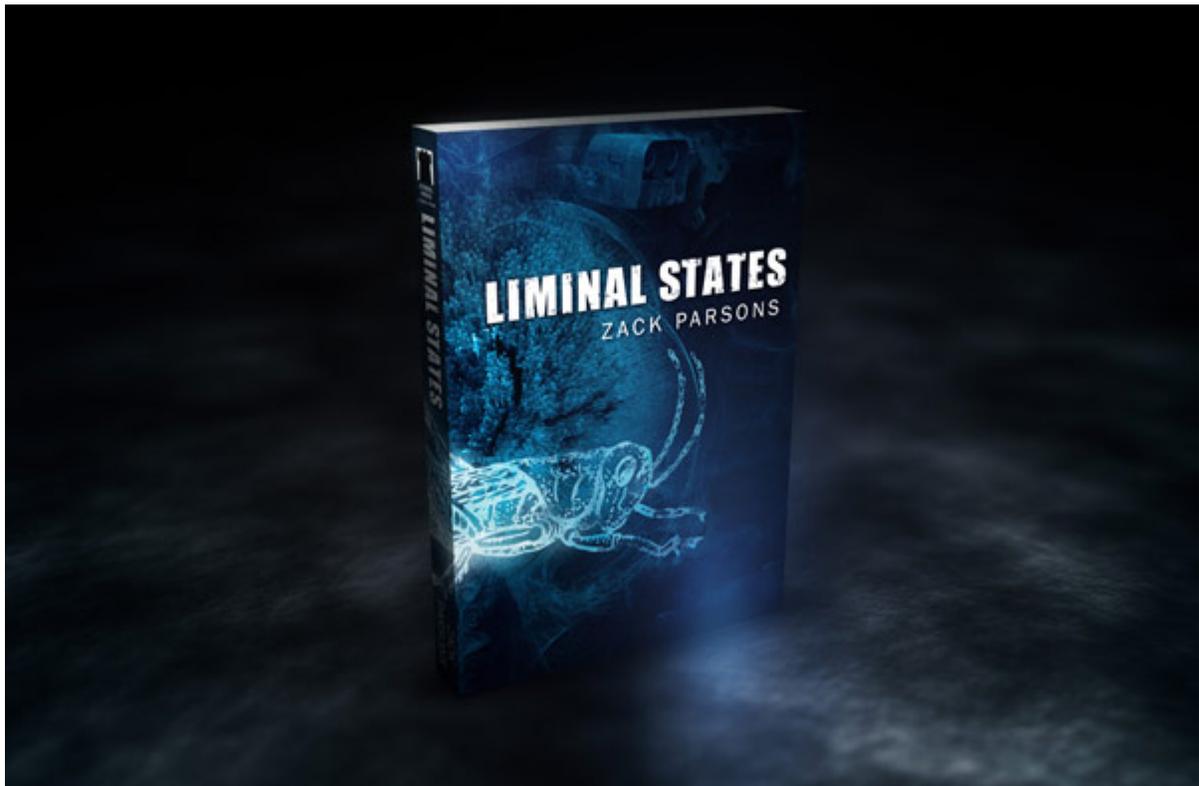
She closed her eyes and began to imagine Chico Castro and his boat. Her fantasy swam into a dream reality. The deck was sun-warmed beneath her bare feet. Placid waters unfurled in every direction. Chico waved from behind the pilot’s wheel. He was smiling, bronze-skinned, and muscular, incredibly handsome. He called out, but his voice did not make any sound. He frowned.

She was very aware of the sound of her breathing and the noise of the ocean. The soft lapping of waves against the side of Chico’s boat became as hollow as the slosh of water in a bathtub. A single ominous note began to howl in the distance. The bright day began to darken. The noise drowned out every sound, growing louder and louder, until it was a familiar whine.

Polly opened her eyes, her body seized by waking tachycardia, and the spore sirens howled to life across the city of Los Angeles.

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