

THE QUARRY

The Deathless

Jeremy Nigro

I signed *danger* to Kira and Luke using our language; a mix of traditional American sign language and the tactical hand signals used by the old military. They repeated the message down the line and the other seven members of our party squatted down amidst the dense undergrowth of the forest; our hooded, olive-green ponchos near completely camouflaging us. We stop, look, smell, taste and touch but we cannot hear. We are all profoundly deaf.

There shouldn't be anyone out here. It's one giant, wet forest. The terrain is hilly, dotted with ancient clusters of mighty trees, separated by dense, mossy ferns and shrubland. Rain is a constant, forever supplementing the abundance of creeks and rivers which crisscross the misty lowlands.

There was no indication of any immediate danger, so I continued towards the object which had attracted my attention, signalling to Luke and Kira to stay.

They shook their heads vigorously in response. The waves of concern radiating from Kira's worried eyes contrasted with Luke's usual expressionless visage.

I repeated the sign again, forcing them to hang back. They have no choice; I am the leader.

Raising my rifle, I continued my approach, slowly stalking my way through the underbrush, imagining myself as stealthy as a leopard.

I hate having to carry guns. We all do. It is not our way.

It has been two weeks since the first group was sent in to verify reports of a small group of aliens living deep in the heavily wooded mountains. The only information they had to go on was their general area of activity and a name: The Deathless.

There was no reason to expect any trouble, considering the unlikelihood of there being a group of aliens hiding out in the mountains more than ten years after all the others left. We never found out why they came. One day they appeared, dropped a bunch of bombs on us and wiped out most of humanity. Many of the survivors, predominantly those in the outer suburbs, were left permanently deafened by the ear-splitting detonations of the alien devices.

On that day, I remember seeing a bright purple light and hearing the last noise I would ever hear. I stumbled out into the street amidst all the devastation, the deafened survivors crying, wandering around hopeless and confused. Ears bleeding, screaming but hearing no sound. I was ten years old.

Coming closer to the object, I realise it is some kind of totem-pole; a giant, wooden stake, sharpened at the top and about twice my height, covered with small pale objects which I can't make out.

There'd been no reports of any alien activity since then, so it was unusual to hear of any aliens left behind, like castaways marooned amongst the vast sea of stars. The first group going out unarmed was therefore not unusual.

The council decided a second team would be sent in and they would be armed. My father, currently the leader of the council, assigned me to lead this mission. I would've volunteered anyway, considering my partner Kira's sister, Madi, had been in the first group. It'll be my first time as leader though. I wonder whether tasking me with this responsibility is his penance for sending the original group off unarmed.

Closer now, I realised with horror what the pale objects attached to the pole were. I turned around to find Kira and Luke standing behind me. I tried to turn Kira away from the totem, but she was already wide-eyed and backing away with her hands over her mouth. Her eyes began to well-up as she ran back to the group. Luke was as astonished as I'd ever seen him.

Nailed to the totem, from base to tip all the way around, were roughly two dozen pairs of severed human ears.

Twenty-two. Could be worse.

I cocked an eyebrow at Luke.

Could've been thirty. His expression was stoic.

It had been impossible to tell if they were our people, all the jewellery had been removed.

We were back with the group, some distance away from the grotesque totem. Kira was slumped on forest floor, being consoled by some of the others. It was hard to stay composed seeing Kira in the mud. Tears and rain streamed down her face in rivulets. It wasn't lost on anyone the chances of finding Madi and the others alive now.

Our community is several thousand strong. Nearly everyone is deaf and those who aren't use sign. You've no choice but to be cooperative when everyone is deaf and fighting for survival. We don't carry weapons, we build and trade. We're in no rush to rebuild humanity. Our lives are peaceful.

Grant, the largest member of our party, suddenly emerged from a thick patch of ferns from the direction of the pole, with his trusty crossbow in hand. A barrel of a man, middle-aged and beardless, Grant had fought the aliens from the very beginning.

Path, he pointed in the general direction we'd been heading.

I said *thanks* by moving a flat hand forward and down from my lips towards him.

He nodded and melted back into the foliage.

I approached Kira, gesturing the others to move away. I cradled her head in my hands, tilted her face up towards mine and gently kissed her forehead.

We will find Madi, I assured her.

She looked up at me, her eyes moist and red. *Alive or dead?* she asked.

I brought her head to my chest, holding back my own tears as I embraced her trembling body.

We could see the faint glow of their camp over the hill ahead. It was easy to spot once the moonless night rolled over.

I decided Luke and I would scout the camp from a distance and Grant would be left in charge.

Kira hugged me, put her hands together in two 'K's and moved them in a circle; the sign for *careful*.

We headed towards the glow. It was emanating from the lower side of a long sloping hill. A thin river ran along the western side, turning into a cascading waterfall once it reached a steep cliff-face at the bottom of the slope. It was a near perfect place for a base as the only clear avenues of approach were from the north and east.

We moved closer to get a better look. The camp was surrounded by a crudely constructed palisade wall, made from nearby forest timber which also created clear sightlines for the defenders. A large bonfire blazed in the central courtyard around which were several, crudely constructed structures. A smattering of tents and smaller dwellings were scattered about further out from the center.

There could be fifty aliens in a camp that size. Far too many for us to handle. I looked over to Luke whose face mirrored my own concerns.

We started to head back to the group but standing directly behind us were a pair of helmeted figures wearing mismatched pieces of clothing and alien armour.

The last thing I saw was the butt of a gun heading towards my face.

I awoke as the sun rose, its low, white beams piercing through the misty underbrush.

I looked around with groggy eyes. I was on the muddy floor of a cage slightly taller than me and a couple of meters wide. How could I be so stupid? Never send the leader out to scout. A rookie mistake from a rookie leader.

I noticed several other wooden cages in a haphazard semi-circle pushed up against the inside of the palisade wall. To my surprise, three familiar faces from the first group were inside the only other occupied cage. A huge weight lifted off my chest when I discovered Madi among them.

An older woman wearing worn clothes, with long, grey-black hair was sitting just outside their cage. She passed a skin of water through the cage to Madi. I wondered why the woman outside the cage didn't run? There was nothing stopping her.

Luke was slumped in a ball in the corner of my cage. I roused him awake.

Madi and I smiled at each other in relief.

The others? I asked Madi.

Her smile faded. She shook her head. *Dead.*

I began to ask how when I noticed the older woman scurry away from the cages. Seconds later, three helmeted figures approached. All wore a mishmash of clothing and the black, chitinous metal of alien armour. The alien in the centre, noticeably bulkier than the others wore a necklace of human ears around his neck.

Madi and the others retreated to the backs of their cages, recoiling in the dirt.

The lead Deathless removed its helmet to reveal it was not an alien at all, but rather a wild-eyed brute of a man, with long grey-black hair and a scraggly beard. The other two were a middle-aged, blonde woman and a tall bald man, who had a hideous burn on one side of his face, the centre of which was now a useless milky eyeball.

The leader approached our cage and launched into a vitriolic tirade. I looked into his eyes and all I saw was hate and anger. At the end of his speech, he pointed directly at me and Luke and slowly ran his forefinger across his throat from ear to ear, simultaneously mocking our deafness and signalling his intent. Then they walked away.

Luke remained sitting, letting no hint of fear or surprise cross his passive face.

I looked over at Madi and the others; she was signing something which I couldn't quite decipher. It appeared similar to *not deaf*—which seemed obvious—then she brought her hands

up wider as if encompassing the whole camp and made the sign again, this time adding *the* at the beginning.

It took me a few moments to understand, but when I did, I realized how foolish we had been.

They must have spread the rumour that they were aliens to keep other humans away. The self-titled Deathless had in fact been a group of non-deaf humans all along.

It was early afternoon when they finally came to get us. The sun had vanished and light sprinkles of rain once again began to dampen the barely dry earth.

We were in the main courtyard where the large bonfire was. Luke and I in the centre, down on our knees, whilst Madi and the others were off to one side. A crowd of villagers gathered around us. For the first time, I noticed the regular folk of the camp. They were thin, dirty and scraggly dressed. There were mostly women with scarcely a young person among them. I recognised the woman who'd helped Madi. She was staring at the ground, looking sullen and empty.

The leader of The Deafless emerged from the largest structure. He sauntered around us, grinning and talking the whole time. He stroked Luke's smooth, bald head like one would stroke a priceless bust. Whatever the leader was saying had turned large parts of the crowd from a languorous, pathetic bunch into a pack of wild animals. He slowly unslung a nasty looking sawn-off shotgun from his back.

Luke looked at me once, closed his eyes and looked down.

He pointed the shotgun back and forth between Luke and I. I didn't have to be a lip-reader to know he was saying 'eeny, meeny, miny.' The barrel got closer to my face with each swing until he touched my nose with it. I tried to focus on the smell of metal and gunpowder and the feel of cold steel rather than my impending execution.

Tears streamed down my face and I clenched my teeth in anticipation. I'd failed and I only had myself to blame. I closed my eyes.

I felt a thud as something heavy hit the ground near me. I hesitantly opened my eyes to find the leader laying on his side directly in front of me, with an arrow sticking between a pair of still grinning, madman's eyes.

Chaos ensued. The tall man with the burnt face rushed towards the leader. He violently staggered back twice in quick succession and fell to the ground.

The few other fighters in the camp haphazardly fired their weapons towards the hill. The smell of gunpowder hung in the air and the cracks of nearby gunshots hit me in the gut with each vibration. Sticking to the ground, I risked a quick glance around. The two sentries on the palisade wall were already down, a crossbow bolt sticking out of one of them. The few remaining guards were being struck down one by one seemingly from nowhere. Soon, it was all over. All the Deafless who'd put up a fight were down or had surrendered.

The main gate opened and our group entered with all the precision and synchronization of a well-oiled special forces team. Grant was in the lead with his crossbow raised. I should've known they'd come. At least I'd made the right decision leaving Grant in charge.

Luke and I got to our feet as the others approached. Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed the tall man with the burnt face hobbling towards me, one hand clutching his stomach and the other holding the leader's menacing shotgun, which he now aimed squarely at me.

An instant later, there was a burst of bright green fire and the man was gone, disintegrated in an instant. I turned around to see Kira standing behind me, her alien pistol pointed in the direction of the recently atomized Deafless.

The villagers slowly emerged after the fighting had finished. They the unknowing audience of our silent opera of sign which would ultimately decide their fate.

Look what they became, Grant was signing, a grim look on his face. *They're savages.*

They didn't end up like this because they're not deaf, Madi pleaded, still in the arms of her older sister.

They would be a danger to our community, Grant was vehement.

I tried to stay out of it, assessing both sides of the argument knowing the decision was ultimately up to me. I sympathised with Grant. His daughter had been killed by a human scavenger not long after the bombs fell.

Let them decide, Luke suddenly signed, still expressionless.

Grant threw his hands in the air in exasperation.

We looked at the pitiful bunch of villagers gathered around the square, illuminated by the dying light of the untended bonfire.

Eventually, the woman who'd helped Madi hesitantly approached me. She bent down, scratched something in the mud with her finger before retreating back to the others.

It was one word. It said *please*.

I repeated it by moving a flat hand in a clockwise circle around my chest.

Kira smiled at me and signed, *There's something we haven't considered*.

Then she maternally caressed her stomach with one hand.

Someone will need to teach the children how to speak.