

PLAGUE ZONE

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Chapter One

Cam Najarro pushed into the fallen greenhouse with one arm, struggling through the torn sheets of plastic. In his other hand he held his flamethrower down against his leg, the blue fire in its muzzle guttering near the back of his knee. He didn't want to start a blaze if he could avoid it, so he used his body like a shield, hiding the weapon as he waded into the tangled, slumping mess.

The fuel tanks on his back snagged in the plastic. Then he encountered a broken two-by-four and had to duck, awkwardly protecting the nozzle of the gun against his belly.

The plastic was clear in single layers – but when the greenhouse collapsed, its roof and walls had twisted into knots. Worse, the sunset was fading. Cam wore a flashlight on his belt, but he'd found that the light only reflected in the plastic, blinding him. He could see better in the shadows.

The greenhouse smelled like fresh earth and a dank, more humid scent. Everywhere the concrete floor was speckled with ants and locusts. Some were dead. Others jittered and flexed, trapped in the folds of plastic all around him.

His headset crackled in his ear. "What's it look like?" Allison asked.

"It's quiet," he said.

"I've got a bad feeling, Cam."

He smiled. "Don't you always?"

“Get out. Please.”

“No. Eric might still be alive. What if he’s unconscious?” Cam reached into another curtain of plastic, but he could barely move its weight. He knelt and tried to squeeze past. On his right, the way was blocked by a long wooden planter, its soil blasted over the floor. Cam pushed left instead, crawling on one hand and both knees.

He stopped. There was a red-colored drift on the floor where the crushed ants were particularly dense. Cam brought up his weapon before he continued forward, wanting to be sure these ants were casualties, not a new invasion. He saw immature queens and winged males mixed with worker drones. By necessity, every man and woman on the planet had become a practicing entomologist, and Cam had a very healthy fear of these insects. The ants were both delicate and powerful. Their fragile legs and mandibles were capable of incredible force, as witnessed by the destruction around him.

He put his boot down, crunching the red bodies. “I think I know where they came in,” he said. Each word echoed in the silence. Beyond the greenhouse, he could hear the wind and people shouting, and he heard those voices more clearly when Allison answered on the radio.

“Just leave it alone,” she said. “It doesn’t matter.”

But it mattered to him. He’d built Greenhouse 3 with his own hands, and now one of his friends was missing inside.

Cam brushed at the ants with his glove, trying to make sense of the swarm’s direction. He found his clue against another ravaged planter. There was a hairline crack in the floor where they’d bolted the planter’s sides to the concrete pad, which was only inches thick. That hadn’t been enough. One end of the crack was now a ragged hole. The ant colony had scratched through with inhuman patience and strength.

Less than an hour ago, ten thousand fire ants had billowed into the greenhouse, surging through the protected area like a cyclone. The weight of the frantic people inside was enough to topple one wall. Then someone crashed against a support beam. The ants were more interested in the corn and tomato plants, but still they stung and bit. Three people made it out. Eric Goodrich was the only one who hadn’t emerged through the two doors that served as an airlock, sealing off the sweet, moist plants inside from the world of the machine plague.

The locusts came after the plastic had ripped. Like the fire ants, the black-spotted desert locusts were nonnative to Colorado, but they were adaptable and opportunistic, filling the gaps in the ecology like so many other species. The locusts were also suicidally ravenous, expending at least as much energy as they gained. They suffered huge losses just to attack the crops and their rival insects, allowing their own numbers to be decimated even as their dead provided more food for the surviving ants.

Cam would have burned them all if he could. "The ants came from underneath," he said.

"It doesn't matter!" Allison was impatient now, even rude. She could be combative when she was worried. "Just get out of there," she said. "We can salvage things in the morning."

Eric might still be alive, Cam thought, but he didn't want to argue. He simply rose into a clear space and kept walking through the dark maze of lumber and plastic.

He moved with a limp. His hands were bad, too, already cramping on the nozzle of his weapon. Old injuries. There were few people who didn't bear some mark of the machine plague or the wars that followed, but Cam Najarro had faced any number of hard choices. Sometimes he marveled that he was alive at all. He wanted to share his good fortune.

"Eric?" he called, forgetting to turn off his headset.

"Goddamn it," Allison said. "He's dead. We would have heard something."

"What if it was me, Ally? You'd come in after me."

"Get out. Idiot."

Cam smiled again. Allison had softened now that she was four months pregnant, although she would have denied any change in her outlook. She was more selfish of him, more protective, which made her a better wife but not such an excellent leader. She no longer put everyone else first. *And she's probably right*, he thought, peering into the shadows. There was a shape on the floor like two bags of fertilizer... or was it a man?

Suddenly he clapped his hand against his cheek, killing an ant before it could bite. Then he discovered more of the red bugs on his arm. Cam repressed a shudder, scraping his glove over his hood and his jacket sleeves. His hip was spotted with ants, too. Their stragglers and their wounded were beginning to focus on him in the swift, disturbing way of a hive mind that communicated solely through motion and scent.

"Okay, you're right," he said, looking for a way out. Unfortunately, the nearest wall of the greenhouse had rolled, creating a heavy barrier. "I'm on the north side," he said. "Can you guys cut through?"

"Turn on your light so we can see you." Allison's voice was sharp with relief, and then he heard her yelling faintly outside the greenhouse. "Over here!"

The ants were unpredictable. They were always breeding now, and they became more vicious with each short-lived generation. Cam and Eric had led "smoke" teams to poison four colonies just last week. Obviously that hadn't been enough. Maybe the area around their village would always be infested, no matter how careful they were with their garbage and other waste — but the ants' metabolism was dependent on the heat of the sun. In the cold nights of the Rockies,

especially in early September, the ants went to ground until morning. Cam knew it would be safe to look for Eric's body in another hour if he could only convince himself to abandon his friend.

No, he thought. They'd served together in the Army Rangers, and dying here was a stupid way to go for a man who'd helped bring an end to World War III. It made Cam angry, so he turned back into the ruins of the greenhouse with his flashlight.

"Cam?" Allison asked. "Cam, you're moving away from us."

He was twenty-six years old. He could still be impulsive even though he was physically worn as if twice his age. Like the ants, Cam hated the cold. In the Colorado nights, his hands ached with arthritis. A badly healed knife wound rippled across his left palm, and his fingers were thick with burned tissue. His face was equally blistered, although he could hide most of this scarring with his beard. He wore his coarse black hair at shoulder-length to cover a disfigured ear.

But the bugs were here, too.

"Jesus!" Cam staggered back from the lump on the floor. The irregular shape seemed to leap up, startled by his approach. Winged ants pattered against the plastic overhead. Then they flew toward him.

Before the cloud obscured the body, Cam saw that Eric was gone. Hundreds of red worker drones crawled from the wet cavities of Eric's face, exhuming his insides through his mouth and eyes. They filled his clothes, too, writhing and bustling.

There were other cracks in the floor where columns of ants marched through eroded gray concrete and dirt. Somehow the insects had torn through. The colony was still expanding. They were insulated from the night by the greenhouse itself, glorying in their find despite the oncoming cold.

Cam destroyed them, screaming, "*Yaaaaaah!*"

The gun roared. Burning streams of fuel splashed between the low ceiling and the floor. The heat turned the plastic into melting runners. The carpet of ants shriveled and disappeared, blown away by the fire. Even the bugs at the edges of the inferno curled into dry cinders, whirling up through the air like a blizzard. The smoke was intense. Coughing, Cam reared back from the fire. Eric's body reacted, too, its muscles contracting. The corpse twisted within the blaze, arching its hips and neck as the empty gap of its mouth pulled impossibly wide.

Cam tried to shut off his weapon but the flamethrower was a clumsy thing they'd built themselves. It shot gasoline in fat, deafening blasts that weren't easily contained. He was forced

to expend another two seconds of fuel, clearing the gun, and he kept the blaze on Eric's corpse rather than turning the fire away. Cremating his friend was better than hurting anyone outside.

I'm sorry, he thought. Oh, Christ, Eric, I'm sorry . . . What I am going to tell Bobbi?

A section of the roof fell in. As the plastic burned, it separated. A wide heap of plastic slammed into the concrete. The fiery tongues covered Eric. Another hunk of it lashed down on Cam's right, splashing his arm with drizzles of hot liquid.

The smoke was more dangerous. It was toxic. Cam was lucky that when the roof collapsed, the haze was taken away by the wind. Suddenly his breath came easier. He barely noticed, sick with adrenaline and grief.

He'd lost his flashlight in the confusion. Now it was dark except for the bubbling fire and several lights beyond the greenhouse. Cam stalked through the mess, punching his weapon against a slick hill of plastic when he couldn't get past. The night overhead had a gorgeous blue quality he'd never seen anywhere except in the Rockies, but he winced and turned his eyes down.

Then there were arms reaching for him. Four people pulled him out. Bobbi and Allison were among them, a contrast in colors. Cam's wife was blond, her long ponytail bleached almost white by the sun, whereas Bobbi Goodrich was black, with a tight, dark cap of hair.

"Are you okay?" Bobbi asked, her face gleaming with tears. Both women held knives. Their jacket sleeves were coated with strange dust from cutting at the plastic, and Cam could see that Bobbi had transferred her emotions to saving him. She knew Eric was dead.

He couldn't meet the urgent heartache in her eyes.

"Poison," he said roughly. "We're going to poison the whole fucking colony tonight."

Allison leaned into his chest and pulled Bobbi after her. Cam embraced both women. Behind them, the greenhouse smoldered. Then another man spoke up. "I'm sorry, I don't think we have enough insecticide to—"

"We'll do it with gasoline," Cam said. "I don't care. We'll pour ten gallons into every hole we can find and light 'em up."

"Let's put a team together," Allison said, moving away from him. She tugged at Bobbi and the other woman nodded, even though she was still crying. Long ago, they had all learned there was never any time to waste, and yet Cam saw the doubt in Allison's gaze.

We might not have twenty gallons in the entire village, Cam realized, walking into the night with her, but Allison didn't say it and neither did he.

They were losing the battle for the environment.