



ENCLAVE

THOMAS LOCKE


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Thomas Locke, Enclave
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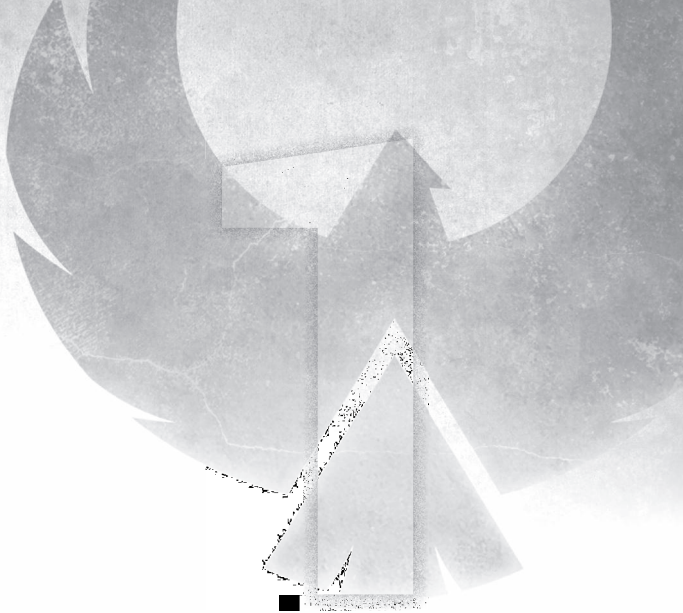
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The night was beyond black. The windless air condensed the fog into droplets that clung to every surface. Kevin Ritter was on lead. Behind him, twenty-six refugees were strung out in a terror-stricken line. He could hear the panting whispers, he could sense their fear. He had not been out on the line in six months, maybe longer. He had almost forgotten the coppery taste of such dread, or how every minute stretched into hours. Or the weight of every delay.

Kevin flicked on his pocket light, then flashed it again. Both times the mist glowed like weightless jewels. The woman behind him shivered so hard it fractured her breaths. She probably did not even realize she moaned. Her name was Carla, and she was twenty-two, three years younger than he, and very beautiful. Her boyfriend, Pablo, was next in the line. Kevin disliked knowing their names. But they had both

introduced themselves, as if the connection were important. Kevin found it best not to forge such bonds with refugees. When he did, they crowded his dreams. But Carla was different. She reminded Kevin of his ex-fiancée. But Kevin's love was lost to him now, and there was nothing he could do about it except yearn for all that would never be.

Carla had confided that they were refugees from Richmond and had fled in order to keep her boyfriend safe. Kevin resisted the urge to tell them to turn around, go home, accept whatever was required to live within Richmond's boundaries. Now they were just another pair of ragged survivors, clutching at the slim hope that Kevin's team could slip them under the wire, fashion the myth of a new ID, and help them forge a new life in Charlotte Township. That was why Kevin risked his life working with the underground railroad. For people like Carla.

Far in the distance a lamp glowed and disappeared, then a second time. Kevin turned to Carla and said, "Wait here for me. Watch for my signal. When you move, keep low and keep silent. Pass it down the line."

"What if you don't make it back?"

She was the kind of woman the bounty hunters preyed on. The militia would eat her alive. Which was probably what fueled her terror. Kevin knew there was nothing he could say that would make it all right. So he said again, "Stay here and stay quiet."

Like the original underground railroad of three centuries earlier, groups of concerned citizens had secretly banded together to help the helpless. Unlike the earlier version, however, Kevin's team did not ship their refugees north. According to rumors, the north was in worse shape than here.

Their one hope was to sneak the survivors *inside*. Fashion new identities. Hide them in plain sight. Doctors became janitors. Engineers turned into carpenters. But there was at least the chance to keep their families together and fed.

Kevin crawled down the gutter on his belly. The wet gravel sawed at his elbows and ribs and knees. A hundred and fifty yards farther on, the electrified border fence had been lifted and bound to the next strand, then replaced with a plastic imitation painted to mimic the rust-streaked steel. He waited a long moment, breathing with his mouth open, listening and scouting. He saw no patrols, so he turned back and waved them forward.

No matter how much they warned the refugees, no matter how sternly the parents spoke to their children, twenty-six untrained people were bound to make a lot of noise. Kevin lifted his head above the gutter's lip and scouted the night. Finally they were crouched behind him, clumped in so tightly he could smell the sweet tea Carla had drunk before leaving their last hiding place. He hissed for silence and listened. Then he aimed his pocket light and flashed twice. Three minutes or an eternity later, the light responded.

"Follow me. Stay close. Pass it down the line." Kevin lifted the fake fence and lashed it into place. He then lowered himself back into the moist grit lining the gully and crawled.

The gutter ran down the west side of the border market, a motley assortment of stalls and taverns. Kevin had not made this trip in two years, not since he had been named co-leader of the local underground. He had followed the example of his father, who had led the railroad until his death, by remaining unseen. His father had been a sheriff's deputy, killed in the line of duty when he stopped highwaymen from

robbing a wagonload of refugees. His mother ran the underground now, though only a select few were aware of this fact. Kevin had started serving with the railroad at sixteen.

Their destination was the market's largest vegetable stall, connected on the far wall to a tavern owned by the same proprietor and reputed to have the best food in the border region. Where the two establishments came together, the owner had erected a small warehouse she used for storing both produce and kegs. The rear wall hung slightly over the gutter, as though the owner had overbuilt by error. Kevin slipped under the ledge, turned on his back, and knocked three times.

The warehouse floor came up, a light shone into his face, and a woman hissed, "Who on earth are you?"

"Emergency replacement." Kevin slipped the paper from his pocket and handed it up.

She gave the drawn symbol a careful inspection. "Where's Clem?"

"Broke his leg. You should have received word."

"I did. But you stay alive by staying vigilant." She handed back the paper, uncocked her pistol, and offered him a hand. "So you're the new Clem."

"For this one night."

She watched Kevin emerge, her eyes widening when she saw his size. "Big one, ain't you. You the teacher's boy?"

"Yes." That was how his mother was known, for she taught political history at Charlotte University. "We'll make other arrangements tomorrow. But no one else was available, and the shelter is full to the brim with another group due in."

The stallholder grunted her acceptance and waited as Kevin helped the refugees rise into the hold. The woman

told Carla and her boyfriend, “You two, come help me serve food.”

She and her volunteers began handing out steaming plates and mugs. It was the first hot meal most refugees had eaten in days.

When all were served, Kevin asked the proprietor, “When do they move out?”

“Soon as they’ve eaten. You know the destination?”

“Yes.”

“Tell me.”

Kevin heard the guarded tone and saw the massive six-shooter’s handle protruding from her apron belt. Such suspicion became deeply embedded among long-term workers on the underground. They helped the refugees out of principle. Every day refugees like these were robbed, assaulted, murdered. It was against the Charlotte law to help illegals’ entry. Over time the dread of capture gnawed at them all.

He replied, “The uptown shelter. By the old stone church.”

“Vigilance. That’s the key to waking up tomorrow.” She waited while the group ate off tin plates filled with her thick, rich stew. “All right, everyone. Gather your belongings and follow me.”

Between the tavern and the shop was a narrow alcove used for unloading supplies. A produce truck was parked tail in, the rear flap open, the floorboards removed. The first refugees climbed the wooden steps and balked at what they saw inside.

The woman was ready for this. “You’ll be crammed in tight as sardines, but you’ll also be safe. No one will ever think there’s room down there for anything, much less all you lot. And remember, we’ll be halted at least once for inspection.

When you hear the brakes, stop breathing. If an infant so much as whimpers, we're all dead."

After that, the loading went swiftly enough. Packs were used as headrests, and gradually the truck bed became filled with prone bodies, arms clasping the person in front. Kevin remained at the foot of the wooden steps, handing up bundles and infants, urging on the hesitant.

Last in line were the lovely young woman and her boyfriend. At a sign from her, Pablo clambered in first. Carla drew Kevin a step away and said, "You have changes coming. None of them are welcome. All of them are vital."

Kevin felt a sense of electric dread at the words. He realized Carla was one of those known as a special, gifted in some unexplained fashion. He also now understood why the couple had been forced to flee. "Will I survive?"

"You and those you are closest to." The young woman showed Kevin a fathomless gaze. "But only if you heed my call to flee."

That shocked him utterly. "*Your* call?"

She nodded. "When that happens, you must find safety in the company of those called abominations."

Kevin replied, "No one deserves that tag."

"And that is why you must survive." Carla stepped toward the truck. "Be ready for the change when it comes."

Kevin watched her climb up and fit herself in the overtight space. He had a hundred more questions he wanted to ask, a thousand new fears that would ignite his dark hours. But he stayed silent and helped the tavern owner set the floorboards back in place. They tossed empty burlap bags over the scarred surface, retied the canvas backing, and closed the rear gate.

Areas of uptown had been refitted as massive greenhouses to feed the hungry township. The militia troops manning the inner-city checkpoints would scarcely glance at a produce truck making the pre-dawn run.

Kevin stood watching as the truck rumbled off. Then he locked the storeroom's outer door and returned to the secret entry point by the far wall.

He dropped into the gully, carefully resealed the floor panel, and started crawling. He tried not to think about Carla and her strange words. For people like that, there was probably no hope of survival. Even if they did survive, Kevin had no way of knowing where they might land, or how to contact them if he wanted to. Which he most definitely did not.