

## Chapter 1

Silence.

Ryan hated silence. It was a facade, designed to lure him into a false sense of security, a state of relaxation. To relax was to put your guard down, to open yourself to danger, so Ryan had not relaxed once in all his twenty-seven years of life.

He advanced with caution through the silence. Every movement was calculated; every footstep pre-planned for minimal disruption of earth. Any crunch of dead leaves under his boot heel made him flinch; any distant creaking of tree branches was a potential predator stalking his every move.

A rustling nearby. Ryan stopped in his tracks, kneeling to the cold ground. Footsteps? He put the scope of his rifle up to his eye again, though he knew it was fruitless. All it provided him was a narrower window into the bleak grayness enveloping him.

The fog was as much a godsend as a hindrance, of course. Ryan knew his unseen enemies were just as blind as he. But Ryan preferred to know whether he was the hunter or the hunted. He lowered his weapon and resumed his march into oblivion.

It didn't take long for Ryan to find the first body. The yellow ribbon on its shoulder told Ryan it was one of his, and when he turned the man over he suppressed an aching sigh. Jaime Langston, 29, one of Ryan's most trusted teammates. Tall and lanky but deceptively nimble, Jaime had entered the fray with Ryan many times and come out the other side intact—but not today. The bullet had pierced his neck and exited neatly on the other side.

There was no pain in Jaime's expression. He stared blankly to the sky with that familiar unseeing gaze Ryan had grown accustomed to. Ryan hoped that he went quick, that the suffering was not tremendous. It was the best he could hope for these days.

Far off in the distance, the first breach of quiet: the steady *ratatat* of gunfire. He listened to the cadence, anticipating the answer, and soon it came: a feeble retaliation, an uneven volley from a less powerful weapon, before silence returned to fill the empty space between.

Ryan salvaged what he could from Jamie's unwitting donation pile: a rifle magazine, a smoke grenade, a bloodstained battle helmet. He couldn't stay long. He had to keep moving.

Ryan sought a reference point, anything to break up this monotony of cracked earth and barren trees. Soon he found one: a patch of tall grass, yet another fog-of-war, offering concealment for the prey

but also the predator. Ryan ducked low and entered the maze. At least here he had eyes in the back of his head. At least now he felt in control of his own destiny...a luxury not often afforded in the Blood Games.

He could stop here. If he waited long enough without incident, the danger would eventually pass, and he would be free to walk out of this place without resistance. But to stop would be to invite the gnawing thoughts to annex his mind, restless energy to pile up, unpleasant memories to resurface. Progress was the only reprieve.

Then, an unexpected break in the sea of blades: a metal pole shooting out from the ground amidst the tall grass, blocking Ryan's progress. An anachronism pulling Ryan out of time, out of the primal hunt. A digital billboard.

Ryan paused, basking in the artificial light. He allowed himself one glance at its message before moving on, long enough only to file away the information and pretend this intrusion had never happened:

*10-9. 12:06 remaining.*

Soon the tall grass receded into an open clearing. Ryan perched at the edge of the grass, examining his new surroundings. The outline of a hillside was now visible in the distance, separated from him by some fifty yards of open air. He would love to take the high ground, but it was late in the hunt, and surely somebody had the same thought and

already claimed the summit for himself. Ryan peered at the ridge through his scope, trying to spot movement through the treeline, but it was too dark to make anything out of the dancing shadows.

He was distracted by a blinking red light high overhead, drifting lazily in his direction. The drones used to bother him, but by now Ryan begrudgingly accepted them as part of the arena. It hovered some thirty feet over the landscape, its minuscule black lens trained in his direction. He knew that could only mean one thing: danger.

Ryan focused his scope on a weathered oak tree nearby, its drooping branches creating a natural barrier around a sunken depression in the earth. An ideal hiding spot. The drone was halfway between Ryan and the tree, as though anticipating action. Ryan hated how the drones affected the Blood Games, how they gave away enemy positions. But in this instance, it might save his life...somebody was nearby.

Ryan's senses heightened; his heart rate quickened. This was the moment he'd been waiting for. The moment of conflict. His finger quivered over the trigger, waiting to strike. The nervous excitement that preceded a kill coursed through him like electricity...

Then, a flash of light from beneath the tree. A short, dull burst in his direction before going out. Then a second in quick succession, then a third. A signal.

Ryan breathed a sigh of relief. He moved his hand off the trigger and up the length of the rifle, finding the light switch affixed to the side of the barrel. He flicked it on, off, on, off, on, off, repeating the code back to sender.

Movement came so suddenly that Ryan was unsure if he would have been prepared to fire in time. A shadowy blur, silent as the night, raced towards him across the open space, and it was upon him in seconds. Ryan heard the faint rustling of blades as the mystery figure slid into the tall grass beside him.

“What gave me away?” Ryan whispered.

“You made a helluva racket in the grass,” Jake chuckled. “What gave *me* away?”

“That goddamn drone,” Ryan grinned, mimicking a burst of gunfire at the floating object overhead. “Figured you’d be nearby.”

Jake rolled his eyes and playfully punched his brother on the shoulder. Ryan never doubted he and Jake would cross paths again in the fight. They’d been in hairy situations like this before, separated in

the thick of battle, but trusting that they'd find each other and clean up the mess together in the end.

“Was that you I heard a couple of minutes ago?” Ryan asked, remembering the short exchange of gunfire he'd heard not long ago.

“Yep,” Jake said grimly. “Donaldson and I got ambushed over at the ravine. Never even saw ‘em. I got away by the skin of my teeth, but Donaldson...”

He didn't need to finish the sentence. They fell silent to remember their fallen comrade. Kevin Donaldson was their longest-tenured teammate, a smart and reliable fighter that had been by their side for years.

Ryan felt a pang of anger at the loss, a familiar sensation that he could channel and stoke. He fed it, letting it fester and grow in his gut, welling up to his chest until he was bursting with a sense of righteous vengeance. This is what he needed. That drive to win. To repay the favor...

“Where are they now?” Ryan growled.

“Dunno,” Jake sighed. He knew what was brewing in his little brother's mind at that moment, and was careful to keep it tame for now.

“They were probably headed towards the summit.”

Ryan's eyes darted back to the hill, his vision augmented by a newfound rage. "I'm ready whenever you are," he muttered.

"Let's talk this through for a minute," Jake cautioned, hastening to keep Ryan in check. "Do we really want to risk making a move? There are three of them left--"

"Two," Ryan corrected. "I left Ruiz to bleed out ten minutes ago."

"You don't know that for sure," Jake warned. "It could be three perfectly healthy fighters waiting for us."

"I don't care if there are twelve of them," snarled Ryan. "I'm going after 'em."

"We should take the loss and move on. Can't win 'em all."

"Like hell we can't."

Jake didn't retort right away. Ryan knew he would win the argument, one he'd won many times in the past. Whether Jake liked it or not, Ryan would not be deterred once his mind was made up. And Jake sure as hell wouldn't let him enter the fray without backup.

Eventually Jake reached the same conclusion. "What's our angle?" he sighed.

Ryan immediately motioned to their right. "Good tree cover all the way up the ridge," he pointed out. "If we can clear the expanse without notice, we have a good shot."

“That’s a big if,” Jake muttered, considering the proposed route. “That’s a good thirty yards of no man’s land. If they spot us, we’ll be sitting ducks.”

“Then I hope you stretched earlier, ‘cuz we’ll have to be fast,” Ryan smirked.

Jake still looked troubled by the idea. “We could circle back around through the tall grass,” he reasoned. “Look for better cover to the ridge. There’s no reason to risk our lives when we’re facing a numbers deficit—”

Ryan grunted in frustration. He was itching for action, and Jake’s careful scheming grated on his waning patience. “I’m going on the count of three,” he snapped, interrupting Jake’s train of thought. “We’re wasting time here.”

“This is a life or death decision, Ryan—”

“One.”

“We can be aggressive, but there’s a difference between aggression and stupidit—”

“Two.”

“Christ, you’re stubborn.” Jake put his eye to his scope and trained his barrel on the distant hillside. “Godspeed, brother.”

Ryan steeled himself for his mad dash for the treeline. Bullets might rain down on him in mere seconds. He was prepared for that outcome. He'd always been prepared for it. He knew that every moment, every decision could be his last. It no longer fazed him. It only strengthened his will to survive. His will to succeed.

“Three.”

Ryan burst out of the grass and sprinted across the clearing. Hyper-focused on every movement, every step. He would not fail. He was in full control...

Before he knew it, he was across. Not a bullet fired. Ryan quickly set a vantage point up the hill and gave Jake the signal to follow. Then Jake was across just as quickly, safely under cover of the trees.

“Told you,” Ryan ribbed him.

“Let's keep moving,” Jake sighed, refusing to humor his brother. Ryan smirked, victorious, as they stole forward up the hillside.

They passed another billboard shortly after. *10-9. 5:43 remaining.*

“Ten to nine,” Jake whispered. “Still three enemies alive.”

“Two.”

“We can't assume Ruiz survived. Could be three fresh fighters waiting for us.”

“I'm telling you, no way he bled out that fast.”

“Just keep your eyes peeled,” muttered Jake. “We might be walking into a trap.”

That was indeed a possibility. But Ryan refused to acknowledge his doubt and give Jake the satisfaction. Besides, he couldn't resist the opportunity to steal a win before the clock expired. The difference in prize payout was enormous...

“Hold.” Jake jerked to a halt, Ryan right behind him. Ryan couldn't see any difference through the thick trees, unsure what it was that had Jake suddenly spooked.

“What is it now?” he asked.

“*Shh.*” Jake put his scope to his eye and scanned the approaching terrain. Ryan did the same. Movement? Or was Jake just being unnecessarily cautious? Ryan respected his brother's strategic mind for the Blood Games, but rarely did Jake's instincts outperform his own.

“Quit being paranoid,” Ryan muttered. He lowered his weapon and brushed past Jake on his way up the hillside. “We're running out of time—”

*RATATATATAT!*

Ryan scrambled behind a tree as bullets rained down on him. Jake was already returning fire, giving Ryan time to set up a proper cover spot. In seconds Ryan had rolled to his left and gone prone, joining his

brother in suppressing fire. Two sets of muzzle flashes up the hill promptly disappeared as their unseen assailants took cover to reload.

Before the deafening sound of gunfire ceased ringing in Ryan's ears, he could hear his brother barking orders. "*Alt five! Alt five!*" Jake screamed. Immediately Ryan processed the play call and knew what he needed to do.

*Pop! Pop! Pop!* Ryan fired single shots at random intervals to make the enemy believe he had an accurate line of sight. He counted in his head as he did so: *One. Two Three. Four. Five...*

On cue, Ryan heard similar *pops* from his right as Jake resumed firing. As soon as he did, Ryan launched to his feet and ran up the hill at an angle while his brother covered for him. Counting to himself: *One. Two. Three. Four. Five...*

He slid behind a tree and began firing again. *Pop! Pop! Pop!* Somewhere opposite him, Jake was now making a beeline of his own. *One. Two. Three. Four. Five...*

They continued alternating the cover-run technique, advancing slowly in a circling position around the enemy. Ryan could now make out the enemy position, nestled in between a thick cluster of five trees. They had stopped firing, no doubt confused about the exact position of

their targets: always moving, alternating sides. Soon Ryan would have an angle for a direct assault. *One. Two. Three. Four. Five...*

Then, the gunfire stopped. Jake did not resume his own cover fire. Ryan knew what that meant: he had an angle. Ryan trained his weapon on the tree cluster and waited. This was a wait he didn't mind so much. He knew the enemy was coming to him. And he was ready for them.

*BOOM!*

A grenade exploded on the right side of the tree cluster, spraying shrapnel, leaves and bark everywhere. A second later, two figures scrambled for safety out of the cluster in the opposite direction. Directly into Ryan's line of sight.

*Pop pop pop pop!* Ryan's shots were quick and efficient. The two enemy fighters were dead before they could get to their feet.

Ryan chuckled a little to himself. For a moment there, he thought they'd had a real enemy on their hands. A trap they would actually need to work hard to escape from. Instead, another easy victory for the Eastwood brothers – 11 kills to 10.

Ryan clicked his tongue twice to signal that the coast was clear. He stood and walked out into the open; moments later, Jake appeared from across the way.

“Told you there were just two,” Ryan laughed as the drones converged on their location to capture the closing moments of the match.

“Told you it was a trap,” Jake fired back grimly.

“Guess we’re both getting rusty,” grinned Ryan. “C’mon, let’s get outta here.”

The brothers turned to march back down the hill and head for the exit. Ryan was already out of the forest in his mind, planning ahead to the city that awaited just two miles away. What he’d wear for the post-game press conference. Where they’d eat dinner tonight. Which club he’d visit to find a lucky girl to lay...

Then it happened, without warning.

*CRACK!*

The noise came from above and behind Ryan, so close it startled him, pulling him back into the game. He turned and raised his weapon, firing twice before he could even fully see his target. The unseen assailant crumpled and fell out of his hiding place in the tree. If it wasn’t for the green ribbon on his upper arm, Ryan might not have realized this was an enemy fighter. He stared at the lifeless figure before him, dumbfounded.

After the initial shock wore off, Ryan let out a sigh of relief. “Guess you were right about three enemies after all,” he chuckled.

He turned to see Jake lying in a heap on the ground.

Ryan rushed to his brother’s side. The bullet had entered Jake’s left eye socket and left no exit wound. A thin trail of blood ran down Jake’s cheek like a corrupted teardrop.

“No,” Ryan muttered, unable to comprehend what he was seeing. “No no, you’re fine, brother. Get up.”

Jake did not get up. Ryan felt the body start to go limp in his arms.

“C’mon, you son of a bitch,” Ryan growled, starting to get angry now. “Stop playing games with me.” He shook Jake a few times, as though to wake him. But Jake would not wake.

It slowly dawned on Ryan the reality of what he was seeing. The moment he’d dreaded all his life. The moment his indestructible better half became mortal. The loss of his best friend.

Ryan’s eyes began to bubble with tears. His world was crashing down upon him. And he knew it was all his fault.

“It should have been me, Jake,” he sobbed as the drones pressed in close to capture the moment for the world to see. “It should have been me.”