# ILIXIR

## LADARIUS

A SURVIVOR STORY




WRITTEN BY
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# LADARIUS

A Short Story from the World of

## ILIXIR: In the Shade They Wait

By Mark Biron Jr.

EXCLUSIVE BONUS STORY

# Exclusive Bonus Story

This short story takes place in the world of ILIXIR and follows events happening outside the main novel.

While Ladarius’s story is not included in the book, some characters, locations, and moments from these bonus stories connect to the larger outbreak in ways you may not expect.

Some will return.

Some will be remembered.

And some may have already crossed paths with the story to come.

The outbreak has only just begun.

The fluorescent lights buzzed overhead as Ladarius worked beneath them, his hands moving almost entirely on instinct.

Meat.

Lettuce.

Cheese.

Fold.

Repeat.

Another taco.

Another order.

Another impatient customer.

The line stretched nearly to the front door, and every few seconds, another order flashed across the monitor above his station.

"Hurry up!" someone shouted from the lobby.

Ladarius ignored it and reached for another taco shell.

Meat.

Lettuce.

Cheese.

Fold.

Repeat.

The finished taco disappeared into a bag with seventeen others.

Without wasting a second, he hurried it around the counter.

"Have a blessed evening, ma'am," he said, offering the exhausted smile he'd been wearing all shift.

The tiny woman couldn't have weighed more than a hundred and twenty pounds soaking wet. Judging by the size of the order, she had to be feeding an entire family.

She didn't respond.

Instead, she tore open the bag before she'd taken three steps from the counter.

The first taco disappeared in only a few bites.

Then another.

Then another.

She never slowed.

Never looked for a table.

She simply stood in the middle of the restaurant, tearing open taco after taco and devouring them almost faster than she could unwrap them.

Ladarius frowned.

"That's... different."

Shaking it off, he hurried back to his station.

The moment he looked up at the order monitor, his stomach sank.

The number of self-service orders had nearly doubled.

Every time he completed one...

Two more appeared.

There was no catching up now.

A coworker rushed over, slid a steaming tray of seasoned beef beside him, then disappeared back into the kitchen.

"Appreciate it," Ladarius muttered.

Without missing a beat, he grabbed another taco shell.

Meat.

Lettuce.

Cheese.

Fold.

Repeat.

The rhythm had become almost hypnotic.

Then a voice boomed across the dining room.

"Forget the tacos! Just let me buy a whole damn tray of beef!"

Several customers turned.

Almost immediately, another man pointed toward the serving line.

"Yeah! Me too! Just give me the beef or chicken!"

A woman near the drink station joined in.

"I don't even want the shell! Just put the meat in a wrapper. I'll buy it like that.

Ladarius paused for the briefest moment before reaching for another taco.

Something wasn't right.

The manager still hadn't shown up.

No phone call.

No text.

Nothing.

The cashier who normally worked the front had called in sick just before lunch. That left Ladarius making food, bagging orders, carrying meals to customers, and helping wherever he could for nearly three extra hours.

Sweat rolled down the side of his face.

He wiped it away with his shoulder and shook his head.

"This just ain't worth it," he muttered. "I was supposed to be clocked out three hours ago."

He glanced toward the back.

"I'm outta here."

Then something caught his eye.

His coworker stood just outside the manager's office. A fresh tray of taco meat rested on a prep cart beside him.

Instead of taking it to the serving line, he was scooping steaming beef into his mouth with his bare hands.

One handful.

Then another.

Grease dripped between his fingers and splattered onto the tile.

He didn't seem to notice.

Ladarius stopped cold.

"What…? All these people are crazy…"

A chill crept up his spine.

Something was terribly wrong.

Without another thought, he untied his apron, pulled it over his head, and tossed it onto the nearest prep table.

He headed for the back exit.

Before he could reach the door—

Shouting erupted behind him.

"Move!"

"Get outta my way!"

A deafening crash echoed through the kitchen.

Someone had climbed over the front counter.

Then another.

Metal pans clattered across the tile as customers shoved one another aside, swarming Ladarius's station and plunging their bare hands into the trays of meat.

"The tray of beef's mine!" one man screamed. "You better not touch it!"

Ladarius didn't look back.

He grabbed the back door, shoved it open, and stepped into the Fourth of July evening.

Humid Florida air wrapped around him.

For a brief moment, everything looked almost normal.

The smell of charcoal grills drifted through the neighborhood, mixing with lingering fireworks smoke. Pops and booms echoed across the city as bursts of red, blue, and white lit the darkening sky.

It should have felt like the Fourth of July.

Instead...

Something seemed off.

Ladarius pulled his electric bike away from the building, swung one leg over the seat, and pressed the power button.

The motor hummed quietly to life.

As he rolled through the alley behind Taco Bell, he noticed cars racing through intersections far faster than they should have.

Tires screeched.

Horns blared.

A pickup truck barely missed another vehicle before disappearing around a corner.

"Lord... what is happening?" he whispered.

A gentle twist of the throttle sent him toward home.

Without warning, a man burst into the street, sprinting across without so much as glancing at traffic.

Seconds later, another man came charging after him.

Instinctively, Ladarius let off the throttle.

Neither man shouted.

Neither said a word.

He twisted the throttle and continued on.

"I just need to get home."

The farther he traveled along the back roads toward his neighborhood, the stranger things became.

Cars rolled through stop signs without slowing.

Drivers leaned on their horns as they swerved around one another.

People darted between moving vehicles without looking.

Others stood outside gas stations and convenience stores, eating directly from grocery bags.

One man sat on a curb beside two open pizza boxes, shoving slice after slice into his mouth without pausing.

Nearby, a woman leaned against the hood of her car, drinking straight from a gallon jug of water. She emptied it, tossed it aside, then grabbed another from the back seat.

"Lord..." Ladarius murmured. "What is going on tonight?"

His grip tightened around the handlebars.

Then, at last...

The familiar oak tree in his front yard came into view.

Relief washed over him.

Finally.

Home.

Coasting beneath the old oak, Ladarius brought the bike to a stop where he always parked it.

He pulled the heavy chain from his pocket, wrapped it around the trunk, threaded it through the bike's frame, and snapped the lock shut.

No matter how strange the evening had become, some routines happened without thinking.

Just as he turned toward the house, another car screamed down the street.

Its tires squealed as it disappeared around the corner.

For a moment, Ladarius simply watched it go.

"Lord... please let everybody be okay. This has got to be the craziest 4Th I've ever seen..."

He climbed the porch steps, unlocked the front door, and stepped inside.

The familiar smell of home welcomed him.

The door clicked shut behind him as he slipped off his Taco Bell visor and hung it on the wooden coat rack beside the entrance. His keys landed with a soft clink in the small bowl on the entry table.

"G-Ma," he called as he walked farther into the house, "you wouldn't believe the day I just had."

No answer.

He smiled anyway.

"I don't know what got into folks today. They just kept coming through those doors wanting more and more food. I ain't never seen anything like it."

Passing the living room, Ladarius noticed the television quietly playing the local news but barely gave it a glance.

"I swear, I think half the city showed up at Taco Bell tonight."

Still nothing.

A quiet chuckle escaped him.

"You must've already started supper."

He continued down the hallway toward his bedroom, still talking.

"I've been praying about it all day, G-Ma. I really believe the Lord's opening another door for me. I don't think he means for me to stay at Taco Bell forever."

A smile spread across his face.

"If it's His will... maybe I'll finally get to start working with the youth over at church."

The only reply was the low hum of the refrigerator...

...and the faint sound of someone chewing.

Ladarius frowned.

He stepped into his bedroom and closed the door behind him.

For the first time all evening...

Everything was still.

Bending down, he untied his work shoes and kicked them beside the dresser before pulling his phone from his pocket.

31%.

"Better get you on the charger."

As he reached for the cable on his nightstand, several notifications caught his eye.

"I didn't even have time to look at these today."

He unlocked the phone.

A couple of missed text messages.

A weather alert.

A notification from his Bible app.

Then one email caught his eye.

First Baptist Church of Vero Beach.

His heart skipped a beat.

He tapped it open.

Thank you for your interest Ladarius.

After carefully reviewing your application, we'd like to invite you to interview for our Youth Ministry position at First Baptist Church of Vero Beach.

Ladarius froze.

Slowly, a smile spread across his face.

He lowered his head.

"Thank You, Lord."

His eyes filled with tears.

"I knew You had a plan."

For months, he'd prayed for God to open a door—to give him the chance to leave Taco Bell and begin serving in youth ministry.

Maybe...

Just maybe...

This was the answer he'd been praying for.

He looked down at the screen again and smiled.

"G-Ma's gonna be so happy."

Still clutching the phone, Ladarius hurried toward the kitchen, eager to share the news.

"G-Ma," he called as he rounded the corner, holding up the phone. "You are not gonna believe what happened."

His G-Ma stood with her back to him in front of the open refrigerator.

Bright white light spilled across the kitchen floor, casting long shadows through the room.

She didn't answer.

She just kept chewing.

Ladarius chuckled softly.

"You must've been hungrier than I was after work."

Still smiling, he stepped farther into the kitchen.

"I've been trying to tell you about my day."

Nothing.

Not even a glance.

The smile slowly faded from his face.

The refrigerator door was wide open.

So was the pantry.

Empty cracker boxes were scattered across the counter. Potato chip bags, food wrappers, and empty food cans were everywhere.

A loaf of bread sat open beside an empty package of lunch meat.

An empty egg carton just beside her on the floor with egg shells scattered about.

The kitchen looked as though someone had torn through every cabinet searching for something to eat.

Then another sound reached him.

Water.

The faucet had been left running.

A steady stream poured into the stainless-steel sink, splashing endlessly against the basin.

"My Lord..."

His stomach tightened.

G-Ma still hadn't turned around.

An oversized glass of water rested in her left hand. With her right, she reached into the refrigerator, grabbed something else, and slowly brought it to her mouth.

She took another bite.

Chewed.

Swallowed.

Slowly, Ladarius stepped closer.

"G-Ma...?"

No answer.

Concern replaced the last traces of his smile.

"G-Ma, what's wrong?"

He moved beside her.

The moment he saw what she was eating, his blood ran cold.

A package of raw chicken ripped open in the fridge.

One piece was clutched tightly in her hand.

She tore another bite from it with her teeth, chewing methodically as pink juices dripped onto the floor.

At her feet just in front of her lay a small pile of bones.

Every one of them had been picked completely clean.

"My God in Heaven..." Ladarius whispered. "G-Ma... you're gonna make yourself sick!"

He reached gently for her wrist.

The instant his fingers touched her, she jerked away with surprising force.

Ladarius recoiled.

Before he could say another word, she reached back into the refrigerator and grabbed a tube of raw breakfast sausage.

She bit through the plastic casing.

Then squeezed the raw sausage directly into her mouth.

Bite after bite.

Grease and juices ran down her chin.

"G-Ma, please..."

Ladarius reached for her again.

Before his fingers could touch her, she ripped her arm away.

This time, it wasn't just quick.

It was violent.

Ladarius stumbled back, staring at her in disbelief.

His heart pounded.

She had never moved like that before.

With trembling hands, he pulled out his phone and dialed 911.

The call connected almost immediately.

"911..." the operator answered between heavy breaths. "...what's your emergency?"

Ladarius froze.

Was...

Was she eating? Ladarius thought before ignoring it.

"My grandma!" he blurted. "Something's wrong! She won't stop eating! She's eating raw meat!"

Silence.

Then—

A scream tore through the phone.

Several rapid gunshots followed.

More screaming.

Another burst of gunfire erupted somewhere in the background.

"Hello?" Ladarius shouted. "Hello!"

No one answered.

But the line stayed open.

He could still hear the chaos on the other end.

People yelling.

Someone crying.

Gunshots cracking in the distance.

Then—

BEEEEEP!

The television in the living room erupted with the piercing tone of an Emergency Alert System broadcast.

Ladarius jumped.

His eyes darted toward the television...

...then back to G-Ma.

She hadn't reacted.

Slowly, he slipped his phone into his pocket, never taking his eyes off her.

Step by cautious step, he backed into the living room...

...and turned toward the television.

NATIONAL EMERGENCY ALERT: EXTREME
JULY 4, 8:19 PM

The Department of Health and Human Services and the Centers for Disease Control are investigating reports of severe adverse reactions associated ILIXIR .

Individuals experiencing extreme aggression, confusion, violent behavior, abnormal eating habits, or altered mental state should seek immediate medical attention.

Avoid contact with blood, saliva, or bodily fluids from symptomatic individuals. Do not attempt to restrain violent persons.

Emergency services are experiencing unusually high call volumes.

A low, feverish whimper drifted from the kitchen.

Barely louder than a whisper.

Ladarius' eyes slowly pulled away from the television and toward the sound.

"G-Ma...?"

No answer.

His heart hammered against his ribs.

Ladarius bumped into the end table beside G-Ma’s recliner, her hearing aids rolled off and onto the carpet below.

She was no longer bent over the refrigerator.

She stood perfectly upright.

Perfectly still.

The refrigerator door remained open behind her, its pale light spilling across the kitchen floor.

She didn't reach for more food.

Didn't chew.

Didn't move.

She simply stood there...

Facing away from him.

The silence that followed was somehow more terrifying than the eating had been.

Unsure of what else to do, Ladarius slowly backed toward the front door.

The commotion outside was growing louder.

Car horns.

Shouting.

A scream somewhere down the street.

Then a woman ran past the kitchen window.

"Help me!"

G-Ma sprang to life.

She launched herself toward the sudden movement outside with such violence that Ladarius barely had time to react.

She slammed face-first into the kitchen window.

CRASH!

Glass exploded outward as her head and shoulders punched through the pane.

She immediately grabbed the frame and began pulling herself through.

Jagged shards still clung to the edges, slicing into her arms as she dragged herself across them. More broken glass tore into her stomach as she forced the rest of her body through.

She never slowed.

Never cried out.

Within seconds, she tumbled outside, scrambled to her feet, and took off after the screaming woman.

Ladarius stood frozen.

Blood coated the jagged pieces of glass still clinging to the bottom of the window frame. Slowly, it seeped over the sill and ran down the wall beneath it.

For a moment, he couldn't move.

Couldn't speak.

He could only stare through the shattered window as G-Ma disappeared into the chaos outside.

Slowly, his attention returned to the television.

The warning still filled the screen.

He barely had time to read another word before—

Everything went black.

The television shut off.

The lights vanished.

The hum of the refrigerator died.

In an instant, every trace of electricity in the house was gone.

Only the chaos outside remained.

His shock finally gave way to fear.

Ladarius bolted down the hallway toward his bedroom.

He rushed inside and slammed the door behind him.

Without wasting a second, he grabbed the dresser and dragged it across the floor, wedging it against the door.

Then he shoved his bed against the dresser, bracing both against the entrance.

Only when the barricade was in place did he step back.

His chest heaved as he stared at the door, listening to the chaos outside.

Ladarius closed his eyes and clasped his trembling hands together.

"Lord, please protect me..."

He tried to steady his breathing.

"Please protect G-Ma. Please protect everyone out there."

He kept praying.

Over and over.

The same words.

The same pleas.

Anything to keep his mind from what he'd just witnessed.

Then—

"HELP!"

Ladarius' eyes snapped open.

The shout had come from outside his bedroom window.

He cautiously moved toward it and peered through the glass.

A man sprinted across the yard next door.

Three people chased close behind him.

Then Ladarius saw the fourth one lagging behind.

G-Ma.

His heart twisted.

"No..."

The man glanced over his shoulder as he ran.

His foot caught on a blue toy car lying in the grass.

He went down hard.

The three people chasing him fell on him almost immediately.

The man thrashed beneath them, desperately trying to push them away.

G-Ma reached the pile seconds later.

She grabbed for one of his arms as he fought to pull it away.

"Get off me!"

His legs kicked against the grass.

His body twisted beneath them.

Then Ladarius heard him scream.

Not a shout for help.

A scream of pain.

Ladarius recoiled from the window, his arm striking the television on the stand beside him.

The flat screen rocked backward.

Before he could catch it, it toppled over.

CRASH!

The television slammed onto the floor.

Ladarius froze.

For several seconds, he didn't move.

Then, he slowly leaned toward the window and peered outside.

The man lay in the grass, sobbing.

The people who had attacked him were no longer interested in him.

They stood around him.

Still.

G-Ma stood among them.

Every one of them was facing towards Ladarius' house now.

The man continued crying at their feet, completely ignored.

Ladarius' breath caught in his throat.

The TV.

They had heard it.

The man slowly staggered to his feet.

He looked from one person to the next, his face twisted with fear and confusion.

"What the hell is wrong with you people?!”

None of them reacted.

They remained perfectly still, all facing the same direction.

The man noticed.

Following their gaze, he turned toward Ladarius' bedroom window.

Ladarius quickly ducked beneath the sill.

"Help me!" the man shouted. "I don't know what is going on around here!"

Ladarius pressed himself against the wall beneath the window.

The man's voice grew closer.

"Please! I bet you!"

BANG! BANG! BANG!

Ladarius nearly jumped out of his skin.

The man was right outside.

"They aren't moving!" he shouted, pounding against the glass. "Let me in! Please!"

BANG! BANG! BANG!

"Please!"

Ladarius stared up at the window, afraid to move.

The glass shuddered in its frame with every blow.

"The fuckers aren't doing anything! I'm going around to the front door! I'll pay you whatever you want!"

Ladarius' stomach dropped.

If the man went around front, he might lead every one of them straight inside.

"No, don't!" Ladarius shouted from beneath the window. "The people are sick!"

For a moment, there was silence.

Then the man screamed.

A raw, terrified scream.

Ladarius looked up slowly at the window above him.

Several faces suddenly filled the window.

Ladarius scrambled backward.

G-Ma was among them.

Hands slapped against the glass.

Fingers scraped along the pane as bodies shoved against one another, each trying to get closer.

Low, sickly moans came from their throats.

"Go away!" Ladarius screamed.

The only response was more determination.

More hands struck the glass.

More bodies pressed against it.

The entire window began to shake.

A thin crack appeared across the pane.

Then another.

Ladarius stared as they spread through the glass.

"No... no, no, no..."

The window frame groaned beneath the weight of the bodies pressing against it.

Another sharp CRACK filled the bedroom.

They were going to come through.

Ladarius spun toward the door.

The barricade.

What had protected him only moments ago was now trapping him inside.

He rushed to the bed and pulled with everything he had, dragging it away from the dresser.

Behind him, the window cracked again.

He grabbed the dresser and began shoving it away from the door.

"Come on... come on!"

CRASH!

The window gave way.

Glass scattered across the bedroom floor.

Ladarius didn't look back.

He kept pushing.

Behind him came the scrape of hands against the window frame.

Then a heavy thud.

He glanced over his shoulder.

A woman had forced herself through the broken window and fallen onto the bedroom floor.

She immediately began scrambling to her feet.

Ladarius shoved the dresser aside.

Just enough.

He grabbed the doorknob, squeezed through the opening, and ran.

He tore out of the bedroom and slammed the door behind him.

He didn't stop to see if the woman got back up.

Didn't stop to listen.

His bare feet pounded against the floor as he raced down the dark hallway toward the front door.

Behind him, something slammed against his bedroom door.

Ladarius grabbed his keys from the bowl, twisted the front doorknob, threw the door open, and charged through.

The screen door flew outward as he slammed through it and stumbled onto the porch.

The neighborhood that had been celebrating the Fourth of July only hours earlier had descended into total chaos.

Screams echoed randomly in the distance.

Accompanied by gunfire.

A few scattered shots.

Then several more.

Police sirens wailed somewhere beyond the neighborhood, growing louder before fading away again.

Ladarius crouched beside the porch and cautiously peered around the corner of the house.

The people who had been trying to force their way through his bedroom window were gone.

He searched the yard.

Nothing.

"Lord... what do I do?"

He had no idea.

Where was he supposed to go?

Who was he supposed to call?

The police?

After what he'd heard on the phone, he didn't even know if any police were left to call.

He couldn't stay here.

Ladarius stared into the darkness, his mind racing. He had to decide fast.

Then it came to him.

"The church."

He hurried to the oak tree, unlocked his electric bike, climbed on, and took off.

Street after street, watching the carnage of the night unfold around him.

Cars sat wrecked in intersections.

Some burned along the roadside, flames pouring from beneath their hoods.

Others had simply been abandoned in the middle of the street, engines still running, headlights shining into empty yards.

Screams carried through the humid night.

People ran between houses.

Others chased after them.

Gunfire cracking seldomly not too far away.

Ladarius kept moving.

Whenever the road ahead looked too dangerous, he turned down another street.

He cut through back roads and narrow walkways between buildings.

Going places cars couldn't easily go and most people weren't using.

He didn't know how far this nightmare had spread.

All he knew was that he had to reach the church.

Ladarius rounded another corner—

And immediately stopped his bike.

A car burned in the street ahead.

Flames poured from the vehicle, casting a bright orange glow across the road, the neighboring yards, and a small house beside it.

At least a dozen people crowded around the house's front door.

They shoved and clawed their way forward, struggling to get inside.

Then the crowd surged.

Several disappeared through the doorway.

Gunfire erupted from inside.

Ladarius flinched.

Shot after shot cracked through the night.

Then, almost as quickly as it had started—

Silence.

Ladarius twisted the throttle, crossing to the opposite side of the street. He tried to put as much distance between himself and the house as he could.

An American flag hung from a pole near the front porch, waving calmly in the warm night breeze.

As Ladarius drew even with the house, the orange glow from the burning car illuminated the doorway.

He almost involuntarily vomited.

Now he understood why they'd had so much trouble getting inside.

It wasn't a baracade…

It was bodies…

They were piled on top of one another across the porch and inside the front door entrance.

Twenty.

Maybe thirty.

So many they nearly clogged the doorway.

"My God..."

Ladarius kept riding.

Fat up ahead he noticed movement.

Someone came sprinting out of the darkness onto the road coming toward the house.

Then another.

Three more appeared between two homes.

More emerged from a street behind him.

They weren't running away from the gunfire.

They were running toward it.

The shooting had drawn them.

And they were coming from every direction to this location.

Some began changing course as they got closer.

Toward Ladarius.

One after another, they broke away from the others and sprinted toward his bike.

Some charged out of yards.

Others came tearing down the middle of the street.

Ladarius looked over his shoulder.

More were coming from behind him.

"Oh, Lord..."

He twisted the throttle as far as it would go.

The electric bike surged forward.

But they kept coming.

Full sprint.

From both sides of the street.

From behind him.

They were converging on him.

Ladarius had no choice.

He jerked the handlebars to the side and took the bike off the road.

The tires bounced violently across the grass as he cut through a front yard.

Behind him, they kept coming.

He glanced over his shoulder.

They were getting closer.

Suddenly, someone came barreling around the corner of a house ahead.

Ladarius barely had time to react.

"Move!"

He swerved.

The man lunged at him as hepassed, his fingers brushing Ladarius' shirt before slipping away.

The bike wobbled beneath him.

Ladarius fought the handlebars and managed to keep it upright.

"Leave me alone!"

The man didn't answer.

None of them did.

No shouting.

No threats.

No growling.

Nothing.

They simply ran.

No matter how much Ladarius yelled, they never responded. They just kept following as more appeared from different directions.

Gunshots erupted again from the direction of the burning house behind him.

Ladarius flinched and glanced into the small side-view mirror mounted on his handlebars.

The orange glow of the burning car was still visible behind him.

Several of the people chasing him suddenly stopped.

Their heads turned toward the gunfire.

Then they bolted back toward the sound.

Ladarius didn't wait to see what the others would do.

He kept going.

But he couldn't build any speed.

Every time he managed to put some distance between himself and the people behind him, another abandoned car forced him to slow down and weave around it.

A wreck blocked half the road ahead.

He swerved around it.

Another car sat sideways across the next lane.

He cut through another yard.

Then his eyes grew wide.

"No..."

The entire intersection was blocked.

Two vehicles had collided head-on, with several others crashed or abandoned around.

There was no way through.

A man standing in a nearby yard saw Ladarius approaching.

Then he saw what was behind him.

The man hurried inside his house and slammed the door.

Ladarius desperately searched for another way around.

In the middle of the street, a man lay completely still.

Blood surrounded his body, shining beneath the headlights of an abandoned car.

Ladarius squeezed the brakes.

The bike skidded to a stop.

He looked behind him.

They were still coming.

Then he glared back toward the intersection.

There wasn't a way around.

There was only one choice.

Ladarius jumped off.

He left the electric bike where it stood...

And ran.

The infected behind him didn't hesitate.

They continued the chase.

There were nearly a dozen of them now.

Some were faster than others, but every one of them seemed to not slow down.

Fortunately, Ladarius knew how to run.

Just a year earlier, during his senior year of high school, he'd placed second in the region in track.

He cut through one yard.

Then another.

A fence appeared ahead.

Ladarius didn't slow down.

He planted a hand on top and vaulted over it, landing hard on the other side before breaking into another sprint.

He raced through the next backyard, circling a large above-ground pool.

Another yard.

An old trampoline sat crooked in the grass, its safety net torn and hanging loose from the frame.

Ladarius darted around it and kept running.

He risked a glance over his shoulder.

Half of them were gone.

The ones that remained were much farther back now.

But they were still following.

Still running.

Ladarius faced forward and pushed himself harder.

He knew what he had to do.

He couldn't just outrun them.

He had to break their line of sight.

He rounded the corner of a small home.

It was almost impossible to see.

With the electricity out, the neighborhood had been swallowed by darkness. Only the pale light of the moon remained, barely

illuminating the silhouettes of houses, fences, and trees around him.

He rounded the side of another house—

And slammed directly into someone.

Both of them crashed to the ground.

Ladarius scrambled backward, his heart pounding.

In the faint moonlight, he saw who he'd collided with.

A boy.

He couldn't have been much older than twelve or thirteen.

A small school backpack was strapped over his shoulders, and in what little moonlight reached them, Ladarius could see tears streaking down his face.

For a second, they just stared at each other.

Before Ladarius could say another word, the boy scrambled to his feet and ran.

"YO, BRO! I'M NOT LIKE THEM! WAIT UP!" Ladarius cried out.

The boy never looked back.

He disappeared around the side of the house and vanished into the darkness.

Then he heard it.

Footsteps.

Fast.

Several sets of them.

Getting closer.

His shouting had given away his location.

Ladarius scrambled to his feet and took off.

Seconds later, the infected rounded the corner behind him.

There were ten of them now.

Maybe more.

One took the corner too fast and lost its footing, crashing hard to the ground.

The others didn't stop.

They didn't even look at the fallen person.

They just kept sprinting.

Ladarius burst into the street.

His legs were on fire.

Every breath burned in his chest, and he didn't know how much longer he could keep this up.

The infected who were slower than him weren't much slower now.

And one of them was different.

A fit man had pulled ahead of the others and was gaining on him.

He was almost as fast as Ladarius.

A year ago, Ladarius could've maintained this pace longer.

But now—

Every step drained what little strength he had left.

Desperate Ladarius looked around before spotting it.

"Salvation..." he muttered between ragged breaths.

A dumpster.

It sat behind an office building no more than a hundred yards ahead, beneath the canopy of two massive oak trees.

One of the lids was already open.

Ladarius didn't have another option.

He reached for whatever strength remained inside him and pushed.

Harder than he ever had during track.

His exhausted legs screamed with every stride.

His lungs begged him to stop.

But he refused.

For those final hundred yards, Ladarius gave everything he had.

The problem was...

He didn't have much left to give.

No matter how hard he pushed, the infected continued gaining.

The fit man was the closest.

Then another began closing the distance.

Then another.

Their footsteps pounded against the pavement behind him.

Closer.

Closer.

The dumpster was still ahead.

Ladarius gritted his teeth and kept running.

Lord, please...

Ten or fifteen feet.

That was all that separated him from the people behind him now.

He didn't look back.

He couldn't.

He just kept throwing one foot in front of the other.

Again.

Again.

And again.

Then, after what felt like an eternity—

He was there.

Ladarius threw himself toward the dumpster and leapt inside.

Trash bags crunched beneath his weight as he crashed down.

His head slammed against the metal wall with a loud—

THUD!

Pain shot through his skull.

Ladarius reached up, grabbed the open plastic lid, and yanked it down.

The infected reached the dumpster just as he disappeared beneath it.

They slammed into the side just as the lid dropped shut.

Ladarius lay frozen.

They were just inches away.

Nothing but the plastic lid and steel walls of the dumpster separated him from them.

For the first time, he could actually hear them.

Heavy, exhausted breathing.

A strange, pained moaning.

Low.

Weak.

Almost like the sound someone might make when they were deathly sick.

Ladarius pressed himself deeper into the trash and tried not to make a sound.

They clawed at the lid.

Others scraped and pounded against the walls, the metal booming around him as they tried to get inside.

He curled himself tighter among the trash bags and stayed completely still.

Minutes passed.

Slowly, the banging stopped.

The scratching stopped.

Everything went quiet around him.

His lungs were still burning. Sweat ran down his face as he desperately tried to control his breathing.

He waited.

And waited.

Finally, he shifted slightly against one of the trash bags.

BANG!

BANG!

The dumpster shook.

Clawing erupted against the lid.

Hands scraped across the plastic above him while others pounded against the steel walls.

Ladarius froze again.

Within a few moments, the dumpster became still again.

They hadn't left.

They were waiting.

Slowly, Ladarius reached into his pocket and pulled out his phone.

The battery icon was red.

Almost dead.

He stared at the screen for a moment.

Then he remembered something.

Carefully, trying not to disturb the trash around him, Ladarius reached for his back left pocket.

It was still there.

A faint smile crossed his face.

He pulled out his small travel Bible.

Of everything he'd lost tonight, somehow he'd managed to hold on to that.

Using what little battery remained, Ladarius turned on his phone's flashlight and opened the Bible.

This was something he'd always done whenever he needed guidance.

Whenever he felt lost or didn't know what to do, he'd open a random page and read.

Somehow, he could always find something.

An answer.

A direction.

Or at least something that helped him understand what he was supposed to do next.

Ladarius closed his eyes.

Then he let the Bible fall open in his hands.

He raised the phone and shined its weakening light across the page.

Ladarius lowered his eyes to the words.

And began to read.

Isaiah 26:20

"Go, my people, enter your rooms
and shut the doors behind you;
hide yourselves for a little while
until his wrath has passed by."

Ladarius stopped.

He stared at the verse.

Then slowly raised his eyes toward the plastic lid above him.

He was hidden away.

The lid shut over him.

And just inches beyond it were the people who had chased him through the streets.

His eyes returned to the Bible.

"Hide yourselves for a little while..."

A chill moved through him.

It was exactly what he was doing.

He sat there for several seconds, staring at the words.

Then he continued.

"See, the LORD is coming out of his dwelling
to punish the people of the earth for their sins.
The earth will disclose the blood shed on it;
the earth will conceal its slain no longer."

Ladarius stared at the page.

Then he closed his eyes again.

He let his fingers move through the pages.

Stopped.

And opened the Bible somewhere else.

Jeremiah.

His eyes traveled down the page until a verse caught his attention.

Jeremiah 7:33.

Ladarius began to read.

"Then the carcasses of this people will become food for the birds and the wild animals, and there will be no one to frighten them away."

His eyes stopped moving.

The words sat heavily in his mind.

He thought about everything he'd seen tonight.

The bodies.

The blood.

People being chased through the streets.

People being killed.

The pile of bodies clogging the entrance of that house.

G-Ma.

Ladarius slowly closed the Bible.

For a moment, he simply sat there in the darkness.

Glancing down at his phone.

The battery icon was deep red.

Several unread messages and notifications remained on the screen.

He opened the first one.

URGENT NATIONAL MESSAGE

ILIXIR RELEASE DATE:
JULY 3
3:00 P.M. EST

Ladarius stared at it.

His eyes moved toward the corner of the screen.

1%.

He couldn't waste what little battery he had left.

Ladarius held down the power button.

His thumb hovered over the screen.

Then he stopped.

July 3.

3 P.M.

Something clicked.

His eyes widened.

"No..."

He immediately grabbed the Bible and flipped through the pages.

His fingers moved frantically.

"Come on... come on..."

Jeremiah.

He found the passage again and raised the dying phone over the page.

Jeremiah 7:33.

Ladarius froze.

He looked at his phone.

JULY 3
3:00 P.M.

Then back to the Bible.

7:33.

July third.

3 P.M.

His eyes returned to the verse.

"Then the carcasses of this people will become food for the birds and the wild animals, and there will be no one to frighten them away."

The phone trembled in his hand.

Slowly, Ladarius raised his eyes toward the closed lid above him.

What was left of the sliver of battery was now gone as the phone turned off.

Total darkness.

Ladarius didn't move.

For several seconds, he couldn't see anything.

But his eyes began to adjust.

Thin slivers of moonlight appeared through the cracks around the dumpster lid.

Just enough to remind him where he was.

Just enough to see the steel walls surrounding him.

Just inches beyond the wall beside his head—

A slow, labored breath.

Then another.

A faint, sickly moan.

Low.

Weak.

Almost a whisper.

Ladarius held his breath.

They were still there.

Waiting for him.

# The Outbreak Has Only Begun

You've just read an exclusive bonus story from the world of:

ILIXIR

The short stories you receive through this list are bonus material created outside the novel.

These stories explore different people, places, and moments during the outbreak—events happening beyond the main story as the world falls apart.

While LADARIUS may or may not be included in the novel itself, the people, consequences, and events of these stories are still part of the larger world.

Some characters may return.

Some may be remembered.

And some moments may matter more than they first seem.

Every story is another piece of the outbreak.

Another glimpse into what happened when everything changed.




# ILIXIR: In the Shade They Wait

Projected Release: July 2027

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