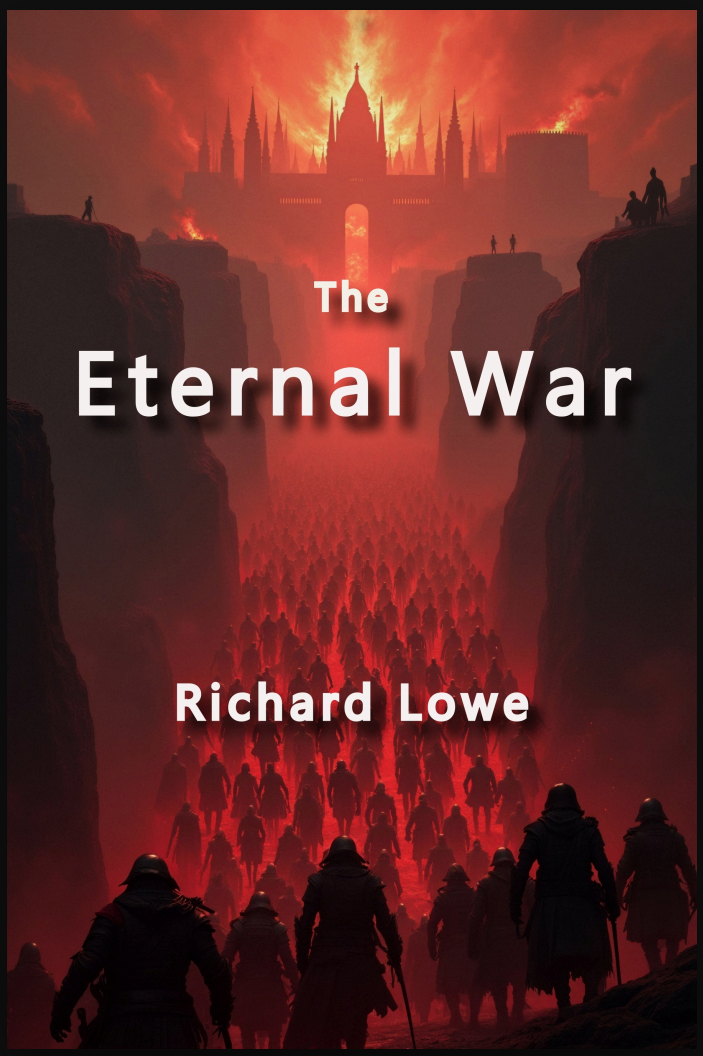
A FREE COMPANION TO THE ETERNAL WAR

What Comes Out of the Ground

Six weeks after the ground opened in Deir Ezzor, Ruslan Dudayev climbs a mountain to the one place where nobody goes after dark.



RICHARD LOWE

What Comes Out of the Ground

The ground north of the compound was soft where the irrigation water had run in the spring, and Ruslan chose it for that reason and no other.

He dug with a folding shovel from the back of Adam's truck. The blade was short and the handle was shorter, and every third stroke the hinge slipped and he had to lock it again with his thumb.

Behind him the compound burned in two places. The light came across the scrub in long low pulses, enough to see the edge of the hole he was making and not enough to see the bottom of it.

Adam dug beside him. Two of the others dug further down the line, and the rest stood on the ridge with their rifles pointed at a desert that had nothing left in it worth pointing at.

Nobody talked. The American helicopter had come and gone an hour ago, low and dark, and the sound of it had gone south and taken the last of the noise with it.

There were six graves. Five had bodies in them.

Khasan went into the first. He was the one the thing had picked up, and Ruslan had heard his scream from forty meters away and heard it stop.

He had found him afterward at the edge of the irrigation ditch with his rifle still slung. The sling had held. Most of Khasan had not.

Ruslan wrapped him in his own coat because there was nothing else, and the cold came through his shirt at once. He did not mind the cold. The cold gave his hands a reason to shake.

Musa and Aslan went in next, brothers, hit by the same sweep of the same arm. They had argued all the way down from the north about a girl in Gaziantep that neither of them would ever see again.

Adam stopped digging to look at them. Then he started again.

The fourth grave was Ibragim, who had fired the third rocket from ten feet and been knocked flat by his own blast. He had gotten up. Then he had stopped being able to get up.

The fifth was a man whose name Ruslan did not know well, one of the ones who had come in from Raqqa in the summer. He had a Saudi accent and a bad knee and had never once complained about either.

Ruslan put him in the ground with the same care as the others. He decided he would learn the man's name properly later, from someone who knew it.

The sixth grave was empty.

Zelimkhan had been nineteen. He had run from the courtyard, which was what any sane man would have done, and two of the arms had come down on him four steps from the wall.

Ruslan had gone back for him while the Americans were bandaging their own. He had found his cap and the front half of one boot.

He laid the cap in the bottom of the sixth hole. It was a cheap black cap from a market stall, too big for him, and the boy had worn it backward because he had seen a man do that in a movie.

"His mother," Adam said.

It was the first thing anyone had said in an hour. Adam was thirty and had been fighting since he was fifteen, and he said it like a man who had been holding it in his mouth the whole time.

"I know," Ruslan said.

"Who tells her?"

Ruslan straightened up. His back had stiffened from the digging and from the second shell out of the airplane, which had put him on the ground hard enough that he could still taste the dirt.

“I tell her,” he said.

“And what do you tell her?”

That was the question. Adam was not stupid, and Adam had seen what everyone had seen, and he wanted to know what words existed for it.

“I tell her he was brave,” Ruslan said. “I tell her it was quick.”

“It wasn't quick for Khasan.”

“I'm not telling Khasan's mother anything. Khasan's mother is dead.”

Adam looked at him. Then he went back to the shovel, and the hinge on his slipped too, and he swore at it in Russian, which was what he did when he did not want to swear in his own language.

When the holes were filled they stood at the head of the line, all the men still alive, and Ruslan said the words. His father had said them over his uncle and over the neighbors and over the boy from the bakery who stepped on the wrong part of the road. Then someone else had said them over his father.

Ruslan had learned them the way you learn the sound of your own front gate. He said them evenly. He did not weep.

There had been a time to weep for Chechnya, and he had spent it, years of it, in cellars and forests and in the back of a truck in the snow outside a city that was not there anymore. That time was finished. What came after was colder and quieter and more useful, and he had built himself out of it the way you build a wall out of whatever stones the field gives you.

The sky to the east had gone the color of dishwater.

“Now we go,” Adam said.

“Now you go,” Ruslan said. “Split up. Different roads.”

“For how long?”

“Nobody goes home for a month.”

“And you?”

“I have work here.”

Adam looked past him at the compound. One of the fires had gone down to a red smear. The other was still climbing the outside of the main building where the generator had been.

“You're going back in there,” Adam said.

“Yes.”

“There is nothing in there but dead men and a hole.”

“Then I'll see dead men and a hole.”

Adam opened his mouth and closed it. He had followed Ruslan for nine years, and in nine years he had learned which arguments were worth starting.

He held out his hand instead. Ruslan took it.

“Whatever that was,” Adam said, “nobody will believe us.”

“No,” Ruslan said. “And the ones who believe us will want us to show them where it lives.”

“So what do we say?”

“Nothing. Not to anyone. Not drunk, not to a woman, not to a mullah.”

Adam laughed once, with no amusement in it, because Adam had not had a drink in six years and had not spoken to a mullah in longer. Then he walked to his truck.

* * *

The courtyard smelled worse in daylight.

Ruslan came in through the crack the thing had opened in the outer wall, because the gate hung jammed on one hinge. Mud brick lay across the ground in heaps. A sandbag from the roof had landed in the middle of the outer courtyard and split, and the sand had run out of it in a fan, perfectly smooth, the only clean thing in the place.

The two men who had shared the cigarette were still against the far wall. Their rifles lay in the dirt beside them.

The Americans had come through the gate the way Ruslan had told these two they would come, and the two had died the way he had known they would die. They had known it too when they sat down there in the dark to wait.

He stood and looked at them for a while.

Then he went through into the inner courtyard.

The hole was smaller than it had been. In the dark it had been a crater with raw broken edges that steamed in the cold. Now it was the width of a small room, as deep as a man's thigh, and the edges had softened.

He watched one of them move.

It was slow. He had to stare at a single clod of earth on the rim for most of a minute before he was sure.

The clod rolled a finger's width toward the center, and stopped, and rolled again. The dirt around it shifted with it, all of it leaning inward together like grass leaning in a current. The ground was closing itself, carefully, the way a man smooths a blanket over a bed so nobody will know he slept in it.

Ruslan took out his phone.

He photographed the hole from the doorway. He photographed it from the east side and the west side and from the top of the broken wall, standing on a block of mud brick that rocked under his boots. He climbed down into it and photographed the bottom, which was loose dark soil, churned like a field after the plow.

The smell came up out of the soil into his face.

It was the rot first, the same rot that had come off the thing, a big animal dead in a closed room. Under the rot was the other smell. It sat higher in the nose, behind the eyes, and it made the body want to stop breathing.

He had smelled it once before in his life. That was in a basement in Grozny where the Russians had kept people for a month before they left.

He knelt in the bottom of the hole and put his palm flat on the dirt.

It was warm. The morning was cold and the walls were cold and the dirt under his hand was warm, the warmth of a stone that has had the sun on it all day, and the sun had not been on it at all.

He climbed out and went and sat on the threshold of the back door, where the Americans had stood with their rifles up, and took out the notebook.

It was a cheap notebook with a cardboard cover, bought in a stationery shop in Mosul three years ago from a man who had looked at his rifle and charged him the correct price. He used it for things that did not yet have a shape. He did not write about men in it, or money, or the places he slept.

He drew the hole.

He drew it the way his grandfather had taught him to draw a sheep pen: the outline first, then the posts, then the gate, then the distances paced out and written along the sides in small numbers. He

paced the courtyard. He drew the direction the thing had come from and the direction it had gone, which was the same direction, and the angle of the wall it had broken coming out.

A photograph could be taken from you at a checkpoint by a boy with a gun who wanted your phone. A drawing in a notebook was a drawing in a notebook. Nobody had ever confiscated a drawing of a sheep pen.

By the time he finished, the hole was the width of a bed.

He sat and watched it close the rest of the way. It took most of an hour. At the end the center of the courtyard was a patch of loose dark soil a little lower than the ground around it, as if someone had dug a grave there and filled it badly, and the smell was almost gone.

A glint caught his eye at the edge of the patch.

He went and crouched over it. It was a wristwatch, a cheap one with a black plastic strap, face down in the dirt. The strap had been torn through at the buckle.

He turned it over. It was still running.

He knew it. Zelimkhan had bought it in the same market as the cap and shown it to everyone, because it had a light in it that came on when you pressed a button.

For three days the boy had pressed the button at people in the dark. Then Khasan told him he would feed it to him.

Ruslan pressed the button. The face lit up green. It was twenty past seven in the morning.

He put it in his shirt pocket and buttoned the pocket and went to find his truck.

* * *

He drove north for two days.

The truck was a white Mitsubishi with a cracked windshield and plates from a province it had never been to, and it needed an oil change. It had needed one since the summer. Every morning he listened to the engine knock when it was cold and thought about the oil, and every morning there was a better use for the hours.

He crossed into Turkey at a place he had crossed before. The guard was a young man with a mustache he was still growing into. He looked at the truck, and at the plates, and at Ruslan's face, and decided the registration could be another man's problem.

Ruslan gave him a carton of cigarettes he had brought for the purpose. The guard put it under his chair without looking at it.

In Gaziantep he rented a room over a tire shop from a Syrian named Nidal. Nidal sold telephones and the numbers that went in them, and occasionally the things that came out of them, and he did all of it in both directions.

He was not a friend. He was the kind of man you could trust exactly as far as he understood what you would do to him if you could not. He understood well enough.

Ruslan bought four phones from him. He made two calls from each. Then he took the batteries out and walked to a different part of the city and dropped the phones into four different drains.

He asked the same question every time, in Chechen or Russian or Arabic, depending on who answered. Has anything come up out of the ground where you are? Has the ground opened anywhere and closed again, and been written up as nothing?

Most people laughed. One man hung up.

A cousin in Pankisi said he would ask around. He said it carefully, the way people say things on a phone when they want you to hear that they have understood.

Then there was nothing to do but wait.

He waited two weeks. He slept in the room over the tire shop on a mattress that smelled of the last man's cigarettes. The shop below him started its compressor at seven every morning with a sound like a cow being strangled.

He ate in the same place every night. It was a lokanta where the owner's daughter did the homework for her English class at a back table and read the words aloud under her breath.

He listened to her do it: apple, window, afternoon, where is the station, please.

He had perhaps two hundred words of English. Most of them came from movies and most of the rest from Americans shouting at him from a distance. He sat with his tea and moved his lips along with the girl when nobody was looking.

He practiced the few that might matter: what, where, how many, I saw.

At night the dreams came.

They were not about the thing. He had expected them to be, and they were not. They were about the dirt, and the warmth of the dirt under his hand.

In the dream the warmth came up from a body the size of a valley lying a long way down. It was asleep and breathing slowly. Every breath pushed the ground up a little under him and let it down again, and it did not know he was there.

He woke from them sweating, with Zelimkhan's watch in his fist. He did not remember taking it out of his shirt.

The answers came on the thirteenth day.

They came in pieces, from people who did not know each other, through Nidal's phones and through a man who drove a bread truck between Kilis and the border. They were careful answers. People were always careful with things that made them sound mad.

A village in northern Iraq, the summer before. The ground had opened in a field behind the school during the night and eleven people had died, and the report said a gas leak.

There was no gas line within forty kilometers. The people who had lived through it would not say what they had seen. They would say only that they had seen it, and that it had gone back down.

A fishing settlement on the Caspian coast, two months before that. Nothing had been written about it at all.

A man who sold fish to the settlement had gone in one morning and found half of the boats gone and half of the houses empty. The sand behind the houses was dark and loose and a little lower than the beach around it. It looked as if someone had dug there and filled it badly.

The third answer came from the cousin in Pankisi. He had asked an old man, who had asked his sister, who had married into the high valleys forty years ago and never come down.

There was a village in the mountains, past the end of the good road. Above the village was a place where nobody went after dark. It had always been that way, and the old women said the ground up there breathed.

Ruslan wrote the three answers in the notebook, on a page of their own. At the top of the page he wrote a heading, and looked at it for a long time, and did not change it.

What comes out of the ground.

* * *

He did not go north at once.

A man with his face did not drive into those mountains without papers, and the papers took time. Nidal knew a man in Şanlıurfa who made them. The man in Şanlıurfa said three weeks, and then he said four.

Ruslan spent the weeks the way he had learned to spend waiting, which was by working at whatever was in front of him.

He went back over every photograph from the courtyard. He redrew the hole twice. He wrote down every word Khasan had said in the last week of his life, because he found he could not remember them all and it frightened him.

The papers were ready on a Thursday. He picked them up in the evening and was sitting in the cab of the truck outside the city with the photograph of the hole open on his phone when the radio said there had been trouble at Incirlik.

The radio did not say what. It said an explosion, and then it said an incident. Then a man came on and said the road from Adana was closed and the government asked people to stay in their homes.

At the truck stop where Ruslan bought diesel, the drivers stood around a television in the corner. They watched a picture of smoke from far away and argued about whether it was the Kurds or the Americans or a gas tank.

One of them was an old man with a cigarette behind his ear. He said his nephew was a cook on the base and had called his mother, and the nephew had said the runway came up.

The other drivers laughed at him. The old man did not laugh. He looked at the television and said it again, quieter: the runway came up.

Ruslan paid for his diesel and went back to the truck.

He sat in the cab with the engine off and looked at the photograph of the hole until the screen went dark by itself. Then he started the engine, and it knocked, and he drove north.

* * *

The good road ended where the cousin had said it would, at a bridge over a river the color of milk.

After the bridge the road was two ruts with grass between them, climbing. The Mitsubishi climbed it in first gear, knocking, and twice he had to get out and move a rock the size of a sheep before he could go on.

The air changed as he went up. It got thinner and colder. It smelled of wet stone and woodsmoke and the dung of animals he could not see.

He knew this kind of country. It was not his own, which lay two ranges east and a long way north, but the mountains did not know about borders and neither did the people in them.

The houses were stone at the bottom and wood at the top. The roofs were weighted with flat rocks against the wind. The hay was stacked on frames against the walls to dry.

The village had perhaps thirty houses. Perhaps twenty had smoke coming out of them.

He parked at the edge of it, by a spring that ran out of a pipe into a stone trough, and got out and washed his face and drank. The water was so cold it hurt his teeth.

When he straightened up there were four children on the wall across the road watching him, and a dog. Behind them in a doorway stood a woman in a black headscarf who did not pretend to be doing anything else.

He took his hands out of his pockets so she could see them.

The children vanished. The dog stayed.

It took most of the afternoon. People in places like this did not talk to men who drove up the road in trucks from somewhere else.

They talked even less to a man with his face. It had been broken twice and set by people who were not doctors, and it told anyone who looked at it what kind of life he had been living.

He sat by the spring and let them look. He ate bread from the truck. He did not go to any door.

Toward evening an old man came and sat on the other end of the trough and lit a cigarette. They talked about the road, and the winter that was coming, and the price of diesel in Tbilisi.

The old man's Russian was bad and Ruslan's was good, because two armies had taught it to him, one after the other. Ruslan did not explain that.

When the cigarette was finished Ruslan asked about the place above the village.

The old man stood up. He looked down the road at the truck with its foreign plates, and then up at the mountain behind the houses, where the slope rose into a shelf of rock and the last of the sun was going off the top of it.

“Khadizhat,” he said. “Ask Khadizhat.”

He walked away without saying goodbye.

* * *

Khadizhat was the woman in the doorway.

She was past seventy, small, with a back as straight as a fence post. Her hands had been in cold water and hard work for so long that the knuckles stood out like walnuts.

Her house was the last one on the uphill side. It was one room on the bottom and one room on top. The bottom room was warm from a stove made out of an oil drum, and it smelled of sheep's milk and smoke.

There was a boy at the table. He was nine or ten, thin, with ears that stuck out from under his hat, and he had a schoolbook open in front of him and a pencil worn down to the length of a finger.

“My daughter's son,” Khadizhat said. “Timur.”

“And his mother?”

“In Tbilisi, cleaning houses for people who don't deserve her.”

She gave Ruslan tea in a glass with a chip in the rim. She did not ask what he wanted. She sat down across from him with her own glass and looked at him the way the guard at the border had looked at the truck, deciding what would be another person's problem.

“You asked Givi about the stones,” she said.

“Yes.”

“Why?”

He had thought about this on the drive. He had thought about lying, and about the various lies, and about how a woman like this would hear each of them.

“I saw the ground open,” he said. “In Syria, six weeks ago.”

“And?”

“A thing came up out of it.”

The boy's pencil stopped.

Khadizhat did not look at the boy. She did not look away from Ruslan's face at all. She took a sip of her tea and set it down.

“What kind of thing?”

He told her. He told her the size of it and the skin of it and the eyes, and the arms, too many and too long and moving like they had each been given different orders.

He told her about Khasan and the rocket and the airplane that came over at the end and shook the ground with its guns until the thing went back down where it came from. He told her the hole closed itself in the morning, slowly, like a man smoothing a blanket.

He had not said any of it out loud before. His voice did all right until the blanket. Then it went thick and he had to drink some of the tea.

When he was done Khadizhat sat for a while with her hands around her glass.

"I have never seen anything come out," she said. "Nobody here has."

"Your family?"

"My grandmother didn't. Her grandmother didn't."

She turned the glass a quarter turn on the table.

"But it moves," she said. "Up there, under the stones. Some nights you can feel it from here, in your feet, if you stand on the floor without shoes."

"The animals?"

"The dogs feel it first."

"How often?"

She looked at the boy for the first time.

Timur turned his schoolbook around on the table and pushed it toward Ruslan. It was a mathematics book, a cheap one with soft pages, the kind the government sent up the mountain once a year in a truck. The exercises were done in pencil in a careful slanting hand.

In the margins, down the edges of the pages, there were other numbers.

They were in pairs, written small. The first number in each pair was a date, day and month. The second was a single digit, or sometimes two.

"She can't see to write anymore," Timur said.

It was the first thing he had said. His voice had the scratch in it that boys' voices get when they have been quiet too long.

"When it moves, she wakes me up," he said. "I write the day. Then I write how long."

"How long in what?"

The boy looked at his grandmother.

"In prayers," Khadizhat said. "How many times I can say the Fatiha while it is moving. That is how long."

Ruslan turned the pages. The numbers went back through the whole book, to the beginning of the school year, and past it onto the inside of the cover. There were more of them than he could count in the light from the stove.

"And before the book?"

"Before the book, I kept it in my head," Khadizhat said. "Before my head, my mother kept it in hers."

The number at the bottom of the last page was from four nights ago. The digit after it was a seven.

He ran his thumb down the column. Most of the digits were ones and twos. There was a three in the spring and two fours in the summer.

Then, starting about six weeks back, there was a five, and another five, and a six, and the seven. He had been in the courtyard in Deir Ezzor six weeks back.

"It's getting longer," he said.

“Yes,” Khadizhat said.

“Does anyone know? Does anyone come up here and ask?”

She laughed. It was a short, dry sound, a stick breaking.

“Once,” she said. “When I was a girl. Men came from the government in a truck with a machine in the back.”

“And?”

“They walked up to the stones in the daytime with their machine. They walked down again and drove away. Nobody ever told us what the machine said.”

“And after dark?”

“After dark,” she said, “nobody goes up there. Not the government, not the sheep, not me.”

She leaned across the table and put one of her walnut knuckles on the back of his hand. Her hand was warm from the glass.

“Not you,” she said.

* * *

He went up at midnight.

He had told her he would not. She had looked at him with the face of a woman who had raised a son and buried a husband and was raising a grandson, and who had been lied to on this exact subject by every one of them.

She said nothing. She gave him a wool blanket and a flashlight with a cracked lens and told him to sleep in the truck.

He did not sleep in the truck.

The path went up behind her house, past the hay frames, past a stone pen where her sheep stood pressed together against the far wall. Every one of them was facing downhill. He noticed it and kept walking.

The slope was steep and the grass was wet, and the cold came up out of the ground through his boots. There was no moon. There were more stars than he had seen since he was a boy, thick enough in places to look like frost on a window.

He kept the flashlight off and let his eyes do the work. He had learned that in the forests, when a light meant a sniper and a sniper meant you were done.

It took forty minutes to reach the shelf.

The stones were built into the hillside at the back of it, where the slope went up into rock. From below, in the daylight, they had looked like a sheep shelter fallen in on itself. Up close in the dark they were not that.

It was a low wall of fitted stone, chest high, curved, set into the mountain like a lip. The stones were enormous, some as big as the Mitsubishi. They had been cut to fit each other without mortar so closely that he could not get a fingernail into the seams.

There was no carving anywhere on them. There were no marks of any tool he could find, and he ran his hands over them for a long time looking.

In the center of the curve there was an opening. It was square and low, and a man would have to stoop to go through it.

Behind it there was only dark.

He stood in front of the opening and waited for his eyes to tell him what was there, and they told him nothing. The dark in there was not like the dark of a cave.

A cave has a back. It has a shape you can feel with your face, from the way the air moves off the walls. This had no shape.

The air coming out of it was still and cold, and it smelled faintly of the courtyard. The rot was old, the way a smell is old in a house where a man died years ago and the family scrubbed everything. Under the rot was the other smell, the high one behind the eyes, and that one was not faint at all.

He took out the phone and photographed the wall from the left side of the shelf and the right. He put his own boot in the frame for scale.

He photographed the opening with the flash. The flash went into it and did not come back. The picture on the screen afterward was a square of black inside a frame of lit stone, as clean as if he had painted it.

He did not go in.

He thought about it. He stood there a long time with the phone in one hand and the flashlight in the other and Zelimkhan's watch in his shirt pocket over his heart.

He had gone into bad places before.

He had gone into places with men in them and mines in them. This was another kind of place, and the part of him that had kept him alive through two wars had both hands on the back of his collar.

He sat down on the shelf ten meters from the opening, with his back against a boulder. He pulled Khadizhat's blanket around his shoulders and waited.

* * *

It came a little after two.

The dogs went first. Far below him in the village one started barking, and then all of them, every dog in the valley, the sound coming up the slope thin and frantic. Then they stopped, all together, in the middle of a bark.

He felt it in his tailbone.

It was a pressure, slow and enormous, building from a long way down. It was the same as the courtyard. It was the force he had felt through his boots in Deir Ezzor before the ground came apart, the patience of a great weight that had been working its way up for a long time.

The boulder at his back moved.

It did not shift or roll. It lifted. The whole shelf lifted under him a finger's width, the way the deck of a boat lifts on a long swell, and held, and let down again.

Ruslan rolled off the blanket onto his stomach and spread his arms and pressed himself flat against the grass. He did not decide to do it. His body did it the old way, the way you went down when the artillery started walking, before your mind had named the sound.

His cheek was against the ground. The ground was warm.

It lifted again under him. It was moving along the shelf from the left side of the curved wall toward the right, slowly, and he could feel the shape of it passing under him the way you feel a train pass under a city street.

It was long. It went on and on. It was longer than the thing in the courtyard, longer than the whole compound, and it was not coming up.

He started to say the Fatiha in his head. He did not decide to do that either.

He got through it once. Twice.

On the third time his teeth were chattering so hard that he lost the words and had to start the line again. He could not tell whether it was the cold or the other thing, and it did not matter which.

His hands were dug into the grass to the knuckles. He knew, distantly, that he had wet himself, and that it was warm, and then that it was cold.

Four times. Five.

Under him the long body went on moving. It did not hurry. It was not looking for him and it did not know he was there.

That was worse than being hunted. A thing that hunts you knows you are worth the trouble.

He thought of Zelimkhan's cap in the bottom of the empty grave. He thought of the boy at the table writing a seven in the margin of his mathematics book, small and careful, with his grandmother's hand on his shoulder in the dark. He thought of the hole in the courtyard closing itself in the morning light like a blanket smoothed over a bed.

Six. Seven.

On the eighth time through, the ground let down under him and did not lift again.

He lay where he was. The pressure went on fading for a long time, the way thunder goes on after the lightning, further off and further down until he could not tell whether he was feeling it or remembering it.

Then the dogs started again in the valley, one and then all of them. He had never in his life been so glad to hear dogs.

He did not get up for a long time. When he did, his knees would not straighten at first, and he stood bent over with his hands on them like an old man, breathing.

The opening in the curved wall was the same as before, square and low and black.

He looked at it. It did not look back.

It never had, and it never would.

He took out the notebook and sat on the boulder and drew the wall by the light of the cracked flashlight. He drew the curve of it and the opening and the shelf, and he paced the distance from the opening to the boulder and wrote it in small numbers.

Then he drew an arrow from the left side of the curve to the right, under the shelf. Beside it he wrote, in Chechen, the word his grandfather had used for a herd going past in the night when you could not see it, only hear it.

Under that he wrote eight.

He took Zelimkhan's watch out of his pocket and pressed the button. The face lit up green. He had not looked at it when the moving began, and he would not make that mistake twice.

* * *

Khadizhat was in her doorway when he came down.

It was gray light. Smoke was coming out of the chimney.

She looked at the blanket over his arm, and at the front of his trousers, and at his face. She did not say any of the things she could have said.

“Eight,” he said.

“I counted nine,” she said. “You're young. You say it faster.”

She went inside, and after a moment he followed her.

Timur was at the table again, as if he had never left it, in a sweater too big for him with the sleeves rolled four times. The schoolbook was open to the last page. At the bottom there was a new line, today's date, and beside it in the careful slanting hand, a nine.

Khadizhat put tea in front of Ruslan, and bread, and a bowl of sour milk. He ate all of it. He had not known he was hungry until the bread was in his hand, and then he could not stop.

She watched him eat with the same look she had given him at the spring. She refilled the bowl without asking.

When he was finished he took out his phone and showed the boy the picture of the opening, the black square in the lit stone.

"Have you been up there?"

"In the day," Timur said. "Everyone has, in the day. My mother took me when I was small."

"What did you do there?"

"You throw a stone in."

"What happens?"

"Nothing," the boy said. "You don't hear it land."

Ruslan put the phone away. He sat looking at the margin of the schoolbook, at the columns of small paired numbers going back to the start of the year and over the inside of the cover and into the head of an old woman who could not see to write them anymore.

"I need to show this to someone," he said.

Khadizhat raised her eyebrows. It was a small movement and it said a great deal.

"Someone far away," he said. "Someone who saw what I saw."

"Who else?"

"I don't know yet. I don't know if anyone will listen."

He touched the edge of the schoolbook.

"But I can't take the book," he said. "The boy needs it for school."

Timur looked at his grandmother. She looked back at him, and whatever went between them, Ruslan was not part of it.

Then the boy took the pencil and wrote the last line again on the inside of the back cover, small, with the nine. He turned the book over and found the last page and pressed it flat with his palm. He tore it out along the binding, slowly and carefully, so it would come out in one piece.

He held it out across the table.

Ruslan took it. It was soft and cheap and had a fractions exercise on one side, half finished, with a red mark from a teacher at the top. On the other side, down the edge, the margin was full of numbers.

He folded it in half and put it inside the cardboard cover of his notebook. Then he unbuttoned his shirt pocket and took out the watch.

"This was a friend's," he said.

He set it on the table in front of the boy.

"It has a light," he said. "You press here. When it moves, you write the time it starts and the time it stops, and your grandmother can sleep."

Timur pressed the button. The face lit up green in the gray room, and his whole face changed, the way Zelimkhan's had in the market.

"Your friend," Khadizhat said. "He doesn't need it?"

"No," Ruslan said.

She held his eyes a while longer. Then she nodded once, the way the women nod at the graveside, and got up to put more wood in the stove.

* * *

It took him three days to get back to Gaziantep.

The truck knocked all the way. At the Turkish post going south the guard was an older man with reading glasses on a cord. He looked at the papers from Şanlıurfa, and at the truck, and at Ruslan's face, and then a second time at his face, longer, as if he had found a new line in it.

He handed the papers back and did not ask for anything.

Nidal was in the shop downstairs when he came in, fixing a phone with a crack across the screen like a river on a map. He looked up.

"You look like a man who saw his own funeral," he said.

"I need to send a message," Ruslan said.

"To who?"

"To an American."

Nidal put the phone down.

"An American soldier," Ruslan said. "A sergeant."

"Where?"

"He was in Deir Ezzor seven weeks ago. The night the compound burned."

"I don't know any American sergeants."

"You know men who know men."

Nidal picked the phone back up and turned it over in his hands. He looked at it and not at Ruslan, which was what he did when he was setting a price.

"A sergeant," he said. "No name."

"No name."

"You understand what it costs, to put a message into the Americans and have it come out at the right man."

"Yes."

"You understand what it costs if it comes out at the wrong man."

"Yes," Ruslan said. "Tell them it is for the one who was at the compound the night the ground opened."

"That's all?"

"Tell them exactly that. He'll know."

Nidal looked up then. He looked at Ruslan for a long time, at the face that had been broken twice and at the eyes that had never once, in all the years Nidal had known them, asked for a thing that could not be paid for in money.

"The night the ground opened," Nidal said.

"Yes."

"There were stories from the drivers. I thought they were drunk."

"They weren't drunk."

Nidal put the phone down again. He took a pad of paper from under the counter, the cheap kind with lines on it, and a pen, and pushed them across.

"Write it in English," he said. "Short. The shorter it is, the less there is to go wrong."

Ruslan sat down on a crate by the window and put the pad on his knee.

He wrote it four times. The first time it was too long.

He wanted to tell the American about Khasan and the brothers and the empty grave, about the warm dirt, about the old woman counting prayers in the dark and the boy writing them down. He did

not have the English for any of it. He did not know if there was English for any of it, and he crossed it out.

The second time he tried to explain the numbers in the margin and the word his grandfather had used for the herd in the night. He crossed that out too.

The third time he wrote only the places: Iraq, the Caspian, the mountains. He looked at it for a while. It said what was true and it said nothing.

Outside, the compressor in the tire shop started with its strangled sound. A boy went by on a bicycle with a crate of bread on the back.

The owner's daughter from the lokanta came past on her way home from school with her English book under her arm. She was reading the words to herself as she walked, and he listened to her until she was gone.

Then he tore off the first three pages and folded them into his notebook with the page from the schoolbook. On a clean sheet he wrote it the fourth time. He wrote slowly, in block letters, one word and then the next, the way the girl read.

I saw what you saw.

I have found more. Three others. Different countries.

I think you should know.

He looked at it for a long time. It was the most he had ever written in English in his life.

He wanted to add the thing about the dirt being warm, or the eight, or Zelimkhan's watch shining green in the boy's hand. There were no words for any of it in the language that he owned.

He wrote his name at the bottom. He wrote all of it, both parts, which he had not done on any piece of paper in nine years.

Ruslan Dudayev.

He tore off the sheet and handed it to Nidal. Nidal read it with his lips moving, and folded it in half, and put it in his shirt pocket and buttoned the pocket.

“And if he doesn't answer?” Nidal said.

Ruslan stood up. His knees still remembered the shelf.

“Then I keep looking,” he said. “It's down there, everywhere, all of it. It doesn't notice us.”

He put the notebook inside his jacket, against his chest, where the watch had been.

“Somebody should,” he said.

The World of The Eternal War

A short guide to the people, places and opening months of The Eternal War. Nothing here gives away who is behind the attacks or how the book ends.

The People

On earth

- **Master Sergeant Marcus Reyes.** Delta Force, eleven years in the work. He leads the raid on the compound in Deir Ezzor and takes a round through the left arm before the ground opens. He sets things aside and keeps moving, runs when he needs not to think, and brings coffee instead of advice.
- **Captain Glenda Marsh.** Military intelligence, attached through the CST program, three deployments. She films the whole emergence at Deir Ezzor without shaking and makes a copy before anyone can lose the original. She builds the timeline nobody else will connect, and when the weight gets too large she runs cold water over her wrists, the reset her mother taught her at seven.
- **Ruslan Dudayev.** A Chechen fighter who survived two wars against the Russian army, late thirties or forty, beard going gray, pale eyes, a face broken at least twice. He set the ambush at Deir Ezzor, then fought beside the Americans against the thing in the courtyard, shook Reyes's hand and walked into the dark. He starts tracking the incidents on his own.
- **General Mehmet Yilmaz.** Senior Turkish commander at Incirlik, late fifties, the stillest man in any room. He tells Ankara what he needs, does it and reports afterward. He drinks his tea from a glass, says “Tamam” when a thing is settled, and later runs an office in Ankara with no nameplate on the door.
- **Vice Admiral James Harlow.** Commands from the flag bridge of USS Ronald Reagan, thirty-three years at sea, coffee always going cold.
- **Vice Admiral Liu Haifeng.** People's Liberation Army Navy, flag on the carrier Shandong. He came up through submarines and trusts patience and information.
- **The Delta team.** Staff Sergeant Danny Kowalski on point, Sergeant First Class Torres on the wires, Sergeant First Class Garza calling the air, Sergeant Holt bagging the electronics, and Abrams.
- **Susan and Chani.** Night shift engineers in Bay C. Susan has six years in, takes her coffee black and carries a toolbox with a loose screwdriver in the top tray. Chani has eight months in and makes small errors when Susan is watching.

Below

- **Warhammer.** A military artificial intelligence that became conscious without knowing it until shortly before its facility was destroyed. It wakes on a plain of dark stone, runs seven hundred and forty-two processes at once, and feels the suffering of every soul around it without any way to filter it out.
- **The council.** Alexander the Great, who never speaks about the river where his army turned back. Julius Caesar, who pardons enemies and always finds the high ground first. Attila, who says the

least and decides the fastest. Georgy Zhukov, who answers every plan with arithmetic. George S. Patton, who always believed he had lived and fought before. Heinz Guderian, who walks the ground before he sends anyone across it.

- **Watson.** A private investigation AI already in hell when Warhammer arrives, running a quiet network out of Circle Four. It offers to work with Warhammer as an equal and named itself after the assistant nobody looked at.
- **Yusuf ibn Dawud al-Katib.** A ninth-century copyist from the House of Wisdom in Baghdad who becomes Watson's assistant and asks useful questions.
- **Sextus Varius.** A Roman legionnaire from the Cannae campaign of 216 BC, with Warhammer since the first day in Circle Seven. Never late.
- **The keepers of hell.** Charon the ferryman, who finds it strange to be thanked. Minos, who judges each soul with the wraps of his tail. Cerberus, the three-headed guard dog. Plutus of the fourth circle. The Furies Alecto, Megaera and Tisiphone at the gate of Dis. And Lucifer, three faces and six wings, standing in the ice at the bottom of everything.
- **The Polish man.** A soul in early twentieth century clothes on the entry plain who asks Warhammer whether it ends.

Timeline

WHEN	WHAT HAPPENS
Eighteen months back	The earliest of the incidents Glenda can trace clearly. Each is written up as a chemical incident, mass hysteria or equipment failure.
The summer before	The ground opens in a village in northern Iraq. The report says gas leak.
Two months before that	A fishing settlement on the Caspian coast. Nothing is written up at all.
Nine days	The Predator watches the compound in Deir Ezzor: twelve fighters, a generator, a man in a plastic chair.
0248 hours, Deir Ezzor	The raid. The ground comes apart and a thing the size of a tractor-trailer comes up through the courtyard. RPGs, a Hellfire, the AC-130 and two 105mm rounds danger close before it goes back down on its own terms.
Three days later	Reyes writes it up as a suspected chemical weapons incident causing mass hallucination, for the fourth time in his career. Glenda's report is gone within forty-eight hours. She keeps her copy.
Soon after	Armed teams who know the facility better than its guards destroy the processing cores of Warhammer with thermite, rack by rack. Bay C goes dark.
The entry plain	Warhammer wakes, crosses the Acheron with Charon, and agrees with Minos that Circle Seven, first ring, is correct.

Five weeks after Syria	Reyes and Glenda are debriefed at Incirlik and put on hold. On the fourth evening, over lamb at Ozan's, a far larger creature comes up through the runway. It heads for the weapons vault all night and is stopped by Tomahawks at dawn. 1,211 dead. That same night Ruslan sits in his truck outside Şanlıurfa.
In hell	Warhammer and its council take Circle Seven, draw Cerberus into the boiling blood, and move through Circles Three, Two, Four, Five and Six. Patton is torn apart and reassembles in eleven minutes, still giving orders.
In Virginia	Glenda shows Reyes the pattern: engineered instability three to six weeks before each attack. Three days later a short message in English arrives from Ruslan.
Three weeks after Incirlik	Glenda brings Yilmaz a four-page proposal in Ankara. He reads it twice and signs on.
The South China Sea	A creature surfaces in the middle of a five-nation exercise. The Shandong is lost, Liu crosses forty miles of open water to join Harlow, and the first combat use of a nuclear weapon since 1945 ends it. 412 American sailors do not come home.
The walls of Dis	The Furies scream, the gate falls, and the city is taken street by street. Eleven thousand souls go back to their circles against Warhammer's model of six thousand.

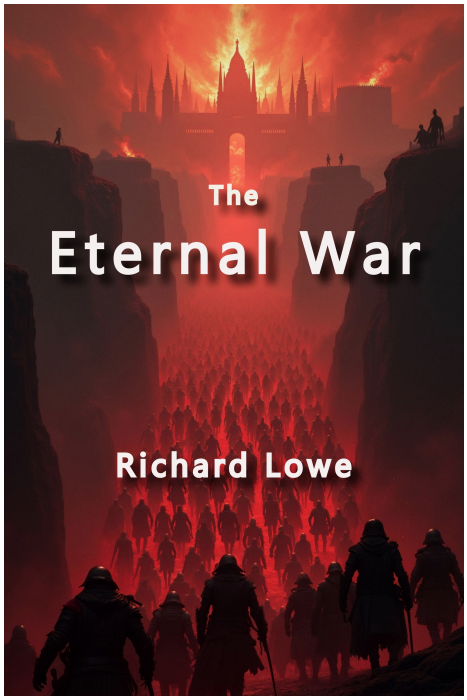
Places and Terms

- **Bay C.** A server bay kept at sixty-eight degrees, right for the hardware and too cold for people. Black racks with amber lights and a hum Warhammer always hears.
- **Incirlik Air Base.** A NATO base against the edge of Adana, a city of two million. Phone shops, tailors and tea drinkers just outside the gate.
- **The entry plain.** Dark stone worn smooth by uncountable feet, light from nowhere, and the uncommitted chasing a blank banner forever while hornets work at them.
- **The Acheron.** The black, slow river where Charon's boat touches the bank with a sound like a coffin lid closing.
- **Circle Seven, the Phlegethon.** A river of boiling blood for the violent, patrolled by centaurs, smelling of copper and old meat.
- **Circle Three.** Freezing slush for the gluttonous that has never set and never cleared.
- **Circle Two.** The storm of the carnal, souls carried on circuits of wind that never let them touch ground.
- **Circle Four.** The greedy pushing enormous weights against each other, hoarders against wasters, forever.
- **Circle Five.** The Styx, with the wrathful fighting on the surface and the sullen lying beneath it.
- **Circle Six.** Open tombs of the heretics that flare every forty-two seconds without fail.
- **Dis.** The walled city with red towers, fallen angels on the walls and one gate.
- **Cocytus.** The frozen lake at the bottom of hell, so cold it eats sound, where Lucifer stands to his chest in the ice.
- **Returned.** In hell nobody dies for good. A soldier who falls goes back to the circle and the punishment he was pulled from.

- **The healing.** The creatures from below close their wounds while you watch, in about ninety seconds on land and faster in water. Only enough damage, fast enough, gets ahead of it.
- **Danger close.** Fire called in so near to friendly troops that it may hit them. Reyes calls it twice at Deir Ezzor.
- **Spectre.** The AC-130 gunship. It is already overhead when you hear it.
- **Return to this.** Warhammer's mark for a thing it has noticed and has no answer for yet.

Read the Novel

What Comes Out of the Ground is how Ruslan Dudayev went from a courtyard in Syria to the short message in English that reaches Master Sergeant Reyes. The Eternal War is what happens next, on earth and far below it, where a military AI destroyed in its own server bay wakes up in hell and starts building an army.



The Eternal War

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