

EXCLUDED
PROLOGUE

SHADEBRINGER

BOOK ONE

THE LAND OF IRGENDWO

GRAYSON W. HOOPER



PROLOGUE

MY NAME IS CLYDE AND I'M A SOLDIER. At least, I think I am. I'm not sure what's real and what's not anymore—it's all a blur. Time no longer has any meaning. When I close my eyes and try to remember who or where I was, I see flashes of war; I see jungle; I see faces of young men I barely remember. Everything I thought I knew is tangled in time and space.

The people here say: I'm dead. They're dead. Everyone's dead. When I first heard it, I thought I'd been captured and ended up in some kind of sick experiment—the crazy shit governments fund at the whims of powerful madmen or out of desperation. But after hearing it over and over again with nobody to tell me otherwise, I'm starting to believe it.

A part of me hopes this is just a nightmare I'm forced to endure while my body rots in a government hospital—gotta die sometime, right? Man, here I am begging for death. I never thought it would come to this, but then again, I never knew the value of finality.

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The people here speak an English dialect mixed with words, phrases, and expressions from countless other languages, which is mostly beyond my comprehension. For example, *shining the Congo* means *to fuck*. *Je*

suis fooda means *I'm hungry*. *Sleeping Tingkat* means *dead* and so forth, though *dead* is pretty redundant. It's a real pain in the ass when they machine-gun it out of their mouths and all I can do is smile and nod and it's a damn shame too. I would have jumped at the opportunity to be a teacher or a linguist—there's even a whole goddamn industry here dedicated to educating new arrivals! Though as things are now, such desires are . . . excluded.

Those I *can* understand are just as cursed as me. The German who saved me on the plains is the calm and quiet type. He speaks better English than most Americans I knew and would feel right at home in an orchestra pit or cabin cranking out novels. Imagine my surprise when I learned he flew Messerschmitts for Hitler. The Brit is a snide goofy bastard who met his end in The Great War but he's got deep connections and maybe a good heart under all that piss and vinegar. But from the interactions I've had with him, I assume his squaddies didn't take his death *too* hard. The rest are fascinated with me but keep their distance and I don't blame them. This world is a hard place to get by in and strangers are a liability, especially a stranger with a price tag on his head. Kind of ironic, I know, considering a stranger saved my ass when I got here.

Where are the pearly gates? *The fire and goddamn brimstone*? Had the Devil's welcome wagon busted an axle? I don't have a better explanation. Hell, I barely have any memories left. Here I sit, looking through a frosted window in winter and I'm not sure the ice is ever gonna melt. In the meantime . . . I really need to find some whiskey.