

## Chapter One

*No one really knows when the Creep first began. No one really knows where it began. No one really knows how it began. No one knows exactly what it looks like; sometimes it's obvious, the ground has a black pallor, animal and plant life are obviously tainted and infected, but not always. Sometimes you wouldn't know just by looking. People who are in infested territory simply know it. It doesn't feel right... maybe it's too quiet... maybe there's not enough activity... maybe it's something else... but you know, and by the time you know, it's often too late.*

*Hell, no one even really knows what it is. The doctors claimed it was a mutant and rapidly evolving super virus. Conspiracy theorists lit up forums across the world with claims of it being some sort of technological nightmare cooked up by either the American, Chinese, British, Saudi, Koren, Japanese, Pakistani, or Russian governments. I even think someone tried to blame the Canadians.*

*Religious leaders called it either a test of God, or a punishment for the world succumbing to vice and wickedness. Pot smoking hippies and liberal tree huggers marched through the streets claiming the planet had finally turned against us and was smoking us out like ticks.*

*All anyone knows is that at this point, Earth is functionally dead. About the only thing that can still "live" is stuff ridden with the infestation... presuming one calls it life. Things still move about within the infestation, they still "do" things, but it seems more like how the parts of a machine move, like an invisible hand moving inanimate objects into some design only it knows. I certainly wouldn't call it life.*

*An emergency convening of world powers fifteen years ago, when the Creep infestation covered nearly half of the globe, made the declaration that ol' Mother Earth had to be abandoned. Every attempt to defeat the Creep had failed. Then every attempt to contain the Creep failed. Mankind had no choice but to retreat. With that, the efforts began merely to stall the Creep while every remaining resource was poured into planning, scouting, and identifying alternate habitable worlds while designing, manufacturing, and training the crews that would form Project Exodus, the colony ships that would take the human race somewhere safe.*

*Of those ten ships, nine have already departed. The last one, the Requiem, is in high orbital dock with the Deep Space Observation Station, a former astronomical research platform retro-fitted for use in Project Exodus. This colony ship is scheduled to break dock and depart on July 4<sup>th</sup>, 2430. All drop ships are required be accounted for by midday sharp standard planetary time. Anyone left behind is out of luck.*

*Which brings me to where I am, along with the four other survivors of the crippled atmospheric orbiter Sender, which crash landed shortly after takeoff from Quantico, Virginia; with seventeen hours to make it to Cape Canaveral, Florida.*

*"Sir, I may have found something."*

Staff Sergeant Nathan David turned from his thoughts to the young man speaking to him, Private First Class Jeremy Cliff. Jeremy was as level-headed a sort as anyone could hope for, given the situation. He was a true marine, even at his obviously young age, with smooth dark skin and black hair that managed to stay thick despite the close crop required by the Corps.

With the pilot of the orbiter killed in the crash landing, it made Nathan the de-facto commander of the remaining survivors, and thus why the private was reporting to him.

*"Alright, show me what you got."* Nathan answered, taking step behind the young man.

Nathan didn't want to depress the one fellow who wasn't drowning in pity, but actually trying to do something to turn around what was really a hopeless situation.

Nathan had a hard time blaming them, though. The other five survivors were civilian, not trained to keep a level keel regardless of the odds, and to always look for solutions no matter what life threw at them.

And this “something” Private Cliff found... was definitely something.

It wasn't an orbiter, but it was potentially a way forward: an armored munitions transport, possibly abandoned and forgotten, so it wasn't cannibalized for materials. At least, the exterior wasn't. It was hard to tell from this vantage point what remained inside.

“I can't get it to start, sir, but I'm told you're the best at this sort of thing,” Jeremy said. “Perhaps you can get this thing running.”

Clearly, Nathan's reputation preceded him. Even when he was young, he had the uncanny ability to take things apart. He also had the ability to put them back together in different ways than they were originally intended. Now, those traits may not seem all that unusual for a young boy growing up in Cleveland... because they weren't. The ability to have that mish-mashed contraption actually serve a useful purpose *was*, however. He could ever really seem to explain how he could do it; it was something innate, an instinct in knowing how things could work together.

That ability had been as much a blessing as it was a curse. He could fix *anything*, be it a neighbor's broken down car, a child's hand held game, a malfunctioning computer, or even a local company's security hardware... and it was that last little bit that got him landed in Detention Block Three, then on the fast track to enlistment in the Marine Corps. The military got wind of his special traits and offered him a deal he couldn't pass up; the last ten years of his prison sentence remanded, in exchange for his enlistment.

Turned out, he rather liked the Marines. The discipline suited him well, and he felt like he was accomplishing something other than helping gangs rob supermarkets after closing hours. The Marines seemed to like him in return, promoting him to Corporal before his first tour of duty was over, then to Sergeant as a reward for signing on for another, and finally to Staff Sergeant just before Project Exodus was announced.

“Yeah, I'm like MacGyver or something,” Nathan grumbled. “Alright, kid, lemme get in there and see what we've got.”

“Who?” Jeremy asked.

“Never mind,” the sergeant said with a shake of his head. Nobody had any sense of culture nowadays.

Nathan scaled the rungs that led up to the operators' seat, and into the cockpit of the transport. The first glaring problem was apparent: the communications panel was ripped out, which not only meant there was no way to contact anyone from the transport, there also weren't any parts that he could use to repair the heavily damaged communications panel on the orbiter. While he was a mechanical savant, he wasn't God.

Taking a deep breath, Nathan put his hands on the top of the dash, and let his mind go blank. “What... what are you doin', sir?” Jeremy asked, his head peeking through the open hatch, but Nathan was only marginally aware of the outside world. The private would know soon enough.

It wasn't like Nathan saw schematics in his head. It wasn't like his mind was a repository of every blueprint ever known to man that formed in his mind's eye. It was just something that came to him after some meditation, and he just knew.

“The wiring leading to the start-up was taken out... likely because it was easiest to get to. Someone also took out the targeting cards for the weapons systems,” Nathan finally diagnosed. “The good news is that I can then use the wiring for the automated defense systems and adapt them to get this thing started and moving.”

“We wouldn't have any guns on this thing?” Jeremy asked warily.

“The primary objective is to get this thing moving forward; weapons don't do us any good if we're stationary. There are supply caches and repair depots all over the place between here and the Cape. I can probably find equipment there I can cannibalize and get the automated weapons online. In the meantime, we can hike back to Quantico if you feel you need more firepower.”

“Think we can?” Jeremy wondered out loud.

“It's going to take me time to rig this thing to roll, and the Creep was still a hundred kilometers inland at this point. It'll give you and the rest of the group something to do. They could probably use the distraction right about now.”

The private nodded, and complied, “Yes, sir.”

Nathan crawled back up and out of the vehicle, wiggled his way underneath it, and with a grunt he pulled open the maintenance hatch. He took a deep breath, exhaled, and pulled himself through the tiny opening into the innards of the beast. This was not going to be fun at all...

Meanwhile, Private Cliff was grateful for the blessing of small favors. The shuttle malfunctioned and crashed less than three kilometers from the now abandoned Quantico base, and he didn't think the three civilians would have been able to make it, had it been any farther.

Quentin Blake was not exactly the most physically fit of people, and that was putting it kindly. The systems programmer had been recruited by Project Exodus for his computing skills, not his three-hundred-pound (and that was again being generous) flabby form. Quentin had been huffing and laboring roughly fifteen seconds into the hike, and was probably slowing them down more than anything else.

At least he was trying to tough through it, unlike Percy Kensington. The logistics consultant for the evacuation had stayed behind until the last orbiter out of “duty and unique skills,” and had made sure everyone on the base, even a lowly enlisted man like him, knew it at every opportunity. Currently, every other step was a cue for the rail thin, gangly, bald (he called it “gracefully aging”) man to utter some form of bitter complaint.

“Why are we returning to the base? The Creep is approaching from that way. We should be going the other way!”

“Sergeant David feels that it's important to have supplies and munitions in order to actually make it anywhere going 'the other way',” Jeremy answered with as much patience as his Corps training could muster.

“Why? Weapons are useless against this thing. While it might manifest something physical to hit, or leave infected people lurching like the undead to waste ammunition on, it doesn't matter. You don't hurt the Creep. Nothing hurts the Creep.”

Finally, the last member of the survivors piped up, “Percy, will you shut the hell up? If it doesn't matter, then just go back to the wreckage now and leave us in peace.”

Amy Burgundy would have probably made a great Marine, had she not been five-feet-one and weighed a hundred pounds when soaking wet. She permed her hair to a near-preposterous height to make herself seem taller, and initially wore platforms that would have likely resulted in severe ankle injury on most others... although she had given them up for a pair of sandals she salvaged from the wreckage, once it became clear that she needed to be practical

and functional if anyone was going to live through this.

Her resilience had been the most admirable, as she had not remained on the base out of any essential skill, but more because other people kept cutting in line. Yet the woman refused to get discouraged as she was bumped from each departing orbiter in deference to more “essential” personnel. Apparently, a mere cook wasn't high on the “Get These People The Hell Out of Here” list.

“You are certainly in no position to be giving orders,” Percy retorted coldly. “And neither is this Sergeant fellow, for that matter. Who died and made him leader?”

“The officer piloting the shuttle, that's who,” Jeremy answered, finally gaining a crack in his composure. “As far as I am concerned, this is a field combat scenario. We are staring at enemy territory roughly one hundred kilometers away. In such a field scenario, the military takes charge, and in this unit, that highest-ranking military personnel is Sergeant David. If you don't like that, the Creep is thataway.”

That harangue managed to finally silence the complainer, and Jeremy then turned his attention to the ghost town of Quantico base. “Alright, we need food and water. Ms. Burgundy, I assume you would know where to find it if any is left.”

“You bet I do!” she answered with a very poor mimicry of a salute, but the sentiment was appreciated.

“Mr. Kensington, you go with her, do what she says.” Jeremy then closed the distance and with a very mean-spirited growl added, “And, I swear to God, if you give her *any* trouble at all... I'll think of something.”

The two went towards the mess hall, and Jeremy hoped they could find something... anything really, even though he couldn't imagine the base staff would have left much behind. “Alright, Mr. Blake, let's go.”

Still having not quite caught his breath, the husky fellow asked tiredly, “What do you need me to do?”

“I'm going to need you to find something, even if it's just a short range hover pallet, for us to put what we find on, while I gather up whatever munitions I can get my hands on,” Jeremy answered. “There a garage over there.” The private pointed towards a large domed structure about a hundred meters to the southwest. “See if there's anything promising.”

“I hope so,” Quentin gasped, and shuffled off to the designated location. “I'm not sure I could make the return trip back on foot,” he finished, his voice reflecting enough of a hint of humor that it didn't strike Jeremy as the sort of griping as Percy had been raining upon the procession.

The base was without power, which meant that he wouldn't have to fight the magnetically sealed doors of the munitions bay, nor would he have to deal with the automated defenses. These were very good things, because he doubted that he would be able to get through either, Marine training or not.

As he had figured, the bay was largely cleaned out except for bits and pieces: broken units and various parts, a scant smattering of battery cells for the energy weapons, and an armload of conventional rounds for the standard bullet guns. There certainly wasn't anything left behind that was in working order, but perhaps Sergeant David could work his magic.

He steadily moved what he could to the bay doors, armload by armload, and heard the satisfying hum of a hovercraft. While on the base, the pallet was polarized against the formulated tarmac, and for all intents and purposes could operate indefinitely. It would have a much shorter life span once they took it off-base, and it would have to rely on the air jets to

remain aloft... but it should last long enough to get everyone back to where Sergeant David would, with any luck, have the transport operational.

“Will this do, Cliff?”

Quentin had this somewhat irritating tendency to refer to people just by their last names with a familiar tone, like he thought he was calling people by their given name. It wasn't particularly annoying, but it was somewhat odd.

Jeremy nodded in approval. “Yeah, that will do fine. Help me load this stuff up here, then we'll flutter over to the mess hall and see if the others need any help.”

There was no need for that, because both Amy and Percy appeared, carrying few supplies but with a great hurry.

“Whoa, where's the fire?” Jeremy asked, then accusingly asked Percy, “You didn't set anything on fire, did you?”

“Most certainly not,” the man replied with a indignant snort. “It was the woman who decided we had to leave with haste.”

“Oh, you weren't arguing,” Amy snapped back, before turning her focus on Jeremy. “We have to get out of here, fast.”

Amy was definitely panicked about something, her pupils were dilated, goose bumps had risen on the exposed skin of her tanned arms, and she was shaking like a leaf. Percy didn't look to be in much better shape, even as on the surface he was trying to pretend that he was perfectly fine and trying to deal with an obviously irrational female.

“What's wrong, Amy? Why do we have to go? What happened?”

“Can't you *feel* it?” Amy asked, aghast. “It's close... I just know it. You know, that feeling you get, that feeling that can only be one thing? That... empty... emptiness?”

Percy agreed in backhanded fashion. “While the woman isn't speaking much sense, I will admit, I do agree that we have dallied here long enough, and should probably make our return trip promptly.”

Now that both of them got him thinking about it, Jeremy had to admit he was sensing that same clammy dripping sensation down his spine, like a wave of hopelessness and loss had washed over the entire base. He forced himself to break that chain of thought, and rationalized it as the group-think tendency to mimic the emotions of others around them, even if there was no reason to do so. “Amy, the Creep is still at least a good fifty miles away, and it moves slower than frozen molasses. It would take a week to get here from its last recorded position.”

“Really?” Quentin asked rhetorically, his voice now trembling with fright as he pointed out towards the west. “Perhaps you should tell the Creep that.”

Jeremy followed the invisible line Quentin indicated... and sure enough, on the horizon, maybe only five or so miles away, he could see the distinctive blackish tint in the ground and even the air. The Creep infestation was considerably ahead of schedule.

“Holy... hell...” he gaped, then with all the mental fortitude he could muster ordered, “Alright, everybody in. Let's get moving, and moving fast.”

Twenty minutes later, Nathan heard the compressed air of their oncoming hovercraft, a seething hiss as it pushed the upper limits of its speed. “Good timing. I think I got this thing road-ready. Let's load whatever you got up and move.”

“Thank God!” Amy declared, grabbing random things in as large a load as she could handle, then throwing it carelessly into the back of the transport, a behavior that the other three quickly seemed to agree upon as the best course of action.

“What's going on?” Nathan asked in concern. He rather expected a degree of panic from

the civilians... to see Private Cliff joining them did not set well.

“The Creep has picked up the pace a bit, sir. It was roughly five miles out when we left the base,” Jeremy replied, his voice cool and collected even as his actions were suggesting anything but.

Nathan cursed quite loudly and violently. “You're sure about this?”

“Yes, sir. I am. I saw it with my own eyes.”

“How good are you at driving, Private?” Nathan queried.

It did Nathan good to see that broad grin develop on Jeremy's face, and the enthusiasm that overwrote the young man's earlier jitters. “Personnel transport was going to be my field of focus, sir. I've logged more than my fair share of hours in just about every craft the Marines have at their disposal.”

“Then you get to drive,” Nathan declared. “It should start easily enough, but try to be as careful as you possibly can... I can't guarantee my transplants will hold up through a significantly rough ride.”

Jeremy snapped a sharp salute. “Yes, sir. Very well, sir!” he barked, then dashed up the railing and into the cockpit, as Nathan hopped inside and tried to keep the other survivor's minds occupied by sorting out the spoils of their scavenging. There was a growl of engines coming to life, then a jerk as the vehicle lifted off the ground and promptly lurched forward in rapid acceleration.

## Chapter Two

*“Have you ever thought about getting outta here, Nate?”*

*I blinked, and looked at Sam... no, Samantha. I have to remember that she didn't want to be called a “boy's name” anymore. We had been friends since we could walk, growing up in the same houses next door to each other for the first fifteen years of our lives.*

*“Get outta here? There ain't no getting outta here,” I answered. “Once you're born here, you stay here. Ain't nobody letting you get out. Go to college? Why? To get yourself two million credits in debt, with no job options that allow you to pay it back, so that you wind up... guess where? Right back here.”*

*“But, Nate... you got a gift! There's no one that can do what you do! The mechanic said my dad's car was done. You got it running strong for the last three years!”*

*“Then I'll do it here,” I answered. “It's the only place the world will let me do my thing. I was born poor and in the city, and I'm gonna die poor and in the city. That's the way the world works.”*

*Apparently, Samantha was talking on an entirely different level. “Nate, that's not necessarily what I mean. You're different than the gangs who run these streets. They've got nothing but a life of drugs, STDs, and violence. You can be better than that!”*

*I boggled at the accusation. “What? You think... aw, hell no, girl! I'm no gang member!”*

*“But Tracy said she saw you at BK with The Greek.”*

*The Greek was referring to the leader of a gang of Grecian-Americans that “ruled” the South Side of Cleveland, having been displaced from their home city of Los Angeles due the advancing malaise later to be called the Creep.*

*“Yeah, they wanted me to use my 'gift' to help them jack cars. I told them just where they could stick it, then reported them to the city police,” I said with an indifferent shrug. “They didn't like it of course, but that's their problem, not mine.”*

*“Nate! They could come after you!” Samantha gasped, astonished.*

*I smiled teasingly, and replied, “Wait, first you were telling me not to associate with gangs, and now you're worried when you learned I did exactly what you just told me to do? Make up your mind, girl.”*

*On that cue, the hissing sound of approaching vehicles erupted to the south, the angry rumble of the engines suggesting a high rate of speed. I sensed trouble and was already diving behind the brick wall of the porch, dragging Samantha with me, as the customized and modified “old school” style hovercraft pulled to a stop in front of my family's home. The nozzles and barrels of a very impressive variety of weapons appeared from the darkened interiors of the hovercraft, and soon the dusk was lit up by the sounds and lights of energy weapons and gunfire.*

*The wall, while providing meager protection from the ballistics, did nothing against the energy fire, turning the brick into vapor wherever it touched, and grazing my right leg. I screamed, and pushed himself down onto Samantha in a futile attempt to protect her from the attack.*

*The hovercraft then rifled away as fast as it had arrived, seconds later to be replaced by the sounds of emergency sirens. Miraculously, Samantha and I lived, though not unscathed. I had seven individual wounds, two of which caused severe bleeding that required immediate medical attention.*

*Samantha wasn't quite so lucky. One energy bolt struck her across the top of her head,*

*and neatly cauterized a three inch wide and four inch deep gouge into her brain. It had the effect of lobotomizing her... the young woman so full of life couldn't even go to bathroom on her own anymore. I remembered that blank, empty, lifeless glare... I saw it whenever I saw video or images of those infected by the Creep.*

“David? You okay?”

Nathan looked up towards where Quentin was looking at him with concern, and asked, “Huh?” He then shook the memory from his head, and replied, “Yeah, I'm okay... just got a little lost in my thoughts.”

He quickly realized what prompted the memory: it happened every time he looked straight down the barrel of any gun. Most of the time, he could block it out and get back to whatever he was doing, but this time, with the stress and nervousness, he apparently got sucked in.

“What exactly are you doing with that thing, anyway?” Percy asked, referring to the mess of components – screws, bolts, and other things that he had ripped apart – to modify the weapon that he was currently holding.

“The Marines discovered that the Creep tended to retreat from sprays of irradiated neutrons,” Nathan explained, hoisting the rifle to its side so he could give the inner workings one more once over before clapping the cleaning panel shut. “It doesn't stop the Creep, of course, but it does slow it down. That's been the reason for the neutron cannon and bomb barrages up until last year. We gave ourselves probably another five years to complete our plans because of it.”

“And so what is that little thing going to do to help us?”

“If we get surrounded? Nothing, I'll admit,” Nathan acknowledged. “But the Creep doesn't seem to move as one giant wave. It has... scouts, if you will, sort of like an advance infestation, that will occasionally crop up ahead of the rest of it. Against one of those... this baby could save our lives.”

Amy stuck her head through the viewhole along the back of the transport hold. “The Creep isn't keeping up, I can feel it.”

“We're not in the clear yet,” Nathan warned. He had been reluctant to tell them this, but right now he needed everyone sharp, not complacent. “The main reason we were supposed to be using the atmospheric orbiters to get to the Cape was because the Creep was showing signs of... flanking us. It had formed like a giant finger, moving southeast, towards Raleigh, and was spreading along that finger towards the Atlantic. Considering how much faster the Creep has advanced recently, it is quite possible it has reached the ocean, or will by the time we get there, and who knows where it will be going from there.”

“So, we're trapped!” Percy shouted.

“Maybe, maybe not,” Nathan replied. “We'll worry about that once we get to that point.”

“But...”

“Let me explain something about survival tactics,” Nathan interrupted. “No matter the situation, whether you're deep in enemy lines, or trying to make it out of the wilderness after an accident, one of the first rules of survival is to take it one step at a time. Don't think too far ahead, just focus on what is in front of you, and deal with the situation as it comes. I don't know what it's gonna look like once we hit Raleigh. I won't know until we get there, and I'm not going to worry about it until I do.”

“Yeah,” Amy agreed, “We'll find a way.”

The Marine sergeant tapped his chin, then said, "Come to think of it..." Nathan then tapped on the door separating the cabin from the cockpit, drawing Private Cliff's attention. "If I remember correctly, there's a communications relay tower nearby somewhere... it should probably show up on the sensor HUD if you zoom out enough. If it's still ahead of us, let's make a quick stop."

"Why?" Quentin asked, not wanting to feel completely left out of the discussion.

"We have to at least let someone at the Cape know we're still out here. If we're lucky, they might be able to send help."

"We're in luck, sir!" Jeremy answered, "It's ten minutes at our current speed, and only a two degree variance off our current course."

"Then let's get there, Private," Nathan ordered obviously.

"Yes, sir!"

Ten minutes proved to be a bit closer to eight, which suited Nathan fine. Apparently, no one wanted to be left alone in the transport, because everybody jumped out to see what the sergeant was planning to do.

"Private, you still got that comm system we salvaged from the orbiter?" Nathan asked.

Jeremy nodded. "Yes, sir! I'll get it!"

"Bring it fast," Nathan ordered, then got to work prying open a maintenance panel on the northwest support leg of the tower.

"What are you going to do?" Amy wondered, but by that point, Nathan was in his trance, and wasn't prone to respond. He was still in said state when Jeremy arrived with the damaged comm system, but snapped out of it shortly after.

"Alright, this is only going to take a minute..." Nathan said, his hand plunging into the wires and electronic guts of the tower.

One minute proved to be more like five, which didn't suit Nathan quite as well, but the end result was satisfying. A green light flickered onto the orbiter's comm system main panel, and another LED light flashed that it was sending and receiving data.

"Perfect, there's still someone at the Cape, I'd wager. It's gotta be the only place on Earth that still has the lights on at this point." Turning on the voice recognition, Nathan transmitted, "Cape Canaveral, this is Sergeant Nathan David of the U.S. Marine Corps. Please respond."

There was silence for ten seconds, prompting Nathan to repeat, "Cape Canaveral, this is Sergeant Nathan David of the U.S. Marine Corps. Please respond."

He was about to repeat it for a third time, when finally a grizzled, gruff voice erupted from the receiver. "Sergeant David, this is Rear Admiral Jamison Doric, U.S. Navy. You're a lucky bastard, we got word the last of the orbiters were coming in within the hour, and we were going to call it good and get off this rock. What's your status?"

"There are five of us sir, myself, Private First Class Jeremy Cliff, and three civilian personnel. We are about eighty clicks south of Quantico at this point, sir... we've commandeered a transport craft, and are making good time. If you think you can wait for us, we should be able to make the deadline, unless you can spare any assistance, sir."

"It's just going to be me, the last drop ship pilot, and the last of the nonessential personnel planetside by the end of the hour. All the engineering crews are already in space prepping the *Requiem* for departure. By the time I could get a crew back down here, prep and refuel an orbiter, have someone come get you, and come back, it would be past the deadline. I hate to say it, but if you're gonna get here, it's gonna have to be on your own."

"Understood, sir."

There was a moment's silence, and then Admiral Doric spoke again, "I'll keep the light on for you as long as I can. Orbital reconnaissance from the space dock reports that the Creep has picked up its pace, so I can't guarantee that we'll be able to stay until the originally planned deadline. But we'll do our damndest to stick it out."

"Thank you, sir."

"I'm afraid the news I just got isn't going to get any better for you, either. The recon shows that the Creep has effectively sealed off the northern North Carolina area, all the way to Pamlico Sound."

Nathan momentarily turned off the voice recognition so that the admiral wouldn't hear him cursing like... well, a sailor. "I understand, sir. Any advice?"

"Well... people in general can resist the Creep infestation for a while, or so I'm told. It wouldn't be the smoothest ride, and who knows what the hell has sprouted up in the infested areas, but it's possible you could drive through it. Another possibility is that there's a lot of seabound ferries that went along the ocean on sightseeing tours or take vehicles out to the tourist islands out at sea. Granted, an armored transport is a bit heavier than your average vehicle... but you could possibly go that route and pray the rumors that the Creep doesn't like water are true."

"Very well, sir. Thank you, sir. Sergeant David out."

He killed the conversation, and said, "Private, help me detach this panel from the tower, and we'll take it back to the transport."

"Yes..." Jeremy began, then stopped cold, his hands gripping into fists as they all felt that very familiar tingle of dread. Then he abruptly screamed, "Scout!"

Sure enough, there was a bubbling of what looked to be a black, translucent, oily substance from the ground ten meters away, a substance that reared up until it assumed a whip-like tentacle shape with a thick, hardened ball of the same substance on the end.

"Get that panel off *fast!*" Nathan ordered, jumping to his feet and pulling his makeshift neutron rifle around to brace it against his shoulder. "I'll keep our friend busy."

Nathan fired off two bursts, the flashing of the red ring on the barrel being the only indicator that the radiated particles were indeed erupting from the rifle. The Creep lashed backwards from the blast, then whipped forward in attack. Nathan anticipated this, and was already on the move, diving to his right, and rolling back to his feet.

The maneuver proved to be unnecessary however, as the attack was way off, swiping in entirely the wrong direction and giving Nathan a clear shot at the hyper-extended stalk of the appendage. That shot caused it's upper half to rip off of the base and dissolve inertly into the air. The bottom half began to regenerate, continuing to bubble and reform itself even as it tried to shy away from the surge of radiated particles. As long as he could keep it at a stalemate, the rest of the survivors would have plenty of time to do what they needed to do.

Unfortunately, such a stalemate was not in his future. A second mound in the earth erupted with another bubbling torrent of Creep infestation, this one spitting gobs of itself, likely looking to hit and infect its target. Much like the clubbing tendril, it seemed like the Creep was shooting blindly, as though it didn't know exactly where its target was, erupting wildly in all directions with a height and angle that made it disturbingly easy to dodge. Nathan just hoped at this point that the globs wouldn't hit the rest of the group by accident.

"Sir! We got it! Let's go!" Jeremy shouted, and that was the cue Nathan was looking for, backing away as quickly as he could while keeping the Creep scouts at bay. By the time Nathan was out of range for his neutron rifle to be effective, it gave him plenty of time to climb into the transport and close the hatch as it took off at full speed.

“I wasn't sure just how much you needed, sir, so we just took the whole panel,” Jeremy noted, pointing blindly to the floor of the cabin, where the entire mounting box of the communications system he had contrived sat.

“I'll hook it into the transport's communications array in a moment. That was a little too close for my liking,” Nathan replied.

“Why did we waste our time grabbing that thing anyway?” Percy demanded angrily, his body trembling from adrenaline.

“Because we can use this to keep in contact with the Cape. Communication is our greatest weapon if we're going to get out of this,” the sergeant snarled. “With this, we can learn how much time we have, what adjustments we'll have to make...”

Even the three civilians didn't buy that story, judging from their doubtful expressions, and so Nathan yielded the truth. “The Creep is moving faster than we predicted, there's no way of knowing exactly how long the Cape will remain clear at this rate. The Creep is expanding from the north *and* the west after all. Admiral Doric is holding out a lifeline for *us*, and us alone.” He grew grimly quiet for a moment, deciding how to word this last bit. “If... if it turns out that it's hopeless for us... if for some reason, we're not going to be able to make it... I want to be able to tell the admiral to get himself and the rest of his crew the hell out of here and save themselves.”

Silence seized the transport after that. Hoping that the gravity of the situation wouldn't affect their abilities to do whatever they could, Nathan grimly picked up the jumbled mess of wires and parts that was to be their new communications system, and took it into the cockpit. With any luck, he wouldn't get in Private Cliff's way too badly.

### Chapter Three

*I was a bit of a purist when it came to doors... the sliding, motion sensor doors were all the rage nowadays, supposedly taking up less space, quieter, and more secure. Not really my thing. Give me solid mahogany, brass, and a charged plasma pistol anyday.*

*As a corollary, a knock on my door was unusual sound in this day and age as well. Not too many people knocked... they preferred using more sophisticated methods. Generally, the only time anyone knocked nowadays was when they had to deliver bad news, but hoped you wouldn't hear the knock and they could slip away.*

*They would have no such luck this time. I was at the door just as the subject on the other side of the door knocked again. I waited for them to finish, then tapped the unlock code on my security panel, and pulled open the door.*

*It was Doug... in his full dress whites, his cover tucked under his right arm. I knew immediately that it certainly wasn't good news, and it didn't take long for me to figure out what. "What happened to Shanie?"*

*Doug gestured in silent request if he could come in. I conceded, and he weaved his way into the living room with swift familiarity, myself close on his heels after I had closed and locked the door again. He slowly sat down on the far end of my sofa, partially out of discomfort and partially because dress whites were a pain to move casually in.*

*I was in my chair a second later, regarding the man I knew since he was fresh out of the Naval Academy. "Doug... what the hell happened to Shanie?"*

*"James..." he began, using my given name, something that protocol would have as taboo in his current uniform. "Do you want the answer Naval Command told me to give you, or what I know?"*

*Now my heart sank into my stomach. If Naval Command was involved... "Damn it, Doug, don't jerk me around. What... the... hell... happened... to... my... wife?"*

*"Naval Command claims she was... 'lost'."*

*"Lost? How the hell do you lose a civilian volunteer?" I asked.*

*"They claim that she became infected with the 'virus,' James," Doug replied. "They won't say she died, because Naval Command knows better, but they know that they can't do a damn thing for her, so she's 'lost'."*

*"What? When did this happen?"*

*"James... this is what Naval Command doesn't want anyone, even officers like us, to know. Whatever that thing is that's spreading, it's no virus. I don't know what it is, but it isn't a virus... and it's not killing people in the sense that you and I think."*

*Doug wasn't making any damn sense to me. "Doug, whatever the hell you know, I want to know it, and right now."*

*Doug leaned forward, and his voice grew quiet. "Command sent me to get your wife's personal effects. I saw her... behind the quarantine line. I found that to be rather odd for a dead person, ya know?"*

*"She's alive? Why the hell did they want me to tell you she was dead?"*

*"Because... I think she is... whatever was moving back in the plague zone, it's not your wife... it's something else. Mark my words, James. That ain't a damn virus, it's something else, and I don't think we can stop it..."*

It had been one hour since first contact had been made with the survivors of the *Sender*

orbiter crash. Admiral Doric watched the orbital recon feed pinpointing the position of the four men and one woman as they continued to make their way south, along with the movements of the Creep and the time remaining until zero hour, the predetermined point when everything that was going to leave the planet had to be gone.

His officer's sense told him it wasn't worth waiting. The Creep was moving faster than it was supposed to be... as it was, the current zero hour was cutting it far closer than the brains of Project Exodus had intended. They would have likely ordered the admiral to cut his losses and leave as well.

But the brains of the operation were no longer here. They should be almost past the official orbit of Neptune at this point, at least half of their number already in cryogenic stasis. All of them were conveniently chosen "at random" to board the first three colony ships, which had launched nearly a week ago.

Admiral Jamison Doric was the one here, and damn it, he was going to give these folks a chance, common sense be damned. Too many people had been given up to the Creep already... he didn't want or need any more resting on his conscience.

The door to the command center opened, startling the admiral, only to be relieved when he saw who it was. "You're back already?"

Jamison went quite a ways back with Commander Douglas Cardiff, when Douglas was an ensign in the Naval Flight Academy and then-Captain Doric was the base commander. When Jamison received a promotion to the flagship *Excalibur*, fate would have it that Douglas received a promotion to squadron leader on that same ship. The pair became so seamless in their work together that Jamison made sure that wherever he went, Douglas came along too. If the pilot had any problems with that, he never aired them.

"Doesn't take long to unload people," Douglas answered. "Anything that isn't nailed, welded, or fused has already been salvaged and taken up to the *Requiem*."

Jamison took no insult by the lack of the usual honorific that a subordinate should grant his superior. In fact, the admiral had insisted on dropping such formalities when it was just the two of them. Perhaps their working relationship was bit more genial, relaxed, and comfortable than the Navy would recommend, but it worked as far as Jamison was concerned.

"So, it's just the two of us on this base, right?" the admiral asked.

"Yep," Douglas confirmed. "And two of seven people still standing on Terran soil. Makes you feel kinda lonely, doesn't it?"

"Mmm hmm," Jamison answered, biting down on the end of his pen as he turned his full attention back to the only display panel still active in the entire command center.

"You know... you probably shouldn't be here," Douglas said. "The *Requiem* is going to need you in command."

"I was the one still here when I took the communication from that Marine, Doug," Jamison answered. "They're my responsibility now. The *Requiem*, I am fairly certain, could still sail the outer space black without me if it came to that."

Douglas took a very deep breath, followed by a pregnant pause. Despite the more cordial relationship he had with Jamison, the older man *was* still an Admiral, and what Douglas wanted to say could very easily be construed as somewhat insubordinate.

"Sir..." Douglas began, this time inserting the honorific in the hopes that it would help deaden any potential sense of disrespect, "... this isn't going to bring Shanie back."

The commander could have collapsed into the fetal position with the steely glare Jamison gave him. The admiral's wife had been lost to the Creep, volunteering to the Red Cross to help

the refugees of the major western cities when the infestation reached “pandemic” status twenty years ago... back when the official United Nations response was to classify it as a mutant strain of virus. Men and women willingly walked into infested areas wearing masks, rubber gloves, sometimes even full containment suits, thinking that they'd be safe from infection... only to either never be seen again, or seen as what had become popularly described as the “living dead.”

“I know that, Commander.” Jamison put stress on the rank, dragging the conversation into a formal state while not so subtly asserting his authority. “But maybe one of those five is a 'Shanie' to someone else already up there. How the hell could I look that person in the eye and tell them that I could have saved them if I had just stayed put for another fifteen hours?”

He then pointed with his pen up to the display. “See that proximity ring around our location? That's the seven kilometer mark. We'll leave once the Creep reaches that position. That should be enough time, even with the accelerated spread of the infestation. Don't you think?”

“Yes, sir,” Douglas answered, as he spun a chair around and took a seat next to the admiral, folding his arms along the backrest and resting his chin on them. “All this because you couldn't leave without your lucky pen.”

“I knew I put it down somewhere for a reason,” Jamison answered, tapping the writing utensil on his temple, just above his left eyebrow.

Douglas jerked his head towards the screen, joining the admiral in his careful study of what it displayed. “Think they'll make it?”

Jamison shrugged, “It pretty much comes down to Raleigh. If they get past the infestation there, somehow, anyhow, it should be relatively smooth sailing from there. The Creep from the west is currently still approaching at the previous rate, it's just the stuff from the north that has picked up the pace.”

“That wasn't my question.”

“That's the best answer you're gonna get.”

Meanwhile, the impromptu team back in the armored transport had a decision to make, and increasingly less time in which to make that decision.

Nathan dropped his hand-held data manager down onto the floor of the cabin, a holographic three-dimensional image of the surrounding area flashing with pale hues of light. “Here's our options.” With a flick of his wrist, he scrolled the image south into North Carolina. “We know that the Creep has infested a corridor of North Carolina just south of the city of Raleigh, and extending all the way to the sea at an area called Pamlico Sound. However, this corridor varies in its width; at some points, it is nearly a hundred kilometers from end... but here...” the sergeant pointed towards an area southeast of Raleigh, “... along the outskirts of the city is a patch that is only seven kilometers wide, and doesn't appear to be expanding at any significant rate. Presuming nothing disastrous, we would break through that line within fifteen minutes.”

Amy shivered at the thought of entering infested territory. “Is that wise?”

“People *have* been exposed to the Creep for longer than that, and emerged unaffected. The armor of this transport is polarized to mimic the effects of radiated neutrons as well, making the Creep less willing to attack and infest it. It is more than possible we would make it through. The problem with this plan is, of course, that we have virtually no idea how the Creep would react to our presence. It could ignore us, or it could aggressively seek to eliminate us. Considering how we've already been attacked by a Creep scout, I would not bet that it will be passive. I would have to consider conflict to be a near certainty. Also, that stretch has already

become heavily infested by the reports we've been given. The Creep will be dense, and dense tends to mean more powerful and more aggressive.”

“The other option is the sea route, yes?” Percy asked.

“Indeed,” Nathan confirmed, again scrolling the display, this time to the east and towards the Atlantic Ocean. “It is possible that we can load the transport onto a ferry, and go by water across the sound. While that sounds like it would be the easier trip through a less densely infested area, it has its own problems. Ferries can't move with the same speed as this transport, and we would have to go some distance out of our way to do it. It would be a longer trip, and that assuming that there's a ferry there we can use. If there isn't... our mission is pretty much over.”

Quentin offered, “Rumor has it that the Creep can't infect water.”

“If that was true, why is it that all the undersea bases became infested?” Nathan countered. “Studies suggested it moved *slower* through water, but researchers couldn't really prove that with the limited testing they were able to do. It's a decent gamble, but not a sure thing, either.”

The sergeant wrapped it up with a simple summary, “So that's our options... we can take it hard and fast, or slower and hopefully not as hard.”

Amy shook her head violently at the first option. “I'm sorry... I... I just can't. I can't willingly go through infested territory. Even if it would be faster... it's just too much for me to think about.”

Quentin nodded. “I have to agree. You and Cliff could probably handle it no problem, but the rest of us aren't Marines. We aren't trained to handle the rough and tumble. We can't just go 'booyah' and 'semper fi' and charge into hell.”

Percy gave the option more thought, “At this point, time isn't as much the enemy as the Creep is. In addition to that, night is drawing close; the darkness tends to make all monsters more frightening and intimidating. Neither of the three of us are mentally prepared to handle that, I think.”

Nathan had been expecting a degree of panic from the civilians, but he had not been expecting a fairly rational thought process to explain that panic. They made sense, and that gave him a little bit more hope that they all would make it through.

To be fair, neither option carried a particularly high chance of success... perhaps it was the best choice to play the numbers. He rapped on the dividing door between the cabin and cockpit, and declared, “We've been outvoted, Private. Set our course for Pamlico Sound. Try and get sensors to find any large craft that could support this transport and free of infestation.”

“Yes, sir, I'm on it,” Jeremy answered.

Nathan then turned back to his work... assembling weapons for the other members of the team with what he had. He had been able to cannibalize parts from the transport itself, and with the extra wiring from the communications tower from earlier, had managed to rewire most of the transport's defense systems. “Amy... if things go south, I need you to man the guns on the transport. It's not hard, you just need to tell the systems what target priority to focus on... if you're feeling brave, you can operate the manual turret as well, but I'm not going to expect that from ya, okay?”

The woman nodded nervously. She could do that. If it came to it, she'd have to.

Nathan then handed Quentin and Percy some makeshift pistols, constructed from bits and pieces of six other weapons. “These aren't going to be the greatest, and I can't guarantee they will even work for more than a few shots... but they'll do if you're smart, and I know the both of

you are.”

From there, he pocketed a handful of neutron grenades, on the surface, the explanation being that they packed a bigger punch than any rifle or pistol, for any really tough spots they found themselves in. While that was true, he fully intended to save one, for when all hope was lost. The Creep wasn't going to take any of them, no matter what.

The sun steadily moved through the evening. Just as dusk started to set in, Nathan moved to the viewscreen inside the cabin and panned the video towards the south, where the edges of the North Carolina infestation could now be seen on the horizon.

Unlike the perimeter of the Creep they had seen before, the infestation on the viewscreen was solid black, an indescribable mess of... something... writhing and squirming through the landscape. It ripped down anything standing, be they houses, telephone poles... even the sturdiest-looking trees, transplanted from the mountains, were being torn down, infested, and consumed.

One such tree, a massive oak with a trunk so broad that it was clearly visible even without any magnification, was slimed by a thin sheer of the black taint. Then, like popping a head off of a dandelion, the tree was ripped from its base and tossed into the air, falling back into the infestation with almost a splash, black Creep flying about like water. Soon after, the Creep swarmed the once mighty oak. Everything, from the hardened bark to the leaves, melted like wax under the semi-liquid swarm, literally stripped to its base elements before Nathan could even count to ten in his head.

Amy whimpered at the sight, and Nathan said, “Well, folks, looks like the three of you had the right idea. I don't think we'd have been getting through seven kilometers of that.”

“We wouldn't have gotten through seven *meters* of that.” Quentin gaped.

Percy burred unintelligibly... he looked like he was about to cry.

“I dunno, I think we coulda done it!” Jeremy called out from the cockpit. “We're loaded for bear now! We could take it!”

Nathan figured Jeremy was trying to lighten the mood, but just in case, the sergeant offered a warning, “And that's why you're the driver, and I'm running the operation, Private. Keep your eyes on the sensors for a ferry.”

“Yes, sir!” Jeremy chirped, and Nathan turned back to the view screen, joining the rest of his team in shocked and horrified awe at what stood between them and their way off the doomed planet.

## Chapter Four

*“Listen, I was all on board with helping you and your buddies break into supermarkets to get food. This is something else entirely.”*

*My moral code had shifted a bit over the years... the Creep, as it was called, was spreading like mad, and people were getting scared and desperate. Prices for everything was going up, even for things essential to survival like food and water. Money was becoming scarce as a select few started hoarding it like it really was food. I still don't understand why... did they think they could buy mercy?*

*But lately, Tyrice was becoming more aggressive. He was no longer asking me to disassemble a security system of a grocery store... he was looking to get into a military installation... he was trying to steal weapons. That was something that I still had some scruples about.*

*“We have to be able to stand for ourselves, man. Ain't no one else gonna,” Tyrice answered angrily.*

*“What's raiding a military base gonna do? What does getting guns do? Those things don't stop the Creep.”*

*“It ain't to stop the Creep, you fool,” The South Side Brothers leader insisted. “It's to keep our fellow human beings away.”*

*The Creep was two states away, and he was worried about other people taking his turf? “Are you serious, Ty? You're worried about a turf war at this point?”*

*The much larger man slapped me across the back of the head. It didn't exactly feel pleasant. “For someone who can pick apart some the most complicated machines like they were Legos, you can be hell of a dense sometimes.” He gestured for me to follow him, out of his “office” in the run-down shanty he called a “base.”*

*He led me out to the porch, careful not to step in the giant hole in the deck, made from a combination of rot and a somewhat rowdy party two weeks ago. Making sure he was resting on one of the stable portions of the deck railing, he gestured out to the houses across the street.*

*They all looked exactly like our base, to honest; battered, barely staying together. Hell, the entire street probably would have been ripped up by a moderate thunderstorm... not that there hadn't even been a hard rainstorm for the last five years. Whatever the Creep was doing, it was changing the weather too... only making the pseudo-spiritual environmental blowhards all the more certain that Planet Earth was tired of the “parasites” of humanity, and some collective spirit of the Earth was finally doing something about it.*

*He caught my attention again with a snap of his fingers. “Look at this. Did the Creep do this? Hell no, people did this. We're the ones who did all this. Your father, my father, my grandfather, my great grandfather, my great-great-great-great grandfather... we've all been stuck here in this hellhole. The Creep didn't do this; people did this to us.”*

*Tyrice's eyes stared out into space, and said, “Ya know, in a way I respect the Creep.”*

*This fellow had said some strange things in the past, but this topped them all. “What the hell did you just say, Ty?”*

*“Think about it, Nate. The Creep doesn't care how much money you have. It doesn't care what color your skin is. It doesn't care if you have health insurance, dental insurance, or life insurance. It doesn't care if you have a car. It doesn't care if you own a home. It doesn't care what your credit rating is. It doesn't care if you believe in God, Allah, Jehovah, Vishnu, spirits, whatever. It just eats you up. It doesn't judge, doesn't make exceptions. We're all the*

*same to the Creep.”*

*He dug his fingers into the soft wood. “No, man... we're the ones that decides if you got money, you get to live. We're the ones who say if you've got the guns, you make the rules. We're the ones that say if you have the connections, we're gonna find a way to save you. We're the ones that say if you don't have those things, you're gonna die.”*

*“Ty... the colony ships they're building are gonna be big enough for thirteen billion people...”*

*His introspective turned to rage, and he slapped me across the face so hard that stars swam across my vision, and made me bite my cheek. I could feel the blood dribbling down the side of my lip as he stood over me, angry fire in his eyes.*

*“You honestly believe that bullshit?” he yelled. “When has the man ever been honest with you? When the fuck did they ever go to bat for you? If that's true, why the fuck are all the rich people already outta town? Everyone with the money and power got the hell outta here years ago. The only ones left are the 'peons' like us, with the goddamn Army hovering over us making sure we remained 'accounted for.' They ain't gonna save us, Nate! I wouldn't be fuckin' surprised if the Creep comes burstin' in here, and those fuckers shoot the hell out of us for tryin' to get away!”*

*Tyrice took several deep breaths while he stared down at me, each breath like it was carrying his anger with it, until he turned back towards the street, his voice normal again.*

*“They ain't gonna save us. Ain't no one gonna save us. We gonna have to save ourselves. We gotta make them take us. But to do that, we need a way to make those elitist fuckers take notice. We need to fight them with their own weapons. We gotta become our own army.”*

*Human history had a tendency to be brutal to each other. “Man is wolf unto man” I think the saying went. Tyrice wasn't wrong... he had no reason to believe what he viewed as more lies from the people at the top of the chain. I wanted to believe that it was a little bit different this time, in the face of the Creep, but I could understand why some people couldn't.*

*I slowly stood up, and asked, “You honestly believe that's what it's gonna take, Ty?”*

*“I do, Nate. But I need you on board, else we ain't got a chance.”*

*I knew I was gonna regret this decision, somehow, someday, but I owed it to Tyrice. I owed to all the South Side Brothers, the people who came to me when my mother got sick. They were the ones who tried to get her into the hospital, where she was deemed “non-emergency” by an overworked doctor on a triple-shift, and released.*

*The pneumonia that killed her two days later probably could have been treated... but I didn't blame the doctor for that, unlike the other Brothers. They had an anger I didn't. They had a rage and a sense of oppression that I wrote off as just misunderstanding. I still liked to believe there was good in people. They had given up all hope.*

*So even though I knew this was a bad idea, I still owed it to them. They at least tried for me, and it was only fair I tried for them.*

*I closed my eyes, and reluctantly declared, “Alright, I'm in.”*

Night was closing in; Nathan could feel it. He looked at his watch to confirm the standard time. Seventeen-thirty-three. Roughly fifteen hours to get to the Cape. Time wasn't the enemy... yet. Even then, there was still a hell of a lot that could go wrong.

“Hey, I have a request for all of you,” Nathan said quietly.

Amy looked up, and jabbed Quentin, who followed suit. “Hmm? Did someone say something?”

“Yeah... I got something to ask everyone.”

That prompted Quentin to give Percy a shake, who snorted and blinked tiredly.

Nathan smiled with amusement he hadn't felt for far too long. “Were you asleep?”

“No...” Percy denied, even as he was rubbing his eyes.

While the words of Amy's interjection were accusing, her tone was more impressed and envious. “How the hell can you sleep at a time like this?”

“Enough. Listen to me,” Nathan interrupted. He'd rather not a tit-for-tat emerge over something as trivial as forty winks. “I have a request for all of you. You don't have to do it... I understand that it's not something you're trained to think about, but it's something I'd like you to.”

He took their silence as permission to continue. “I want us to form a pact, I suppose, an agreement between the five of us here. I don't want any of us to think about those who, for whatever reason, weren't able to make it. I don't want any of us to have to hold that on our conscience. So, this is what I propose. From this point on, I would like for us to be in agreement on this one point: either all of us make it to the Cape... or none of us do.”

The silence continued, and Nathan found their expressions impossible to gauge. “I don't want any of you to feel pressured. I know it's a bit of a morbid thing to say. But I do believe we're going to have to work together if we're gonna make it through this.”

“You don't need to ask me, sir!” Jeremy called back, “The Marines don't leave anyone behind!”

“That's why I wasn't asking you, Private!” Nathan called back with a hint of irritation. That boy's attempt at lightening the mood was going to his skull caved in with the back of Nathan's rifle. “And why the hell haven't you tested the night vision sensors yet? The last thing any of us need is you driving straight into the Creep because you thought it'd be cool to drive blind! If they aren't working, I need to know pretty damn quick!”

Nathan was so engrossed in chiding Jeremy that he barely heard what Amy said in the middle, and didn't even process it until after. “Sorry, Ms. Burgundy... what was that?”

“I said, I'll do that,” Amy replied quietly. “I'll make that agreement.”

Quentin bit his upper lip, and followed with, “Yeah, I'll go for that as well. I'd probably wind up killing myself with guilt if I was the only one to survive anyway.”

Percy was the last, but not because he was deliberating, he wanted to hear what the others said first. “Well then, I suppose that settles that. All for one and one for all.”

“Where's that from?” Quentin queried.

Percy was aghast. “How... how can you not be aware of Alexandre Dumas's most famous work? The Count of Monte Cristo! The Vitcomte de Bragelonne! You don't even know The Three Musketeers?”

Amy brightened at the name. “You mean the old candy bar? Oh, I loved those when they were still made!”

Percy slapped his hand against his forehead. “I am surrounded by uncultured louts. God save me.”

Nathan shook his head and laughed. “People don't follow the classics nowadays, Mr. Kensington. Just... let it go, man.”

The consultant lifted his head. “So, you are aware of which I speak?”

“To die among friends. Can a man ask more? Can the world offer less? Who wants to live 'till the last bottle is empty? It's all for one d'Artagnan, and one for all,” Nathan quoted, taking a swig of his canteen to embellish the line.

“I believe that particular translation was from the movie of the early twentieth century,” Percy remarked. “While not the true source, it is sufficiently antiquated enough for your knowledge of it to be admirable. I’ll be honest, I did not expect that from you.”

Nathan’s right eyebrow raised. “Really? Then, what, exactly, did you expect from me?”

“I do beg your pardon, but Marine sergeants never have struck me as the particularly learned type, not exactly prone to look back upon the history of our arts and literature, of any form.”

“Yeah, well, I’m just full of surprises,” Nathan replied candidly. “I did a lot of watching of old movies and television shows from the 'early tech ages', back when I thought knowledge and skill were the way out of the streets. But never mind any of that. We should be hitting the coast soon. Be alert, we might have to move quickly.”

## Chapter Five

Even back in the “height” of our glorious “civilization,” prisons were not the most pleasant of places. During a crisis such as the Creep, it was to be expected that they were many times worse.

The Cleveland Detention center looked like someone had set off a bomb in the middle of the compound, and that was after it had been cleaned up. Trash was everywhere, and the smell of human feces was pervasive during a humid day. There was no working plumbing; inmates relieved themselves in buckets, which they threw out the windows of their cells every night, not caring where it went from there. They took their showers from hoses fired into the cells by the guards every morning.

The guards themselves rarely patrolled the interior of the prison anymore. They didn't have the manpower or firepower to keep control over everything at all times. Often, whole sections of the complex would go completely out of control, riots breaking out over any reason, and if such a reason wasn't present, they happened anyway. At this point, the military and police presence was content with controlling the perimeter and letting no one out. If the animals wound up killing each other, it made their jobs easier.

I think roughly every single person, if given the opportunity to get out of this place, would have done anything to do it. The warden could have told them to kill their entire block, and any inmate here would have done it with a smile.

Except me.

The Marine lieutenant in command of the prison invited one of their recruiters to talk to me when it was discovered I was the one to disable the base security and allow the South Side Brothers to get as far into the complex as they could.

I couldn't do it... I couldn't willingly join the people who killed Tyrice, twelve other Brothers, and locked the rest of us up to rot in here. I told the recruiter he could pound sand, and with a smile, he told me quite confidently that I would change my mind.

Like hell I would, I thought, but funny things happened when people start doing my thinking for me.

A pair of hands grabbed me as I was leaving the mess hall – a fitting name in more ways than one – and dragged me down into the less well-lit areas of the prison. The maintenance crews had pulled out years ago, from what I was told, and the guards didn't care enough for general upkeep to do it, so there were several very dark havens for those who wished to ply their trades, be it gambling, illicit trading, or roughing up other inmates for whatever reason suited them.

I took a punch to my gut that doubled me over, then I was dropped to my knees, clutching my stomach and coughing, when a familiar voice accused, “Do you think you're a tough guy, Nate? Do you think you're earning points with us by staying here?”

Tony Goren, one of the “officers” of the South Side Brothers. The Brothers had a tendency to cuff me for me being “so smart yet so stupid”... a predilection that didn't change in prison, either.

“What are you talking about?” I rasped once I found I had enough breath to speak.

Tony kicked me in the ribs. Nice guy, that Tony. “You think I wouldn't hear about the Marines talking to you?”

“I told them no, jackass,” I replied, confused as to why I was on the receiving end of this abuse.

*“God, you are one stupid fucker at times,” Tony grumbled. “That’s the fucking problem!”*

*That was not the direction I expected this line of conversation to be going. “The hell, man? Why would I join the bastards that shot up Tyrice... and Adam, and Bryson, and—”*

*Tony grabbed me by the throat and slapped me. “You’d think as much as the Brothers smacked you up, you’d get some sense beaten into you by now. Tyrice was trying to get us out of hellholes like this, Nate. He fought and died so that people like you wouldn’t have to live in shit and suffer.”*

*“But...”*

*“You don’t get it do you? Tyrice knew damn well he couldn’t get all of us out. We all knew that. He knew you had a chance. He was doing this for you! And now, you go spittin’ on his grave by refusing the opportunity he died to get you!”*

*I stayed silent... because I had no idea how to respond to that, and because I really didn’t want to get hit again.*

*“Now, you’re gonna go right back to that Marine man, and you’re gonna take him up on his offer. Because if I see you still in this prison come lights out tonight, you’re not living to see light in the morning. Got me?”*

*Tony was never particularly strong in the logic department... it was very possible in his mind he was making sense and following Tyrice’s wishes. At any rate, gambling that it was an empty threat was not something I was keen on rolling the dice for.*

Nathan wasn't sure what exactly prompted that memory. Perhaps it had something to do with the agreement he asked all of his teammates to make earlier. He didn't have much time to think about it either, because at that moment, Private Cliff spoke up nervously.

*“Sergeant, sir... you might want to come see this.”*

The three civilian members of the team gave him looks of silent question, which Nathan warded off with an upheld palm, and slipping out to the cockpit. “What have you got, Private?” he asked.

Jeremy pointed to the regional map displayed on the HUD, where there was a yellow circular crosshairs spinning. “Well, I do believe we’ve found ourselves a boat, first of all. It’s a cargo ferry, moored on the north side of the sound. A query of its designation calls it the Sault Antoinette, an oceanic trading vessel, generally used for sending things up and down the Atlantic Coast. It should be more than enough to handle this transport, and it still is out of the range of the Creep. We should be at its location in fifteen minutes.”

*“Fortune smiles upon us at last,” Nathan muttered.*

*“Well, here it gets strange,” Jeremy said, pointing towards the other side of the HUD, to an infrared display.*

In no way did the Creep resemble a living organism through infrared, so the blotch of orange red on the docks was like a single light bulb in an empty stadium.

*“Is... that what I think it is?”*

*“Yes, sir. It’s human... or at least mostly,” Jeremy warned. “An exposed human this close to the Creep can’t possibly still be clean... but I’ve never heard of an infected human wandering that far out from infested territory.”*

*“I suspect we’ll find out soon enough, considering it’s right there on the docks,” Nathan decided. “Once we get there, I’ll check it out while the rest of you get the ferry ready to go. It shouldn’t take long for me to figure out which it is, and deal with it accordingly.”*

“You sure about that?” Jeremy asked. “If he is infected—”

“Then a sidearm will stop him as easily as it would a normal person. There's never enough Creep in an infected human to pose a danger.” Nathan patted the pistol at his hip for reassurance. “And if, by some miracle, this person is still clean... then he needs the same chance to get out of here as we do.”

“Very well, sir. I meant not to question you.”

Nathan patted Jeremy on the shoulder. “If you have genuine concerns, I want to hear them, Private. It's not like I know much of anything, either. I'm kinda winging it myself.”

The three others shared their concerns once the transport pulled to a stop at the loading dock, and Nathan jumped out and started walking away.

“Hey, David! Where are ya going?” Quentin asked in confusion.

“Sensors picked up a humanoid life form roughly four hundred meters away, and I'm going to check it out.. Help Private Cliff with whatever he needs. I'll be back in at most thirty minutes.”

Nathan couldn't sense the Creep's presence beyond the subtle sense of dread from the infestation down the coastline. Nonetheless, he warily approached the pinpointed location, confirmed by his personal data manager. He had little doubt that whatever the sensors picked up was infected. It had remained largely stationary since it popped up on infrared, and he simply couldn't imagine being that close to the Creep for that long, and not being affected by it.

A storehouse soon was in between Nathan and his target, and that was when he started to smell a smoky aroma. He remembered that smell from his younger days; black and mild. The older men in the neighborhood he grew up in used to smoke that particular type of tobacco.

This only made things more confusing. From the reports he had seen and the stories he heard of infected people, they didn't behave like normal people would. He doubted smoking was on their list of behaviors.

As he was about to turn the final corner, he paused, and prepared to draw his sidearm, when a voice with a very rich southern twang asked, “Who's there? Who's out there?”

Finally, Nathan made that turn, discovering the source of the voice and infrared signature.

Even at ten meters away, the first thing that was readily apparent was that the man in front of him was indeed infected. The black, sooty splotches on the man's face and other exposed skin was a clear indicator of the Creep taking control of his body. But usually, by that level of infection, a person was animate only in the sense that he or she moved. He or she would have no discernible personality, no cognitive response to any stimuli, and certainly no signs of communication.

The man, dressed in casual dress clothes, white button-up shirt, black slacks, black tie, and a large-brimmed black hat looked towards where Nathan had appeared, but it seemed like the man was staring through him rather than at him.

“I'm sorry...” the mysterious man said. “The Creep took my eyesight, so pardon me if I'm really not looking at you.”

“Who are you? Where did you come from?” Nathan interrogated.

“Who am I?” the man chuckled. “That really doesn't matter at this point, now does it? As for where I came from... hard to answer that question when I don't even know where I am.”

“You don't know where you are?”

The man sighed, and momentarily took off his hat, to run a hand through a head of robust brown hair, grown to almost shoulder length in the back. “The last thing... I remember... was... it's supposed to be secret, but I guess there's really no point to it, huh?”

“What are you talking about?”

“The name's Howard. Howard Cooley. For what use names are anymore,” he said. “But, I'm also part of the Creep. It took me... several years ago... but sometimes... I escape. It's like living a nightmare that I can occasionally wake up from. I don't where it takes me, or why... all I know is that I probably don't have much time.”

Nathan then asked, “So... what is the last thing that you remember? The thing that's supposed to be so secret?”

“Did you ever wonder how who was going on what colony ship was decided?”

Nathan snorted. “How else? The rich and the powerful got to go first, and so on down the line.”

“Really?” Howard queried rhetorically. “It didn't turn out that there was limited space, was there now? On top of that, I know a lot of very important people were chosen for the last vessel to leave.”

Nathan had to acknowledge that had been true, a promise made by world leaders that had actually been kept. Even prisoners, the type that his old friends back home were worried would be left to be devoured, had been given space. Hell, if he had been told right, rumor had it was that the *Requiem* was going to likely take off for deep space half empty.

“So... if it wasn't space... what else could have been in short supply?” the infected man asked.

Nathan wasn't terribly amused. “I have a tight schedule, Howard. I don't have time for guessing games.”

“That's precisely it, actually,” Howard replied flatly. “Time. Perhaps the people running Project Exodus got a better handle on just how fast the Creep was expanding, but in those critical planning phases when they were deciding who would be going where, there was the potential that one ship would be cutting it tragically close.”

“The *Requiem*,” Nathan noted.

“Is that what they called it?” Howard wondered. “Can't say I like the name; makes it sound like we've already lost. Anyway... there is one common thread among every single person that was assigned to leave on the *Requiem*. That was the big secret. There are people... resistant... to the Creep. Most lifeforms are infected right away... there is a small percentage, however, that can resist its effects. Not entirely, and some not for very long... but the project managers hoped that those people could buy themselves enough time to get off the planet if it came to that.”

“Really?”

Howard shrugged. “I'd think so, since I suspect you're standing on or near my very infested jacket, and have been for some time.”

Nathan looked down, and to his horror, discovered that his foot was indeed standing on a black jacket, the color so dark that it mostly hid the dusty and almost ghostly residue of the Creep. He hollered in shock, jumped back, and swiftly took off his shoe. To the Marine's amazement, the Creep that had soaked through his shoe simply slid off his foot lifelessly as he pulled away.

Howard smiled, and said, “Told ya. Anyway... I suggest you get going. I can feel the Creep starting to tug on me again, and I'd rather not be anywhere near you when that happens, for my sake more than yours, as I can only imagine you're armed.”

Nathan had been carefully studying his boot and sock while Howard had been attempting to give partings. He didn't see any signs of infestation... and it didn't *feel* infested, either... he

could have it, and himself, scanned more thoroughly once the most pressing crisis was past. "Are... you sure you want to go back?" Nathan asked, trying to sound merciful even as it implied that he'd be killing Howard. "I... can end it."

"I've been able to wake up from the nightmare before. I suspect I'll be able to again. And even if I don't, it really doesn't make much difference, does it? Nah, I think I'm fine for now. I appreciate the offer though... I never got your name, young man."

"Nathan."

Howard nodded. "Nathan. Nice name. I'm guessing you're going to try and ford the sound. Be careful... the Creep can infest water just as it infests land. The infestation *started* from the ocean... but that can be a tale for another time if by some twist of fate our paths cross again. Farewell."

Nathan didn't say anything to confirm or deny that implication. "Very well then. I won't wish you to be safe... seems to be a rather empty parting."

"It is," Howard answered, straightened his hat, and started shambling to the south, towards the infested area.

Nathan glaned down at his data manager to check how much time he had before he turned around himself. Private Cliff and the rest of the team better damn well have gotten everything ready by the time he got back.

For the most part, they had, and Nathan had to acknowledge they had done some good work, considering they were four people trying to do the work of a team of probably seven or more well-versed sailors.

Amy was the first one he met, the one-time cook straining to pull the mooring straps tightly through the treads of the transport. She squeaked in fright when she felt Nathan's strength added to her efforts, and she sighed in relief when she turned her head to see what it was. "Oh! Sergeant David! You scared me! Thank you for the help, though."

"Where's Private Cliff?" Nathan asked.

She pointed up to the bridge. "Waiting for me to tell him that the transport is secured, for Quentin to tell him that he figured out how to program the navigational system, for Percy to tell him that he's not going to vomit, and for you to tell him... well... that you're back."

"I'll get to it, then."

Amy sheepishly asked, "What... was it out there?"

Nathan wasn't sure exactly how to answer that with full honesty, so he went with a partial one. "Just another infected human, is all. Nothing to worry yourself over much."

He approached the doors that led to the raised bridge, a slight hint of rust on the hinges causing it to protest as it slid open. The stairwell was clean, save for the muddy footprints of his team as they moved back and forth between the deck and the bridge.

Nathan had noticed that tendency among what people were leaving behind; tidying and cleaning up the very things they were abandoning, like they were planning a short trip over the weekend and were going to come back and get right back to work. Was it force of habit, perhaps? Something to take their minds off what was happening? Nathan just knew that his bunk on base was an absolute mess when he left it, and that was despite the supposed cleanliness and discipline the Marines were supposed to instill in him. Personally, he got out of there as soon as he could and was glad he wouldn't have to come back.

People were so strange sometimes.

On the bridge, Private Cliff was looking over the control panel very carefully. Not wanting to startle him into making a mistake, Nathan rapped on the door quietly, and asked,

“Everything in order?”

Jeremy looked up and shared Amy's look of relief. “Yes, sir. This... I haven't piloted too many watercraft, sir, and all those were small Marine craft... the layout on this is a bit different. I know we don't have much time, but I want to acclimate myself to reduce the chance of me making a mistake.”

“Good idea. I can't imagine navigating the sound is going to be easy. If it would help any, I'm sure the sensors will help you navigate the immediate hazards. Another possibility is that we take this ferry out into the open sea.”

Jeremy shook his head. “No. We've been trying to flank the creep long enough hoping to find an easier route. You don't circle around and avoid the Creep. We're going to have to cross it no matter how far out to sea we go. Let's just get it over with now.”

“You're a good man, Private. You just keep us afloat, no matter what. The rest of us are gonna have to keep the infestation at bay somehow.”

“Well... I did learn something about this ferry as I was looking over the console,” Jeremy noted. “It's tritium powered.”

Nathan's eyebrows lifted. “Which means...”

“There's hydrogen and neutron fuel around here somewhere,” Jeremy said. “Perhaps...”

Nathan was almost already out the door. “Get this ferry going. I'll be in the engine room trying to work something out. Let the others know that they might have to keep the Creep busy. Quentin and Percy have neutron sidearms, and Amy can try manning the turret in the transport.”

“Yes, sir,” Jeremy replied, and turned back to the helm after Nathan disappeared from view. “All righty, here goes nothing.”

## Chapter Six

*The U.S. Government had lost communication with the Deep Sea Research Station Isolation five days ago, and my ship was tapped as the one to check in on them. My crew groaned upon my orders to the helmsman to change course. I couldn't blame them. They were heading back from the Philippines to San Francisco, and were going to be granted their two weeks leave.*

*And this may have been the most remote location on this earth. The Station Isolation was true to its name, located at the oceanic pole of inaccessibility, the farthest point from any land on the globe. Even for a man well familiar, well versed, and well traveled in the sea, the sight of nothing but open water on every horizon, and knowing that nowhere else on earth was farther from land, was a bit disquieting.*

*The rumor mill among my fellow captains was that the Isolation was a site for top secret biological testing. My superiors would neither confirm or deny this, except to tell me that any survey and rescue teams should be prepared for full contamination from any number of sources: biological, chemical, and even nuclear or technological.*

*Just what I wanted to hear.*

*I briefed the recovery team as best I could, hoping I left them with the impression that they were to anticipate anything... and then some. They were my best specialist units; I couldn't trust anyone else with such a highly sensitive and potentially disastrous maneuver. From there, I ordered the comm officer to reroute all communications and status updates from the team directly to my ready room, where I would await their reports.*

*Before I could do that, I got my first sense that something was very wrong. I couldn't explain it accurately... it was like a pit had opened up in my stomach and was churning like I had eaten something rancid. Moments later, the helmsman informed me that the flight boss wanted to see me immediately.*

*Said flight boss was waiting with Lieutenant Commander Cardiff. "The commander here says he saw something in the water during his fly-by of the area."*

*I don't even remember why I ordered a fly-by, to be honest. I think it was more to give the flight crews something to do rather than wait for the search team to finish their job. But Douglas actually had something to report. "I flew over the base itself, and noticed that there seemed to be something... bubbling up from the water. It seemed to be a thin black mist. My sensors couldn't identify it, so I got the hell out of there as fast as I could." He then pointed out to sea, and said, "You can actually see it hovering in the air if you look closely enough."*

*At that point, I patted myself on the back for telling the helmsman to come to a full stop eight kilometers away. While the bubbling point that Douglas saw was beyond the curvature of the Earth... the misty black cloud indeed was not.*

*My communications device beeped on my belt, and the helmsman informed me that the survey and rescue team wanted to make an urgent report. I ran as fast as my legs could take me back to my ready room, and where the private channel flashed a holographic display the moment the door closed.*

*It was deathly dark, illuminated only by the red glow of the emergency signals and the lighting from the team's search lights. Not that there was terribly much to see...*

*"Captain, sir... I... it looks like something exploded in here," the team command officer described, even as his HUD was relaying the images directly to me. The entire station, as far as I could see, was covered with a black, mucous-like substance. It was dripping from the ceiling,*

*pouring down the walls, and undulating along the floor. Barely anything remained discernible in the surrounding area, everything from top to bottom covered in that inky ichor.*

*“Our scans can't identify it, or even find anything that this stuff even closely resembles,” the officer continued. “What the hell did the geniuses down here cook up?”*

*That gnawing pit in my stomach felt like it had just grabbed my insides, and gave them a squeeze. “Commander... you and your team withdraw, now. That's an order. Get the hell out of there.”*

*“I'm not going to protest in the slightest... Danes, Howell, Kelsey, fall back, get back to the rover, now. Kelsey! Kelsey! Come on! Now!”*

*The officer grabbed his subordinate by the shoulder, and turned him around, then yelled in fright at the sight before him: Lieutenant Kelsey, his face tainted by black splotches visible through the clear visor of his containment suit. Most haunting was the young man's eyes, lifeless and staring blindly off into space, no longer conscious of anything or anyone.*

*“Commander Keating! Help! This shit is all over me!”*

*The image on my display turned about towards Lieutenant Howell... the black slime from the floor having swallowed the man up to his waist. The supposedly nigh-impenetrable containment suit melting like warm butter, quickly infecting the officer with whatever in God's name it was... the skin pallor turning white in seconds, the same gristly marks spreading over his cheeks...*

*By the time the squad leader thought to save himself, it was too late. “Shit!” he shouted, and looked down to see the black ichor swelling up his legs. “Captain! Get the hell out of here! Now! Cap—”*

*The image blinked away in an instant, and I jumped to my feet in a panic, overriding the sliding door to my ready room because it didn't open fast enough. “Helm! Take us to full speed out of here! Now!”*

*The helmsman, understandably, didn't find this enough for him to act on. “But, sir... to where? And what about the survey team?”*

*“The survey team can't be helped... something down there got them, and it's going to get us if we don't get the hell moving. Just go full speed dead north, and plot a course to the nearest Navy dock from there!”*

*I didn't realize it at the time, but I had been one of the first people to see the Creep, and the living dead it could create.*

Jamison had grown increasingly grim once it became clear that the survivors were turning east, towards the sound. Now, they had just begun what the old Admiral knew was going to be a perilous trip across infested water. At this point, it really was their best option. They would have needed to go nearly a hundred kilometers out to sea to find the one remaining window of clean water, which even now was being rapidly shut by the infestation crawling forward out of Europe and Africa. Such a detour would have pushed them past the deadline, and likely by a good margin.

“You think they made the wrong choice,” Douglas remarked.

Jamison shook his head. “I know they made the wrong choice. But considering there was no *right* choice, I can't exactly blame them.” He paused and took a deep, nervous breath. “Thirty kilometers of Creep infestation to cross. I can only pray it's not as dense as it was further inland. The waters in that region aren't all that deep, so hopefully that means the Creep won't be able to cook up something unexpected beneath the surface.”

“We both saw the images Sergeant David transmitted to us from the Creep inland. There was no way they were getting through that.”

Jamison nodded in agreement. “How long would it take you to prep the drop ship?”

“Not long. Even by myself,” Douglas replied.

“Get started anyway,” the admiral ordered grimly. “If these five are lost, I really don't want to stay on this dying rock any longer than I have to.”

Douglas stood up from his chair, saluted, and left Jamison to maintaining vigil. The pilot knew that his old friend carried a great deal of guilt for what happened at Station Isolation nearly three decades ago, even more so when it became clear that whatever the Creep was, it was the same stuff they had both seen deep below the waters of the Pacific.

Douglas just hoped that the old Admiral understood that there had been no hope for the specialists that had went down into that pit of death... and that there might not be any hope for those five souls sailing across the Pamlico Sound either.

As that was happening, the survivors of the *Sender* crash approached perilously close to where the Creep had infested the water of Pamlico Sound. In the now twilight conditions, the readily visible blackish taint couldn't be seen, but it didn't need to be.

Percy was not a soldier... he knew this... everyone knew it. So why was he out here while the two Marines were either on the bridge or below decks?

“Because Sergeant David is trying to rig the engine to carry a neutron stream across the boat's hull, and Private Cliff is the only fellow who knows anything about steering this damn thing,” Quentin answered from the other side of the deck.

Percy was startled. Had he asked that question out loud?

“Your face gives your thoughts away pretty easily,” Quentin explained. “You wouldn't make a terribly good poker player.”

“And, you would be, I take it?” Percy said with a snort.

Quentin shrugged. “Won a few tournaments in my day. That sort of thing really is up my alley, though. Crunching numbers, calculating risk versus yield, logical deduction of opponent's hands... reading their faces was a skill I picked up over time by osmosis.”

“If only you could put those skills to use to read when the Creep is planning to attack.”

“Don't need to,” the portly man replied. “Can't you feel it? It already begins.”

The air did feel thicker, and that telltale dread chilled Percy to the point where he thought he'd never be warm again. The black mist that now blanketed them began to form droplets on Percy's skin, most of it sliding off harmlessly and flaking off, inert, onto the deck.

Even then, he momentarily panicked, frantically wiping his arms until Quentin snarled, “Will you relax? The density of the Creep that can suspend itself in the air is so small that it would take several hours breathing it directly into your lungs before it could infect you. It's the stuff in the water that we have to worry about.”

Percy glanced over the edge experimentally, the searchlight mounted to his pistol revealing that the black stain of the Creep was indeed working its way up the hull. “Wasn't the sergeant supposed to be working on protecting the ship?” Percy asked, only to hear the thump and whoosh of a pistol spitting out a neutron charge.

“Yeah, and it might take some time, so why don't you keep it busy while he finishes up?” Quentin offered, firing again onto the advancing Creep.

That seemed like a fairly good idea, all things considered.

Down below decks, Nathan dashed from the engine room to the hold in the other room along the aft side. He knew what he wanted and needed to do... it was simply a matter of

whether he had the materials and means to do it.

The skeleton of the ferry was constructed almost entirely of stainless steel, a nice conductive material for radiated neutrons to flow through without drastically compromising it. The problem was that the ferry was constructed in a compartmentalized manner: the skeleton was not welded together in one piece, but more like ten separate boxes connected together using a fiberglass bridge between the compartments. That material would burn out quickly, and quickly ruin the entire neutron-laced hull he was trying to create.

Thus, Nathan had to bypass each junction point. That was going to take time, of which he likely didn't have all that much to spare. He could literally feel the Creep in the water below the ferry... small specks of the black substance began to leak through the floorboards. With enough purchase, the Creep would rip the ferry apart.

The trick was linking the steel frames to each other with copper and steel wire he had stolen from the surplus electrical wiring in the engineering room. Forcing his way through the interior wall, he stuck his hand through the ripped-open panel, groping blindly for the wires he had already anchored and fed through on the other side of the divider wall. Once he found them, he pulled them closer and quickly tied the supple wires to the now exposed skeleton on his side of the wall.

Satisfied with the work, he took a deep breath, gripped his loop of stripped wire tightly, and dashed back into the hall towards the next junction. One down, nine to go...

As Nathan sprinted about below decks, Quentin, Percy, and Amy fought a losing battle with the approaching Creep. Quentin personally lost count of how many pulses he fired, and it wasn't like he was really making any headway. For every finger of Creep that he momentarily stalled, ten more continued its slow crawl up the side of the hull.

"Quentin, watch out!" Amy's voice boomed from the speakers of the transport, the manual turret spinning in the portly programmer's general direction. Quentin dropped to the deck, soon after hearing the deafening roar of the turret's cannon erupting with a solid charge that rifled off into the bay. It exploded with a bang that sent Creep flying, splattering onto the deck where it quickly dried up and evaporated into the air.

By the time Quentin got back to his feet, the Creep along the hull had reached the top of the railing, and were starting to climb down the deck. "Sorry, Quentin! There are big piles of Creep forming out there!"

"Keep the turrets focused on them, Burgundy. Kensington and I will do our best with the stuff coming onto the deck."

"Because we're handling it oh so well, right?" Percy quipped, firing twice more, then howling in pain as the heat generated from firing made the pistol too hot to handle comfortably. "Damn it, Quentin, I can't keep this up!"

"We're not supposed to, Kensington!" Quentin yelled back, wondering what was taking Nathan so long...

Nathan could feel the squish of Creep underneath his boots, leaking through to his feet. So far, he was resisting the effects as he had during his encounter with Howard, but he didn't know how much longer that was going to last, or how long before the Creep had the grasp it needed to rip the ferry into pieces.

His every compulsion was to rush through the task at hand, but he remembered an old axiom of his grandmother's, a sentiment echoed by his Corps training. "People who hurry their job as fast as they can often find themselves taking more time in the end, going back and fixing what they didn't do right. Take your time, do it right the first time, and it'll work out for the

best.”

Then again, something told him the Creep never listened to his grandmother.

He quickly tested the connection between the two compartments and decided it was good enough. All they needed was enough of a neutron stream to make the Creep think twice... theoretically, he would have the time to strengthen the connections later.

He was back into a full sprint to the engine room, taking a pair of quick shots to force back the Creep that had worked its way up the control panel, and executed the command to open the neutron flow. Here's hoping...

On the deck, Quentin and Percy had slowly been backing up from the advancing creep, and were initially considering loading into the back of the transport, until they remembered that it was powered down at the moment and wouldn't have that neutron shielding anyway.

But fortunately, the hum of power filled their ears, the energy produced from the stream of radiated neutrons stirring the Creep into retreat. It was like a crashing wave in reverse; the black ichor seemed to jump away from the boat, receding with a haste that was the antithesis of its advance.

Percy dropped to his rear, exhausted with relief. Quentin had a bit more energy, hopping and cheering and yelling threats into the darkness. “Terribly mature, Quentin. I'm sure the Creep is horribly shamed,” he finally chided.

“Hey! We need to take what small victories we can get!”

Amy's voice then boomed out from the transport's speakers. “Oh... shit... grab hold of something! We've got a big wave coming from the ocean!”

“A wave?” Percy asked. “You mean like a tsunam...?”

True enough, a wall of infected water crashed onto the side and deck of the ferry, casting Percy and Quentin across the deck and crashing them into the far railing. The Creep sizzled upon contact with the vessel, but that didn't dissuade it from taking another shot.

The two men had pulled themselves to their feet just as the second tainted wave struck the craft, sending them flailing down again. Nathan then stood in the hatchway leading below decks, and ordered, “Everyone inside now! Even you, Miss Burgandy! Double time!”

Nathan didn't have to repeat himself. Amy jumped out of the cockpit of the transport running, promptly slipping on the slick deck and having a face-to-floor meeting. Quentin and Percy helped her to her feet, and the three of them raced to the hatchway.

They didn't quite make it, as yet another towering wave sent them scattering across the deck. Quentin rammed face-first into the bridge tower. Percy went spinning in circles, splayed out across the deck, until he was unmercifully crotched by a winch mechanism on the starboard side. Amy managed to grab hold of the side of the hatch, and for a couple of seconds struggled to remain upright, legs scrambling desperately, until finally the shifting slope of the deck and physics won out, cutting her feet out from under her and causing her to smack her chin on the deck.

It would have probably been comical to watch if the situation hadn't been so charged with tension and fear. Fortunately, their next attempt to reach safety met considerably more success. The three all crumpled onto the floor inside the bridge tower seconds before another wave crashed into the ferry.

“Do you think the Creep can tip us over?” Amy asked nervously.

“It can try,” Nathan stated. “This ferry has a wide enough base that it's going to take something a lot bigger than that, and even if the ferry *does* capsize, it has a self-correcting system that will take over and turn it upright again.”

“So... we're safe?”

“For now. Could be all of three seconds depending on what else the Creep does,” Nathan admitted. He then turned to the ship's intercom, hit a button and asked, “Private, how much farther do we have to go?”

“Twelve clicks, sir,” Jeremy answered. “At our rate of speed, it'll take roughly eight minutes.”

“Understood. Do whatever you can to keep that speed if not faster.”

“Yes, sir!”

Percy had finally gathered enough breath to speak again, asking a fairly simple question. “So now what?”

Nathan shrugged, huffed, and replied, “We wait until we see what else is in store for us.”

It didn't take long. The four survivors had roughly one minute to catch their breath before a loud thud from below shook the entire ferry. Percy found himself once again tumbling to the floor, and asked, “What the hell was *that*?”

A second crash rocked the ferry before Nathan could again turn to the intercom.

“Private? Did you run us aground?”

“No, sir!” Jeremy protested. “There's a large object swimming around the ferry and ramming us!”

“You have got to be kidding me...” Nathan grumbled, “Well, what do the sensors say it is?”

“Unknown, sir. Whatever it is, it's infected... so the sensors can't identify it for certain. All it can determine is that it is either a large shark or small whale, sir.”

Nathan clenched his eyes shut. “You have got to be kidding me...” Snapping them back open, he stared out the hatch and started planning, stopping once he spied the winch. “I have an idea. Percy, Quentin, come with me. Keep yourselves low in case the waves start hitting again.”

Nervously, the two men followed Nathan back out onto the deck, towards the winch he identified. Taking a moment to find the cord release, Nathan detached the tension in the line and pulled the heavy hook and cord to him, wrapped it around his waist twice, then latched the sturdy hook onto its own line.

“David... what the hell do you think you're doing?” Quentin demanded.

“Just snap this tension back into place, and reel it back in once whatever is down there is dead,” Nathan answered. “I'll be all right.”

“Sergeant David!” Percy called out, but by that point there was no dissuading the Marine, who dove headfirst into the infested waters of Pamlico Sound.

Even along the outer edge of the coastal islands of the sound, the water was not terribly deep. Nathan estimated it was only about eight to ten meters – hence his earlier fear that Private Cliff had run them aground – which gave him a hint of an advantage over whatever was down there, as there wasn't much room for anything particularly large to maneuver. However, the waters quickly dropped off after the coastal islands, from where their adversary was attacking.

An orca, from the looks of things. While the water was too dark to clearly make out signs of infection from his distance, Nathan had no doubts about it... no killer whale could swim that fast at such a steady rate without the aid of the Creep killing its fatigue and strain.

Now, to get its attention.

His neutron rifle was handy in that regard. While its damage range wouldn't be significant, it could be fired underwater without much trouble, where his conventional ballistics

sidearm would be considerably hampered by the drag of the water.

The speed and direction of the boat was also of benefit, as it would eventually swing Nathan into range without having to waste energy swimming. He fingered one of the grenades attached to his belt, and hoped this plan of his wasn't going to get him killed. He surfaced for air, then submerged again, waiting for his chance.

On the deck, Quentin and Percy had so far braced themselves against the ramming of the monster below, but as Nathan had predicted, once someone was outside the protection of the ferry tower, the waves started crashing again.

Despite the sergeant's warning, it took Quentin off guard, and while Percy had wedged himself low against the railing, Quentin was toppled overboard. The portly programmer clenched his eyes shut in anticipation of crashing into the water, only to have his shoulder nearly jerked out of place when something grabbed his upper arm.

Opening his eyes again, he looked up to see Percy had reacted far faster than Quentin would have expected, and had grabbed hold before Quentin could fall to the waters below.

Jeremy noticed what had happened, and also knew that another wave would probably send them both overboard if something wasn't done fast. He examined his underwater sensors, and decided his best course of action.

"Percy! I'm going to make a sudden turn here. Keep hold, and get Quentin back up fast!"

Jeremy did just that, turning the ferry into the next incoming wave at an angle that would theoretically block Percy and Quentin from the brunt of the incoming water. He hoped that would be enough... he really didn't want to test their "all for one, and one for all" policy so soon.

Below the water, Nathan had been about ready to take his shot, when the ferry quickly jerked unexpectedly to the east, out towards the open sea. Wondering what in hell Private Cliff was doing, Nathan emerged to the surface again, and identified the source of the problem... Quentin hanging on for dear life, Percy trying to pull him up, and with another wave coming, Jeremy had turned the craft to try and block it.

Unfortunately the infected orca also saw or sensed the overboard passenger, and was starting to circle towards them. Nathan started pulling himself along the winch cord, hoping to get in range for a shot.

"You really need to lose some weight!" Percy grunted. Adrenaline was helping his efforts, but it was a slow process.

Quentin shouted back, "First thing I'm doing on the colony ship! Dropping twenty kilos!"

Percy laughed despite himself, but the next wave to hit the craft caused him to lose his humor. While the brunt of the water didn't hit him, the jostling of the ferry from the wave and the monster still attacking was enough for his grip to momentarily slip, and lose pretty much all of the headway he had made.

What appeared to be a fin now appeared through the darkness, cutting through the water towards the overboard man. With a burst of strength Percy never would have thought he had possessed, he quickly jerked Quentin upwards, just enough to avoid the surge of an orca from biting Quentin in half. Unfortunately, the burst wasn't enough to pull him back up over the railing, and so they soon found themselves back where they started.

One danger passed soon after, as Percy witnessed a flash of red light, presumably from Nathan's neutron rifle, and the marine monster turned in the direction of said flash, swimming rapidly. While that didn't solve the problem at hand... it was at least one less thing to worry

about.

Finally, he received help in the form of Amy, who said, "Why should you boys have all the fun?" Percy wasn't much in the mood to argue, and the two of them were able to pull the husky programmer back onto the relative safety of the deck.

"Grab hold of something folks, I'm turning us back to the south!" Jeremy declared, and the ferry slowly maneuvered back towards the proper course, just in time for all three of them to get a nice bath of infected water.

Nathan had successfully drawn the orca's attention, but another quick maneuver of the boat prevented him from springing his trap as the monster swam by. Surfacing for another breath of air, he silently cursed Jeremy's insistence on changing direction, and submerged just in time to see the killer whale nearly on top of him.

It was only a quick movement back to the surface that kept Nathan from being ripped apart, but he couldn't afford to lose his wits. This next pass was going to have to count, as it was going to be at an optimal opportunity... the orca swimming directly away from the boat and thus putting the most distance between them.

All around him, he could sense the Creep thinning, but that was of little comfort. Unlike the Creep itself, infected animals or objects could survive detached from the infestation that spawned it. This creature had to be killed, or it would just keep attacking.

The orca disappeared into the dark waters, then returned into his view as it readied another charge. The creature opened its mouth, and that was when Nathan struck, unhooking the grenade he had been fingering, throwing it down the beast's maw as he fired his neutron rifle off to his right.

Without the proper traction from standing on solid ground, the kickback from the rifle pushed him to the side, just enough to avoid the snapping jaws, even as he bumped roughly on the monster's slick skin as it swam past yet again. Nathan waited as long as he could, then pressed the activation trigger to the grenade. He could only hope he was far enough away.

The neutron grenade worked a lot like the larger neutron bombs, only to not quite as drastic of a scale. Nonetheless, it was still plenty of power that could vaporize organic matter with ease... not to mention the shock wave produced by the explosion.

And so it did to the infected orca, the bright white light from the grenade's detonation lighting up the water and painfully expelling the nearby Creep. The shock wave hit Nathan a second later, jostling him painfully and causing stars to swim across his eyes. No doubt it would leave a handful of nasty bruises when all was said and done.

Jeremy must have announced the beast's end of his own volition, or perhaps the others saw the explosion and assumed the threat was abated. Whichever the case, he could feel the tug on his waist as the line drew him back toward the ferry, regardless of giving no order to do so.

He gladly accepted Quentin's hand as all three of the civilians hauled him over the rail and onto the deck, where Nathan flopped out and inhaled wonderful air. Above, the stars twinkled, no longer shrouded by the airborne residue of the Creep. He had never looked to the night sky all that often in his life, and the few times he did, it had been dimmed by the lights of the inner city. Shame that he never really had a chance to see the stars until the night before he flew off to meet them.

Private Cliff's voice carried through the breeze. "Good news, sir. We are now through the Creep infestation according to our information, and are four clicks from a suitable landing point. We've made it through, sir!"

Now, that was a victory even Percy was willing to cheer, and even Nathan cracked a

triumphant smile. With any luck, it should be nothing but clear, uninfected land straight to Cape Canaveral.

## Chapter Seven

*Samantha's father, Eaton, was a collector of antique things. I think that was where I got my love and understanding for historical literature, movies, machines, and such. He had a library of media in his basement, mostly bootlegged and illegally copied, from times before the millennium. I'd often spend as much time there as my own home next door... not that my mother minded all that much. I was somewhere close, where she knew how I could be found, and I was enjoying myself without getting into trouble. In the streets of Cleveland, a mother was truly blessed when she could say such things.*

*The man was especially in love with his machines. Samantha's mother would shake her head whenever I would jog up to her door and ask where her husband was, then point in surrender towards their garage. She would somewhat bitterly remark that there was more money put into those "damned piles of rust" than there was anywhere else in the house.*

*Eaton liked to restore and repair all manner of trinkets from days gone by, his garage having become a museum of sorts for old and sometimes forgotten relics. Every so often, the kids of the neighborhood would stop by and ask about what new toys he had fixed up, and of course he'd show them around, along with a glass of lemonade or soft drink for their trouble.*

*He normally rejected modifying them to be compatible or fit the technology of the modern day, claiming such artifacts could only be properly done justice by keeping it true to the era of their make.*

*One such item was a twenty-first century Dodge Charger. The frame for that thing was more than four hundred years old when he had it towed onto his driveway, and that was about all that was left once he and I finished stripping down what was salvageable. From there, we pored over manuals and old books – with some assistance from my "gift" – to learn how it was supposed to look, how it was supposed to come together...*

*It was during the restoration of the car's exterior shell that I asked him just how much this thing would be worth once fully rebuilt.*

*"Oh, I dunno... maybe some museum or classic car collector would buy it for a couple million or so," he answered.*

*That amount was something I wasn't expecting. "Would any of the other stuff we've rebuilt be worth anything?"*

*Eaton shrugged. "Maybe, I guess. I suppose it could be. Never really bothered to have this stuff appraised."*

*"Mister, you're sitting on gold here! You could sell this and get out of this place!"*

*Eaton frowned. "Get out? Why? Part of the problem around here is that all the good people try to get out. That's why the thugs take over. Believe or not, I like it here. I like showing all you kids all this stuff from the old days. Should I sell it to a museum so that they can charge twenty credits a person to see what they can see here for free? Or to a collector who will hide it in some gallery where only himself and a handful of socialites he wants to impress will ever see?"*

*He snorted at the very idea. "I'd rather appreciate the stuff I build than build stuff so it can appreciate. People don't understand our history, they don't understand and try to learn where we came from, and so they're lost going ahead. Take a good look, Nate. All this stuff is gonna be gone soon. Who is going to carry that memory?"*

Nathan doubted Eaton could have understood just how true and how quickly his vision

would come to pass, or that he'd been thinking about the alleged “supervirus” that people called the Creep. Nonetheless, that question was coming to pass right now.

It's why Jeremy didn't understand why Nathan had abruptly called for him to stop and back up a bit. It was why Quentin and Amy had no idea what was so important. It was why Percy – who at least was versed in antiquity – wondered why this, of all things, was something Nathan demanded to stop and come back for.

The Creep was long behind, so that wasn't terribly much of a concern. Neither was the time, as it was only just past midnight, so they were in no real danger of missing the deadline. It was more a matter of *why* they were stopping that made everyone cross.

Nathan decided it would be quickest for their trip to continue along the coast and meet with the main highway once they hit the Georgia state line. This brought them along Myrtle Beach, and a restoration garage that caught the sergeant's eye and demanded they stop for the moment. There, among the lineup of vehicles that spanned the motorized age of mankind, he found a single black and silvery two-wheeled machine. Upon a closer look, it was indeed everything he thought it was.

“This, my friends, is a piece of *history!*” Nathan admonished. “This... is a Harley Davidson Road Hog touring motorcycle... a 2030 model if I don't miss my guess. This thing was refurbished from a four hundred-year-old design! You just don't see this sort of thing anymore!”

“Yes, and for good reason: they're obsolete pieces of trash,” Percy scoffed.

Amy poked at the wheels with her right foot. “It doesn't even have hover technology. That's got to be one bumpy ride. What a quaint method of movement.”

“Bah, that's how you know you're on the road, by feeling it underneath you,” Nathan chided. His hand ran across the polished chrome decal of the front mud guard. “I mean, look at this thing! Sure, it's been modified to fit and operate off a modern tritium engine, but everything else is perfectly to the original design. This is a thing of beauty!”

“Beauty?” Amy wondered. “Clearly beauty is truly in the eye of the beholder.”

“My God... look at this, the dual-linked exhaust from both ends... this is real chrome... yes, natural cow's leather... oh, my...” He ran his finger along the dash panel. “Oh yeah, real blown glass, not that plastic stuff we use nowadays.” He dropped down to his knees to analyze the frame. “Looks like they went with a modified look, lowering the frame and pulling out the front wheel and fork into a 'chopper' style. And this color, a matte black finish with chrome trim... do you three understand just how rare it is to see real chrome the way it was originally and meant to be made? The people who owned this shop must have been furious that they had to leave this behind.”

From the transport, Jeremy called out, “Sir, the Admiral wants to know why we've stopped.”

“Tell him we're picking up some equipment... just in case,” Nathan shouted back. “We'll be on our way again shortly.”

“Wait...” Percy began, but Nathan was already at full sprint into the shop. “You aren't possibly thinking about taking this... ancient machine with us? We won't have room!”

There was a smell to a garage, even one long abandoned, that reminded Nathan of those old days as a child helping Eaton fix up his latest discovery. Oil, fluid, and human sweat mixed into a concoction that reminded him of earlier days, when the Creep was just a nuisance, and the only worry was if they'd ever get that 2200 Corsair up and running.

Along the north wall were the keys to each vehicle, helpfully lined up in the same order

they were displayed out in the lot. Even the keys were made from the right materials; light grade steel for the blade, and a bow sheathed with a soft polymer plastic for easy gripping. He made a mental note – if he ever got the opportunity, he would attempt to find out the proprietors and let them know that they did as fine of work as he had ever seen... and that he paid proper homage to what must have been the jewel of their collection.

Percy hadn't stopped his tirade, even when Nathan was out of earshot. "... attach yourself to some damn fool contraption you're going to have to discard in roughly eight or nine hours anyway. I refuse to share space with this machination. And that is final!"

"I'm not going to throw this beautiful machine into the back with someone like you who can't appreciate magnificence when you see it," Nathan replied, aghast at the very suggestion.

"Well, at least sense has eventually sunk in—"

"I'm going to be *riding it*, you fool."

"—and that you have realized that this child's game... wait... what?"

Nathan repeated himself, "I'll be riding it down the Cape. Give it a proper sendoff."

Percy blinked, and muttered, "You're insane."

Nathan shook his head. "Percy, you don't leave perfection to sit and rot. You give it one last ride. And that's what I intend to do."

Nathan took his place in the saddle, at this point ignoring Percy's protests as he slid the key into the ignition and turned it over, listening to the exhaust kick out and start purring like a kitten... a thirty-foot-tall kitten with chainsaws for a throat. "Oh... how very clever. They modded the exhaust to replicate a Harley's growl even with a tritium engine. Not *quite* exactly the sound, but pretty damn close."

"You're serious," Percy gaped. "Do you honestly think that four hundred-year-old relic of the past is going to keep up with a pinnacle of modern technology?"

Nathan gave the throttle a good pull, and smiled as the engine responded just like a classic Harley Davidson should. This was almost as good as heaven.

"I guess we'll find out, won't we?" he said, kicking up the stand, and taking an experimental loop around the transport. "Come on. Load up, folks. We don't want to keep the admiral waiting."

Thirty minutes later, Nathan raised his comm unit to his face, having discovered it was too hard for anyone to hear him against the roar of wind as the bike cut through the air. "Hey, Private? What's taking you guys so long?"

The transport was barely within sight, at least three kilometers back. He could have a much greater lead if he really pushed the limits of the machine... but that would have been overdoing it.

"We're coming, sir," Jeremy answered. "And Mr. Kensington says you've made your point, and you can stop showing off anytime."

## Chapter Eight

*To Whom it may Concern:*

*I remembered my early life, growing up on the suburbs of Boston, our home was on a coastal road that looked out onto Chesapeake Bay. I used to sit on my back porch and watch the ships sail in. While a lot of people had their head in the clouds and towards the stars, I liked looking out towards the sea. It had been my dream to sail the waters of the world... one dream among millions, an insignificant speck upon a speck upon a minute dot of sand within the scale of the universe.*

*I envisioned myself as a traveler, with nothing but the wind at my back and a song on my lips, sailing through every sea on this planet, racing through the English Channel... fishing on the North Sea... lazily following the currents of the Pacific... sipping poi with natives of the Hawaiian isles... oh, the people I would meet, the places I would see.*

*Through hard work and good fortune, I made that dream happen, while, granted, it was not the path I had initially intended. The Navy gave me the structure, the discipline, and the means to do everything I wished and then some.*

*I have always been an oddity among my fellow officers. They questioned my, dare I say, friendly rapports with my subordinates, like it was a scarlet letter I had to bear as if it was a sign of impurity... the indecency of knowing about the lives and desires of those who rely on me for leadership. They claimed I was in danger of growing attached to those under my command, and wouldn't be able to make the tough choices needed of a Commander... then a Captain... and now as I appeal to the Senate for the promotion to Admiral. It was argued at all my promotion boards previous that I made too many decisions with my heart, and not enough with my head.*

*I'd always felt that too many officers take too broad of a view about the people under them. They detached themselves to the point where it becomes more of a numbers game, and how to maximize those numbers with the least amount of loss. I think, in some ways, they forget that the "resources" they lead and manage are more than just numbers, but people just like them. They forget about being human, and that humanity is really our greatest weapon of them all.*

*But I also know that I'm not the only one with dreams... with a will to live that extends beyond their tour of duty. I will not throw those under my command into hell unless it truly is unavoidable. If that, a desire to preserve those under me and to accept them as people in their own right, is truly an undesirable trait in the highest stations of the branch of the armed forces that I dedicated my life to, then perhaps this isn't the Navy I thought it was.*

*But I don't believe that.*

*Now, with all the sentimental story-telling aside, I wish to be practical. I know the demons we face, I am one of the few that saw it firsthand. I have the experience and knowledge needed to prepare my men, and lead in a way in accordance to the threat that has been unleashed upon us. I have been fully briefed on the nature of Project Exodus, and I know you need a commanding officer for the final colony ship. I am aware that I am suitable for the task.*

*In fact, I volunteer for this duty. It would be my honor and privilege to man the helm of the last colonists. I feel strongly that I am the only person truly willing and capable of handling this monumental task. I suspect you will feel the same way.*

*Sincerely,*

*Captain Jamison Doric, USNF*

“Told you they would make it,” Jamison said with a broad grin as Douglas re-entered the command room, pointing towards the active view screen which pointed at the survivors of the *Sender* well past the Creep infestation, approaching the Georgia border.

“No you didn't,” Douglas answered.

Jamison asked, “I take it the drop ship is fueled up and ready to go?”

“I'd have to run through the actual start-up process, of course, but other than that, we could pretty much load up and go.”

The old admiral nodded in approval, and resumed his careful and silent vigil. “That should be the worst of... the hell is this?”

Douglas, initially worried that Jamison had seen something on the view screen that he hadn't, leaned forward and squinted to see what had happened. “What? What is it, Jamison?”

The admiral, meanwhile, was staring downwards towards the console in front of him. The touch panel was flashing an incoming request for communication, audio only. Considering that they had an open channel reserved for the *Sender* survivors, as well as for the rest of the command crew working on the orbital platform, he wondered who could be trying to contact him. It wasn't an emergency transmission, otherwise it would have broken in after a one-second prompt.

Tapping the panel display marked “More Information” yielded the source of the attempted communication... the *Pathfinder*, the first of the colony ships to leave. Its entire complement should already be in cryogenic sleep, folding out through subspace past the Oort Cloud by this point. The actual sender was listed as anonymous, which meant whomever was on the other side either didn't want the Cape to know who it was... or didn't know how to attach a name.

Finally, having delayed long enough, the old admiral accepted the transmission. “This is Cape Canaveral, Rear Admiral Jamison Doric speaking. May I ask the name and nature of this communication?”

“This is President Reginald Talbot, Admiral,” the voice replied. “I would recommend you do well to address me as such.”

Jamison rolled his eyes. How exactly was he supposed to do that when the person on the other end programmed no ID to the transmission. “I apologize, Mr. President.”

The chief executive of the United States huffed in acceptance of the apology. “Why, exactly, are you still on the Cape, Admiral? Last report I heard was that the last of the orbiters reached the cape hours ago.”

“There was one that was delayed,” Jamison answered. “I and one of the drop ship pilots decided to stay until they arrived.”

“How many people have been 'delayed', Admiral Doric?”

“Five, sir.”

“You're risking your own neck for five people? Out of four hundred *million*?”

“The four hundred million are safely on board the orbital platform, well out of the reach of the Creep. There is no harm holding here for the time being. There is hardly any risk in this scenario. We are ready to depart at a moment's notice.”

“I think you underestimate the Creep... there is no such thing as 'safe' or 'hardly any risk.' You have one hour to be on the platform, and I expect to hear that the *Requiem* has left dock by the end of the day. Am I clear?”

Jamison and Douglas shared a silent conversation. Jamison momentarily muted the channel, and asked, "What's he going to do? Field demote me?"

"It's possible that he could, I think," Douglas answered. "He wouldn't be able to promote anyone else by himself, but technically, you're still a United States Admiral and still under his authority. Granted, I'm not a lawyer, so I could be wrong."

Jamison hissed, "Damn it..." but then, he had an idea.

An idea interrupted by the President crossly shouting, "Admiral Doric! I demand you answer me!"

He dropped the mute momentarily. "I am conferring with the orbital platform, Mr. President. Give me a few moments' leave."

The mute was enabled once again, and he activated the channel to the orbital platform. "Captain Smelling, can you find me Lieutenant Dockery?"

"He should be in Engineering, sir. Should I route you there?" the colony ship's second-in-command asked. William Smelling was actually a member of Her Majesty's Navy, not bound to any orders by the American president... and not exactly his biggest fan to begin with. This could work...

"If you could."

As the necessary protocols were entered into the communications system, the captain took to ask, "May I inquire why your President seemed so agitated?"

"He thinks we should leave immediately rather than wait for the last of the survivors."

The captain was silent for a moment. "Is he aware they are past the Creep and there is little to no danger in waiting?"

"I doubt he took the time to fully understand the situation."

If there was one thing Jamison could count on, it was that military personnel always tended to take civilian orders with a considerable amount of loose interpretation, especially when it was coming from a foreign leader. "Should I just inform the lieutenant myself that the *Requiem* has developed an unforeseen glitch that needs considerable attention before I feel it safe to leave dock?"

"That way I could attend to my President immediately. Very good, idea, Captain."

Smelling nodded, "I will consult with Lieutenant Dockery immediately, and will have a suitable story ready if the President tries to contact us again."

"You're a good man, Captain."

"I like seeing your President throw a temper tantrum. Why your country elected him three times is beyond my comprehension." The captain ended transmission, presumably to attend to matters.

From there, Jamison focused his attention back to the impatiently waiting President. "There has been a systems failure in engineering, from what Captain Smelling informs me. I didn't get specifics at the moment, since I figured I should inform you immediately."

The President was understandably dubious. "Is that right?"

"You can ask yourself, sir. They could probably give you a more detailed report."

"I find it awfully convenient, Admiral. Make no mistake, if I discover you are lying to me, I will have your stars so fast you'll think you never were promoted past Ensign."

"Very well, sir. Is there anything else?"

"Not at this time. Carry on, Admiral."

Finally, the communication went dead, and the channel closed. Jamison leaned back in his chair and breathed a sigh of relief.

“So, now we hope that Captain Smelling has a suitable story?”

Jamison shook his head. “I doubt our wonderful President will go that far. Politics is more about the appearance of action than actually doing things. That would be an awful lot of work to deal with a colony ship that he is going to be four hundred light years from by the time all is said and done. Hell, he probably only raised a stink at all because some other politico on that ship noted it was an American admiral that was sitting here likely doing nothing.”

Douglas left it unsaid that there was a suspiciously high number of political figures that had been managed to find their way aboard the *Pathfinder*. “I thought officers weren't supposed to speak ill of their Commander-in-Chief.”

“Did I say anything?” Jamison answered with a Cheshire Cat grin belying his otherwise innocent expression. “Surely you must be mistaken.”

The playful banter was interrupted by the *Sender* survivors opening communication. “Admiral Doric, sir? This is Private Cliff. Do you copy?”

Jamison accepted the incoming stream, and replied, “Yes, Private Cliff. I'm here.”

“We're receiving a very weak distress signal, but we can't get a precise source of the transmission because we're moving at a rather high rate of speed.” Jeremy asked, “Has the Cape picked up anything?”

Douglas quickly checked in on that, and shook his head in the negative.

“No, we haven't, Private,” Jamison answered. “But depending on where it's originating, that could be a matter of range. You could be a lot closer to it than us.”

“Understood. I'll ask Sergeant David if we can stop and divine the location.”

“Very well, Private. Keep me informed.”

Douglas seemed skeptical. “A distress call? All remaining people are accounted for, aren't they?” He then grew suspicious, and asked, “Could they have left behind some survivors of the *Sender*?”

“Could also be someone who has remained off the docket, if you will, and finally came to realize that the Creep was every bit the danger the 'evil government' claimed, and is now panicking,” Jamison replied. “If they had left behind survivors of their orbiter crash... they'd just ignore the distress call, because they'd already know who it was from.”

“I suppose,” Douglas relented.

Jamison offered, “Why don't you try and see if you can't get one of the booster towers up and running and try and help them confirm the source of the distress call?”

Private Cliff then spoke up again, “Were there any reports of other orbiter accidents, sir?”

“No, Private. All other ships are accounted for.”

His focus eventually moved back up to the view screen, where the two blips - indicating the transport and the motorcycle that the group had appropriated - had stopped, then diverged. The transport then continued its path south, while the motorcycle turned off and started traveling west-southwest.

Jamison was immediately on the comm. “Sergeant David, we've just seen you detach from the transport. What is your status?”

“We pinpointed the distress call. It's originating from Atlanta. I am taking a detour to check it out,” the Marine sergeant answered.

“Atlanta?” Jamison asked in disbelief, his focus on the view screen turning towards the city in question... a city roughly thirty miles within the border of the Creep. “But...”

“I know, sir. It's probably nothing,” Sergeant David replied. “But I have to check it out and see anyway.”

“You're not going to make it out and back, Sergeant. The Creep will eat you alive.”

“I've been resistant to the Creep so far, sir,” he answered grimly, “and the survivors claim they have an inoperable orbiter they can use to get out. I understand that I probably don't have much chance; that's why I've informed the others to continue on. If they make it to the Cape before I do... I recommend you leave without me.”

Jamison understood the sergeant's sentiments. Had the admiral been a younger man in that position, he probably would have done and said the same things. “Understood, Sergeant. Get in and out as quickly as you can. You have time if you're quick about it.”

“Understood sir. Sergeant David out.”

Jamison leaned back, his face neutral to this latest development. “If that Sergeant makes it through all of this, I am going to have to make it painfully clear how damn lucky he is I took his first communication, and not someone else.”

## Chapter Nine

*The assignment to be the Chief Engineer of the Requiem... hell, any of the colony ships... was the highlight of my career. It meant I was considered to be truly one of the finest minds in the field of propulsion engineering. Not bad for a boy born on a farm in Nova Scotia.*

*The colony ships constructed by Project Exodus were the highest of human technology, a fact that I was probably a bit too eager to point out, that moment I saw the engine room of the Requiem for the very first time.*

*"Is that an alteration drive?" I asked in awe. I think I was drooling.*

*This was the holy grail of engineering... the technology that literally bent reality.*

*Since there was a wee problem of physical matter not being able to exceed the speed of light, it made travel beyond the solar system impractical. The alteration drive changed the limitations of humanity. It warped space-time with a "blue-shift" field that allowed for the speed of light to be accelerated up to a hundred times over.*

*With it the stars were in our grasp. I had only heard of three such deep-space vessels – before the colony ships, of course – that had been equipped with this reality changing marvel. I certainly never had the chance to actually work in person with one.*

*"Yes... and while the travel time between Earth and the Requiem's destination will be shortened considerably, we are still talking about a forty-year journey," warned the project leader giving me the tour. "Forty years where nothing can be allowed to go wrong. Perhaps billions of lives will depend on you never making a mistake with this drive."*

*"We chose you because your record is exemplary, and every single superior we interviewed in your vetting process assured us you were the best they have ever worked with. We have been assured that you are one of the best in the world at what you do."*

*"All the tech manuals and the texts for calculating the new set of physics you will face have been sent to your data pad. Hard copies also exist in your office. This task supersedes any and all others, even from your own government. We have full faith you will master this material by the time you will be needed."*

*The gray-haired man then leaned in uncomfortably close to me, and whispered, "Don't prove our faith in you wrong."*

Chief Engineering Lieutenant Adam Dockery loved the engine room... even though such a term was long outdated. The traditional combustion engines that ran off carbon-based fuel had been abandoned centuries ago, but the term "engine" continued to be used despite the ever-increasing inaccuracy.

Adam actually disliked the pungent oily smell that came with the antiquated engine rooms of the past. He had been subjected to it fifteen years ago when a damned near ancient listening outpost in the Yukon finally was forced – by both law and necessity – to upgrade their physical infrastructure.

It was likely the last combustion engine in legitimate service in North America, and Adam couldn't get out of that hole fast enough.

This, however, suited him much better. He was working in a clean, sterile environment with the highest technology the human race had ever produced. This was more at home for him than his own home, and certainly more comforting than the closet that passed for his quarters on the *Requiem*.

This was his domain, his expertise, his perfection. Nary an accelerator coil out of place,

not a single proton unaccounted for. It had to be. Nothing less was acceptable.

So, he was a shade bit insulted at what Captain Smelling suggested of him.

“You want me to *fake* an engine failure?” Adam queried, aghast at the thought. “I have spent the last *four damned months* making sure *everything* was in perfect order, and now you want me to *pretend* that something has gone *wrong*?”

Smelling rubbed the back of his neck, and nodded, “That's the short of it.”

“I trust there is more to the story behind this order.”

The Captain gave the surroundings another look over, even though Adam had assured him repeatedly that the area had been secured. “The Admiral is getting some grief from his President because he's still planetside waiting for the last evacuees on Earth.”

Adam blinked, “There's still more down there? I thought only Commander Cardiff's drop ship was still planetside.”

“Five remaining in the wild, from what I understand. The Admiral has decided to give them until the deadline... something that the American President has decided is foolhardy, apparently. And considering how meddling the man can be, the Admiral and I figured it would be easier to concoct some story that keeps the *Requiem* moored for the time being.”

“There's no harm in holding out then?” Adam asked.

Smelling nodded. “There's certainly still time, if that's what you're asking. The deadline is currently five hours before total infestation. I personally don't see any harm in waiting, and the rest of the command crew agrees.”

They were interrupted by a communication from the bridge. “Captain Smelling, President Talbot of the United States of America is hailing us and requesting your reply.”

Smelling cursed under his breath and replied, “Give me just a moment, Ensign. I am consulting with our engineering chief.”

“Of course, sir.”

Turning to Adam, Smelling then asked, “I need an answer, Lieutenant. Are you on board?”

Adam frowned then pursed his lips thoughtfully. He was not keen on suggesting that his work was anything less than immaculate... it was a bit of an insult to his pride in his profession.

But at the same time, he had gained considerable respect for the crew in command, especially Admiral Doric. He would stand behind them.

“Yeah,” Adam finally agreed. “I can give him some technical nonsense that should sate his curiosity.”

From there, Smelling addressed the bridge. “Patch Talbot to Lieutenant Dockery's office, Ensign. I'll take the communication there.”

“Yes, sir. Patching through now.”

A holographic display flashed to life from the projector on Adam's desk, forming the bust of the U.S. President. “Mr. President, we are honored to have you here,” Smelling said in welcome.

“Cut the pleasantries, Captain,” President Talbot groused bitterly. “What the hell is going on over there?”

“Well, sir, first of all, we have yet to reach the deadline, and there are still people planetside.”

“Yes, I'm aware. Admiral Doric made me painfully aware of that fact... a small handful of people who might not even make it to begin with,” Talbot snarled. “I am talking about the 'systems failure' that your engineer claims is keeping the vessel docked rather conveniently.”

Adam momentarily gave a silent glare to the Captain. Apparently they hadn't waited for him to sign onto the ruse before they started this tall tale, but once it came time to make his decision clear, there really wasn't any choice. A reputation could be rebuilt. People, even a mere handful, could not.

So Adam cut in with just the right amount of confidence that said he knew what he was talking about, and yet that perfect hint of embarrassment that comes from having made a mistake that he shouldn't have. "Yes, Mister President. I... overlooked a step when I began a warm-up run on the alteration drive, and the entire blue-shift field stalled. We have to realign the field generators and give it another warm-up run before I can sign off on departure."

"And how long will that take?"

Adam did some quick math in his head and replied, "Approximately twelve hours." That would be enough time after the deadline to hopefully quash the President's attitude.

The holographic image leveled a steely glare in the Lieutenant's direction, as if he could divine duplicity in the engineer's mind. "I hope you don't expect me to believe any of you. Don't you doubt that I'll be confirming your report. If you're dragging this out, I'll have all your heads."

The two officers looked at each other, and rolled their eyes. While the President had been boorish and overstepped his bounds in the past, at this point there was little he could do, especially with people that weren't even citizens of his country.

It was Captain Smelling that put a democratic end to the discussion. "We seek nothing but the safety of the crew and the civilians on the *Requiem*. That it coincides with Admiral Doric's continuing presence planetside is pure coincidence, I can assure you."

"It better be," the President warned one final time before the hologram vanished.

Smelling nervously rubbed the back of his neck again, and apologized. "Thank you, Lieutenant. You've saved me a half day of grief. I'm sure the admiral would extend his thanks as well."

"Fortunately I won't be meeting any of my colleagues on the other colony ships again. I'd never hear the end of making such an amateur mistake," Adam noted. "Those people planetside better make it. I'm not going to have sacrificed my stellar reputation for nothing."

Captain Smelling was already on his way out of engineering. "I'll be sure to relay your sentiments."

## Chapter Ten

*My transition into the Marine Corps was not a smooth one... which should have surprised no one, considered that the only reason I was there at all was due to what amounted to be a threat on my life. I didn't want to be there, and my words and actions made sure everyone on the base knew it.*

*But, somehow, Sergeant Jimmy Brassler didn't get that memo.*

*There is an image of Marine drill sergeants in the public consciousness... men of gruff, angry convictions, spitting piss and vinegar, holding a general contempt of all things human. Sergeant Brassler wasn't any of those things. Not that he couldn't be stern if you did something damn stupid, but his default setting was much more helpful and complimentary than his stereotypical kin.*

*And he seemed to have made me into his personal pet project. I hated his attention, and his attempts to understand me. As far as I cared, he was part of the problem, trying to make me one of them and forget where I came from. He quickly became the target of all my pranks and stunts. I was going to make sure he knew that I'd never be one of them. I was a South Side Brother, not a Marine.*

*Two weeks into my basic training, I thought I had finally done enough to get under his skin. I rewired the hardware to the security system throughout the entire barracks, making it so that every command he entered set off the security alarms throughout the entire base.*

*It took them seven hours to figure out that the software hadn't been tampered with at all. Seven hours as some of the "best minds" in the world pulled their hair out, trying to figure out who had hacked the security protocols and how. It was a thing of beauty – watching the chaos, thinking how much the fool Sergeant Brassler must have looked, seeing his squad so out of control. Of course, once the brain trust finally figured out the problem was in the hardware, it didn't take much to figure out who was responsible.*

*I was certain after the prank I pulled that he would demand the Corps throw me out. I sat in that brig until the following morning, waiting for the good news that I had been discharged from the service.*

*But right after the reverie sounded, there was Sergeant Brassler, half smiling with that same aggravating infinite patience, unlocking the door and saying, "Alright, Private. Outside. Time to have another talk."*

*"I'm not discharged?" I asked.*

*"Wouldn't be much of a punishment if we gave you what you wanted, now didn't we?" he answered. "Come on outside. I might have a deal for you."*

*With a deep breath, laced with annoyance and reluctance, I followed Sergeant Brassler outside the brig. He took a seat cross-legged on the exposed deck on the building's east side, and patted down next to him. He had obviously picked out that spot ahead of time, because two cups of what was called "marine coffee" was waiting for us. As far as I could tell, the stuff was made from molten tar, used chewing tobacco, and three ground-up coffee beans. He handed one to me, which I then sat on my opposite side, with the expressed purpose of not touching the mug again.*

*"Here's the deal," Sergeant Brassler said. "We're going to have a real discussion. You be perfectly straight with me, we have an honest face-to-face talk about your future, and afterward, if you want to leave, I'll submit your honorable discharge by noon. How does that sound?"*

*I blinked in disbelief. "Are you serious?"*

*He shrugged indifferently. "Why would I lie to you?"*

*He pointed at me with the hand holding his coffee cup. "Here's what I don't get. You claim that you think that we are going to leave all the inner-city types to die while we go flying off to safety... yet you are intentionally trying to get yourself ejected from your ticket off this rock. For a guy who is obviously pretty damn smart, you really don't seem to have thought this out very well."*

*"I'm never gonna be one of you," I spat. "I refuse to be one of the people that keep people like me down. Even if it means the Creep kills me."*

*"Yeah, I've heard that line already. I don't even think you know what it means. Who are people like me? What policy decisions have I, or even the base commander made that leads you to think that we're gonna leave the 'people like you' behind?"*

*"The rich have always lied to us. The powerful have always used us for their own gain and discarded us like trash," I insisted, trying to inject as much anger as I could into my voice.*

*"Damn... I didn't realize I was rich and powerful," Sergeant Brassler said sarcastically. "And I think you know that's a load of crap too. Try again."*

*I figured, what the hell, might as well get to the heart of it, if only to get this man to stop asking. "One of the gang... told me that they knew they had no chance of making it out. They... got themselves killed for... me, I'm told."*

*Sergeant Brassler nodded. "And you don't like that. And so, to reward them for their actions, you want to throw it all away."*

*"Yeah, that's what Tony said," I admitted. "But..."*

*"You don't want to be the one with that weight on your conscience," Brassler finished for me. "I can understand that, actually. There's been plenty a soldier throughout history that has said that often the worst thing that can happen to a man in uniform is to be the one who lived." He took another sip of coffee, and replied, "I can't imagine it would be much different for a 'gang'. It's a brotherhood, just like soldiers in a squad are." The sergeant took a deep breath. "But the way to resolve that isn't to go charging headlong back into the first firefight you see. Besides, let me reassure you, those of your gang that are still alive... there's a spot for them."*

*"You really believe that?" I asked, uncertainty creeping into my voice.*

*"It's going to be a huge wake-up call for everyone. Everyone is being divided into eight colony ships, and cast out into the far reaches of our technological limits. There isn't going to be much room for racial or economical divisions during the trip and once the colony ships reach their destination. What good is the money the rich have squirreled away? It's not going to have any value, and people are already learning that there's not much they'll be able to take with them, either. It's going to be a damn near clean slate for everyone."*

*Brassler then tapped me hard on the shoulder. "But we need people like you on board to make it happen. With all the things that can go wrong on that sort of very long-distance trip... someone of your talents will be vital."*

*"Is that why you're trying so hard to get me on board?" I asked bitterly. "Because of my gifts?"*

*The sergeant scoffed. "Like hell. You think you're the only person with a knack with mechanical parts? You're not that unique, Private David."*

*"Then... why? Why go to all this trouble for me?"*

*Sergeant Brassler sat up, and said simply, "Because whether you like it not, Private, you're a Marine now. And the Marines don't leave anyone behind."*

Nathan wished he could really open up the full power of the beast purring underneath him, the chopper wanted it too. Machines had souls as well... this one was a primal force of nature, it wanted to go full speed straight ahead. But he had promised the rest of the team that he wasn't going to show off anymore.

He couldn't complain all that loudly though. There weren't many ways to celebrate his last night on Earth than to be rolling old-school style through the South Carolina coastline, following a similar road of pilgrimage bikers had taken for hundreds of years.

"Sir... we might need to stop for a moment," Jeremy's voice interrupted his wistful thoughts.

Nathan furrowed his eyebrows, and asked, "Why? What's going on?"

"We're getting a general broadcast distress call... but with so many of the communication satellites powered down, it's hard to get a pinpoint location."

"What about the Cape?"

"Admiral Doric isn't picking up anything... it could be that the Cape is out of range."

Nathan thought about this. "That's likely, considering most, if not all, of the signal-boosting planetside towers are disabled as well. Alright, let's pull over and find out what we've got."

Once that was done, Jeremy could turn the transport's sensors to the task of locating the exact position of the distress call. "I just can't figure out how there are still people on this planet. There weren't any other accidents like ours, were there?"

He then promptly asked the Admiral in the cape if that was the case, and received the negative answer. As he pondered who it could possibly be, the sensors honed in on part of the answer.

"Atlanta?" Jeremy asked in disbelief. "But..."

"Atlanta's been consumed by the Creep for the last two months," Nathan finished. "Is it just an automated distress call... or are there people actually behind it?"

"Not automated... or we would have caught it sooner, I think," Jeremy concluded. "Yeah! There's people! See?"

He was pointing to the dashboard computer, which was flashing an identification tag on the HUD. Nathan rolled his eyes, and said, "Well then answer them, for Christ's sake!"

"Oh, right! Of course! Right away, sir!"

Once the order was carried out, Nathan took charge. "Atlanta, this is Sergeant Nathan David of the United States Marine Corps. Do you read me?"

An aghast, elderly female voice replied, "Yes, Mr. David! This is Doctor Beverly Anders. We're so relieved! We were worried everyone had left this rock and that we were too late!"

"Not quite yet, ma'am," Nathan answered, even as his mind twisted around that name, trying to remember why it sounded familiar. "What's your status? How can you be still alive two months into infestation?"

"That is... something I do not wish to get into while over an unsecured channel. There may be ears about that I do not want to learn our techniques."

"What do you mean?"

"My husband and I have been researching the Creep for years. Over these last two months, we have garnered much intimate knowledge of this menace. We are both of the hypothesis that the Creep actually is an intelligent life form... to what level, we are not sure, but

we don't wish to take any chances.”

Nathan decided not to press that issue, as ludicrous as it sounded to him. “Very well... I will inform you that I and the others with me do not have the resources to mount a rescue mission that deep into the infestation.”

“Please, you can't leave... us... here. We have an orbiter that was left for us... but we wound up salvaging parts of it to continue our research. If we can get that operational again, we have a way out.”

Nathan found this conversation extremely hard to absorb, like he was given a puzzle with half the pieces missing. “Why did you cannibalize your way out in the first place?”

The woman on the other end of the communication grew agitated, “Again... these are things I am not comfortable discussing via the communications array. I can explain everything face to face, let me assure you.”

Nathan paused, before finally saying, “I read you, Atlanta. I'm a good enough mechanic... I could probably get your orbiter operating, but I'm going to need a precise location in order to reach you. I'm making no promises I can get there.”

Jeremy began, “Are you—” before Nathan silenced him with a hand.

“Oh, thank you. I promise you will not regret this! I can upload a beacon link immediately.”

“Send it to my personal data manager... details are incoming,” Nathan corrected quickly, piggybacking the signal with a handful of taps on the small device, then nodded in satisfaction once the positioning program began flashing his new destination. “Alright, I've got it. Thank you. I think you'll know when I get there... It'll be pretty obvious.”

“Good luck. There's far more at stake here than you realize.”

Nathan was climbing out of the hatch before the communication had even been properly terminated. Jeremy called out after him frantically, “Permission to speak freely, sir?”

“Permission denied.” Nathan knew what the private was going to say. Nathan was already telling himself the same things. This was crazy at best, suicidal at worst. The intensity of the Creep even in South Carolina, infested for a week at the most, had been impenetrably terrifying. What could lie within land two months infested would no doubt be the work of the deepest nightmares.

“Sir, I know you're resistant to the Creep... but how resistant are you? Do you even know?”

“Good of a time as any to find out, Private,” Nathan answered. “Your orders are to get to Cape Canaveral. If everything works out the way I hope, I might just beat you all there anyway.”

“And if it doesn't?”

Nathan turned over the engine to his chopper, and replied in half answer, “You have your orders, Private. If you want, you can keep tabs on my location as well, so you'll know I'm alright.”

“What about our pact?” Amy asked, her head sticking out the end of the transport, overhearing the conversation so far.

“I have no intention of dying, Ms. Burgundy. If the infestation is as deep as I fear, I'll probably have to turn around anyway. I'd be able to catch up to you quickly enough on this thing,” Nathan lied. He had no intention of turning around and leaving people stranded... but hopefully it would get them to stop worrying about him and get themselves to safety.

“Now, get moving!” Nathan finally yelled, pulling out with a momentary squeal of

rubber.

Of course, his team wasn't the only one wondering what the hell he was doing.

Three minutes into his new course, his data manager erupted with Admiral Doric's voice. "Sergeant David, we've just seen you detach from the transport. What is your status?"

Nathan grabbed the device off his belt and answered simply, surprised that Private Cliff hadn't informed the Cape of their findings. "We pinpointed the distress call. It's originating from Atlanta. I am taking a detour to check it out."

"Atlanta? But..."

"I know, sir. It's probably nothing. But I have to check it out and see anyway."

The admiral's protest was on the same vein as the rest. "You're not going to make it out and back, Sergeant. The Creep will eat you alive."

"I've been resistant to the Creep so far, sir. And the survivors claim they have an inoperable orbiter they can use to get out. I understand that I probably don't have much chance... that's why I've informed the others to continue on. If they make it to the Cape before I do... I recommend you leave without me."

The admiral's reply was measured. "Understood, Sergeant. Get in and out as quickly as you can. You have time if you're quick about it."

"Understood sir. Sergeant David out," Nathan answered, returning his data manager to the holder on his belt, opening up the chopper's throttle just like he had wanted to earlier. Sometimes, it took some doing to find the positives in life.

## Chapter Eleven

*I had first met Beverly Anders during a progress report and briefing set up by the station staff at Quantico two weeks before the first colony ship was slated to take off. By that point, I had already been made aware of my assignment on the Requiem, the last ship to leave. Nor did it exactly miss my attention that most of the highest-ranking political dignitaries and big business leaders had managed to “randomly” get themselves assigned to the Pathfinder or Courageux.*

*On the other hand, I had been assured by many of the old South Side Brothers that they had been assigned as well. Two of them had managed to contact me from Tallahassee, where they had been transferred in preparation for transit to the colony ships. That eased my mind a great deal, and made my lot in life much easier to bear.*

*So, by the time I attended that meeting, I was a far different person – not to mention two ranks promoted – than the one who was doing everything he could to be kicked out of the Corps.*

*Beverly reminded me of one of those TV grandmothers on first glance: permed silver hair, warm smile across wrinkled cheeks, proper in manner and presence. She greeted me with a warm handshake, a half hug across my shoulders, and a quiet thank you for my efforts in the service and for my role in the entire project. Listening to her, I would have thought I constructed the colony ships myself with my bare hands.*

*My first question was rather innocuous to me, and at the time I didn't think much of it. I remarked that I was surprised someone as important as she was to Project Exodus wasn't at Cape Canaveral or already on the orbital platform. She just smiled and said something along the lines of having her station set long before. I had just assumed she meant that she didn't have to wait, and that she would get priority whenever she decided to show up.*

*My very first thought was that this was some kind of joke. How could this woman possibly be one of the top authorities on the Creep and a ranking official in the Project Exodus mission? Then she was introduced to us officially, and her words were every bit what you would expect of a multiple doctorate and valued member of society.*

*“Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen,” Dr. Anders said smoothly, the motherly tint to her earlier tone of voice gone... now she was all business. “Those of you present have been chosen to embark on the Requiem. Due to this, it has been determined that all of you should have at least a basic primer on Creep behavior.”*

*“I am sure you all have heard the various theories as to what exactly it is, and in truth, not even those who have studied it for twenty years are certain. However, it does have several behaviors that mimic various pathogens or contaminants we do know.”*

*She turned around to activate her display. “Firstly, and the one you will most likely face, if at all, in the days leading up to full evacuation of Earth, is infected lifeforms. These beings spread the Creep in much the same way that a tactile virus spreads. It can penetrate clothing or any other physical barrier. Infected life forms can break off from the main body of the Creep and be contagious up to fifty kilometers, although the ability of such a form of Creep to spread is minimal, and does not appear to be capable of creating a new pocket of infestation in the Earth itself.”*

*“Which brings us to the infestation, a manifestation of the Creep that spreads much like a ground and water contaminant. This is the main 'body' of the Creep, if you will, and by far the most dangerous. This manner of Creep manifests itself in two ways. Firstly, it can suspend itself in small concentrations in the air. This mist thins the oxygen in the air, making it difficult*

*to breathe, and prolonged exposure could theoretically infect a human much like the viral form of the Creep I mentioned earlier. Of course, by that point, the ground infestation will have done you in. It can rip apart large animals and trees within seconds once the Creep sufficiently has covered the victim. Average time of survival for a human in infested land is roughly forty-five seconds."*

*"The Creep infestation has been observed expanding at different speeds across all fronts, and even along the same front, it doesn't expand at a uniform rate. Even then, the fastest speed we have seen the Creep spread is eighty-three kilometers per hour, in short bursts that create 'fingers' of Creep, which we believe to be how scout pockets of Creep are injected ahead of the main body..."*

*I'll admit I rather lost interest after that... it was clear this briefing wasn't going to tell me anything new. I already knew about the Creep scouts, how for some still-unknown reason radiated neutrons repelled the Creep, all that stuff. I was barely aware of her closing appeal to us that we would need to be the people maintaining order on those final days, especially if the Creep turns out to expand faster than projected.*

*It wasn't until the very end that my full attention was snared. Someone in the briefing room, I honestly couldn't remember who, asked where she could be found if we had further questions. I had expected her to refer us to our commanding officer, or some other liaison.*

*Instead, she replied, "I will be at my research station in Atlanta for the foreseeable future. If you wish, I can supply you or anyone else with that information."*

*At that point, Atlanta was perilously close to the border of the Creep, as the west front had been moving faster than the northern front. The obliqueness of Dr. Ander's answer to my question earlier had then become clear. She had no plans of being on any colony ship... she was going to study and gather information on the Creep for as long as she could, even if it killed her...*

Of course, remembering that only made Dr. Ander's distress call all the more confusing. Granted, Nathan only made her acquaintance for a short time, but she did not strike him as someone to panic, much less after having survived for two months as it was. What could have happened that had prompted her to suddenly turn on her convictions and appeal for rescue?

Then a familiar face on the side of the road made Nathan hit the brakes hard and come to a stop. He turned back about, and regarded the infected human Howard Cooley.

"If you're going to be driving into the Creep, I would recommend not being quite so loud about it," the infected man advised. "While I couldn't see you, I could pretty damn well easily hear that bike of yours. Nice model, by the way. Harley, by the sound of it."

"I don't have much time, on a bit of a tight schedule."

"I'm sure... although I have to say I'm confounded by your direction," Howard mused.

"No, don't tell me why. I'm not sure how much of my memory the Creep has access to."

"So, you're of the mind that the Creep is intelligent?" Nathan asked.

Howard tilted his head up, towards the sun. "Oh, hell yes it is. We've known that for years, actually. Didn't want the rank and file to know that, of course. Might scare people, don'tcha know? But yeah, it's real smart... it's been around a hell of a lot longer than us... might want to keep that in mind as you try driving head-on into it."

"Who is 'we'?" Nathan asked. "Who are you really?"

Howard took a deep breath. "I suppose there is no real point in keeping it secret, is there? My name really is Howard Cooley... but as for what I did, I was Central Intelligence up

until I was infected by the Creep seventeen years ago.”

With a deep breath, Howard delved into the story. “It all started with a deep sea research station called *Isolation*, located at the oceanic pole of inaccessibility out in the Pacific. It was initially meant to be a top-secret weapons testing facility... totally against all international waters treaties, for the record. That was probably how all the rumors leaked that it was something the scientists in *Isolation* cooked up. That couldn't be less true.”

“About two weeks before the incident that started the Creep... Central Intelligence received report that the *Isolation* had found ruins... ruins of an ancient city, mind you... literally right underneath them, buried under the ocean floor. Now, considering that part of the Pacific hadn't been dry since... probably *never*... I think you can see why this would be a bit of a curiosity.”

“What... they found there... was far older than anything human. It was older than the dinosaurs... hell, older than the earliest forms of life we have record of. I can't tell you if somehow the scientists woke whatever it was up, or if it was just coincidence, but that's where it all began. But the Creep is only part of a much larger, central, intelligent mind. It lives in that oceanic city, and it governs every moment of the Creep. I don't know what its ends are... I have no idea what its end goal is... but make no mistake, a very intelligent life form is responsible for all this.”

“Anyway... you're in a hurry, from what you said, and my warning is delivered. I better get going,” Howard replied, with a tip of his hat, and a steady walk back towards the northwest.

The Creep couldn't be far if Howard was nearby, Nathan realized, and reminded himself he didn't have time to wonder who the hell that guy really was. He had a meeting time to make.

The infected man did make a point, however. The chopper was extremely loud in this mode, which meant he needed to change the settings on the exhaust. Fortunately, one of the modernizations of the bike was that it featured the Universal Control Panel.

The UCP was a worldwide standard for touch screen controls adopted at the turn of the century, the concept being that every piece of operating machinery would use the same base configuration on its control panel. While it would be personalized from there, any controls that could be automated would theoretically be easy to find, even for people who had no experience with the machine in question. It was a far cry from the three hundred different manufacturers with three hundred different source codes programming three hundred different operating systems that required three hundred different user manuals that no one ever read.

It wasn't perfect, of course, as the underlying complexities behind the surface layout would still baffle anyone trying complicated functions, but in this case, it was a short running through of menus and settings to find what he was looking for, opening the valves that created the Harley's growl, and replaced it with the more conventional, near silent rush of air common to tritium engines. It still was no guarantee that he wouldn't be heard, but it had to be better than before.

As Nathan expected, the boundary of the Creep was right over the next hill, the blackish taint filling the area illuminated by the headlight of the chopper. He pulled to a stop momentarily, to analyze the situation, or so he told himself.

The taint seemed to sense the light, as it quickly grew forward in its direction, prompting Nathan to kill the standard lighting and switch on night vision on the control panel, sliding on ultraviolet-sensitive glasses so that he could see what was being projected from the headlight. He wasn't certain that the Creep couldn't sense the ultraviolet light, either, but it at least made *him* feel a bit more invisible.

Which was definitely a good thing, because Nathan was feeling a lot less brave. He could sense the depths of the infestation all the way to his bones... he could only imagine what form of ungodly horrors awaited inside. For a moment, he wavered, and considered going back.

But then he reminded himself that Dr. Anders was in there somewhere, and that she needed help for some reason, a reason he could only assume was of dire importance. He couldn't quit now... the Corps wouldn't accept a quitter. He had gone through the Creep once already, there was no reason he couldn't do it again.

"Here I ride... into the mouth of hell," Nathan recited to himself quietly, then opened the throttle once again, and crossed the boundary into infested land. Atlanta was twenty kilometers away, by his information, and two more to his destination. This... was going to be interesting.

Unlike the mass of activity that he had witnessed earlier along the North Carolina finger, the infestation he was driving across was surprisingly docile... perhaps having already stripped everything of value clean and was now in some sort of hibernating state. It didn't even try to infest the vehicle driving over it, and even the Creep in the air seemed to be ignoring him.

But it proved to merely be the calm before the storm, as he drew closer to what had been the city of Atlanta. He was shocked to note that much of the skyline seemed intact from his vantage point... surprising considering the voraciousness that the Creep had demonstrated earlier. Many buildings still stood... granted, with strange strings of *something* that he couldn't clearly make out from his distance.

The closer he got to the remains of the city, the more he saw the Creep building into what he remembered. Piles of undulating ichor began to dot the landscape, occasionally forcing Nathan off the road to circle around them. He still didn't seem to have the attention of the infesting life form... it was actually starting to worry him, as he began to fear he was walking into a trap.

Then he got close enough to the city to really get a good look at what was going on, and forgot all about any trap.

What he had thought were remains of the Atlanta skyline weren't skyscrapers. They were grotesque towers of mutilated matter, warped from the steel skeletons of said building and twisted into something hideously macabre... like towers of living flesh. The strings were some matter of translucent material connecting the towers together.

He had to quickly hit the brakes to prevent from hitting an infected human female that was crossing the remains of the road in front of him... feeling lucky that he even had the instincts to react considering he had not been paying much attention to the road at all. Said infected human didn't even acknowledge Nathan's presence, continuing to shamle towards its destination, dropping down to her knees with her back facing the nearest pile of Creep.

Thin black tendrils erupted from the pile, and quickly started flaying the flesh from the infected human, like filleting knives taken to a cut of beef. Sheets of skin and muscle tissue were sliced to the bone along the thicker parts of the woman's body, while smaller tendrils worked on the hard-to-reach places... gouging out her eyeballs and slicing out her tongue, for example.

After the flesh was carved away to the ribcage, a firm blow to her back split the ribs open, the force of the strike spilling her intestines where they were gathered and dragged around, sucked into the pile like slurping a spaghetti noodle. Within one minute, what had once been a relatively whole human being was stripped clean to the bone. To the bones, the Creep lunged forward, pouring itself onto the skeleton, melting it like wax and dissolving it within the ichor.

Nathan thought of himself as a man of stout stomach, but it took all his inner fortitude not

to retch his guts out after witnessing that gruesome ritual. Fearing that he might be next if he didn't move, he slowly began accelerating forward again, forcing his mind specifically on his destination. He didn't want to see anymore... he wasn't sure he could bear it.

Finally within the old city limits, Nathan reached the conclusion that the Creep had simply built over the city, and in the city center was a massive dome of what looked like mutilated flesh and gristle at least a kilometer from end to end. From Nathan's perspective, he swore it was pulsing and shaking as if alive, with bulging vessels that looked like veins pumping unidentifiable matter across the quivering surface.

The strands... or tubes... or whatever they were that linked the towers together... also connected to that throbbing dome at its top. He had no way to prove it... but somehow he knew the tubes were carrying harvested biological matter, from victims like the one he had seen cleaned and consumed to whatever that monstrous mass of matter was. He could only speculate as to its purpose, but whatever it was, Nathan wanted no part of it, and gave the... thing... as wide of a berth as he possibly could.

How could Dr. Anders still be alive? How could an *army* have survived this mess of inhumanity? Nathan glanced down at his data manager. Christ, it seemed like every time he looked he was farther away. The insidious sense of wrongness, that sickening feeling that the Creep brought upon humans was so pervasive that he could feel his mind starting to shift into a primal need to escape. Deep in his brain, he swore he could hear something talking... barely above a murmur... whatever it was, it wasn't human, gurgling a language that he doubted he could replicate even if he could understand it.

The Creep was getting to him... maybe not physically, but there was something here... gripping at his mind and gnawing at his sanity. Every last fiber of his will kept him on task... the Marines never left anyone behind. Even if he ran away now, he'd never make it back to untainted land before he went mad. His only option was to find Dr. Anders, to repair the orbiter they claimed to have, and escape that way.

One good thing came of that internal battle, at least: by the time he had finally won over his increasing despair, he was nearly on top of his destination. It didn't look like much at first glance; a long, single-level building roughly three kilometers from the central mass, identifiable by the fact that it looked normal. He felt his hair stand on end as he crossed an invisible boundary of charged particles, and onto a scrap of ground free of the infestation.

He felt the monster in his mind recede, the fear and terror and madness quelling. It didn't disappear, but it became much more manageable. Deciding it was best to announce his arrival before attempting to enter, Nathan reached for his data manager to try and open a connection.

Before he could even get to press a key, the front door of the building burst open, and the silver-haired doctor herself emerged with blood in her eyes and a menacing rifle almost as big as she was tucked in her arms. "Alright! You may have gotten through the field, but I'm not going down without a... oh!" The rifle dropped, and she said simply, "I thought your name sounded familiar when you responded to our distress call. I remember you... Quantico, I believe, yes?"

Nathan nodded, astonished that she would remember his face in the crowd.

"Yes... you were one the project had their eyes on for some time. I'm not terribly surprised you made it, honestly. You were projected to have an unnaturally high resistance to the Creep. Anyway, come along. We don't have much time, and I'll fill you in on the way."

"This may come as a bit of a shock to you..." Beverly said in opening, "But the colony ships, especially the last one, weren't exactly chosen at random..."

"Yes, the members of the *Requiem* were selected because it was determined that we had

some sort of resistance to the Creep. I'm not sure how such a determination was made, but yeah, I got the gist of it.”

Beverly regarded him very carefully. “Now how, pray tell, did you gain knowledge of classified information only thirty people among humanity should know?”

“I had an informant... an infected human by the name of Howard Cooley,” Nathan explained. “In two separate meetings, he gave me a general rundown of the origin of the Creep and that some humans could resist it to varying degrees. I wasn't able to get many details, however.”

Beverly clicked her teeth. “Howard Cooley... there's a name I haven't heard in a *long* damn time. Figures that he'd find some way to survive, even infected by the Creep. He was one of those types that just wouldn't go away. Well then, in that case, I suppose I can save us both time and just fill in the gaps.”

“As far as we can ascertain, there is a genetic sequence that causes the tissue within the body to... radiate a sort of psycho-kinetic field that the Creep doesn't particularly like. For us humans, we completely overlook it, but for the Creep, it seems to render said humans anywhere from mildly resistant to damn near immune. From what little study I was able to do... it resembles the energy released by... take a guess.”

“Radiated neutrons?”

“I knew you were a smart lad,” Beverly said, making a gun with her fingers, and clicking the hammer. “Of course, what I can't figure out is how it works on a human level. Chemically, someone like you isn't any different from me. We don't know why or how this particular sequence does what it does. In a perfect world, I'd be able to study you, but we frankly don't have time for that. This complex is running out of power to maintain the suspended neutron field my husband fashioned. We'll hold the fort as long as we can... but you have to get our orbiter functioning and get out.”

“Wait... so I'm taking your husband?”

“Heavens, no! He's the one compiling all this data on the Creep, and will be the one to send it to the orbital space station in our one last act before we're taken. The data we're collecting here could be vital if one day... humanity thinks about returning and trying to win Earth back.”

“Hold on a minute. Then why did you call me here?”

They turned the corner into the main lab, and she gestured to the northwest corner. “Because of them.”

“Them” referred to four children, huddled together fearfully. Nathan guessed the youngest to be five and the eldest to be ten. The latter was a young man, with short, buzzed, black hair that almost seemed to match his equally dark skin. The second and third appeared to be identical twin girls with matching pigtails and dirt-encrusted dresses barely hanging on by tatters. The fourth only had a makeshift diaper, mercifully clean, clinging to a ratty, heavily battered brown teddy bear, dirty enough to leave Nathan uncertain of its original color.

“These four stumbled into our care yesterday,” Beverly tried to explain.

“Yesterday?” Nathan replied. “How? They'd have been in infested space all this time!”

“I know,” Beverly answered.

The eldest took the opportunity to speak, a high-pitched voice that carried the gravity of a young man forced to grow up very quickly. “We made due... but there wasn't much food left after a month or so.”

Nathan scratched his head. “But the Creep...”

“Never bothered us,” the twin on the left declared. “It couldn't see us... couldn't touch us. We were invisible to it.”

“These children have a gene sequence that we've identified as Creep-resistant, but extended farther than anyone else we were able to test. These children, as far as we could gather, were born of illegal immigrants who, out of fear of deportation, hid from the government eye and avoided registering themselves... and nearly to the doom of humanity. These four are effectively immune to the Creep. I think now you can understand why it's so important that they are delivered to safety.”

But Nathan's mind was spinning back in time, to a supposedly chance meeting that he now understood was anything but chance. The pieces were falling into place at long last.

A bald, thick man, who Nathan guessed was in his late sixties, stepped into the circle and said, “While it's wonderful we're all coming together as a happy family, I'd wager the Sergeant here is on a tight schedule. You have a little over seven hours until the Earth closes for good.”

“As if we needed the reminder, Clint,” Beverly snapped. “Nonetheless, he is right. Turn about if you could, Sergeant David.”

In the center of the large room was a standard-issue U.S. High Atmospheric Orbiter, albeit missing three panels and some significant parts from its starboard side. “The President insisted we keep this thing, and get out once it got too rough. Clint and I had no intention of using it, so we took what we needed to replace damaged and overworked parts to our defensive shield and research equipment. I can only pray there's enough for you to work with... anything you can salvage back is of course, yours to do so.”

Nathan put his hand on the intact panel above those removed, then concentrated, finding his focus difficult due to the still-nagging dread of the Creep surrounding the building. Nonetheless, his gift didn't fail him. “I should... be able to get it working. I'm going to need whatever tools you can spare, and all the wiring you can find. The only serious issue may be the left thruster... the transformer has some shorted-out connections. I might need to borrow some resistors from... anything that has them, really.”

Clint felt the need to ask, “I don't suppose you know how to fly one of those things?”

“Marine Corps training requires at least moderate knowledge of the UCP, and at least novice command of all military vehicles. It won't be the smoothest flight, but I know how to do it,” Nathan answered, nodding in thanks to Beverly who had acquired a quite impressive tool box for him to use.

“Clint, stop grouching and get him the materials he needs. After all, you're the one who pointed out how short on time he is,” she snapped.

The older man stomped off, grumbling, as he retreated into an adjoining room. Meanwhile, Nathan lunged up to his waist through the exposed panel, and into the innards of the orbiter. Once he got a closer look at things, he decided he was definitely going to need some resistors to replace the ones that were shorted out and/or damaged during the Anders' cannibalization of the craft.

“I need the closest size you have to a Belger Triux Silver Code resistor,” Nate called out. “But I suspect I could manage with any size silver or gold resistor you have. At least three, from the looks of things.”

Several minutes of silence passed, and then a small hand reached in, holding three properly coded resistors in an upturned palm. The accompanying voice came from one of the girls, although which one exactly, he couldn't say. “Here you go.”

“Thank you...” He paused when he realized he hadn't learned her name.

“Alissa,” the girl replied. “My sister is Melissa. My older brother is Jacoby, and my younger brother is Amon.”

“Thank you again, Alissa,” Nathan said gently, taking the small items and carefully placing them on a stable surface nearby. “Can you get me the welding laser... it's the gray tube with a blue emitter on... oh.”

Nathan was startled to see that the girl was one step ahead of him, and was holding out the implement to him before he had even finished his sentence. “Thank you again, young lady. How exactly did you—”

“Know what you needed? I could see it in your mind. All four of us can do that,” Alissa explained. “Our parents thought it was an amusing game, how we'd finish each others sentences, complete each others thoughts. Then they grew scared that we'd be viewed as freaks. So they kept us at home... wouldn't let us go outside and play or anything.”

“I'm sorry to hear that,” Nathan said, finishing the touches on the first replacement resistor. “I wasn't able to play much outside myself. Downtown Cleveland wasn't the safest of places.”

Alissa then nervously asked, “Can you hear it?”

Nathan had just put the second resistor in its place, and asked, “Hear what?”

“The Creep. It talks... I can hear it. So can my sister and little brother. Big brother pretends not to. He pretends to be brave, but some nights, I hear him crying from the nightmares, from the voices in his head.”

Nathan focused on his task, not in an attempt to be cold, but in an attempt to try and make himself forget that the inhuman mumbling in his head was there. The effort failed, and he admitted, “Kinda. I hear something mumbling... but I can't make any of it out. It doesn't sound human.”

“It's not,” Alissa answered. “I can hear it very clearly. When the Creep came, it was so loud I couldn't sleep for days. My mom and dad finally decided it was time to escape, but it was too late. It came from the north and south... we all ran from one part right into the other... it ate mom and dad... and left us alone.”

And here Nathan was, losing his mind at the sight of a stranger being harvested, when these four children watched their parents be consumed right in front of their eyes. That was a little bit humbling, to be honest.

“You're coming to save us, are you?” she asked. “To get us away from the voices.”

“That's the plan,” Nathan answered, finishing the second resistor, and quickly moving to the third.

“I hope so. I don't wanna hear... it... anymore.”

The third resistor was replaced, and he began work on rewiring the system to bypass damaged circuitry and wires that had been damaged or taken out. In fact, outside of that isolated area in the left thruster, everything else on the orbiter remained in remarkably good repair and condition.

“I do believe that is everything,” Nathan replied. “I trust it's well fueled?”

Beverly shrugged at that. “We haven't turned it on since it was delivered to us, except in circumstances where we needed the extra power to maintain the shield against particularly aggressive attacks from the Creep. I... can't say for certain how much tritium is left.”

“I knew this was moving too smoothly,” Nathan grouched, running his hand through his hair. “Alright, let's fire this thing up, and I'll see what I can do to streamline power consumption —”

Then the minimal lights overhead flickered, and for a brief second went out along with all other electronic devices, before turning back on. But that brief second marked the beginning of the end.

“It gets worse,” Clint remarked, lunging to a station along the south wall just as it finished going through its reboot checks. “The Creep slipped through the shield during the power down. We have critical failures of the shield in seven panels.”

“So much for going over everything one more time,” Nathan snarled, and pulled open the passenger hatch. “All in, kids. We're getting out of here.”

“Hurry!” Beverly replied, slamming the release to the ceiling that parted for the orbiter to take off, then grabbing the rifle Nathan saw her carrying earlier, “The Creep has already infiltrated the building. Clint and I will hold it off for as long as we can. Go!”

Nathan loaded the four children two at a time, then jumped in himself. “You're gonna have to buckle yourselves in. I'm afraid we don't have time for an easy takeoff.” He slammed the hatch shut, quickly checked to make sure it sealed properly, then shuffled into the cockpit, rushing through the start-up sequence.

He was only peripherally aware of the sound of weapons fire, his nerves causing his hands to shake as he went from frantic to almost absurdly careful. There was a brief moment just between the orbiter lifting from the ground, and before the pitch and yaw stabilizers kicked in that he was damn certain he had crashed the craft into the wall... only to slap himself when he realized it hadn't even been one second and the orbiter had only shifted twenty centimeters.

Already the Creep was infiltrating the main room of the building, the blackish taint dripping down the open ceiling, as the orbiter cleared into open sky. “Everyone buckled in?” Nathan asked, even though he really didn't have time to find out, pushing all thrusters into full speed forward, accelerating to supersonic speed and out of the hell that was the remains of Atlanta.

A sliver of light appeared just to the left of the windshield, a few minutes later revealing itself to be the rising sun, opening the last day on Earth. It was both a relieving and grim icon; light breaking through the darkness behind him, yet reminding him that he was also running out of time.

Then, a red warning light flashing on the orbiter HUD told him time wasn't the only thing he was running out of. Not surprisingly, powering a suspended neutron field over a large radius took a considerable amount of energy, so much so that the orbiter was warning him of impending systematic power failures due to a low tritium reserve.

The good news was that they were past the Creep infestation, having just crossed the Florida border. The bad news was that they weren't going to have the fuel to make it to Cape Canaveral. Unless there was some other form of transportation to be found... they were out of luck.

Nathan began scanning the nearby area, hoping to settle down the orbiter in an area where they could commandeer further transportation. A lightly developed area thirty kilometers to the east looked to be the most promising option, and he didn't have time to analyze any others or the orbiter would drop like a stone. At two hundred thousand feet... there wouldn't be anything to salvage. It would leave an impact crater.

As it was, the power started failing with still two thousand feet left in the descent, and then a temporary thruster failure took several seconds for the struggling computerized systems to compensate, giving Nathan another landing line.

“Hang on kids, this is gonna be bumpy!” he called back, taking manual control from the

flickering autopilot, and guiding the orbiter down as close as he could to the projected landing path.

The orbiter landed fairly even, but too fast, friction immediately shearing away the landing gear and causing the craft to skid in a shower of sparks along the stretch of road he had been aiming for. After a half kilometer, it veered off the paved surface, and ground into the dirt and topsoil, finally coming to a stop another half kilometer away.

“Alright, that's it... no more orbiter flights. They're just bad luck for me,” Nathan mumbled to himself as he tried to clear the stars from his eyes. “You four all right back there?”

“Jacob is hurt!” declared one of the girls – he still couldn't tell which, just from the voice.

“I am *not*!” the eldest boy retorted.

Nathan squeezed back into the passenger area, and examined the boy. Through the young man's tattered clothes, he could see a long strip of raw skin, likely from the harness digging in during the crash landing. “That's going to bruise, but probably isn't serious. Having trouble breathing?”

Jacoby shook his head insistently. “I'm fine.”

“You'd make a good Marine, kid,” Nathan said with as warm a smile as he could manage. “Everyone else okay?”

They all were troopers... that trip ought to have been terrifying. Any other child he knew would have been bawling their eyes out. “Okay, everyone out... we're gonna have to try and find another vehicle.”

Outside the orbiter, it became clear that Nathan had misidentified his target. The lightly developed area was an airstrip, courtesy of the Air Force, and abandoned for some time from what he could tell, judging from the cracks and weeds on the smooth craft surface.

Examining one of the hangars confirmed his fears. Jansen Air Force Base, closed down in 2417. There wouldn't be anything here... just empty, rusted shells and a cracked, beaten-down airstrip.

He had meant to give a brave front to the four children, but even if they couldn't sense his thoughts, they saw the underlying hopelessness in his eye. “We'll... be all right... I'll think of something.”

“You don't have to lie to us,” Melissa – he thought – replied. “You tried. It's... okay.”

There was a momentary crackle of static from his data manager, then the voice of Private Cliff. “Need a ride, sir?”

Nathan grabbed the device from his belt, and was going to demand an explanation, when he looked up and saw a very familiar armored personnel transport coming in from the south, and with considerable speed, if the cloud of dust formed in its wake was any indication. He put the device away, deciding it would be better to chew out the private in person... even if, unwittingly, Jeremy made probably the best decision of his life.

The transport slid to a stop with a hiss, and settled onto the damaged runway, the back of the transport popping open as Jeremy stuck his head out the hatch.

“I distinctly remember ordering you to get to the Cape and not look back, Private,” Nathan chided, even as he couldn't fight back the relieved smile.

“Hey, get mad at Percy. He was the one that insisted we keep tabs on you,” Jeremy answered.

The consultant froze as the sergeant's eyes locked on him. “We kept ahead of the Creep... we weren't in any danger... and... well... you obviously can't complain!”

Nathan patted Percy on the shoulder, and said, "No, I suppose I can't. Let's get everyone loaded in... we still got quite a bit of ground to cover."

## Chapter Twelve

*Even during the best of times, relations between civilian and military interests were... strained, to say the least. This tension was often magnified by the Commander-in-Chief of the United States armed forces often being a civilian with no military experience.*

*Such was the case with President Reginald Talbot.*

*Talbot had been a career politician, a real “play it by the numbers” sort of personality. Then again, after selling his soul to any and all special interest groups to get himself nominated, putting on a warm and friendly face to sell himself to the American public, and then selling his plans that benefited the money elite he represented while convincing the public it was in their benefit, I wasn't sure he had much of a personality left.*

*Was a president and a sales manager of a department store all that different?*

*The major source of strain between this president, and many of the military leaders that counted on him to be the primary administrator for Project Exodus, was that President Talbot established a time line for several critical steps to the process... such as the date the first colony ship would depart. When the promised date was missed by three weeks, Talbot had a near conniption fit, tried to demote the Admiral in command – a Frenchman, by the way, far beyond his authority – eventually demanded the project leaders remove said Admiral of his command, then again overstepped his bounds and promoted his own Chief of Staff to the position. By that point, the project leaders were so tired of his antics they let him do it.*

*The evening after, the President was delivering a tearful apology for failing the American people's trust, citing incompetence from the man who had been entrusted with their lives and well being.*

*Talbot only saw the numbers. He didn't care for the explanation – or “excuse,” as he called it – that for such a groundbreaking and unparalleled venture, the numbers and the time frame given were a very loose estimate at best. He felt that the numbers given to him were set in stone, and if they weren't met, it reflected badly on him.*

*I suppose, in a way, I am being unfair. His job is not an easy one, with pressure from all sides, and a general guarantee that half of the country at any given time will hate him no matter what decision he makes. Much of the blame when things go wrong would fall on his shoulders, when he often had little or nothing to do with the actual law or policy enacted.*

*Didn't mean he wasn't an insufferable pest, though.*

*“Good God... even when we shuttle him off the planet, he's still an annoyance.”*

*I jerked my head up to the source of the voice: General Anderson Scott, a Marine three-star that had been assigned secondary command of the Salvation, the third colony ship. The general was pointing towards the holographic projector in the center of the diner, where said president was going on about being strong and patient in these last troubled times... even as the colony ship he was on was currently breaking the elliptic to avoid the asteroid belt past Mars.*

*“Shouldn't you be in Cardiff by now?” I asked.*

*“Leaving tomorrow.” Anderson answered, then jerked a thumb back towards the holo display. “Listen to him, pandering to the public... like they're going to vote him in again. He's not even going to see anybody he could possibly be addressing ever again. Half of the Pathfinder, I swear, is political figures and religious leaders. That colony ship is pretty much fucked.”*

*General Scott, from what I knew of him, was not a particularly big supporter of politicians and bureaucracy, and made little effort to hide that fact after he got his stars. “I'm*

*sure they will be just fine,” I commented, sipping my wine twice, trying to sound nonchalant. I had to agree with him to an extent. Many of these world, religious, and business leaders seemed to have this idea that they’d land on their respective colony world and just step right into the role they always had.*

*“You’re a lucky bastard, you know that?”*

*I didn’t find my assignment particularly lucky. “Pardon?”*

*“I’ve seen the distribution docket. You have all of one national level politician on your colony ship. Even better is that by the time the Requiem actually breaks dock, every single one of the politicians you’d answer to are going to be so far away that they’d really have no authority. The way I see it, what are they going to do to you at that point? You could tell them just where to stick it. I envy you that right.”*

*“Want to trade, then?” I asked.*

*“Nah... too many of those damn politicians are still around.” General Scott answered with a laugh. “Besides, I’m not sure I want to be on Earth that close to zero day.”*

Zero day... the estimated day that the Earth would be completely infested by the Creep. Said projected time had varied considerably due to the variance in the Creep’s speed. Now, there wasn’t any more confusion. Today was it.

Douglas traced out an outline on the viewscreen, and noted, “The Creep has picked up its pace... immensely. It’s expanding at nearly two hundred kilometers an hour in some places... both from the west and north, and we have a potential threat with the east flank for that matter... it’s only one hundred and fifty kilometers off the coast at this point. At this rate, even the south flank of the Creep is going to make landfall in the Everglades within three hours.”

“I can see that, Doug,” Jamison grumbled in annoyance. It was right there on the viewscreen.

Douglas licked his lips, and said, “At this rate of speed... if the Creep were to reach the seven kilometer mark we set for evac... that wouldn’t be enough time for us to get up and out of here. We have to revise our exit strategy.”

Jamison ran his hand over his face, feeling the effects of what amounted to an all-nighter... something he hadn’t done in years. “What do you advise then, Commander?”

Douglas took control of the viewscreen display, and expanded the yellow circle Jamison had outlined the day before. “There. It’ll give us the same amount of time taking into account the new speed of the Creep. We can adjust it again as necessary if it slows down...”

“... Or speeds up,” Jamison finished. The transport carrying the last survivors was minutes away from entering the Cape peninsula. They were still well ahead of the Creep, but the infestation was gaining fast. It was going to be pretty damn close as it stood.

“We also need to consider the possibility... of... refusing them aboard.”

Jamison was damn certain he didn’t hear right. “Pardon?”

“We will need to spend time scanning all of them for possible infestation. All nine of them have been exposed to some varying degree to the Creep, especially the four children they acquired.”

That was something Jamison had *not* thought of. It was true that there was absolutely no way they could allow even a potentially infected person to spread the taint to the orbital platform and the *Requiem*. Each one of them would have to be scanned before takeoff, and that would take time... time they really didn’t have. “Damn it... you’re right. How much time do we have?”

“That’s precisely the problem. At this current rate of expansion, we won’t have time.

Not unless the Creep slows down or they speed up,” Douglas said grimly.

“So, we should just give up and leave then,” Jamison intentionally misconstrued. He was tired, and really didn't want anyone questioning his decisions.

Douglas became defensive. “No! I... just want us to be ready in case we *do* have to give up.”

Jamison grunted incoherently, and then replied, “Your suggestion is noted.”

The console beeped in warning of an incoming transmission, a quick glance confirming what he already knew. “God damn it all... just what I need...”

“Our wonderful president again?” Douglas asked.

“Who else?” he muttered, then with less vitriol opened the channel and replied, “What can I do for you, sir?”

“You can get yourself off that planet and do your job of getting the *Requiem* out into space. I don't give a damn what 'issues' you claim you have. Stop wasting time for a handful of doomed souls and focus on saving the billions that are waiting for you to get them to safety.”

“Mr. President, with all due respect, I am in full control of the situation...”

“And that will promptly change if you continue to refuse my direct orders!” he shouted. “You have fifteen minutes to leave Earth's surface and one hour to tell me that the *Requiem* is ready to leave dock. If either of those conditions are not met, I will have you demoted and have someone else appointed who *will* follow orders.”

Jamison killed his end of the connection, turning his attention to his crew on board the *Requiem*. “I take it you are hearing this, Captain?”

“I am, sir,” Captain Smelling replied. “It's quite classic, really. I'm recording it for posterity.”

“Well, I'm glad to hear you're on my side,” Jamison mumbled.

The captain corrected quickly, “Truth be told, sir, he has a point. The situation planetside is becoming increasingly dangerous. I'm sure our projections match yours on this score... even if you assume every member of the remaining survivors is uninfected... you won't have time before the Creep overwhelms the Cape.”

“I see...”

“What I do disagree with is folding while there is still a chance something will change, especially when children are involved,” Smelling amended yet again. “I personally, and I speak for the whole crew on this, say we will support your decision, whatever it is. This man isn't here... he hightailed it two months ago. I personally think he voided his say in what we do when he ran with his tail between his legs.”

“Admiral Doric!” the President bellowed in fury.

Momentarily opening that channel to reply, “I am consulting with my crew. I will have an answer for you shortly,” he then returned back to the channel aimed to the *Requiem*. “You mean this? Everyone is on board?”

“Those that aren't... well... need not know,” Captain Smelling replied smugly. “I am more than willing to consider any and all conversation with the *Pathfinder*, or any of the other colony ships, at a close. There's no need to consult them any longer.”

Jamison regarded Douglas, and asked, “What about you?”

“I've followed you dutifully and without complaint up to this point,” the commander replied with a shrug. “Why should that change now?”

Jamison nodded in acceptance, then grinned broadly. “I've been waiting for years to do this...” With that same evil smile, he opened up transmission towards the *Pathfinder* once more.

“Mr. Talbot, I would like you to deliver a message to a General Anderson Scott. Tell him that he was right.”

“*Mister* Talbot? What are you talking about?”

“Tell him that he was right. It is quite refreshing to tell you that your authority is no longer recognized here. Be my guest and appeal to the *Requiem*, I think you'll find they're all behind me on this score. This is *my* command, not *yours*, and I will execute that command however I damn well see fit. Have a good trip.”

With that said, he terminated the connection, and promptly blocked all future attempts at communication from that origin. He brushed his hands together emphatically, and said with considerable cheer, “Well that work is done... now... what can we do to help out those kids out there?”

Douglas dropped his head in thought. “Well, right now, the concern is actually the western front of the Creep. The northern flank is still quite a ways back. If we can somehow stall the western flank, it might buy them enough time to get here.”

“So, how do we do that?” Jamison asked.

Douglas turned the control panel in front of him towards Jamison, and explained, “The cannons outside the base are still loaded with neutron charges back when we were anticipating the possibility of a fight to the last. A pair of carefully placed and timed barrages might be able to convince the Creep to work around rather than continue to surge straight forward. It might only be a few minutes extra time... but every minute counts, right?”

“How long would it take to get them online?”

Douglas shrugged, “I'd just have to make sure there was enough power being generated to operate them. Just a few minutes to ride down to the base generator, and open up a few more reactor grids.”

Jamison pointed to the door in acknowledgment and order. “Get going. Make it fast.”

The commander complied in the most literal sense possible, running and manually forcing open the door rather than wait for it to slide open. Jamison wondered if Douglas was even going to waste time turning on a hover, or was just going to sprint to the power station.

Douglas always tried to play the calm, rational, stoic one – always tried to pretend that he didn't invest himself emotionally into anything. But that wasn't the manner of someone just doing as ordered, that was a fellow who was willing to whatever he could for a group of people he felt an attachment to. It made Jamison feel a little bit better about what was looking like an increasingly bad decision.

## Chapter Thirteen

*When I had gotten the note that I was going to be under the command of an American Naval officer, I had to admit that I was a bit underwhelmed. I had served under the Canadian flag all my life, it seemed almost treason to settle in under the command of a foreigner.*

*But Admiral Doric grew on me very quickly; from the moment he appeared on the engineering deck to get familiar with the ship and the crew that he needed to keep it together, I could sense he wasn't your typical high officer.*

*He shook my hand in the way an enlisted man would, with a firm grip and a smile. You can tell a lot about a man by the way they shake your hand. This was a man who considered himself in command, but not a superior.*

*We couldn't have talked long, but by the end it felt like he had heard my every concern, complaint, and suggestion. As he moved on, I was sure I was grinning like an idiot.*

*Then Captain Smelling followed. It's somewhat unfair to say that he didn't give me the same vibe as the Admiral... I'm not sure anyone could. It wasn't that the Captain was dismissive or cold or snobby. But I could feel an envy between the Captain and the Admiral... a slight hint of distraction in the Captain's handshake.*

*He also didn't seem to give me the same full attention, his focus constantly wavering. I often had to remind myself not to judge Smelling too harshly, as much of it was likely caused by simply having to follow a smashing act... even as my cynicism told me something else entirely.*

*High ranking officers tended to be an ambitious lot; I had little doubt that the Captain desired to be in the Admiral's position. I stopped myself from immediately assuming that Smelling would backstab Doric... that wasn't something men of uniform did as a practice. But I couldn't stop myself from thinking that the connection between the two would be tested, and that I couldn't predict the result.*

Adam didn't particularly have a nose for drama... unlike his wife who could sniff out even the slightest bit of trouble having gone cold for months. But there was little doubting the stagnant chill that crept down the engineer's spine when he was called up to the Captain's office.

He felt out of place on the bridge as the elevator opened for him and out into the brain of the *Requiem*, having spent all of seventeen minutes there prior to Smelling's summons. He was far more used to the ship's heart.

And of course, the path to the Captain's Office had to be directly on the other side of the bridge, requiring him cross the entire uncomfortable, foreign area, circling along its aft perimeter so as not to potentially block any of the visuals and projections onto the main screen.

Not that it was even *possible* for him to do so, as the bridge was designed to prevent exactly that sort of thing, as the screen was raised several feet above the floor and the bridge itself sloped downward with the projectors mounted to the center of the arched ceiling more than twenty meters above the floor.

But that was going to be the excuse he stuck with in case he was asked why he was nervously shuffling across the aft side.

Even then, it seemed like every pair of eyes on the bridge were on him as he moved with all the speed walking could allow through the area of the bridge designated for the communications crew.

Mercifully, the ordeal ended and he slid into the relative privacy of the Captain's Office. Smelling didn't look up to even acknowledge the Lieutenant, his head bowed staring at the

surface of his desk, hands folded in front of him, lost in deep thought.

“You wished to speak to me, sir?” Adam asked, trying to hide his nerves and confusion as he saluted.

Smelling finally looked up from his desk and got straight to the point. “How much longer can you continue your charade, Lieutenant?”

“Sir?” Adam blinked, in his high-strung state completely forgetting his previous scheme.

“The 'drive trouble', Lieutenant. Remember?”

Adam slapped his forehead. “Right... of course. Well, by my original 'estimate', I still have about five hours before anyone could expect the Requiem to be up and running. I could... encounter some 'unforeseen' circumstances that could extend the process.” The engineer paused, then added with curiosity, “Why do you ask?”

“President Talbot has... relieved Admiral Doric of his command. He has supposedly put himself in charge.” Smelling answered.

“He can do that?” Adam asked.

Smelling shook his head, “Of course not. But that's never stopped him before. He's given me one hour to accept the assignment or 'he'll find someone not insane who will.' I'm sure there's no end of people within this command structure willing to do whatever he says in order to command this colony ship.”

“Then what does it matter how long I can draw this out?” Adam asked.

“Because when I accept this commission, Talbot is going to demand I move out the moment you've given the all clear. If I dally, he makes good on his threat, I am sure, whether legal or not. I really don't want some damned war of succession emerging on the *Requiem*.”

“And you're not sure those still on the ground will make it in time.” Adam said, putting it together quickly enough. “You need me to lie to him again.”

“Possibly.” Smelling confirmed, cringing slightly.

Adam slowly exhaled the deep breath he had been storing. “Why not? It's not like I can sacrifice my dignity any further.”

“Thank you. Return to Engineering, and let me know when you get there.” Smelling ordered, “Dismissed, Lieutenant.”

Adam saluted again, and made as hasty a retreat as decorum could allow back to where he felt comfortable; retracing his steps in reverse almost perfectly to the lift. He was nearly punching the “door close” button in the irrational hope that it would shut faster.

When it finally did, part of the anxiety melted away, only to be replaced by a different fear. President Tolbert had no problems stripping an Admiral of his command... what could he do to a mere Lieutenant if he thought he was being strung along?

He had worked his entire life for this opportunity, and now it was an unstable politician with a notorious quick hand towards the axe that could take it all away with a couple calls. The command chair wasn't all that different than his position in the sense that there wasn't exactly a shortage of people with the expertise and the willingness to take over if given the opening.

By the time Adam reached the Engineering Deck, he was practically covered in a cold sweat, having successfully talked himself into a near panic. He had been in such a hurry to get back to his office, and now the last thing he wanted to do was actually be there.

Lisette Dupres, one of the many capable engineers that Adam had been thinking of, crossed in front of him. Her French accent was apparently so thick that her English was near incomprehensible to some; fortunately Adam's had been granted enough exposure during a two year stationing in Montreal, and the loose similarities to be able to decipher her speech without

needing her to repeat herself.

“What did the Captain need?” Lissette asked, “Or is that need to know?”

Adam shook his head, “No... just wondering how much longer before we can power up the drive and get going.”

“I still can't believe you forgot to align the prism grid before trying to activate the blue-shift field.” Lissette said chidingly, “We could have left by now.”

“I know.” Adam groaned. The crew underneath him had given him considerable flack for the “error” as it was. It had gotten annoying to the point where he almost wished he had committed such an error to make the heckling worth it. “I screwed up.”

“Did I misspeak?” Lissette queried, her brow furrowing in confusion.

“I don't know what you mean.” Now Adam was confused.

“I can't believe you made that mistake. Or, should I say, I *don't* believe you made that mistake. I checked the logs. You didn't mess anything up. We could have left by now, yet we aren't. Why?”

Adam frowned. He hadn't expected someone to check through the operations log to prove he had been lying about the whole malfunction. It wouldn't have been worth it, Adam had assumed, and would have gained nothing; once Adam had ordered the emergency shut down, they would have had to restart from the beginning anyway.

Caught, Adam relinquished the truth. “Admiral Doric is still planetside waiting for the last people to reach Cape Canaveral. Apparently, they are survivors of a drop ship that crashed. Captain Smelling and I have been playing this entire malfunction as a means to buy the Admiral and the survivors time.”

“And that is what you and the Captain were talking about?”

“President Talbot has removed the Admiral from command. It's mostly bluster I guess, but the last thing the *Requiem* needs is a whole bunch of people in a power grab for leadership. So we need to keep the ruse going.”

“What does the Captain need you to do?”

“To continue to stall if need be.”

Lissette spun Adam towards his office, and said firmly, “Then you are going to go in there, and say what you need to say. If you believe in what the Admiral is doing, then you need to do whatever it takes, yes?”

She gave him a good hard shove on his way; followed by a shooing motion when he looked back at her. But she made a good point... Admiral Doric needed everyone he could get behind him; Adam couldn't let him down now.

Entering his office, he took one more calming breath before sitting at his desk, and opening the comm. “Captain, I'm here and I'm ready.”

“Good timing, Lieutenant. There's someone who wants to talk to you.” Captain Smelling answered, transferring the communication to the President of the United States.

“So, I'm told you're still claiming a malfunction?” Talbot grouched.

Adam played innocent. “I'm not sure why you thought changing the commanding officer was going to make the process go any faster. If you doubt me, you can have someone in your Engineering to link up real-time and see that we're moving as fast as we can.”

Talbot's holographic projection pointed accusingly at him, “Is it amateur hour over there? If I find out that this is some scheme to keep the *Requiem* grounded for some damn fool altruistic suicide mission, I'll...”

Adam had been mocked by his peers, and could accept that. But getting berated by a

man who couldn't tell a grid prism from a neutron trap was the final straw. Any nervousness about bluffing vanished, replaced by a rage that the usually even-mannered Nova Scotian normally kept in check.

“Or you'll *what?*” He challenged angrily. “You may be a President, but you are *not* mine. I do not know *why* everyone up until this point has let you walk over them, but I draw the line *here*. You may question my motives, you may question my professionalism, but you do *not* question my abilities or my duty to make sure that the people aboard this vessel makes it to their destination safely. You will do *nothing*, and you will like it.”

“You... you...”

By that point, Adam cut off the communication, and let himself stew until the realization of what he had done sank in and he started to shake. He had just told off a head of state of one of the world's most powerful nations.

Smelling broke into his comm soon after. “Apparently, you are a disgrace to your country and if I had any good sense, I would relieve you of your command immediately.”

“I wonder if he even knows what country I'm from, sir.” Adam scoffed.

Smelling laughed, “I told him I'd take care of it. I trust you are duly regretful for your actions?”

“No, sir.”

“Good. I see no reason to relieve you of your duty. Keep up the good work, Lieutenant.”

“Yes, sir.”

Smelling cut the communication, and Adam allowed that support to calm his nerves. He went back to his comm, and called up his second. “Lieutenant Dupres? Don't exactly rush to get everything online. We're going to give Admiral Doric all the time he needs, whether some President likes it or not.”

He could see the woman nodding through the windows of his office. “Understood.”

“And... thanks.”

“Happy to be of help.”

## Chapter Fourteen

*I barely understood I was alive when my grandmother died... the concept of death wasn't something I had completely absorbed at the point when it became clear granny was in her last days. I always regretted that I didn't understand that at the time – that I couldn't appreciate that my time with her was short.*

*For the first eight years of my life, granny was the foundation of our family. When my dad had lost his job, when all the other members of my family somehow just didn't have enough space to share, she was the one who let us stay in her row house on the South Side. When it became obvious that both my mom and dad would have to make money in order to get back on our feet, my granny was the one that took over the job of making sure I had good food to eat, my clothes were clean, my homework was done, that I took my bath and cleaned my room. She was the mom my mom couldn't be.*

*And then, she got sick... and didn't get better. I remember coming home from school to see about thirty relatives packed in our living room. I asked what was going on and why everyone was here.*

*My mother emerged from the mass of humanity, knelt down with a sad smile, and said, "Grandma is very sick. You know that, right?"*

*"Of course I know that," I replied, not making the connection between her cold and why every living relative I could think of – and a few I couldn't – was sitting in the living room.*

*"Your grandma wanted to see you the moment you got home," my mother replied, seeming to change the subject in my mind. "Don't keep her waiting."*

*Keeping her waiting was rather unavoidable, considering the tangle of body parts I had to navigate to get through the living room and the stairs that led to the second floor. And, of course, it was expected that I at least say "Hello, how are you?" to every person I nearly stepped on or came within six inches of, as well as listen to them coo about how I was growing up to be such a fine young man, and that cousins I had barely met were about my age and getting so big too.*

*Even at eight years old, I could tell meandering small talk for what it was; tripe meant simply for conversation. Not a single damn one of them really cared about anything I might have had to say, just like they really didn't care about how I was doing. I was the child of the "deadbeat loser man" and the "troubled child of the family." It was a label my parents fought over pretty often when they thought I was asleep.*

*My struggles through the living room led up the square-angled stairwell and the upper floor. To the left was my room, the door ajar, and the sound of giggling coming from inside. Putting aside my grandmother's summons for another few minutes, I investigated to see who had wandered in, and shoved out two of my distant cousins who had decided that my property was theirs as well.*

*Closing my door behind me, I had no other distractions from attending to my grandmother in her room, right across the hall from mine. My granny's weak coughs made me hesitate for a moment, thinking that she might be getting over her cold.*

*But as I stepped through the door, the sight before me was not of a person recovering. Grandma looked... exhausted, her wrinkled face gaunt and pale, her eyelids drooping, and her eyes themselves seemed yellow and bloodshot.*

*She struggled to get up to a sitting position, waving off my attempts to help. She had always been independent, and was determined to be so to her last breath. "How was school*

today, Nate? Did you give your shop teacher trouble again?"

"No, Gran," I sighed. Tell a teacher he was doing something wrong once, and you're branded a troublemaker. I was even right about it! "We're making a simple engine for our final project. I'll be done by the end of the week."

"You always had a gift with machines. I remember when you took apart your remote-controlled plane when you were four..."

"Yes, Gran... and I put it back together and it flew faster, higher, and needed less power," I recited. I had heard that tale a hundred times, even though I remembered no such thing.

"You're a special young man who is destined to do some great things. Don't let anyone try and convince you otherwise, understand me?"

I nodded. "Yes, Gran. Is there anything else you needed?"

"Do you know Jesus?" she asked.

Again, I felt slightly lost by the shifts in the conversation. My grandmother had not seemed like a religious person... there wasn't a Bible to be found in her house, religious talk was met with a scornful glare and a reminder that such "nonsense" was not welcome in her home, and she took particular glee in scaring away every proselytizer that came onto her doorstep.

"Yeah... I guess so..." I replied. "My mom takes me to church on occasion..."

"I'm not talking about that 'Jesus loves you' crap and that he'll heal all the sick and make all the blind see and all the people of the world be happy. That garbage belongs in the kiddie books section with all the other fairy tales."

That was the granny I knew.

"I'm not talking about Jesus, the trumped up superman that is the result of a thousand years of storytelling and exaggeration. Not the magic man who died for all our sins. That fellow never existed. That man is the result of everyone missing the damned point for twenty five hundred years."

She coughed, interrupting her bitter monologue. "Preachers and priests and ministers and bishops and reverends will tell you he gave himself up to the Romans to save us all, a noble sacrifice to purge ourselves of sin so that we could face God in the end. What damned sense does that make? Can you tell me?"

I shrugged. Not too many things made sense to me at that time.

"Why is it not good enough that he gave himself up so that his friends didn't get themselves killed fighting a battle they had no chance of winning? The spirit of Jesus about isn't spreading his love to the heathens, and conveniently the collection plate while you're at it. The story of Jesus isn't about love or the word of God, and certainly not some divine booty call to a virgin in Bethlehem. That's all static... all fiction... to make us feel better about the world around us... so that we don't think about how bad it is and what we can do to make it better."

"The lesson you should take out of the story of Jesus... the message he was trying to send... is this: the world can be a wonderful place, or it can be a heavy weight on our shoulders. Sometimes, that weight falls on people who don't deserve it or can't bear it. And that is when we are tested as kind human beings... not some stupid ritual with grape juice and scraps of bread. Jesus's message was that of sacrifice; of willingly bearing the brunt of the consequences for the sake of those he loved and cared for. The true follower of Christ is the one who gives everything he or she can, for the good of someone else... even if it would mean your death."

I didn't know how to respond, I couldn't even really understand what she meant.

"It's not an easy road to follow... nor is it meant to be. If it were easy, then there would be no point to it. I'm not saying you will ever be in that situation, but I know you'll be ready if

*you ever are.”*

*She smiled faintly, and was soon racked by another cluster of angry sounding coughs. “I’m sorry if I overwhelmed you with all that... but it was a lecture I wanted to give you, and I don’t think I’d have the chance when you’re older. Thanks for being patient with this old woman, Nate.”*

*I gave her a hug, “Oh, I’m sure I’ll get it one day, Granny, if I’m as smart as you always say I am.”*

That memory was something that had been burning in Nathan's mind for the last several hours, especially when he saw that the Creep, always observed as a slowly progressive force, had sped up far beyond anything the “experts” had ever theorized. At this point, it was closing on the transport, and would likely catch them before they made it to the drop ship.

“Sergeant David, do you copy?” Admiral Doric's voice filtered through the communications system.

Nathan lunged for the comm, and quickly replied, “Yes sir, we're here.”

“Commander Cardiff is going to try and fire off the remaining neutron shells on the base to try and slow up the Creep. I'm sorry, but at this point, I have to draw the line... I can only give you thirty minutes.”

Thirty minutes wasn't going to be enough time; they weren't traveling nearly fast enough for that. “Understood, sir,” Nathan said grimly.

“If you people have any cards still up your sleeve, now is the time to play them,” the admiral replied. “I am abandoning the command post now, so any communication will need to go through my PDM. Good luck, and Godspeed.”

“To you as well, sir,” Nathan answered, and the comm went silent.

Jeremy was quick to protest, “Sir... thirty minutes isn't...”

“I *know*, Private!” Nathan shouted, his mind racing to think of what he could do to speed up the transport. There was a method to overcharge a tritium engine and increase its output significantly, but it was a dangerous proposition at the best of times, and the end result could very easily overheat and detonate the reactor core. Not exactly the prettiest way to go.

That was the sort of modification done with the highest quality technicians in a controlled environment with an engine that certainly wasn't running at the time. Nathan wouldn't have that luxury.

But he also knew that they didn't have any other options as far as he could tell... time to see if his “gift” was everything it was advertised. He rushed back into the hold, grabbed a loop of reinforced cord, and lunged back into the cockpit.

Jeremy, not surprisingly, wondered exactly when his superior went insane when Nathan popped open the hatch above. “Sir! Where are you going, sir?”

“To do a quick modification,” Nathan replied, already halfway up the ladder to the transport's exterior. “I'm going to have to take apart the weapons systems again and salvage some of the parts there to do it though... but I think at this point, we aren't going to be needing them anyway.”

“On a running vehicle, sir?”

“Just try and keep her steady, Private,” Nathan answered, disappearing up onto the top of the transport as he did so.

It was going to take some monkey-like maneuvering to get this job done. The weapons system hardware was located on the top of the transport. The engine casing was underneath,

directly under the cockpit.

The wind shear generated by the speed of the transport nearly blew Nathan completely off the vehicle, and only a burst of adrenaline allowed him to grab a handhold and pull himself back onto the relatively stable surface. Once reasonably secure, he took the cord he had collected and made a loop between his belt and the handholds normally reserved for those climbing the ladder, then tripled up the loop and knotted it as tight as he could, hoping that it would be enough to secure him to the transport so he could work.

It passed the first test, holding firm as he yanked open the panel and tossed it to the winds – it's not like it would be needed again anyway. Slipping inside, he identified the parts that would be necessary to make the modification at least possible, even if it remained extremely ill-advised. A regulator here... some titanium-glazed wiring... a power converter... another flow regulator... other bits and pieces... some of which were already reverse engineered from the extra pieces of the communication tower his team had cannibalized the day before.

That felt more like a week ago than yesterday.

Fortunately, all the pieces he needed fit reasonably well into the pouch of his tool belt, and he prayed he didn't manage to damage them as he negotiated his way underneath the transport. This was where it was going to get fun...

The booming sound of cannon fire momentarily caught his attention, and far in the distance, the white hot streaks of neutron charges cut a swath through the sky. The barrage sailed to the west however, instead of in their direction. It momentarily confused him, until he remembered that the Creep was closing in on many fronts, and that the western flank was very likely the closest to the Cape.

As he then turned away from the sight, his eyes caught something else – a momentary figure, caught out of the corner of his eye, a figure Nathan identified moments before the transport zipped too far away for such identification.

Howard Cooley. He stood with his arms crossed and a dark, foreboding glare as he followed the path of the transport as it passed. It figured that he would show up one more time, and it helped Nathan come to the conclusion he had been hoping to avoid.

Nathan knew what he had to do.

Back on task, Nathan clambered underneath the transport and took as firm a hold as he could, working his way until his back was hovering mere centimeters above the ground, desperately tying himself and hooking his legs around the undercarriage. He found his mind drifting ahead, and he forced himself to remain focused... one step at a time... one moment at a time... getting distracted now would make ruin everything else.

The electronic work wasn't very difficult beyond getting to the grid that he needed. For once, everything was in working order, undamaged and unbroken. He also thanked military technology for anticipating the need for quick field repairs, having all computerized parts made with a universal size and docking port.

The engine work itself was much trickier.

A bump from the hover, likely an over-correction in the air suspension, caused him to drop the engine panel he had been removing. The increased output from the engine proper would likely leak radiation through that open panel at an alarming rate. Even now, he could feel the radiated heat from the engine's normal operation, but there was no helping it. Short-term exposure shouldn't be fatal to anyone.

But he also realized that he'd only have one chance at this. The heat on the engine block would likely melt his tools in seconds, he wouldn't be able to make a second adjustment if he

messed up the first time. He took a deep breath, sized up his target, got a tight grip on his screwdriver, and thrust into the breach.

Five quick turns and a tug pulled out the restraining rod for the tritium core by eight centimeters. That's all it would take to increase the number of reactions by nearly double, generating more energy. The updated electronics would divert that additional power straight to the engines, thus increasing their output significantly. All he had to do now was recalibrate the system to take advantage of the increase.

Once he had reached the ladder along the transport's side, he paused to look down the road behind it. The Creep was still coming fast, now readily visible on the edge of the horizon. But it didn't matter anymore. The Creep was too late... Nathan was going to make sure of that right now.

He vaulted himself back into the cockpit, and grabbed control of the co-pilot's console, accessing the system settings that he needed. "Okay... this *should* work. Once I'm clear, I want you to hit this new button I'm programming into your UCP. It's linked to the left panel. That will supercharge the thrusters and should give you the speed to make it on time."

Nathan was already moving to the rear of the transport by the time Jeremy called back, "Once you're clear? What the hell are you talking about, sir?"

Nathan checked the charge on his rifle and made sure he had enough working grenades. "I'm going to buy you some more time. Once I jump, you hit that turbo, and you don't look back."

The three civilians that he led through hell were probably going to protest, but he cut them off with a slash of his hand. "Listen to me, the plan has changed. The Creep isn't after all of you... it's after me."

"Wha... after you... like you specifically? Why?" Amy asked.

"I don't have time to explain. Your orders are to get these four kids to safety whatever the cost, understand?" Nathan instructed, manually overriding the transport loading door and throwing it open. "Private, I don't care if you have to insubordinate yourself to do it, you make damn well sure the admiral does *not* leave these children behind, do you understand me?"

Jeremy, not surprisingly, was a bit taken aback at the idea of getting aggressive with one of the highest ranks in the modern military. "But... why?"

"Because these kids are immune to the Creep," Nathan elaborated swiftly, then tucked up and jumped out the back of the transport.

Jeremy didn't have time to think about what Nathan had said, or what good that possibly could mean. He had his orders.

"You're honestly going to leave him?" Percy asked. "After all we went through, doubled back once already... and that's it? The pact we made... suddenly doesn't matter?"

"The sergeant said the plan has changed. I have my orders," Jeremy responded grimly.

"But..."

Jeremy finally snapped, "I don't like it either! But ya know what? We don't have time! If the sergeant thinks he can buy us enough time to get to the launch site, then damn it, we have to take it! Don't let what he's doing for us go to waste! Sit down! We're gonna be going pretty damn fast!"

He waited two seconds after Percy had settled back in before navigating the controls to find the command Nathan added. Hitting it, Jeremy immediately felt the increased power flow and the thrusters howl and kick in at a burn it certainly was not designed for. But the results were clear, almost doubling the speed of the transport and requiring all of Jeremy's concentration

to keep on the road and upright.

In the transport bay, the others watched Nathan disappear into the distance, seeing him get to his feet as the door slowly closed behind him.

Melissa put one small, dark hand on Quentin's arm, and said gently, "You can cry if you want. It's okay."

Quentin straightened, and huffed, "Guys don't cry." Then leaning over, he whispered discreetly, "At least... not in public."

Meanwhile, Nathan attempted to roll his shoulder to loosen up the joint, and feeling his body protest the movement. He hadn't landed and rolled as cleanly as he intended, and his left side took the brunt of the impact. He likely broke his collarbone, judging from where the pain was centered, possibly cracked some ribs as well. All in all, not a very bad exchange considering he jumped from a transport traveling close to two hundred kilometers per hour.

He growled, gathering his discipline and Marine-bred toughness to force the pain aside. He didn't have time to hurt... not when everything was on the line.

He then readied his rifle, made sure it was at its highest setting, and took one of his grenades into his right hand. "Alright, Howard... let's go... *one more time!*"

Time passed, and Jamison was growing steadily nervous – not because he was worried that the survivors weren't going to make it, but that they were actually making it close. He watched their progress intently on the small display offered by his data manager, having to squint slightly to catch the smaller details. Whatever they had done, they were moving a hell of a lot faster, and the Creep wasn't gaining on them nearly as quickly.

Then, Douglas poked his head out of the drop ship to deliver more good news. "Jamison... you're not going to believe this..."

"What?" The admiral asked.

"The Creep is shifting away from the Cape. It's pretty much stopped spreading our way."

Jamison found that hard to believe, but scanning the western flank, he saw the same thing to. The "flow" of the Creep to the west had stopped, and was shifting further north. Projections from the orbital platform suggested it was now centering on an area five kilometers north of where the transport currently was.

"While I'm not one to scorn a gift..." Jamison began, "what the hell is going on out there?"

He checked his communications link, and said, "Sergeant David, can you read me? Sergeant David, are you there?"

The admiral received no answer, even after repeating his hail, and so he turned to the second option. "Private Cliff... do you read me? Private Cliff, respond!"

Again, there was no answer, and the admiral was now starting to get annoyed. He was about to let the enlisted man have it when an unfamiliar voice broke through from the transport. "I am sorry, Admiral Doric, is it?"

"Yes, young lady," Jamison answered, his eyes narrowing. Who was in charge over there? "May I ask who is speaking?"

"I am Amy Burgundy, sir. Private Cliff is a bit occupied trying to keep this thing from losing stability, so he really can't afford to break his concentration," the woman replied nervously, afraid that she might anger the admiral.

Jamison could only imagine how clunky and unwieldy those large, armored vehicles must be under normal conditions, much less when it was moving at a rate of speed reserved for high-

performance racing hovercraft. “Understood, Miss Burgundy. Where is Sergeant David?”

There was a long pregnant pause before Amy gave her answer, her voice cracking as she stumbled through it. “He... he... jumped out of the transport. He... said something about the Creep being after him... and that he was going... going... to give us time. He said some other things, but I... I can't do it... Private Cliff will fill you in when we arrive.”

Jamison had grown conditioned to the concept of a noble sacrifice... but he also understood fully how to have it happen to someone you had come to rely on would be traumatic, especially for someone who had no preparation for it. He supposed he could press for an answer now, but that would just be cruel. “I copy that, transport. We'll be waiting for you... you should be in the clear, but don't waste time anyway.”

“The Sergeant thought the Creep was after him?” Douglas asked skeptically as knelt down to the cart carrying the medical scanner.

Jamison pointed at the data on his manager. “You tell me... sure as hell looks like it. Maybe the Creep didn't get the message that Sergeant David lost his mind.”

“Point taken.” He grunted, pulling on something just out of Jamison's line of sight, “Damn thing... it's still stuck.”

Momentarily in a panic that something had gone wrong with the drop ship, Jamison spun about and asked, “What? What happened?”

“The scanner... ya know, the one we check for Creep infection? It's stuck... I can't pull it out of the holder.”

Jamison slapped his forehead. “You've never used it before, have you? You don't remove the display panel. You take the wand next to it, run it over the person being scanned, and the results flash on the display.”

Douglas grimaced, the full futility of roughly ten minutes of work since he first acquired said medical cart coming to a head. With a fake smile, he identified the white, plastic wand in question, pulled it from the slot it was resting in, and noted the blue bar running across its length light up with a neon glow.

“Hush,” The commander warned Jamison as the admiral grinned broadly in amusement.

The hiss of a straining hovercraft engine followed the billow of dust that indicated a vehicle traveling at terrific speed. Jamison actually began to wonder if the private operating the transport would be able to actually *stop* it.

Even after the transport did pull to a stop twenty meters away from the launch pad, Jamison couldn't be sure if it was Private Cliff putting on the brakes, or the hovercraft itself breaking down and collapsing to the paved surface in a shower of sparks and smoke.

Literally, smoke was everywhere... at any place there was somewhere for air to circulate, smoke was pouring out of it, even the rear door as it was kicked open by a pair of boots, human beings stumbling out of the smoldering transport coughing and sputtering. Jamison was sprinting as fast as his old legs could take him, Douglas right behind despite the burden of the medical cart.

The cockpit hatch flung open, and a man who had to be Private Jeremy Cliff tiredly pulled himself out of the smoky hole, and crawled akin to a lizard to the side of the transport before sliding down the ladder and collapsing in a heap on the smooth road surface.

He was not Jamison's first concern, however. That honor belonged to the four children that had just been unloaded from the transport – specifically, whether he could spot visible signs of Creep infestation in them. There was no way those kids were in Atlanta for as long as they had to have been and not be infected... there was just no way...

“Commander, get these people scanned. We've got to leave, now,” Jamison ordered when he saw there was no apparent surface infection. He returned back to the side where Private Cliff was now on his feet, woozy and marked on his face with soot from the smoke.

“Alright, Private... apparently there is a story you need to tell me. What happened to Sergeant David?”

The Marine, to his credit, tried to be respectful, flipping as dutiful a salute as he could over the protests of his obviously exhausted body and recovering lungs. “Sir, Sergeant David bailed out of the rear, convinced that the Creep was after him specifically.”

“There might have been something to that,” Jamison admitted. “The Creep shifted to the north moments before I demanded a report. If that's where Sergeant David bailed out, I'd say he was dead on.”

Jeremy seemed honestly surprised by this, so much so that he didn't even acknowledge that Douglas had started scanning him for Creep infection. “Then... maybe he wasn't crazy about those kids...”

“What about them? How did they survive in infested territory for God knows how long?” Jamison asked insistently.

“Sergeant David said they were immune to the Creep, sir... and that I was to make sure they made it onto the colony ship, even if I had to make myself guilty of insubordination.”

The old admiral's attention drifted towards the four young people, huddled together next to Amy, who was kneeling down and trying to comfort them. They were obviously terrified, those poor children. Who knew what hell they had lived through just to get to this point?

“They are clean as far as I can tell, sir,” Douglas interjected. “I do believe I'm reading the display right, anyway. I suppose I could be wrong.”

“If it isn't flashing a red warning along the lines of 'kill it now,' then yes, you're reading it correctly,” Jamison replied dismissively, his thoughts all turned towards what had, up until that second, been a crazy dream.

He knew that many of the board operating Project Exodus had a semi-secret goal, to devise a strategy to retake Earth from the Creep. Their research into that goal had been the driving force for many of their technological developments. And now, the answer laid before him... not in any machination, but in the natural tendency of humankind.

Humanity's strength came in its diversity; that no matter what the disaster, there would be *someone* out there that could survive *anything* thrown at the human race. And here, finally, was proof that not even the Creep was exempt from that rule. Now it was his job to preserve it.

“Alright everyone, on board the drop ship,” Jamison ordered. “Let's not waste what the good sergeant has given us.”

Said sergeant was still giving, even as the Creep was now everywhere about him, some places ankle deep in ooze, the rest clearly tainted by the blackened ichor. As long as he kept moving, the infestation couldn't get a good gauge of where he was, he could see it bubbling, churning, slapping about blindly where he had been and where it thought he might be.

He certainly couldn't keep that up forever. Eventually he would either tire out, or the Creep would get lucky. But that wasn't the plan... he simply needed to keep it busy, keep its attention on him, rather than the launch area... just long enough for everyone else to get to safety.

He found himself amused... suddenly recalling an old memory in high school... of a girl he had a crush on saying she wouldn't go to a dance with him even if he was the last man on Earth. He wondered if there was any possibility in her mind that he *would* actually wind up being the last man on Earth.

A slap from a Creep scout came a little too close for comfort, a spray of neutrons both dissolving a good chunk of said scout... unfortunately, even as random as he was trying to be, it was becoming clear that his surrounding foe was working out the pattern Nathan was subconsciously forming in his movements.

Then, at long last, and to his immense relief, he heard the sound of rocket propulsion from behind him, and broke his focus to look back, seeing the small metallic speck of a Navy drop ship followed by a plume of white-hot flame.

Time to put an end to this charade.

Nathan stopped moving, threw down his rifle, and said, "Alright, Howard... I'm done playing. Let's talk one more time."

There was silence... the eerie dead silence that unnerves even the staunchest of souls, for several minutes. Finally, the Creep five meters ahead congealed, and spun to a roughly human height. From that translucent mess formed the face and body of Howard Cooley as he stepped forward out of the ichor to face Nathan.

"Yes... I do find trying to hit you rather annoying," Howard snarled, his voice now inhuman, like his voice box was filled with air and phlegm. "Even now, I can only see where you aren't. Quite frustrating to be honest. You really could have saved yourself a lot of needless effort, if you were only stalling for time. I care little about the ants scurrying away."

"Oh?" Nathan queried.

"The matter all of you humans compose in relation to the rest of the planet isn't even worth bothering over," Howard replied, his hand waving dismissively. "Especially the last six humans you were trying to stall for. I care little for your titles or your hierarchy... you may think an admiral is important, to me he's just another scrap of matter. Now, since you summoned me, I assume that's because you have some questions your tiny, insignificant mind desires to be answered."

Nathan did indeed have some questions... a couple of pieces to this puzzle he wanted to sort out before he could die content. "First of all, who are you really?"

Howard scoffed, "Names... a silly human invention. There is no need for titles and labels, everything here is mine, it all belongs to and is me."

"So, you are the planet?" Nathan said, deeply concerned that he was going to die with the knowledge that all that pseudo New Age clap-trap was right. If there was a God, he prayed it would either prove him wrong, or strike him dead now.

Fortunately, Howard eyed Nathan like the latter had sprouted a third head. "No... this planet belongs to me. Everything on it is because I willed it."

"So you're God."

"I am me. Whatever you want to label that is your choice. I already tire of the exercise."

Nathan abandoned that line of questioning; it wasn't as important as other things he wanted to know. "Explain to me why if humans are so insignificant to you, that you took such interest in a transport of stragglers... and then me in particular."

There was a flash of anger in Howard's eyes. "Because you interested me."

"How so?"

Howard began to pace back and forth as if agitated. Nathan wondered how much of that was the original Howard Cooley's tendency that the Creep was simply emulating, or if Cooley was somehow a part of the Creep now and leaking out in that behavior. "I was ancient while this planet was still a ball of magma. I witnessed the birth of the star that breathes life into this

planet. From the time primates realized they could bang rocks together to create a spark to the height of your 'civilization' was but the twitch of my sleeping eyes.”

The avatar of the Creep finally stopped, now clearly angered. “And yet... *I can't touch you!*”

Howard grabbed Nathan firmly by the shoulders, and violently shook the Marine sergeant, while screaming in fury, “I can barely see you, even as you stand in my own self! This world is mine! Everything! This... this... dying flesh...” He pinched Nathan on the forearm. “This is mine! All of it! But I can't take it from you! You won't let me have what's mine! I want to know why you can do this! I want to know how!”

Nathan began to laugh triumphantly, piquing the curiosity of the Creep.

“Interesting...” Howard muttered, his rage momentarily forgotten. “When humans laugh, it is generally because they find something... amusing. Whether it be joy, bitterness, or malice, the core of it is the same. So, I ask you, human: what is so amusing?”

Nathan smiled with sinister knowledge. “I know how you will be defeated.”

“What?” the avatar of the Creep found this preposterous. How could an insect whose life barely was a flash of a light when compared to his nigh-eternal existence possibly know how it would end? Deciding to amuse the deluded speck, Howard asked, “Oh, then do not leave me in suspense. Or is the secret the key to my demise?”

“Hardly. I discovered it in Atlanta. In your curiosity, you led me right to the beginning of your destruction,” Nathan declared.

“That barrier?” Howard grunted in dismissal. “So what? Those neutron streams you discovered are a nuisance. They fade in time, the power to run them dwindles. There is nothing you insects can manufacture that I cannot overcome with time.”

“I wasn't talking about the barrier,” Nathan smugly asserted. “I was talking about the children.”

Howard blinked. “Children? What children?”

Finally, it was time for Nathan to reveal his trump card. “The four children you never saw, even after they survived in Atlanta for two months. The four children that have the complete effect that made me so interesting to you. They were completely invisible to you.”

“Is this supposed to be what you humans call a joke?” Howard sneered. “I don't feel humor.”

“You are so wizened, so much superior, yet you overlooked this?” Nathan chortled. “Think about it. Why would I be called to Atlanta, go through the depths of your infested land, only to leave alone? Information? That could have been sent electronically. No, they needed me to transport something physical. Something like people.”

As Howard mulled over this carefully, Nathan continued. “You already admit I'm near invisible to you... that you can't infect me. Is it impossible to think there were people who could take that even further? As for Admiral Doric, he could have left at any time. I wasn't stalling you to save the admiral. I was stalling you so those four children made it to the colony ship safely.”

Howard had resolved to glaring angrily again as Nathan delivered the final verse to his eulogy. “What do you think they're going to do up there? I'll tell you what. They're going to find love, they're going to find mates, they're going to have children, and pass on whatever it is that makes them untouchable.”

Nathan pointed at the avatar of the creep, and predicted ominously, “And one day... it won't be tomorrow... probably won't even be a hundred years from now... hell, it might not even

be a *thousand* years from now... but one day, they'll come back. They'll come back an *army*.  
An army *immune to you*.”

Howard's nostrils flared, his lips contorted in barely controlled anger, extending so far that the skin split, and tendrils of black slime began writhing through the ripped flesh. With an inhuman howl of rage, the avatar of the Creep spat in fury, “Enough! I will discover what makes you untouchable! I'll take you apart and put you back together so often you'll beg for me to end my experiments!”

“No you won't.”

Nathan then reached into the hem of his pants, pulling out one last neutron grenade; one that he had been saving for just this scenario, having programmed it to detonate without delay.

Nathan hit the button, and his thoughts and senses went black, never even processing the brilliant flash of light that consumed him, along with everything else organic within twenty meters.

Within the inferno, its shell burned away, a hideous beast of black ichor and tentacles screamed in indignant rage, an unnatural howl that mortal language could best describe as the sound of every living animal roaring at once. Two beady eyes within the mass of Creep flared blood red, slitted pupils narrowing to thin lines of frustration, anger... and a hint of fear.

At this point, it could only wait and see if the last human on the planet was right.

## Chapter Fifteen

*Today, I deliver a eulogy for a man I never met, yet who I feel was the greatest human being I have ever known. Because of him, humanity has hope – not that we will survive, we always had that – but that we can overcome.*

*Project Exodus, to many of us, felt like a surrender. We couldn't defeat the Creep, so we had to run away. That resignation was almost as damning to the future of humanity than the Creep. Too many people refused to leave, too many people died, rather than leave all that they had ever known. Those that had lived felt more like they were going through the motions of life, almost as dead inside as the infected humans they were fleeing from.*

*I haven't exactly been forthcoming as to the unique nature of the four young children that Sergeant Nathan David saved from the ruins of Atlanta, but I can't help but think that the civilians and lower ranks of the Requiem have sensed something different about the leadership, and that sentiment is filtering down the line. We all feel now that we are a part of something bigger; humanity is again alive aboard the Requiem.*

*And for that, we have this man I had never met face to face, to thank.*

*The Medal of Honor was reserved for those men in service who went above and beyond the call of duty. It was the highest recognition that could be given for those in the United States of America, an honor so prestigious that normally only the President was permitted to issue the medal with the approval of Congress.*

*I already, by the laws of the country I once served, would be overstepping my bounds on that score, but even that doesn't feel like it's enough. But in honesty, what could be?*

*Sergeant David's life was one of redemption... both personal and for the human race, demonstrating that no matter where you came from, no matter what your past, it is never too late to something extraordinary.*

*How do you put an honor to that? How do I properly convey what he had done, for me, for those he saved, and for the race that now isn't running, but merely retreating?*

*It's my duty to try.*

The *Requiem* carried at final tally carried 420,318,995 people by its docket. The number of people that knew the person the commanding officer had announced a memorial for wouldn't have even been a blip as far as a statistician was concerned.

Even then, a surprisingly significant number was present within the fore promenade for the memorial, filling the public grounds to its capacity, if for nothing but curiosity. Clearly, this man had to be of some importance. It would look good for them to be present to pay their respects.

A holographic image bearing the man's likeness, along with a nameplate with his rank and unit number hovered open an empty casket covered with an American flag. To many colonists, who had been given the line that these colonies represented a new nation, it already felt slightly archaic to continue with the old traditions.

One visitor noted this somewhat loudly, to be chided by a man in Marine dress in the front row, "He lived, and died, a U.S. Marine, ma'am. He never got the chance to even set foot on this ship. This is the right way for him to be recognized."

The woman apologized sheepishly, more out of the vehemence shown by the uniformed man more than any true sense she was somehow wrong.

The chatter in the promenade quieted once Admiral Doric appeared on the stage at the

center of the public area. He straightened his collar, made sure the voice amplification was on, and said, "I think you for coming, as we honor the passing of a great man."

"You may ask what made him great. Was it the eight people that he saved from certain death in the final days of Earth? While these eight people, who stand before us today, probably would agree... many lives were saved by the actions of others. One should not be willing to label the expectation of duty performed as a sign of greatness."

"He indeed, as the saying goes 'went above and beyond the call of duty,' and while that is truly worthy of accolades, that is not a tribute to greatness either," Admiral Doric continued. "In ways most of you will perhaps never know, he gave everything to give everything to everyone. He changed the lives of those who never met him, and changed them all for the better. That is the mark of greatness, even if it is never seen by those who will benefit the most."

He stopped speaking for several seconds, hesitant about his next course of action. In the end, however, he decided it was the best and most fitting honor he could bestow, something that best encapsulated what Sergeant David had done; a subtle change that few would understand, but that everyone would feel.

"I have approved, with the blessing of the command personnel, the re-designation of the *Requiem*. From this point forward, the systems and transmissions from this colony ship will carry the designation *Redemption*. This colony is *not* humanity's final song. It is our rebirth. It is the beginning of a war that we will not see the end of. But mark my words, let them be recorded from now until the end of time. We *will* retake Earth. We *will* return, and defeat the Creep."

Applause erupted from the crowd, even from the three men and one woman that Sergeant David had led from Virginia to safety. This was how they would honor his memory, by taking back what was lost.

To the left of the front row was the four children, who for all intents and purposes had been "adopted" by the *Sender* survivors. They stood straight and proud, resolute not to cry, not to be a burden, even to the point where they were smiling broadly in appreciation for their rescue and for the promise of a new and better life...

... With eyes a uniform solid black, the black of the Creep.