



Arrival (Planet of Last Resort #1)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: Melisande “Melly” Jericho is a newly licensed medical doctor, returning to her home planet to practice family medicine. She hasn’t been home in years and is excited to see her friends and family again. But when her shuttle lands, the spaceport seems deserted and she can’t get her handheld to connect to the network to call for help. Stranded on the landing pad far from the terminal, she joins forces with the only other passengers to arrive, never dreaming they’ll all soon be plunged into a life-or-death situation.

Jeff Pearson, retired Sectors Special Forces captain and his friends have come to colony planet Randal Four to take up ranching. He’s attracted to the curvy doctor as soon as he sees her on board the shuttle to the planet and hopes he can at least get her com details and maybe set up a dinner date before he and his team leave the city to reach their waiting ranchland. His tentative plans come to a crashing halt as a strange horde of moaning, growling people emerges from the terminal, headed in their direction with clearly murderous intent.

Jeff, Melly and the others make a desperate run to escape from the mob and begin an adventure the likes of which none of them could ever have predicted. As they struggle against overwhelming odds to survive, evade the infected, escape the city and reach her family home, the attraction and trust between the two grows ever hotter. But so does the danger and the mystery of what happened to the people of Randal Four

Planet of Last Resort is book one in a new scifi romance series set in the Sectors. This book will end in a Happy For Now situation for the two main characters; however the series arc will continue and the challenges and dangers will not be resolved in this book. Melly and Jeff will find some of the answers they’re seeking with more mysteries to solve.

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CHAPTER ONE

Melly stood on the cracked landing field and took a deep breath of fresh air, rejoicing in being home, finally. Four long years at a mid-Sectors university, then completing her degree and residency as a doctor and she was finally able to return to Randal Four. Sure she owed the government five years of service as a doctor now to pay off her student loans but all Melly had ever wanted to do was practice medicine on her home world and take care of people. The fact Randal Four was still designated as a colony, despite its three bustling major cities and other amenities, had made it possible for her to accomplish her dream.

One week from today she'd be reporting to the big hospital here in Central City as Dr. Jericho, thank you very much, and her long journey to achieve her goals would be complete.

If the darn robo ground tram ever showed up to whisk her and her luggage away from the landing area and off to the terminal. Shading her eyes with one hand, Melly stepped away from the flimsy shelter offered by the robo dropoff area and stared across the shimmering surface toward the terminal. Nothing. There was a small cargo mover quite a distance away but it wasn't moving and the doors were open. Was that a body on the pavement next to it?

She blinked and tried to refocus. Surely not.

Her train of thought was interrupted.

“Does it usually take this long to pick up arriving passengers?”

Startled, she turned to the man who'd spoken. He was good looking, imposing in size and build, with a military stance, despite being dressed in casual clothing. Four men stood at his back. They'd all flown to the planet with her in the robo shuttle, Randal Four wasn't big enough to warrant an actual piloted shuttle. The only ships which touched down here were government, military or free traders. Cheap cruise liners like the Solar Flower operated with a minimum of crew and even fewer luxuries. It was a tired old ship plying the Outer Sectors and ferrying humans and other sentients from one colony world to another. It had been the last leg of her trip from the Mid Sectors and at each stage she'd found herself on less congenial vessels, with the Solar Flower being the least amenable of them all.

But it was cheap . The price was right. The government only paid so much to transport a brand new doctor like herself to her assignment.

Melly hadn't seen these five aboard the cruise ship but she'd pretty much stayed in her tiny cabin. Since they'd landed she'd been observing them surreptitiously, not wanting to seem rude, but the five were an interesting group. "No, I was wondering about that myself actually. There should have been ground transport here waiting for us."

"Hmmm." The man contemplated the far off terminal complex with a frown before giving her his attention again. "Jeff Pearson, recently retired from the military," he said, putting his hand out.

"Welcome to Randal Four," she said, shaking the proffered hand. Mr. Pearson had a firm grip and a direct gaze, his blue eyes piercing. "Dr. Melisande Jericho. I'm coming home after completing med school and my residency."

"Impressive! Congratulation." He waved at the other four men, who nodded as he made a rapid-fire introduction. "Cody, Zach, Samms and Trent. We're here to take up our veterans' acres and make a living ranching."

“Welcome to the planet then,” she said with enthusiasm. She was matching her observations to the names and trying to keep the four men straight in her mind. Cody was the one who’d been pacing and playing with a spinning fidget toy, which made her dizzy to watch. Trent had been listening to music, tapping his toes, very much at ease. Samms played some game on his handheld and barely took his eyes off the screen to wave at the introduction. He reminded her a bit of her younger brother, who was also an avid gamer every chance he got to play. Zach was built on a massive scale, with tats on his bulging biceps. He stood well over six feet and dwarfed the others, even Jeff, who was pretty buff himself.

“My guess is we need to hike, captain,” said Zach now. “No one’s coming with a welcome wagon today.”

“All right,” he agreed, turning away from her. “Get your gear squared away and let’s go.”

She certainly wasn’t going to wait endlessly out here on the landing pad either, so Melly gathered up her backpack and small carryon. “Mind if I join you?” she asked, walking over to where the group was dealing with their own possessions.

“I wouldn’t have it any other way.” Jeff’s grin lit up his face, which she’d already decided was handsome enough for a highly effective recruiting poster. “Not leaving you here by yourself. Can you manage your things or do you need us to carry them?”

With a laugh she surveyed the men in front of her, each with his own rucksack. “I can manage, thank you. The rest of my stuff was in the cargo pod which hopefully landed okay a few hours ago.”

“We sent ours ahead on an earlier ship,” Jeff told her. He looked past her to the two businessmen. “You coming, gentlemen?”

“I suppose,” one said, running a hand over his sweaty face and sounding aggravated. “Really the service here is abysmal, Paulson. If we didn’t need the contract so badly?—”

“It wasn’t this bad last time we came through,” his companion said as if trying to make up for the first man’s brusque remark. “Probably a minor thing. Once we’re at the terminal we’ll be fine, Baird. We have plenty of time to make our first meeting.”

“After you,” the captain said to Melly, with a good humored expression and a sweeping gesture as if inviting her to a dance.

Feeling more lighthearted now she was taking action, Melly began walking. She speculated where exactly the men were going to stake their veterans’ acres claim and hoped it wouldn’t be too remote. She realized the group had formed up around her as if she was a celebrity they needed to protect as they proceeded. The two businessmen trailed behind, Baird huffing and puffing. She might have to give him medical attention by the time they reached the terminal. The thought reminded her of what she thought she’d seen beside the stationary cargo mover. She paused and looked in that direction again.

“Something wrong?” Jeff asked, coming to a halt beside her.

“I—I think maybe someone is on the ground next to the hauler over there,” she said, pointing. “You go ahead—I need to check on them.”

“We’ll go with you,” he said. “We’re in no rush and if the person does need attention, you may need help.”

Melly was relieved as she changed direction to approach the stopped vehicle, which was about a hundred yards away. The continued emptiness and silence were getting on her nerves and seemed quite eerie. You’ve watched one too many scary trideos ,

she thought to herself ruefully. During the long voyage out here she'd spent the time in her cabin catching up on all the past four years of entertainment available and binged a number of series she'd missed while in the organized chaos of medical school and her residency. There'd been no point in getting to know any of the other passengers—or so she'd thought, with a sideways glance at Jeff beside her. Randal Four wasn't a major destination and Melly hadn't expected anyone else to be debarking here.

“Samms, take point,” Jeff said to one of his men, startling her. “Check it out before the doc arrives.”

The soldier took off at a run, easily leaving them behind. Melly watched as he arrived at the side of the cargo hauler and bent to check on the person lying there. He rose to his feet, shaking his head and made a hand signal in their direction.

Jeff put his hand on her arm. “Samms says the man is dead. No need for us to go further.”

Annoyed, Melly shook herself free of his grip. “I'm the medical professional here. I appreciate your concern but I have to go see for myself. It's my duty.”

She gave him credit for not trying to dissuade her and sped up her pace. As she got closer to the cart, an errant breeze brought her a whiff of the unmistakable odor of death. Wishing she had a mask or other protective gear, Melly kept going anyway. In her peripheral vision she noticed Jeff and his men were now holding blasters as they moved with her. Where had they concealed those? Once she was close enough to the body she could see the terrible wounds and had to work hard to maintain her medical detachment.

“As if something tried to eat him,” Samms said as she stood next to him. “Been here a few days by the condition of the body, captain.”

“And no one came to help? Or to investigate?” Melly said, unable to believe what she was seeing.

“Don’t touch him, doc.” Jeff pulled her away a few feet. “We have no idea what happened.”

“I wouldn’t, not without protective equipment,” she said, a bit dazed. “But this is insane.”

“When was the last time you had contact with anyone on the planet?” Jeff asked.

“I exchanged messages with my parents right before we left the last planet. It costs too much to do a vidcom from the ship.” She blushed a little, embarrassed at revealing how tight her finances were.

“So about ten days?”

Nodding, she wondered what he was getting at.

“Someone’s coming now, captain.” The soldier named Cody pointed at the far distant terminal. “Quite a crowd.”

With relief, Melly turned in the direction of the buildings but her elation morphed into puzzlement. At this distance she couldn’t make out details but the large group of people headed their way seemed odd. The movements were jerky and the breeze carried the sounds of moaning and growling.

The two businessmen, who had continued on toward the terminal when Melly and her escorts veered off on their errand of mercy, stopped, staring at the oncoming mob. Suddenly both men threw their bags to the ground and broke into a run, rushing toward Melly and the soldiers. The crowd behind picked up their pace.

“What the seven hells?” she gasped.

Jeff grabbed her by the elbow. “Take cover behind the cargo hauler,” he ordered, dragging her with him.

His men moved smoothly to do as he’d commanded. “We can’t fight off that horde,” Zach said, although he took up a defensive position, aiming his weapon at the crowd. “Not with these weapons.”

Melly was fascinated and horrified by the mob headed their way. As they got closer, she could see more details, none of which made much sense. The people were wearing all kinds of clothing, much of it torn and stained with fluids she’d rather not think about. The ones in the lead had terrible injuries, bones sticking out, gaping wounds...things no one could survive, much less be sprinting across the landing field toward her and the men the way these people were. Their eyes were milky white and glowing in the late afternoon light. The leading edge of the horde was right on the heels of the fleeing businessmen and she gasped as Baird tripped on a seam of the pavement and fell. Paulson grabbed his elbow and got him to his feet but then screamed and began running again on his own, leaving his colleague behind. Baird staggered, took a horrified look at the mob and tried to run.

The first individuals reached him and what followed was gruesome. Jeff grabbed her and turned her away from the scene of carnage as the businessman was devoured by the crowd. “Don’t watch,” he said.

“We have to help him!” Her protest was muffled against his chest.

“He’s beyond anyone’s help now.” Jeff moved her toward the cargo hauler and thrust her into the passenger seat. “Can you shoot?”

He was holding a blaster in front of her and Melly grabbed it. “I learned as a kid but-”

“Head shots,” Jeff said, raising his voice to address them all. “Knees otherwise. Trent, get the damn boxcar train loose—we’ve got to get the seven hells out of here.”

Cody jumped into the vehicle beside her, fumbling with the controls. The engine initiated a bit lazily and he revved the power into a shrill whine, which seemed to excite the crowd, who moved away from their recent victim and surged toward the soldiers and Melly.

“We’re loose,” Jeff shouted. “Get us going as fast as this thing will move. Head toward the cargo storage building over there.”

Cody engaged the drive and the cargo hauler lurched into motion. Melly saw there was one baggage cart still attached, which the other soldiers had climbed onto. They were shooting into the mob and she saw bodies fall each time the bolts lanced outward but to her horror, unless the shot had been to the head, the creatures continued crawling toward their prey with grim determination. Paulson the other businessman was running to catch up and one of the soldiers gave him a hand at the last second, heaving him onto the cart where he collapsed in a heaving mess.

The hauler wasn’t built to go at a high speed although clearly Cody was squeezing every ounce of propulsion possible out of the engine. They were managing to stay ahead of the fastest members of the horde but Melly was terrified how close the creatures were getting. The noise of their growling and moaning, mixed with the buzz of the blasters was intense. Her adrenaline was racing and she took as many shots as she could. Jeff was right—if hit anywhere but the head, the injury had little to no effect on their pursuers. A few fell from her erratic shots and she fought down nausea at what was happening.

And why wasn’t anyone coming to help them?

“It’s gonna be close,” Jeff yelled from his position on the cart behind the hauler. “Pull

right up to the doors. We'll use the hauler as cover while we get the door open."

Cody did as ordered, nearly toppling the cargo hauler over with the violence of his turn. He parked with the passenger side to the building's door and Melly needed no order to scramble out of her seat and clear the way for him to clamber to dubious safety. Jeff grabbed her, placing her behind him. The leading edge of the horde reached the cargo hauler and seemed baffled how to get at the people trapped behind it. Melly had an instant of relief but then the crowd behind the frontrunners pushed and shoved them and individuals began spilling around the sides of the hauler and the single boxcar, while others climbed over and through. The soldiers kept up a solid barrage of blaster fire but she knew it was only a matter of seconds before they'd be overwhelmed. She took shots where she could, peering out from behind the captain to do so.

The wall behind her gave way and before she could think, she'd been shoved into the building so hard she fell. Rising shakily to her feet she twisted to see the door closing as Jeff and the soldiers fended off their attackers. When the portal slammed shut with a thud, she drew a shaky breath. Words failed her as she stared at her companions.

Page 2

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CHAPTER TWO

Jeff was already in motion. “Clear the building,” he said to Zach and Cody who nodded and took off at a run, weapons ready. “We’d better burn these.” The captain and Samms aimed their blasters at a few severed arms which the door had cut off as it inexorably closed. Melly closed her eyes and tried to control her nausea. Sure she was a doctor and used to sights and injuries a nonmedical person would find disgusting but this was so bizarre, so wrong on so many levels she was having a hard time coping.

“Are they people?” she asked, her voice more tremulous than she’d expected.

“Unknown,” Jeff answered crisply.

“Although I saw a few with spaceport badges,” Samms added.

Paulson the businessman struggled to his feet and he was clutching his arm, blood flowing sluggishly between his fingers. Instinctively Melly moved toward him before the captain blocked her progress.

“What happened?” he asked, holding his blaster in readiness, not quite aimed at Paulson but clearly ready to take action. “Did one of them bite you?”

“No, no,” the man protested hurriedly. “Just a scratch from when I got yanked onto the cargo hauler. There was a rough edge.”

“Let me see.” Jeff was implacable.

Melly glanced from him to Paulson and back. “He needs treatment. Let me?—”

The businessman rolled up his torn sleeve to reveal a nasty jagged gash, from which the blood was leaking. Wincing she said, “That must have hurt. You need skin sealant.”

“So much going on I barely noticed,” he said, seeming a bit calmer. “I’d be grateful if you could help me, doc.”

“Must be a first aid kit in here somewhere,” Jeff said.

“I travel with a medkit,” she answered, feeling relieved to be able to take a helpful action. Melly offered Jeff the borrowed blaster. “Thanks for the loaner.”

He waved it away. “Keep it. We’re not done with the problem here.”

The pounding on the door and the muffled sounds of their pursuers emphasized his words. She licked her lips and studied the door. “Will it hold? Will they go away?”

“Door seems sturdy enough,” he answered. “I’m hoping they’ll forget about us and wander off. Intelligence seems to be in short supply in that bunch.”

“Leaving a feral instinct to pursue and kill,” she said with a shiver. Pulling the medkit out of her backpack she gestured to Paulson. “There’s a chair over there where I can work on the wound more efficiently.”

Jeff held her in place as the man nodded and headed for the chair. “Protective equipment, doc, and be careful, okay?”

She studied his face, trying to assess what exactly he was trying to tell her. Lowering her voice, she leaned closer. “You think he was close enough to them to catch

whatever they have? But we were all close to them out there. If he's sick, then we all are. If it's an airborne illness we're all at risk."

"None of us got scratched," he answered. "Even if it wasn't done to him by the infected, we don't know what happened here or how they got this way. I'm simply saying watch yourself." Raising his head he snapped an order at Samms. "Go with her and keep an eye on the guy."

Unsettled, Melly took her kit and went to treat Paulson. While she cleansed the wound, treated it with antibiotics and sealed it up, part of her mind was thinking over what she'd seen outside and wondering how seemingly ordinary people could become those mindless killers. Surely it was localized to the spaceport. Maybe the whole place was quarantined and someone forgot to warn off the robo dropship in time. Just our bad luck. But then why didn't anyone come to their assistance? She tried not to think about her family, hoping their house in the suburbs was far enough away from this mess for them to be safe.

"All done," she said, moving away from Paulson and running the decontamination ray over her gloved hands. Carefully she stripped off the gloves and ran the ray again. Better safe than sorry. She'd given him an inject as well, for various potential infections or issues. "I'll check the dressing tomorrow if we're still here and we haven't gotten help."

"Thanks, doc." Paulson leaned back in the chair and closed his eyes. "I think I'm going to stay right here and try to relax."

When she stretched to get the kinks out of her back, she saw the other soldiers had rejoined Jeff and there was an intense discussion going on. Her first priority was getting in touch with her family. Now the adrenaline of the arrival at the warehouse and then patching up her patient was subsiding, she felt lightheaded and shaky so she perched on a stack of boxes and got out her handheld. The unit was powered up and

active but no matter what she did, she couldn't connect to the planetary network. There was a private net in the subdivision where her parents lived and she managed to link to it but she couldn't be sure her message was actually sent. She had no pending messages, not even a welcome home text although they'd known the date of her arrival, if not the exact time.

Figuring she needed to know whatever the soldiers might have learned, she walked over to join them, Paulson on her heels. Jeff welcomed her with a tight grin. "The building is secure and safe enough for now. Zach and Cody found another two of those walking infected locked in an office upstairs and took care of the problem. All the exits are locked and blocked as best we can do." Glancing at the handheld as she stuck it in her pocket, he asked, "You get anything?"

"Planetary network seems to be down," she said with a sigh. "Outages happen occasionally if there's a big enough storm somewhere but there are supposed to be backups. I sent my folks a message on the neighborhood's net but no answer yet. I have to get home to check on them as soon as possible." Rubbing her arms, Melly checked out the large expanse, filled with endless rows of cargo pods neatly lined up. "What are we going to do now?"

"Stay put and try to find out more about what we've landed in the middle of. There'll be a sentry on overwatch on the roof at all times, keeping an eye on the crowd. Trent is up there now." His answer was crisp. "We aren't getting anything on our coms either. Our next move is trying to find our cargo pods."

"Why?" she asked, trying to imagine what good ranching gear would do them in the current situation.

"We have a few useful items in there," he said with a wink, seeming amused.

"What can I do to help?" Melly figured sitting and brooding would only leave her

more frightened than she already was.

"A woman of action—I like it." His tone was teasing. "Can you scrounge through the offices and the employee breakroom on the second floor and see what you can find in the way of food and water? My guys did a basic sweep but they weren't foraging. Anything else you think might be useful."

The idea of going off alone in the building wasn't appealing but she'd volunteered, hadn't she? Knowing the soldiers had killed two of the infected trapped inside made her nervous. Where there had been two there could be more. Touching the butt of the blaster he'd given her, she swallowed hard. "Sure, I can do that. You think we're going to be here long enough to need extra rations?"

"At least tonight and possibly tomorrow. I'm thinking it may be safest to move at night but we have to gather more intel. The situation here is so weird the last thing I'm going to do is rush out blindly. If we can find our stuff, we'll be able to do recon and reduce the likelihood of nasty surprises."

Melly wasn't sure how exactly he expected to conduct reconnaissance of the area with anything from his cargo and she wasn't too pleased at the idea of being cooped up in this glorified warehouse for so long but she couldn't argue about the danger outside. "Maybe someone will come to help."

"We can certainly hope." Although Jeff smiled, she had the sense he didn't share her optimism.

"It can't be the whole planet affected—it must be local. We just have to let the authorities know we're here. What about the cargo master's office? Could we call out from there?"

"Samms will be working on the issue and other things. He's our coms and systems

expert.”

Realizing she was trying to tell the man how to do the job he was trained for and experienced in, while she was only a civilian, Melly bit her lip. “All right, I’ll go on my treasure hunt now. Listen, thanks for getting me here safely. I don’t know what would have happened to me if I hadn’t landed in the same shuttle with you and your men.” I’d have ended up like poor Baird out there. The thought made her nauseous.

“I’m glad we were here to help.” Studying her more closely, he frowned and touched her elbow. “You doing okay, doc? You look pale. I can have one of my men conduct the search and you can rest.”

Time to toughen up again and pull her weight. Melly straightened her spine and pulled the blaster from its place at her waistband. “I’m fine. I’ll start in the Cargo Master’s office.”

“We have two days’ worth of survival rations in our go bags,” he said, “So anything you scrounge up will be helpful.”

“You carry food around?” she laughed, thinking about what was edible in her backpack. Nothing but snacks and candy, none of which were good for her, which she knew as a doctor, but she craved them anyway.

He shrugged. “Gotta be ready for anything, even whatever the seven hells this is we’ve landed in the middle of.”

Melly couldn’t think of an answer to the undeniable truth so she headed to the cargo master’s office, where she found Samms already seated at the desk, working on bringing the systems online. “I’ll try not to disturb you,” she said, opening file cabinet doors beside the desk. A half full cup of synthcaff sat on the edge of the desk and a bunch of data disks lay scattered on the floor as if knocked over by someone’s

elbow, leaving in a hurry. She was sure Samms hadn't done it.

"No problem." He didn't even glance up from what he was doing.

"We're lucky the building still has power." Melly could tell he wasn't in the mood for idle conversation but when she was nervous or anxious she liked to talk. Finding a small stash of bottled water, she realized she was going to need a way to carry whatever she found on this assignment of hers.

"It's on emergency power," Samms said as she moved to leave the office. "Has been for days evidently."

When she turned to stare at him, his blank face scared her a little. Melly realized she'd been taking the lights and power completely for granted. "Not—not the planetary grid?"

Shaking his head, he directed his attention to the keyboard and controls again. "Solar panels on the roof feeding this with a backup generator in the building somewhere. Captain'll have to get Zach working on that to keep it running. Indications are it's badly overheating."

Not sure what to do with the information, she continued on her way to grab and empty her backpack, then searched for Jeff. She found him and three of his men out in the cargo storage rooms, moving methodically through the stacks of containers waiting to be distributed across the continent. She supposed the shipments might never happen now, depending how widespread the problem was. In here she could tell the building was on emergency power and the light was dimmer and there were many dark spots. "Can't find your stuff?" she asked as she came up behind Jeff.

He straightened and grimaced. "If Samms can get the systems up and running, he can pinpoint it for me but in the meantime we're reduced to good old fashioned eyeballs

on the shipping labels. Got nothing better to do with our free time. Done with your scrounging already?”

“No, barely got started actually,” she said holding up the backpack. “But Samms said we’re on emergency power and you need to check the generator because it’s running hot.”

He touched a spot right behind his ear. “Thanks but he’s already reported the issue. We have subaural com implants linking us all together. Not as good as telepathy but I’ll take it.”

“Oh, of course.” Now Melly was awash in embarrassment. Trying to tell them how to do their job again.

“You didn’t know,” he said kindly. “And I’d always rather have too much communication than not enough. Not much experience with us military types then?”

Thinking over her years in the MidSectors at school and then her residency as a doctor, Melly couldn’t remember a single time she’d ever had a soldier as a patient. “Only in adventure trideos,” she said finally.

“We’ll try to live up to the public relations-created image.” Jeff flashed her a tired grin. Leaning closer, he added, “The trideo industry takes a lot of liberties with the truth.”

“I’m sure but I’m grateful for everything you’ve done since we landed. I’ve got no complaints.” Blushing, she left the cargo area and went to the office to gather the water. This time she didn’t bother Samms, who was head down and concentrating on the coms. She thought he might be listening to a news broadcast but figured it would be better not to disturb him.

The second floor employee locker room presented a challenge as the individual receptacles were of course locked, except for one or two with open doors, contents in a mess, as if the owners had grabbed items in a hurry and fled. She hoped they were okay and safe somewhere. Using the blaster at a low setting she sprang the locks on the rest of the containers and found a few packaged snacks, another sealed water bottle and a couple of warm jackets which she set aside for later. Nights on Randal Four got pretty cold at this season and she didn't have anything warm in her backpack or her cargo pod. She worried whether her parents had picked that up as planned when it arrived but thinking about her family brought tears to her eyes again and ramped up her anxiety.

Going through the lockers had made her tense. Poking around in other people's belongings was stressful and she expected to have the rightful owners arrive unexpectedly and accuse her of being a thief. When this is all over I can find a way to repay them for anything we use. The idea didn't bring much comfort though.

The employee breakroom was a chaotic mess, with one table overturned completely, rotting food and dishes on the floor in a puddle of spilled drinks. The other tables had partially eaten sandwiches and other signs of a meal violently interrupted. Stepping carefully she worked her way through the mess and investigated the stasis keeper, finding it running on the emergency power but close to empty. She decided to leave what was in there for now and make a note for later. The vending robo was about three quarters full with chips, candy and the like, including a few packets of nuts, so she used the blaster to open it. As Melly was loading the booty into her backpack, Cody appeared in the doorway, blaster at the ready.

"You okay?" he said, scanning the room. "The captain sent me to check once we heard the blaster buzz."

"I'm fine," she said, both pleased Jeff was concerned for her and embarrassed not to have realized how the sound of the weapon firing would carry.

“Need help?”

“Sure, I found a lot of good stuff up here.” Melly had been loading the items into another bag she’d found in a locker and she handed him that one. “I’ve checked all the rooms.”

“We found our containers,” Zach said as they descended the stairs in single file. “Captain’s pretty happy right now.”

Jeff himself greeted her as she hopped off the last step. Taking her bag, he said, “Looks like you had a good scavenging expedition up there. Everything ok?”

“Eerie. Spooky,” she said with a shiver. “Like all the employees left in a big rush. My mind is working overtime visualizing what it must have been like. I wonder what happened to all of them.”

“Concentrate on us and our situation,” he advised. “You’re just in time because Samms has found information he wants us to see.”

She walked with him to the cargo master’s office, Cody trailing behind them and found Trent waiting with Samms.

“It’s not good, captain,” the soldier said as soon as she and Jeff arrived. “I managed to tap into one news station still broadcasting.”

“Show me,” the captain said, leaning over his shoulder but making sure Melly could see the holo pad as well.

An empty set came up, with the network’s name and symbol emblazoned on a back wall behind the desk where the anchors should have been. She exclaimed in disappointment. “This doesn’t tell us much, does it? Where are the newscasters?”

“Good question.” Samms gave her a tight nod of approval.

“Exactly. We can infer, however, the place is abandoned in a hurry because otherwise the feed would have been turned off by someone or there’d be a broadcast,” Jeff added.

“Is that a blood stain on the floor?” Melly asked, pointing at the edge of the holo.

“Sure looks like it.” Samms adjusted the feed and she could see the pool of dried blood more clearly. An arm lay stretched out at the edge but the rest of the body, if there was one, couldn’t be seen. “This isn’t all,” Samms said. “Once I was in, I managed to hack the stored stream. Let me share it chronologically from the first mention of major trouble I found.”

Suddenly the space filled with a holo of a standard duo of cheerful news anchors, a man and a woman obviously finishing up talking about a story on a local arts festival, which she remembered would have occurred about two months ago. The woman gazed at them—at the holo camera—and said, “There’s a new flu virus this year which seems to have some unusual symptoms and a high mortality rate. Doctors are expressing concern but so far the outbreak is localized to the western territories. Better get the annual inject from your medcenter this week just in case though. It’s free of charge.”

The pair then went into their banter for the end of the program and Samms closed the holo, only to open another.

“Flu?” Melly said, doing a doubletake while he was fiddling with the controls. “Whatever happened to those people outside was no flu virus. I don’t understand.”

Jeff touched her arm and she stopped talking to listen to the next holo clip Samms was showing them.

The same two anchors were back, slightly less perky than before. By the date at the corner of the holo, Melly calculated about two weeks had gone by. “Planetary authorities state there’s no cause for concern about the Western Flu,” said the woman newscaster. “Sporadic outbreaks in other areas are to be expected but the new travel guidelines should keep spread to a minimum outside the territories. Doctors remind us not to try to treat this flu by yourself at home so if you or a family member starts feeling sick, go at once to the nearest medical facility.” She smiled at the camera, although it seemed a bit strained to Melly. “Drink lots of fluids and remember varnaberry juice is the old wives’ remedy for anything that ails you.”

The male anchor chimed in with banter about his mother making him drink the bitter juice as a kid and then the duo moved on to the next story.

Again Samms worked his magic and brought up a new clip. This time the woman was alone at the news desk and she was visibly tired, with circles under her eyes the makeup wasn’t hiding. Her voice was scratchy and a bit hoarse and Melly noticed her hands shook. “The Western flu is spreading in the three major cities now and a shelter in place order is in effect as well as a curfew. If someone you know becomes ill do not attempt to care for them. Call the comlink at the bottom of the screen and report the case. First responders will be sent to pick them up for transport to a medical facility.” She swallowed hard and stared straight at them. “Symptoms of the flu include high fever, muscle aches and in some cases violent reactions to the presence of other people. I repeat, don’t try treating this at home, folks.”

The next clip was of a woman Melly hadn’t seen before, young and nervous, reading a prepared statement. “I repeat do not leave your current location for any reason. If a person in your location is ill, use the comlink at the bottom of the holo to report the case and then put them outside for the first responders to pick up. Western flu has been proven to have a nearly 95% mortality rate and if scratched or bitten by a victim, you will catch it. The virus is not air borne at this time. Obey any orders you may be given by the police or the military and do not interfere with official actions in

your vicinity. Planetary authorities expect to have the outbreak under control soon and the top scientists are working on a cure. Stay tuned to this station for updates.”

“I think she was sick,” Melly said. “Did you see the bandage on her arm? And how the sweat was rolling off her face?”

“And then the next thing is the empty set,” Samms said, restoring the original broadcast. After a moment the holo flickered and disappeared. “Looks like the station lost power. Must have been on emergency generators the way we are here. I searched on flu and these are the results I got. There may be other broadcasts about this issue we’ve missed but I think you get the essence, right, captain?”

“Well done, soldier.”

Thinking out loud, Melly heard the horror in her own voice. “95% mortality rate can’t be right. There are only a few diseases known to humans with that kind of deathrate and none of them present with symptoms of this type. And then why are all those people outside walking around? Is that what the victims are at the final stage? Medically, none of this makes much sense.” Another thought occurred to her. “Why did the authorities let the Solar Flower land us here then? The whole planet should have been quarantined. And why aren’t there Sectors medships and troops here to help?”

“All excellent questions,” Jeff said, obviously exchanging silent communication with his men. “Certainly at the beginning of the outbreak I can imagine the authorities not wanting to alert the Sectors, who have been known to deal harshly with mysterious illnesses arising. But as things progressed over the two months and your people here obviously lost control of the situation, there should have been an emergency warn off and certainly a call for help to the nearest Sectors Hub.”

“We can’t do an interstellar broadcast from here,” Samms added. “Don’t have the

right equipment. Maybe if we went to the spaceport control tower?—"

"Right in the middle of all those things," Zach interrupted him with disgust.

"Our next step is to eat," Jeff said. "We can chow down on whatever Dr. Jericho found for us here and save the survival rations for another day. Then we'll get back to sorting through our gear and you can go check on your patient, all right, doc?"

She wondered why the captain didn't want Paulson to eat with them but otherwise had no objection to the plan. Melly spread out the more or less fresh food she'd harvested from the rooms upstairs and they managed to make an odd but filling meal from the bits and pieces. There was even synthcaff to wash the food down, brewed on a machine in the cargo master's office. One man was missing, up on the roof doing overwatch but food was set aside for him.

As soon as she was done eating, Melly brushed crumbs from her hands and went to get the medkit. "I'll check on my patient now and see if he's hungry yet."

"Cody, go with her," Jeff said.

Although she thought the captain was being overcautious, Melly didn't protest having an armed escort. Her nerves were on edge and the empty building was creepy, with shadows and odd sounds at every turn. She made her way to the small office where Paulson was lying on chair cushions on the floor. He was asleep, snoring loudly and didn't stir as she and the soldier entered the office. Melly was surprised to see her patient sweating profusely yet deathly pale. She knelt beside the cushions and gently removed the bandages but Paulson didn't even stir. She recoiled and Cody swore as the wound was revealed, now swollen and angry red with ominous jagged black streaks fanning out on both sides.

"Doc, move away from him," Cody ordered, grabbing her shoulder. "Now."

Stumbling, she rose to her feet with his help and took a few steps backward as Jeff and Trent rushed in. The captain shifted her behind him. “Thinking he lied to us about how he got the scratch. You ever seen a wound deteriorate like that before, doc?”

“Never. This is not how blood poisoning or sepsis as its technically known, presents.” She was having a hard time maintaining her professional demeanor. “What are we going to do? I’ll administer more antibiotic cream and give him another inject but then what?”

“Tie him up,” Jeff ordered his soldiers. “I have a really bad feeling our businessman friend here is going to become into one of those things and we don’t need him on the loose when he does. Once he’s immobilized, we’ll put him in the cage for high value items since it has a lock.” He looked over his shoulder at Melly. “Once my guys have him in a safe condition, you can try your meds but I’m pretty sure it won’t do any good. I hate to waste the supplies but since he’s our first up close and personal encounter with this supposed flu, we’ll give him the benefit of the doubt.”

Melly was relieved she wasn’t going to have to argue with the captain about giving Paulson medical care. She couldn’t in good conscience walk away from him without trying every remedy at her disposal, not that she was well equipped. “I appreciate the choice.”

“I’m sure the hospitals here on Randal Four must have tried everything you’ve got in your tiny kit and more, with no results apparently but we may as well see what can be done,” Jeff said.

The soldiers had barely gotten Paulson bound hand and foot before his eyes snapped open. Melly stifled a scream as she saw the milky white, glowing orbs where normal human eyes should have been. He didn’t struggle as he was carried to the small, secure enclosure Jeff had spoken of and she spoke to her patient in reassuring tones,

telling him what she was going to do to further treat his wound. He kept his focus on her the whole time, which made her highly uneasy. Jeff and the soldiers stood by while she treated him.

When she finished rebandaging the wound, forcing herself to take her time, Melly wished she hadn't eaten so much dinner. The black streaks were spreading over his body even as she watched and he was becoming more and more like the horde outside had been. She took a deep breath once he was locked away. "And if he turns?"

"We end his misery. Permanently." Jeff's tone was uncompromising.

"I-I don't think I have anything in this medkit that will end a life," she said, struggling with the idea.

Shaking his head, the captain said, "I wouldn't let you close enough to him to do an inject, if he turns all the way, which I'm damn sure he's going to, sorry to say. I know you hate to lose a patient, doc, but this is beyond the norm. We'll take care of things, don't worry, and we'll be as humane about it as we can be. The guy wouldn't want to live as one of those things outside, I'm sure."

There wasn't anything else to be said so Melly walked away, eyes watering. Earlier in the day this poor man had been fine, thinking about whatever the subject of his business trip was, and now he was well on the way to becoming a murderous killer. She hadn't been able to help him at all except perhaps for some comfort in the early stages, while she was tending his wound initially. Not what I went into medicine for.

"Why don't you go lie down on the couch in the cargo masters private conference room?" Jeff suggested from behind her. "We're not leaving this facility tonight and you need your rest for when we do make a sortie. We'll have to move fast."

“I have to get to my family,” she said, pausing so she could pin him with a firm gaze and emphasize her declaration. “If my parents and my brother sheltered in place like the broadcast said, then I’m sure they’re fine but I need to be there.”

“We’ll get you home, I promise. But we may have to go roundaboutly. Have patience with us, okay, doc?” Jeff studied her face for a moment. “Promise me you won’t try to go off on your own.”

“I won’t. I’m not delusional about my chances out there on my own. I’d be a goner already, like Baird and Paulson if I hadn’t been lucky enough to land with your group.” There being nothing more to say, she made a side trip to grab a couple of the jackets she’d found and retrieved from the lockers and went to the small conference room. The couch was leather and not very comfortable but the day had been so grueling she was exhausted and being able to lie down was a luxury. She used one jacket for a pillow and covered herself with the other, making sure her blaster was close at hand. If the infected got into the building somehow they’d have to get past Jeff and the others to reach her but she didn’t want to be defenseless.

It was gallant of the captain to give her the only couch but she smiled at the thought of any of the tall, well-built soldiers trying to rest on this piece of furniture. It was barely long enough for her.

Drowsy, she realized belatedly she should have offered to take a shift as a sentry on the roof. Jeff will come get me if they need me. Or if anything happens. I probably won’t sleep long anyway.

CHAPTER THREE

Jeff paused for a long time in the doorway to the little conference room, watching Melly sleep peacefully. He was glad she was getting a respite from the stress they'd all been under. She'd been a trooper, for a civilian, kept her head, shot a few infected, gave Paulson compassionate care. Although he wished he and his men had arrived on Randal Four sooner because perhaps they'd have been able to do something to help with the outbreak, he thanked the Lords of Space he'd been here to save Melly. It didn't hurt that she was a beautiful woman either. There was definitely a mutual interest between the two of them, despite the chaotic situation. Shaking his head at his thoughts, he retreated from the door quietly and headed for the next stop on his inspection tour.

As he climbed the stairs to the roof, he hoped Melly was right about her family making it through the outbreak unharmed. He'd like nothing better than to arrive at her home and find everyone there healthy and ready to move out under his protection. Realistically though, he figured her relatives had probably succumbed to the virus like 95% of their fellow citizens. Reaching her home was going to be a hard moment for the doctor and he pledged to himself to be there for her. He wanted to protect her from any and all threats, physical and emotional. It was unlike him to become attached to anyone while he was in the midst of a mission. Honestly, he'd never had a deep attachment to any woman before. The nature of his life, going on constant, unpredictable deployments deep in enemy territory, precluded maintaining a successful relationship, no matter how hard the two people tried. Maybe now he was better situated to be a good partner. Scoffing at himself, he had to chuckle. Right, being in the middle of a mass outbreak, with most of the planet's population turned into some kind of flesh-eating monsters trying to kill him and his men and the lady he

was attracted to was surely a better setting for romance than his previous life. Kidding yourself, Pearson. Well, see how things develop and in the meantime exert every effort to keep the doc alive and well.

For all you know she has a hometown sweetheart.

He doubted it since she'd mentioned her family numerous times but never spoke of anyone else. And frankly at the moment Jeff was prepared to face any obstacle to his desire to get to know her better, even an old boyfriend. Melly was a keeper, a woman worth fighting for.

Opening the door to the roof, he forced his mind away from the woman sleeping two floors below and stepped onto the gritty surface. Zach had his blast rifle trained on the doorway and lifted the muzzle in silent salute. Cody ignored him, busy coordinating his flock of tiny airborne drones, currently fanning out over the area to gather intel.

"Anything significant yet?" Jeff asked as he joined them, keeping his voice low. "Any movement from the direction of the terminal?"

"There were a few lone individuals stumbling around outside," Zach reported, "But once the sun went down they settled in one spot and stayed there. Most of the horde are clustered together inside the spaceport."

"Inserting drones there now, captain," Cody said.

"Show me."

Four miniature holos sprang up on the roof, arrayed in a half circle in front of Cody. Jeff knew he had many more of the tiny robos activated and flying to gather intel, but these were the most relevant to his immediate request. The holos showed the crowd

of infected standing inside, in clumps, not moving, not making sound. “Night seems to calm them,” he observed. “Any of your flock at the control tower yet?”

“Ascending the staircase now.” Two more holos activated, displaying the shadowy area in which the robos were flying, rising floor after floor toward the highest point in the spaceport, which was the control tower.

Cody kept one going upward but had the other linger over a dead body sprawled on a landing. “Seen a lot of corpses, sir.”

“So not everyone turns when bitten or scratched,” Jeff said, adding the fact to his small store of knowledge on the outbreak. “I’m assuming most do, however, given the size of the mob.”

Cody had the second drone rush to catch up with the first and a moment later the duo arrived at the top floor and the entry to the tower. The door gaped wide open and when the drones entered the room, lights on to illuminate the scene, Jeff saw a scene of utter destruction. The chairs were overturned, consoles were broken with components strewn all over the floor and there were no bodies. “Find the primary interstellar coms unit and let’s see if we have any hope of broadcasting an alert to the Sectors.”

As the drones moved through the large room, Jeff said, “Hard to tell if the damage was done by the infected or if there was an attack.”

“Yeah, leaves a lot of questions open, doesn’t it, sir.” Cody agreed with his assessment.

Now the robos hovered above a particularly damaged console. Clearly there was no hope of sending any kind of com from this station.

“Interesting. Now why would the infected, who appear to be mindless, make such a deliberate effort to destroy the ability to talk to ships or to the Sectors?” Jeff rubbed his chin. The questions being raised by this reconnaissance mission bothered him. “Can we set an automatic warn off beacon?”

“Maybe. My drones have limited field capability,” Cody reminded him. “They’re made to observe, not touch.”

For the next few minutes there was silence as Cody concentrated on directing his drones to circle within the control room, searching for the warn off beacon, which should be a completely separate console with safeguards to prevent any accidental triggering of the device. Jeff watched intently as the robos hovered, directing their lights at the controls. “No joy, sir. Not finding a likely panel. I’d need combat drones to tear the place apart, and we didn’t bring any.”

“I’m kicking myself for not insisting,” Jeff replied. “We’re going to have to get up there and find and trigger the damn beacon manually.”

“Are you serious, sir?” Both of his men gave him incredulous looks.

“Is there a way to access the tower without going through the main area where the infected are gathered?” Despite the knot in his gut, Jeff kept his calm demeanor. This had to be done. No more defenseless passengers dropped onto the landing pad unawares, to take their chances with the infected. Activating the beacon would also send a signal to the nearest Sectors hub and eventually would be investigated. It was the best he could do at the moment, barring any other method of interstellar communication. His team had planned to communicate externally using the planet’s own com systems, which was now impossible, at least from this facility. “I’ll do it myself with one volunteer. Tonight.”

“Hells, you know we’ll all volunteer to go with you, sir.”

“You need to keep gathering intel with the drones, Cody, and you’re on overwatch, Zach. I’ll take Trent if he volunteers.”

“Or gets voluntold,” Zach said with a grin.

“Sound seems to activate the infected,” Cody said, glancing up from his concentration on the holos. “One of my drones made it to the city outskirts and caught a small group of them standing around like mannequins, like the ones here at the terminal, and then a dog barked and they came to life and ran and crawled off after the dog. Don’t think they caught it though. I tracked them with one drone as long as I could and the dog seems to have crossed a stream and then gone to ground. These fuckers definitely don’t like running water. Swept a couple of them right off their feet and downstream. No ability to swim.”

“Another good data point. I’ll want a full sitrep when I get back. I’ll stay in touch with the subaural com if I can while we’re out there.” Jeff nodded and headed to the stairs again, anxious to be on his way to the control tower, carry out his mission and return to the relative safety of the cargo building before dawn. The timing would be tight.

He and Trent geared up and exited the cargo warehouse from a side door, which his men unblocked long enough to allow the two of them to slip outside. The landing pads stretched endlessly before them in the moons’ light, empty. Way off in the distance Jeff could make out two or three of the infected standing rigidly. He nudged Trent to make sure he was aware as well and then they moved out at a trot toward the terminal and the control tower at the west end. They’d secured all their gear tightly to prevent the slightest noise and he hoped their thudding footsteps wouldn’t be enough to alert the horde. They’d taken the precaution of wrapping their feet in rags to help absorb the sound which was the best that could be done.

After ten spine tingling minutes completely out in the open, with nothing to take

cover behind if the mob did attack, Jeff and Trent reached the base of the tower. The door gaped open, the interior a dark and ominous hole, although his night vision had been enhanced by the military many years ago in one of their ever-ongoing experiments to make Sectors' fighting men more lethal.

Nothing alive in the tower, Cody said in his ear on the subaural com. Clear to the control deck.

Exchanging a hand signal with Trent, Jeff took point and stepped into the gloom of the tower. He wished they dared to close the door behind them but he was afraid of the noise. This level was offices and conference rooms, with a large lobby. The entire place was trashed and torn up, as if a riot had occurred here. As he made his way toward the staircase, he took note of a few bodies. The stench was powerful but he kept his focus on the mission.

Jeff slipped into the staircase and advanced carefully, weapon at the ready. Although Cody had assured Jeff his drones found nothing alive in the tower nasty surprises were known to happen in combat situations. The control deck was five floors up and the door to the landing stood open, like the others had been.

Still taking point Jeff walked inside the large room and he and Trent did a rapid recon. Any idea where the damn beacon is? He asked Cody over the com.

I didn't spot it when I did the initial fly through. It would be original equipment though, so probably on an interior, load bearing wall?

They moved as one to the most probable area and split up to search. Each colony was required to have a warn off alarm from the moment the settlers landed on their new planet. The Sectors had had a lot of sad experiences with colonies trying to establish themselves on promising new worlds, only to learn there were hidden dangers. It was rare for an older colony such as this one to need the planetary quarantine alarm

although disease outbreaks had been known to occur before. Jeff straightened his back and surveyed the chaos of the usually orderly control chamber. Not on this scale, he thought, returning to his task.

Help me move a console, sir, Trent said over the com. I found a power lead disappearing behind a set of cabinets that definitely don't require power.

Joining Trent, Jeff winced at the thought of trying to move the furniture without making noise. Any activity in the terminal? He asked Cody.

All quiet was the reassuring answer although the situation could change in the blink of an eye.

Slinging their weapons, he and Trent got a grip on the corners of the first cabinet and shifted it out of the way with a minimum of noise. As he got a glimpse at the now clear wall space, Jeff thought the soldier was right – the warn off alarm would be here. The substantial power feed continued on behind the second, smaller cabinet and there was extremely faded writing on the wall with an arrow pointing in that direction.

Idiots, burying their mandatory alarm setup. Overconfident civilian fools. His feelings toward the long-gone people who had been administering the spaceport and those in charge of the colony weren't friendly. He and Trent didn't need to be out here risking their asses to take care of something the authorities clearly should have done weeks ago. And the task shouldn't have been so complicated either. Remove the cover, slap the button and move on. But no, we're damn moving men today.

As they moved the second cabinet, one of the doors swung open and a set of mugs spilled out onto the floor. Jeff watched in silent horror as the cups rolled on the carpet and had just heaved a sigh of relief when a glass mug fell, landing on one of the heavier clay ones and shattering with a loud crack that echoed in the chamber.

Hold! Cody's command was instant.

Jeff and Trent froze, holding the cabinet suspended in midair.

Whatever you did woke a couple of the infected up, Cody reported urgently. Don't make any more noise and let's see if they quiet down.

The next few minutes were the longest of Jeff's life as he and Trent maintained their grip on the piece of furniture, afraid to risk setting it down with the infected stirring. He decided they had to take the chance and complete the job.

As the cabinet touched the carpet, Cody gave them the all clear. Okay, situation nominal inside the terminal again. Clear to proceed.

With a grin Jeff acknowledged the comment and knelt to examine the alarm they'd now uncovered. The red button was under a locked, clear plastiglass cover, so dusty he could barely see it. He tugged at the latch but the cover was locked. He dug a multitool out of one of his pants' pockets and picked the lock, mentally swearing at the delay. Trent took the cover from his hand and set it aside on the rug. There was a small control panel next to the red button but for his first attempt Jeff ignored the pad. The alarm was supposed to be so easy to use that any of the colonists could trigger it – a tradeoff between security and the need for the Sectors to be warned of impending dire problems. The button refused to depress but the control pad lit up. A couple of the buttons remained dark.

I don't have time for fucking games, he thought savagely. All Special Forces operators had a code which was supposed to grant access to any and everything in the Sectors and he punched it in now, forcing himself not to bang the keys. A light flashed in his eyes and the word DENIED glowed in the air.

This isn't good, Trent said.

Tell me about it. Can you disconnect the power to the damn keypad?

Give me room and a few minutes.

They shifted positions and Trent went to work on the power input.

Be sure you don't disconnect the alarm itself, Jeff said even though his man was a top operator. We don't want this trip to be for nothing.

There was a quiet little click and the keypad's lights went out. Have some trust, sir, Trent said reproachfully.

AUXILIARY MODE flashed in the air in big yellow letters. SENIOR COLONY AUTHORITY REQUIRED TO ACTIVATE.

Yeah, I bet if I push this big juicy red button now the alarm is going to kick in regardless, like it's meant to do. Taking a deep breath, Jeff exchanged looks with Trent and then pushed the button, which yielded to the pressure of his gloved finger. Green lights sprang up all around the red button.

Sir, I'm tracking a signal going out now , Samms said over the com. A general warn off.

"Activated," said a loud female voice.

A shrieking alarm sounded in the empty chamber.

Jeff and Trent recoiled.

Oh you've done it now, sir, Cody said over the com, urgency in his voice. The mob is awake and on the move in your direction. You ain't gonna be able to get down the

stairs and out the door in time. You two gotta move now.

Jeff could hear the moaning and growling of the infected growing closer. He shot out the nearest two speakers set into the wall, which diminished the sound of the alarm considerably. Trent moved away to disable a few others and then joined him at the huge window overlooking the landing pads. Jeff shot out the glass, which exploded as his blaster beam struck it. He and Trent took a few running steps and made it through the shattered framework and onto the tiny ledge outside.

“Here goes nothing,” Jeff said and stepped into thin air, Trent at his side.

They each had a personal antigrav unit attached to their boots and floated in midair, moving slowly away from the tower. Jeff wished they’d packed full on combat mode antigrav units but no one had foreseen the need for such serious equipment when they were gearing up to come to Randal Four to run a ranch. The unit he was using now would get him some distance from the tower and land him on the ground, after which he and Trent would run like hell.

Trent was right next to him as the gradual descent began.

Jeff risked a glance back at the tower and saw a wave of the infected plunge through the broken window, heedless of the wounds they took from the shattered glass and jagged metal and then plunge five stories to the ground. Despite the broken bones and other injuries the individuals took from hitting the pavement, the wrecked corpses struggled to follow them. More infected continued to fall from the ledge high above.

The pavement was coming closer and closer so Jeff prepared himself for landing. As his boots struck the firm surface, he was already running, Trent at his shoulder.

Better pour on the afterburner, Cody advised over the com, his voice tight. The ones falling out of the tower now are cushioned by the infected who fell first and they’re

going to be on your tail in a minute or two. Some of them can move pretty fast.

Coming in hot, Jeff said, twisting to shoot an infected who was coming at them from the left in a lumbering run. The infected, dressed in a torn and badly stained mechanic's uniform, must have been one of the solitary individuals already outside.

We'll be ready for you, sir.

He and Trent were both in excellent physical condition but he'd never run so hard in his life before. The horde of infected moved faster than he'd remembered from the day before and shots went arcing over his head as one of his men stood sniper watch on the roof of the cargo warehouse. He was nearly bowled over by a pair of infected women, who clawed and grabbed at him as he ran. Trent killed one with a knife through the skull and Jeff managed to shoot the other under the chin with his blaster but the encounter slowed them down and as he sprinted again, the question beat in his brain whether he'd been scratched. With his adrenaline pumping right now he didn't feel any pain.

The door of the warehouse opened partially. Cody was waving them on even as more sniper fire took care of the closest infected. Jeff fired a knee high barrage of blaster fire at the wave of predators coming for them and when they fell, literally cut off at the knees, the ones behind them tripped and became tangled. More were coming, however, from an angle where his impromptu barricade wouldn't affect them. Trent made it through the open door with Jeff on his heels and the slam of the closing portal was the sweetest sound he'd ever heard.

There were muffled bangs and pounding as the first wave of the infected reached the wall.

"Will it hold?" he asked, rising from his knees.

“Reinforcing the portal now,” Zach replied.

Samms clattered down the stairs from the roof and ran to help. Jeff wasn’t able to take a deep breath until the four of them dragged more crates and random pieces of machinery over to block the portal and prevent it from being breached.

He turned to see Melly standing there, watching, eyes wide in disbelief. “You went out there?”

“Our first duty is to protect the Sectors,” he said. “We took an oath. I had to activate the warn off alarm before anyone else lands here.”

“Will someone come to help now then?” she asked, hope stirring in her voice.

He hated to ruin her mood but shook his head. “Randal Four is pretty remote and not too consequential in the galactic scheme of things. Eventually the report will reach the right people and a task force will be sent but it’s not likely to be any time soon. We’re on our own, doc.” Setting his weapon aside, he triggered a control on his body armor and the gauntlets protecting his arms and legs fell away from his body, condensing themselves into neat black cubes. Beside him, Trent was going through the same routine. Jeff shrugged out of his shirt and unfastened his pants as soon as he had his boots off.

“What—what are you doing?” Melly asked, eyes wide.

“Either or both of us might have gotten bitten or scratched out there,” Jeff said, more calmly than he felt. "It got pretty intense toward the end."

"But you had your armor on," she protested.

He shook his head. “Even so. The risk to all of us is too great. If we’ve become

infected, then my guys know what to do. We can't take a chance on any of us turning."

When he was wearing nothing but his skivvies, Jeff said with a wry grin, "I know you're a doctor so you've seen it all but you haven't seen all of me or Trent here, doc. Fair warning, you're about to."

Surprising him, she stepped closer with a deeply serious expression on her face. "No, you're right it's a good precaution. We need to be thinking about these things now, as insane as it sounds. I'll do the visual inspection for you both."

Jeff spread his arms and widened his stance. He wished he was getting naked with the doc under other circumstances and not in front of four other men but deep inside he wanted the reassurance he hadn't gotten infected. Paulson's gruesome transition was fresh in his memory. The corpse still lay upstairs because after putting the man out of his misery with one shot to the head, Jeff had refused to let anyone touch the body. "We'll be leaving tomorrow night. We can deal with the smell till then," he'd said.

Completely in professional mode, Melly did a body check, not touching him. He had a hard time controlling his cock, which was convinced this was time to celebrate, being almost skin to skin with her.

"You're clear," she said, moving over to do the same check on Trent.

Relief mixed with jealousy. He really didn't like the idea of her being so up close and personal with his teammate, despite the necessity for the exam. And what the seven hells is the sudden possessiveness about? We're in a life-or-death situation here and I barely know the woman. Dressing in fresh clothes as fast as he could, Jeff berated himself for the way he was feeling toward Melly but she certainly was a special woman.

Trent received his passing grade and clearly embarrassed, he grabbed the fresh set of utilities Zach handed him and stepped away to dress with a mumbled “Thanks, doc.”

“The body armor was effective then,” Cody said, breaking an awkward silence.

“I wish we had full battle suits,” Jeff replied. “And combat antigrav lifts and about a ton of other gear no one expected us to need on this peaceful little planet.”

“Gotta make do with what we have,” Zac said philosophically.

“I’d better go check on Paulson,” Melly said.

Jeff caught her elbow and kept his voice soft. “He’s not there anymore, doc. He turned completely around midnight and I dealt with it. Body’s still upstairs though—I’m not risking having anyone touch it.”

Plainly taken aback by the news, Melly chewed her lip before saying, “I’m not a pathologist and I don’t have the proper equipment here but I can do a limited postmortem on the body if you want. Anything we learn might be helpful.”

“Much as I appreciate the offer, I’m going to say no. We can’t risk you and no offense but I’m sure the authorities had the best medical minds on the planet working on the problem before everything went to the seven hells.” She opened her mouth clearly intending to protest so he added, “I know you want to help but you’re the only doctor we have—maybe the only one on the entire planet—and I have to keep you safe. Trent is a combat medic with a ton of experience but he’s not a doctor.”

She nodded, eyes downcast. “What’s the plan then?”

“You should get more shuteye while you can. It’s still night.”

“I’m too keyed up to sleep and I hate sitting and waiting.”

“You’d hate being in the military then,” Zach said with a chuckle. “It’s always hurry up and wait.” He took his blast rifle and headed up the stairs to the roof again.

“We’re staying here through the daylight hours,” Jeff said. “Cody found out the infected tend to be more active, roaming around during the day. We’ll be leaving after sunset and heading into the city. Our first destination is the central police complex, which I calculate we can reach in one night’s march.” He gave her a smile. “Even with our favorite civilian.”

Melly poked at his statement a bit, and he wondered if she had suspicions the soldiers were very much on active duty of some sort. “Aren’t we all civilians technically? You’re retired, remember?”

Now wasn’t the time to have a discussion of their exact mission status, even if he’d wanted to open the Pandora’s box. “Sure didn’t feel like it tonight, not out there.”

“Why the police headquarters? Are there other survivors there?”

Jeff bitterly regretted the necessity to dash her hopes. “We haven’t seen any but it was probably one of the last places to hold out and I’m hoping there will be valuable intel there on the course of the outbreak and if anyone on the planet is safe. We’ll need an eventual destination to aim for.”

“My parents?—”

“Yes, your place is currently on my list as our second stop. I gave you my word. Unless circumstances change drastically. There’s another thing I want at police HQ and that’s armored transportation. It appears from our drone surveillance the Planetary Guard sent at least a few units into the city to render aid and there are

vehicles we can use parked at HQ.”

“Why don’t we take a groundcar or two from the spaceport parking lot?” she asked, clearly puzzled. “Why do we have to walk for miles and take all these risks?”

“You missed the holos from the drones Cody sent over there but the parking lot and the freeway beyond are a mess. Groundcars crashed all over the place—there’s no way to drive through the congestion unless we had a tank and maybe not even then.” He hoped his next remarks would project more confidence than he felt. She’d been stalwart so far but how much more could she take? “We’ll be okay heading for police HQ on foot tonight. We know enough about the infected now to take the right precautions and Cody will do recon with his drones as we go. Am I happy about the need for the hike? No, but the risks are acceptable. Staying here isn’t an option. There’s no help coming and we’ll run out of food and water eventually. We need to stay mobile.”

“All right, I’m convinced.” She grinned. “Do you have a set of handy battle armor to fit me?”

Relieved she was getting with the program, he nodded. “Actually yes, we do. It’s lightweight but effective. What I need you to do today is go through your cargo container and pull out the things you want or need to take with us.”

“Did you find my stuff?” Excitement flared in her eyes and she stared past him to the large cargo holding area as if she wanted to dive into unpacking immediately.

“We did. I made it a priority right after our own gear. We won’t be coming back here so if there’s anything you absolutely have to have, take it but remember we need to be able to move fast so nothing heavy. Whatever medical gear or supplies you have I can portion out amongst the five of us but your personal effects are your own to lug on the march.” He glanced at her pretty but not terribly sturdy sandals. “If you have a

pair of walking shoes, grab those.”

Brow wrinkled in a frown, Melly protested. “But surely I’ll be able to come back here for the rest of my things eventually, once this is all over.”

“From what we saw in the drone holos, the outbreak devastated the planet. Remember the newscast said 95% mortality rate. And then once the infected turned into those things outside, they killed anyone who’d survived who couldn’t run fast enough. We think we may have spotted one survivor moving through the city but we’re not sure.”

“One person out of all the millions?” Tears glimmered in her hazel eyes and he wanted to take her in his arms and offer comfort but restrained the impulse. Before she could say anything, she flicked away the droplets on her eyelashes and straightened resolutely. “Well I’m sure we’ll find others, including my family. Makes sense no one would linger in the city with all this going on. I did tell you my house is in the suburbs, right?”

Was she being deliberately blind to reality? Jeff hated to burst her bubble but he couldn’t let her continue to be so overly optimistic. Before he could utter the words, she glared at him and held up one hand. “Don’t” she said in a commanding, no nonsense tone. “Don’t give me any pessimistic military opinions. My family are survivors, you’ll see. I need to have hope to get through this, do you understand?”

“Got it, doc. Whatever it takes. Just be prepared for what we may find when we get there. May I show you where your cargo container is now?”

Melly made a regal gesture for him to precede her into the actual warehouse, which he did.

CHAPTER FOUR

How in the seven hells am I supposed to narrow all this down to one measly backpack? Hands on her hips, Melly surveyed the piles of clothing and personal items spread out around her. The small amount of medical supplies and instruments she'd packed were in a stack off to the side, since Jeff had promised he and the men would handle those. She'd thought she'd packed a pretty minimal amount of possessions when leaving the planet where she'd done her residency at a busy MidSectors hospital, because interstellar shipping rates, even on a cheap freighter, were astronomical, but it was surprising how many keepsakes, books and other items she had. Pretty much all of those had to stay behind, although she did tuck one holo cube into the bottom corner of the backpack. The cube held reminders of her friends from medical school and her residency and those holos were a reassuring reminder of normal life someplace else than this stricken planet. Her hiking boots were a necessity, as well as the thick socks. She picked a few favorite tee shirts and two pairs of jeans and tossed in underwear, going for practicality, although she did defiantly add one set of lacy underthings. The garments took up next to no room and Melly felt the need to keep her feminine frilly side alive.

Thoughts of the captain crossed her mind. The man was built, muscles on muscles, and even though he'd kept his briefs on during the full body inspection after the sortie to the control tower, the garment hadn't hidden much of what he had to offer a woman. Jeff was a large man everywhere. This is so inappropriate — we're literally fighting for our lives here and I'm thinking about going to bed with him. Mind on the task at hand, girl!

Munching on a survival ration, Melly took a break, sitting on a handy container and

allowing herself to daydream a little. Certainly in the normal course of things she would have made sure he had her com number—if he was interested, which she thought he definitely was—and she'd have found out where the veterans' ranch was located. They probably would have dated and eventually fallen into either his bed or hers. Jeff Pearson was catnip and pretty close to what Melly fantasized about in private moments. Only better because he was real.

And in the middle of an apocalypse with her.

With a snort, she brought herself back to reality. Not to say there's no possibility of anything developing between us despite the situation, but other things have to be the priority.

Melly was reaching to take the lingerie out of the backpack when Jeff's voice came over her shoulder, causing her to startle.

"Doing okay with the packing. Doc?"

Blushing she dropped the bra and panties into the pack, hoping he hadn't seen them, and turned to face him. "It's challenging to winnow all my worldly goods to fit one backpack but I'm trying."

He glanced past her at the piles of clothes and other items laid out in neat stacks. "I guess we're so used to traveling light I didn't think it'd be so hard for you. Those the medical supplies?"

"Yes. I wish now I'd brought more but of course I was going to be working at the general hospital here in the city and they'll have everything." Remembering the current situation, she revised her statement ruefully. "Or they did."

"Remember to pack a few pairs of good socks," he said as he made a rapid

assessment of the rest of her choices. “I’ll send Zach over to pick up the med stuff. We’re doing a mission briefing in the conference room in half an hour and I’d like you to be there.”

“Of course, anything you want but why?”

“I think this will go better if you have the full picture on where we’re going and the route and so forth,” he said. “You’re part of the team for this mission, doc, so we’ve got to keep you up to speed.”

“Makes sense. I appreciate it.”

“Of course.” He left the area without commenting further.

Melly made quick work of packing the rest of her backpack and threw everything else into the cargo container, sealing it with a grimace. She had a hard time accepting the idea she’d never be able to reclaim the rest of her belongings. Despite the news holos she’d seen, she had a mental block against accepting the situation period. In her mind the city was right outside the spaceport gates, civilization running as it normally did. Her parents had to be frantic, wondering if she’d arrived and where she was. Melly tried the com again but the transmission failed, even using the neighborhood net.

“Captain’s about ready to begin the briefing, doc,” Zach said, bending to pick up most of the medical gear and supplies. “Best head on up to the conference room.”

Standing on the cold windy rooftop in the darkness, Melly swallowed hard and tried to quell the butterflies in her gut. At the briefing in the afternoon the whole exfiltration plan had sounded fine. Leave from the rooftop, quick march across the landing fields to the perimeter of the spaceport, hike into the city...but now, waiting to jump into the inky darkness, she was terrified. She flexed her arms, getting accustomed to the feel of the ultrathin battle armor which she’d been given. The same

shielding covered her legs as well. If anyone had told her a week ago she'd be about to jump off a roof, wearing pieces of high tech armor and carrying a blaster, she'd have thought they were insane.

"Ready?" Jeff stood in front of her and his men were lined up, waiting for the word to move out.

She wanted to tell them to go ahead without her. She'd stay here until things returned to normal and she could be rescued but she knew that was impossible and the captain wouldn't allow her to remain behind anyway. With a nod, she said. "As ready as I'll ever be."

Is the subaural com we gave you working?

His voice in her head was intimate and reassuring. Yes, she answered, glad she'd practiced with the unfamiliar device during the long afternoon waiting for this moment.

Remember no talking from here on out, okay, doc?

Her knees were shaking and she was afraid she was going to be sick if she stood here much longer. Can we get it over with?

He took her hand and led her to the precarious edge of the rooftop where he picked her up and took a step off into the void. She bit her lip until it bled so she wouldn't shriek as it seemed the antigrav wasn't going to hold them up but then Jeff managed to adjust the rate of drop and glided away from the cargo warehouse. The five soldiers were deployed in a circle with them at the center, descending smoothly. Zach was towing an antigrav sled loaded with gear and supplies.

The jar of landing knocked her off balance since she'd closed her eyes and burrowed

her head against the captain's warm chest. He kept his arms around her for a long moment after their muffled boots hit the pavement. Doing all right? You handled the drop like a veteran.

Melly was sure she'd done no such thing but she appreciated his effort to keep her spirits up. I'm fine. We'd better move out.

The soldiers had already settled into a formation, with Cody at the point position and Zach handling the rearguard assignment. Silently they headed across the landing field, moving like wraiths. Melly wished she was as smooth. She was afraid her footsteps were too loud and the night vision lenses Jeff had given her created an unsettling vista which was disorienting and giving her a headache. She was strongly considering taking them off.

No motion in the terminal , Cody reported. So far so good . Couple of lurkers up ahead .

Recalculate our route two degrees to the west , the captain ordered crisply. He took her elbow to steer her in the direction he wanted them to go.

Melly had her blaster and she clenched her hand tightly on the butt of the weapon as she moved. It wouldn't do much good if the entire horde came at them. Being out here completely exposed was unnerving and she was eager to leave the spaceport and enter territory where there were places to hide. The captain had ordered Cody to show her a few of his drone holos earlier so she could see what they were up against and why they couldn't steal a vehicle here at the spaceport. As he'd explained to her, the parking lot and the freeway were a mess of crashed groundcars and trucks. Some were smoldering. Many appeared to have infected trapped inside and solo lurkers wandered everywhere.

Clear to the fence line, Cody said.

Glancing ahead Melly wondered how he managed to direct all the tiny drones, absorb and report their feedback and function. She'd have to ask Jeff when they reached their first destination. These soldiers were at a whole other level than anyone else she'd ever encountered. She knew the team was among the elite of the Sectors armed forces and considered herself lucky beyond belief they'd arrived at the same time she did.

By the time she arrived at the sonic fence surrounding the spaceport, Cody and Samms had already worked their techno magic to take down an entire section. How is it running if all the power is cut? she asked.

Emergency generators maybe. The strength is less than a quarter of normal, Samms told her.

She was through the gap in the fence in a moment and the group moved out again, following a little used frontage road. Even here there were crashed groundcars as well as others which had simply been abandoned, doors wide open, Jeff reminded them to keep a sharp eye out for infected. At one point she crossed a freeway bridge as she marched along in the formation and glanced over the edge. Stopping in her tracks, she barely remembered not to speak out loud. What a mess. A huge groundtruck had jackknifed, causing a major pileup, which now consisted of a blob of melted metal and scorched roadway. Groundcars were crashed into it and each other, while traffic, which had obviously stopped for the accident was eerily silent. Nothing moved in the scene of chaos except for several infected, shambling along the lines of cars. Melly didn't see any people anywhere although the night vision showed her a number of corpses strewn around the site. The question of why not everyone turned into the mindless infected once bitten bothered her.

Anyone caught there who didn't get out immediately didn't stand a chance. Jeff's assessment was crisp and he nudged her gently to get her to begin walking again.

Eventually she reached a point where there was a clear view of the city. Normally bright with lights and bustling with activity in the air and on the ground, the skyline was dark for the most part. A number of buildings seemed to be glowing and she realized with horror they were burning.

No more fire department. No more first responders at all.

Imagining what it must have been like to be trapped in an apartment or an office high up in one of the burning skyscrapers, with the infected everywhere. Melly got tears in her eyes. Her father worked downtown but only had to spend a few days a month in the office. Mostly he worked from home and she assured herself he wouldn't have gone to the office during an outbreak. He was a cautious man, always anticipating disasters and preparing himself and his family for them. It had been a family joke for years but now she was glad. As she continued marching forward with her soldier companions Melly prayed to the Lords of Space her parents and brother were safe at home. And let us get there before too much more time passes.

Now they were entering a more urban area, leaving behind the industrial buildings, warehouses and businesses like groundcar repair. This area was more upscale, with shops and restaurants scattered among large multistory condo style residences. The soldiers were in single file, with her in the middle of the line, Jeff right behind her. Here there was the same chaos of the crashed groundcars, but there were also decomposing bodies on the street and sidewalk, many with horrific injuries. Unable to help, she averted her gaze and kept moving. Her boots crunched on broken glass and she glanced up to find she was passing a major commerce hub. High end electronics littered the sidewalk and the road, clothing with tags attached fluttered in the night breeze and she saw the glint of jewelry here and there, as if dropped as the thief fled.

Why would anyone loot a store like this in the middle of an outbreak? She expressed her astonishment over the comlink. I can see maybe going after food, if the logistics

systems all broke down but there isn't even any power. Why steal a holo player?

Society breaks down in different ways, Jeff replied mildly. This probably occurred fairly early in the outbreak, before the infected were so prevalent but after the spreading illness caused an overload on the first responders. The power might have been on at this point — we have no way of knowing. Doc?

Surprised at the change in his tone she hesitated. Yes?

I know this is your home world and the situation is hard for you but less sightseeing would be good right now, okay?

Annoyed at herself because of course he was right, she felt her cheeks growing hot and she hastened to catch up with the soldiers. Sorry.

Twenty or thirty infected a street over, Cody reported a few minutes later. Mesmerized by a fire.

Damn, we need to go in that direction. Jeff was plainly irritated at the new obstacle. We'll go two blocks further and then cut over.

Melly thought she was in good physical shape but she was already feeling the strain of all the walking in her calves and thighs. She didn't want to ask for a break though. She wanted to get as far away as possible from the infected in the vicinity. Time enough later to sit and rest a bit and drink some water. As they finally made the turn to go east as Jeff wanted, she was distracted by a stray cat which erupted from the building she was passing and ran under her feet. Instinctively she screamed as she fell, landing on a stacked pile of looted goods, which toppled into the street with a crash. Melly lost her balance and fell to her knees with a painful thump.

Jeff yanked her to her feet at the same moment as Cody said, That did it. The sound

has attracted their attention. We need to run, lady and gentlemen.

The captain kept his iron grip on her arm, drawing her with him as he sprinted through a side street, his men in a loose formation around them. Behind her she could hear the moaning and growling of the horde growing louder. Zach fired a long blast into the front line of the shambling creatures before rushing to keep up with the others.

Another group ahead, sir. We're going to be cut off and surrounded.

Not missing a beat, Jeff turned into an alley which took them in a direction perpendicular to the two approaching groups of infected. Milly had a terrible stitch in her side and was breathing in huge gasps when she came to the end of the alley, which was closed off by a barred gate. "We'll be trapped," she said in a panic, glancing behind her to see the first infected swarming into the mouth of the alley.

Cutting through the lock now, Trent said.

The rusty gate swung open with a screeching sound that seemed to inflame the infected into moving faster. Jeff shoved Melly through, two of the soldiers at his back. Weld it shut .

A blaster sizzled and she checked behind her to see the wave of infected slam into the barrier, their eyes glowing, reaching clawed hands through the bars. More were piling up behind.

Won't last long, sir, Trent reported. The weight of the crowd behind is going to force it open eventually.

We go up, Jeff said.

At the end of the alley there was a large container for trash and Zach and Cody were already standing on the closed lid. it. As Melly ran toward them, she saw Zach make the leap to catch the edge of a hanging ladder fire escape above them and draw himself up to safety. Cody joined him and both men pivoted to face the alley.

“I—I can’t climb that,” she said in between gasping breaths when she arrived at the trash container. “It’s too tall.”

“No problem.” Before she knew what he was doing, Jeff left her side, leaping to the top of the bin and reaching back for her. Trent boosted her into the captain’s grasp and she got her footing on the top of the shifting container with a gasp. Big hands spanning her waist, Jeff lifted her and literally threw her in the direction of Zach and Cody above, who caught her hands as if she was a circus aerial performer and yanked her onto the small balcony with them.

“Climb as if your life depends on it,” Cody said, pushing her in the direction of a rickety ladder attached to the side of the building. Head for the roof. We’ll be right behind you .

Jeff and the other two soldiers plainly couldn’t get onto the balcony where she stood unless she moved. There wasn’t room for extra people. The three men stood on the trash container lid and fired at the oncoming horde of infected. Cody and Zach added their firepower from above. No matter how many of the infected the barrage mowed down, more came from behind, scrambling awkwardly over their fallen comrades in their mindless resolve to get at the living prey in front of them.

Convinced she was abandoning Jeff and the others and hating the necessity to follow orders rather than stand and fight beside them, Melly scrambled up the ladder as rapidly as she could, praying the rusty fastenings weren’t going to come out of the wall and plummet the ladder and her into the crowd below. The rungs vibrated under her hands as one of the soldiers began to climb and she tried to redouble her pace.

Terror gave her strength. She wished the antigrav units could lift them all to safety but as Jeff had explained to her, the devices were for controlled descent only, lacking the impeller which would allow free flight. Cursing whoever decided not to give the veterans the top of the line equipment, she kept climbing. Finally she reached the roof and maneuvered herself over the lip of the facade, sprawling on the surface beyond like a boneless sea creature. Her legs were jelly and her arms felt paralyzed. She rolled onto her back, gasping.

Cody who'd been climbing behind her was first to arrive and wordlessly he tugged her out of the way so the next man could climb to safety. Melly leaned against the utility vent where he'd left her and tried to control her racing pulse. She struggled to get to her feet, desperate to know if Jeff and others were okay. Evading Cody's outstretched hand, she went to the parapet and leaned over, relieved to find the captain and the other two soldiers well on their way to the roof. The infected had reached the tiny balcony, climbing on the pile of bodies but didn't seem to understand how to climb a ladder.

"You all right?" Jeff came straight to her, taking her by the arm and pulling her away from the edge.

"I'm so sorry," she said, tears streaming from her eyes as emotion flooded through her body. "It's all my fault for making the noise when I fell over the damn cat."

"The important thing is we're all okay and in a relatively safe place. Live to fight another day and all the associated inspirational talk." He grinned. "You'll do better next time. We had it rigorously trained into us how to stay silent at all times—I know you're doing your best for us, doc." He wrapped his arms around her and Melly relaxed into the warmth of his hug for a long moment.

"What next?" she asked eventually, beginning to be a bit embarrassed to be soaking up so much of Jeff's attention, although he didn't seem the least bit bothered by it.

He allowed her to step away, although he remained close. “Already on it. I sent Cody and Trent into the building to see if there’s a place we can rest up through tomorrow. You stay up here with Zach on overwatch until we know the place is clear of infected. If he tells you to do something, don’t hesitate, all right?”

She nodded. “I promise. But I thought you wanted to get further into the city tonight.”

“Until the mob of infected below wanders off it’d be much too dangerous to exit, even on the other side of the building. These seemed to move faster than the ones at the spaceport, did you notice?”

“I was so busy running, jumping and climbing, I didn’t notice much at all,” she said honestly.

“I’m wondering if some of these are smarter than the others and also if the older they get the faster they move, which seems counterintuitive but we can’t take anything for granted. Or maybe we’re looking at variations in what the virus produces when it takes over a body. The whole game changes if the infected suddenly get smarter and faster.”

Melly shivered and glanced at the parapet. “The infected aren’t climbing the ladder, are they?”

“No but I’m having the guys cut the ladder loose in case an infected smarter than the others figures it out.”

“Ready, sir?” Cody stood behind them.

“Yeah, let’s go.” He gave Melly a chin lift and the two soldiers headed for the access door to enter the building, which stood open. “Close this behind us, okay, doc?”

She did as he asked, although she felt as if she was trapping them inside the building with whatever was there, then joined Zach at the edge where he stood guard.

The infected milled aimlessly below. “None of them have left yet, have they?” she asked, trying to do a rapid count.

“Doesn’t look like it, ma’am. I’m walking the perimeter to keep an eye on all sides.” He took a few steps. “If you want to stay here and keep an eye on them, that’d be a help.”

“Anything I can do is fine with me.” She settled into a more comfortable position and watched the horde at ground level. Melly thought it was a good time to gather more details about how the predators behaved but the longer she stared at them, the more she felt she was being watched herself. Finally she focused on an individual standing away from the others, further back in the alley. The man had his neck craned, glowing eyes staring up at her. At first she thought she was imagining it but the infected didn’t waver from his stance. She asked Zach to come render his opinion next time he passed her part of the roof and he agreed it was eerie.

“Do you know him?” the soldier asked. “Maybe he’s got dim memories left.”

The idea was repulsive but Melly forced herself to study the infected as best she could with her night vision lenses. To her knowledge she’d never seen him before.

She jumped a foot when Jeff touched her shoulder. “Whoa, take it easy, doc, it’s just me, ready to invite you inside to see what we found. What’s got you spooked?”

“She thinks one of the infected is fixated on her,” Zach answered before Melly could say anything. The soldier pointed to the alley, where the man could still be seen.

“Easy enough to solve.” Jeff raised his pulse rifle, sighted and took one shot in sniper

mode. The infected's head exploded as the energy bolt struck and he collapsed bonelessly to the pavement. "No more creepy admirer."

"Thanks." Melly was a little shocked by the quick execution but the way the infected had been watching her had given her chills. She decided she was okay with Jeff's decision. "So did you find a safe place for us to hole up today?" she asked as the captain escorted her to the roof access.

"The building is mostly deserted," he said, holding the door for her. "A few infected trapped in apartments here and there—you can tell by the moans and the banging on the doors—but they can't get out. Good thing the virus makes them so stupid they forget how to open doors. And one or two alone aren't enough to break through the nice solid doors the residents have in this fancy building. We blocked off all access to the top floor, which is one huge penthouse condo. No one home but us."

"What if some of the uninfected people are trapped in their apartments too?" she asked as she descended a short staircase in Jeff's wake. "Shouldn't we check to see if we can help anyone?"

CHAPTER FIVE

“A lready done, doc, which is what inspired the trapped infected to make noise. I’ll rescue anyone we come across who wants to be rescued but it’s not looking good currently for finding uninfected survivors.” He opened the next door and made a gesture for her to precede him into the hallway beyond. “But what we did find is pretty exceptional.”

At the end of a short corridor there was an elaborate wooden double door with a burned out lock, which Jeff opened for her and Melly walked into what seemed like a dream. It was a gorgeous living room, with one whole wall consisting of floor to ceiling windows giving a spectacular view of the city. The furniture and objects of art scattered tastefully around made her feel as if she was in a trideo about homes of the generational billionaires and the art on the walls was undoubtedly priceless. A formal dining room was off to the left.

“Whoever lived here was way above my pay grade,” Jeff said as she stepped further inside, lost in her awe at the surroundings. “I’m sure the owners won’t mind if we use this as our safe harbor for the night.”

“How—how does this place have power?” she asked, realizing the lights were on.

“Not sure but my guess is the building has an emergency backup generator. The rich go to great lengths to avoid being inconvenienced.” As if he was a tour guide touting the amenities of a spa, he added, “Better yet, the water is running and there’s plenty of hot water if you want to grab a shower. Freshen up. Do what women do to feel better—you sure earned the downtime after today. No telling when you may get the

chance again with the way things are on the planet.”

A little dazed at the change in his tone as well as the topic, she stared at him. “Are you kidding?”

Forehead furrowed in a frown, he said, “Doc, I promise you complete privacy. We put your things in the master bedroom and it has its own bathroom fit for a queen. The guys and I will bed down in the guest bedrooms. After you’re done we’ll take turn rinsing off in the other bathroom.”

Trent burst out of the kitchen with a small container in his hand. “This guy has real Terran coffee! Not the cheap synth stuff but real-from-Old-Earth coffee. More than one flavor. I’m so having a gallon of this.”

“Are we—are we safe enough for me to risk a shower?” she asked, realizing he’d misinterpreted her misgiving. She wasn’t worried about him or his men intruding on her privacy. “You’re sure there aren’t any infected in this penthouse or loose in the building?” The idea of being trapped in the shower by infected predators was horrifying. She wasn’t sure she could handle being so vulnerable, even with the soldiers right outside.

Jeff took her hand and drew her closer. “I give you my word we’ll be all right. We’ll keep a constant guard and an overwatch and at the first sign the infected might be threatening this building, we’ll be out of here. I do think we should avail ourselves of whatever amenities there are here while we can. Trust me, the owner isn’t going to show up and throw us out.”

“Or call the cops,” Trent added with a laugh.

“All right, you’ve convinced me.” She had all kinds of aches and pains from her fall earlier, not to mention the strenuous climbing and running she’d done and a hot

shower would loosen up those muscles.

“The kitchen stasis keepers are full too,” Trent said. “Three of the biggest units I ever saw. It’s like a grocery store. We’ll eat well tonight.”

Leading her to the closest white leather couch, Jeff urged her to sit. “I’ll help you get the battle armor off.”

“I appreciate that, thanks.” She sat patiently while he activated the controls and the armor retracted, falling away from her body and morphing into small cubes on the carpet. “It’s amazing how comfortable those are. I forgot I was wearing it.”

“A full battlesuit can be pretty cumbersome,” he said with amusement. “We didn’t bring any of those.”

“What were you going to use it for on a ranch?” she asked. “Or all those drones Cody flies around?”

He hesitated for an instant and an odd expression flickered across his face but it was gone before Melly could be positive. “You know herd beasts wander, get lost, fences get broken...we planned to use the drones to keep an eye on the remote parts of the spread, once we got up and running.”

She noticed he avoided the battle armor part of her question but decided to let it go. “All right, lead me to this magnificent bedroom.”

He escorted her out of the living room, past a library and an office, and opened a door into a sumptuous bedroom fit for royalty. Melly walked into the center of the expensive carpet and spun in a lazy circle. “Who lives like this? I’m going to have to think of it as a hotel to make myself comfortable. It’s all too much.”

“Whatever you need, doc. I’m sure if whoever owned this condo knew we were here and why, they’d be fine about it. You going to be okay?”

“I’m okay,” she said, taking her backpack off and setting it on the pristine bed where the scruffy old thing looked so wrong she immediately moved it to the floor instead.

“I’ll leave you to it then. If you need anything, use the com.” He closed the door behind him.

Melly took a deep breath, fighting her unease about taking up residence in a total stranger’s apartment. A filthy rich total stranger. There hadn’t been any personal items or holos in the living room and as she glanced around the bedroom, there were none here either. She saw an ornate holo base across the room on the bureau and tried to resist the urge to go turn it on and see if there was a picture of the unwitting host. Taking her boots off required time and then she unholstered her blaster and laid it aside. After shrugging out of her jacket and sweater, she wandered barefoot on the plush carpet into the bathroom and paused in astonishment. The fixtures were glittering gold and the sinks and tub were obviously high end genuine marble. A luxury label refresher booth occupied one nook and a walk-in shower was next to it. The tub was a glorious huge expanse which cried out for a long luxurious bubble bath but Melly wasn’t in the mood for decadence today. She wanted to scrub off, feel clean again and rejoin her companions. Being alone was scary right now. As a compromise she decided on the shower.

The cabinets opened readily to her touch, revealing washcloths and towels thick enough to serve as bathmats and enough high end products to stock a boutique. She recognized the names but had never aspired to use anything but the cheap shampoo and other care items available in the hospital commissary. She’d had no budget for expensive designer branded goods.

Melly went to retrieve her toothbrush and hairbrush and paused once more, staring at

the holo base. “Oh what the hell.” She stalked across the room and triggered the control. Immediately she wished she hadn’t. A smiling family of five sprang up in the holo field, two parents, two small boys and a baby girl, judging by the whimsical bow in her hair. Melly slammed the off button. “Maybe you weren’t even here,” she said fiercely. “Maybe this is a temporary residence when you’re in town.” After all, there’d been no personal items, much less signs of children or a baby in the rooms she’d seen so far. The condo appeared to have been freshly cleaned relatively recently and not touched since. “I hope you all got out of town safely,” she whispered as she finished undressing

As she padded into the bathroom, clutching her brushes, Melly had to work hard not to think about her own parents and her brother. She’d been keeping up a brave front for Jeff and the others, insisting her family had to be safe at home, but the scope of the disaster was plainly so huge, she had to admit they might not be, which sent a crushing pain through her chest.

Melly adjusted the water to the warmth she preferred and let the pulsating stream loosen the tension in her muscles. There were several large bruises coming up from where she’d fallen earlier. She washed her hair and conditioned it, taking Jeff’s words to heart that they had no idea when there might be another opportunity to enjoy a thorough shower. After bathing with a miracle soap so replenishing it left her skin silky, she leaned her head against the cool tile wall and sobbed, unable to hold back her emotions any longer. Ever since they’d set off across the landing field and the first horde of infected came after them she’d been bottling up the terror and grief deep inside and trying to get through the ordeal and on to the next challenge, trying to be as little trouble as possible for the soldiers. Surely they didn’t really welcome having to babysit a civilian in this dangerous new world they’d landed in, even if she was a doctor. All her skill and training were to no avail against the virus creating the infected.

Her knees buckled and she slid to the floor of the shower, weeping and abandoning

the effort to hold herself together.

Jeff was growing concerned at how long Melly had been absent from the group. “I’m going to check on her, make sure she’s all right,” he said finally, finishing the last ounce or so of the excellent coffee and getting to his feet. “She took quite a fall there and we put her through a lot today.”

His soldiers held their tongues although he was sure the men had all kinds of razzing remarks they could have made. It was no doubt abundantly apparent to them how interested he was in Dr. Jericho, pretty much from the moment he’d arrived on the planet. As he walked down the hall, he wished these were normal times, when a man could flirt, invite a woman out to dinner, get to know her and then eventually wind up in the bedroom. Instead he had to rescue Melly from hordes of slaving infected and make her run for her life.

Not an auspicious start.

As he got closer to the bedroom he thought he heard weeping. Speeding up he rushed into the bedroom and then into the bathroom where he found Melly curled up in the shower, lost in tears, water pouring down on her. Grabbing one of the huge bath towels, he picked her up and wrapped her in the soft cotton, murmuring soothing comments as he did so. He carried her into the bedroom, choosing to sit in one of the big wingback chairs instead of on the bed and holding her in his lap.

He had no experience with weeping women but it tore at his heart to see her in such despair. “What’s the matter, doc? You can tell me—no judgment here. You’ve had a rough few days.”

She turned her tear-stained face to him. “I’m s-sorry. I don’t know what came over me but it just became too much. And then I couldn’t stop crying.”

“Doc, I totally get it. You’ve been under a huge strain and then today was a lot of pure adrenaline. You’re crashing and it’s perfectly natural. Hell, you should know the physiology involved better than I do—you’re the doctor here.” He made his voice teasing and got a small smile as a reward. Unable to resist, he lowered his face to hers and brushed a kiss across her lips. “You’ve done a great job so far, Dr. Jericho.”

She loosened the towel he had her wrapped in, flashing him a glimpse of her generous breasts and looped her arms around his neck, drawing him close for another, longer kiss. Her tongue traced the seam of his lips and he opened to give her the access she sought. His arousal lengthened and hardened as the woman he’d thought so much about for the past two days kissed him enthusiastically. The fact she was naked under the towel had him hot and hungry but he retained enough control to pull back. Smoothing her wet hair away from her face, he said softly, “Are you sure you want to do this? I mean, it’s an emotional moment, lotta adrenaline surging...I don’t want to take advantage of you.”

Melly stared at him and Jeff was lost in the depths of her beautiful hazel eyes. “Would you have asked me out if there hadn’t been this whole infected outbreak situation?”

“Of course. Never doubt that for a moment. I wasn’t leaving the spaceport without your number. I would have followed up.”

“And we would have taken a while to get to this point, right?” She pulled at the hem of his tee shirt.

“You’re a woman to be wined and dined and carefully wooed,” he said, helping her remove the shirt, which was damp after rescuing her from the shower.

“I would have said yes, to the first date and all the others to follow,” she said, kissing his now bare chest and running her hand over his abs to dip below the belt, where his

cock throbbed, aching for her touch. “Could we both die tomorrow if we get surrounded by the infected?”

“You know I’ll defend you to my last breath,” he said, having a little trouble breathing as she wrapped her hand around his shaft.

“But we could die, right?” Head tilted, she challenged him, holding him in a tight grip which made him want to grind himself against her. He used all his dwindling willpower to resist the urge.

“My men and I’ll work hard to be sure that doesn’t happen, I promise.”

“The point is, we don’t have time for all those societal niceties,” Melly said firmly. “Life could literally be too short. And I don’t think it’s ever going back to normal on Randal Four either in spite of all my protests to the contrary. And maybe no one answers the beacon you risked your life to turn on. I don’t want to die without having known you, Jeff Pearson, in the most intimate meaning of the word possible. We’re living on a speeded up timeline here with no guarantees.”

Unable to resist any longer, Jeff captured her lips in a crushing kiss, taking what he wanted, what she was offering. The towel fell away as he rose to his feet, Melly in his arms and strode to the bed, where he deposited her on top of the quilted comforter. She released him reluctantly as he took off his boots and then shed his pants and briefs. Jeff reflected how her examining him in a clinical mode to see if he’d been bitten or scratched by an infected and therefore going to die had been one thing although her hands on him had made it hard to keep his cock down. Melly watching him with eyes glistening, licking her lips as he bared his body for her in order to make love to her was quite another. Her gaze lingered on his shaft standing proud and ready so with a grin Jeff gave himself two strokes root to tip while she watched.

“Like what you see?”

“Absolutely.” She made a beckoning gesture. “Bring all that sexy male energy over here—you’re too far away.”

Coming over her on the bed, his cock beaded with precum, he marveled at how beautiful she was. Summoning discipline he was barely hanging onto, he said, “One last time, because after I’m inside you it’ll be too late to stop—you want this, right?”

Digging her fingers into his butt, she pulled him closer, his arousal cushioned by the vee of her thighs, so close to where he wanted to be. “I want you.” She curled her leg over his, opening herself to him. “I’ve had the inject and I’m clean, had a physical before I left the MidSectors.”

“I had a clean bill of health before we set out on this mission—uh, our retirement,” he said, sensation overwhelming him as the sensitive head of his manhood brushed against her soft folds. Lowering his head, he captured one of her tightly furled nipples in his mouth and suckled while she arched under him and made small sounds of satisfaction.

They were both too impatient to spend much time on foreplay or exploring each other’s bodies. In the back of his mind, the small number of cells thinking rather than feeling, he hoped they’d have a better opportunity for playfulness and exploration another day. Right now he wanted to make furious love to her and she gave every sign of wanting it hard and fast. She was undeniably ready, creaming for him. He slid into her, moaning with pleasure over how tightly her hot slick body held him. Melly met him move for move, her fingernails drawing light scratches on his back, not enough to hurt but spurring him on. He thrust in and out, going deep, going hard, and it was a challenge to keep himself from climaxing much too soon. He’d never been with a woman bareback before and Melly was everything he’d ever dreamed of having in a partner. She teased him with the things her body could do to his and it was with gratitude he realized her climax was imminent. The tensing and tremors he felt coursing through her body transmitted an unmistakable signal. He muffled her

scream of ecstasy with an involved kiss, allowing himself to give in to his own powerful orgasm and they clung together through the intoxicating maelstrom of sensation.

When he finally raised himself onto his elbows, gazing at her flushed, happy face, Jeff said, “You’re an amazing woman, Melly Jericho. In all this chaos and danger, I was blessed by the Lords of Space to find you and I intend to protect you till my last breath.”

“Let’s hope it doesn’t come to that,” she said, kissing him lightly. “I want so much more for us, not just this although the sex was mind blowing, let me assure you. I never believed in instalove and maybe this—whatever is between us—isn’t at that level yet but I want us to have time together, the way we should have if the universe hadn’t become upended by a mystery virus.”

“I’ll do my best to give you what you’re asking for,” he said, recklessly promising a world of tomorrows he couldn’t ensure would occur. “I want the same.”

She fluttered one hand to her brow, pushing aside strands of loose hair. “I’ll be embarrassed to face your men after this.”

“Don’t be. They won’t say anything out of line. My team are good guys, respectful. They don’t begrudge me this and they like you, doc. They know how much I’ve been intrigued by you. It’ll be fine.” He wouldn’t deny the guys had razzed him out of her hearing but he was confident his comrades wouldn’t embarrass Melly.

“We—we’d better get dressed and rejoin them,” she said.

He rose and went to the bathroom to clean up, after which he brought her a warm washcloth to do the same. They dressed in silence, Melly pulling fresh clothing for herself from her backpack. When she was done and had brushed her hair, he held out

his hand, which she took readily. “I think Cody was going to cook us a meal,” he said. “Guy has mad skills in the kitchen, coulda been a chef if he hadn’t wanted to be a badass Special Forces operator. There was plenty of food in the stasis keepers and we can’t be sure when we’ll get another hot meal.”

She hugged him. “Thank you.”

“The pleasure was all mine,” he joked.

Right before he opened the bedroom door he gave her another kiss, sweet and full of promise.

Melly clung to Jeff’s hand as she walked down the hallway and into the kitchen. Despite his reassurance, she expected the soldiers would say something. She didn’t regret their time together in the least and she was a grown woman after all, not a blushing teenager (never mind the flush in her cheeks right now). She’d never had a to face a group of people who probably heard what she and the captain had been doing in bed, immediately after the interlude ended. Melly was a private person by nature.

Cody was at the stove and the aroma of whatever he was cooking was enticing. Zach sat at the kitchen table, cleaning his blaster.

“Where’s Samms?” Jeff asked.

“Sacked out in one of the spare bedrooms,” Zach said, not diverting his attention from his task. “Trent is doing overwatch on the roof, per orders. No change in status although he thinks some of the infected are drifting away from the building.”

I’m back on the comlink now , Jeff said to the group, including Melly. “Dinner smells terrific, Cody. Much better than survival rations.”

“These people had all the spices and ingredients a chef could ask for,” Cody replied, stirring the mixture one more time. “We’re having an Azrigone beef roast as the main course. Gonna be hard to walk away from all this fresh food but we can’t take it with us.”

“I saw them,” Melly said, sinking into the nearest chair. “There was a holo base in the bedroom. Nice little family of five, including a baby. I wish I hadn’t been so curious.”

Jeff brought her a mug of the real Terran coffee. “Yeah, we wondered. One of the bedrooms was clearly shared by two kids and there’s a nursery. But you know there aren’t any signs of a rushed exit, no evidence anyone was sick here. The family might have made it out okay.”

Taking a sip of the rare beverage, she nodded. “I’m going to assume the best case possible.”

“We stay on this planet long enough, we’re going to see a lot worse sights,” Zach said, brow furrowed in a frown. “Just a fact, doc.”

“I’m grateful for this haven right now,” was her heart felt answer.

The group ate in the kitchen as no one wanted to venture into the formal dining room, using dishes which probably cost more than her medical school tuition. Melly and Zach loaded the dishes into the cleaner after the meal, including a dessert made up of five kinds of cake and pastry from the stasis keeper, was finished.

“You don’t have to do clean up, doc,” Jeff said, relaxed in his chair, savoring the last of his coffee. “No one’s coming back.”

“I know but I feel wrong not doing it.” She pushed her hair behind her ears.

“Civilization’s norms haven’t faded for me yet. I want to be a good houseguest.”

“They ain’t gonna be inviting us to drop in again either way,” Zach said bluntly. After a glare from the captain, he added, “But you do you.”

“I intend to.” Melly had to live with herself and the world might be upside down right now but she wasn’t going to bed with dirty dishes here in the kitchen. Cody seemed to agree with her, having cleaned up his cooking utensils and the stove before leaving the room.

Leftovers were set aside for Trent when he finished his stint of guard duty on the roof and for Samms, who slept through the meal. Then they adjourned to the living room where the soldiers broke out a battered pack of cards and played hand after hand of poker for imaginary stakes. Melly wandered into the library, which held real books as well as holo discs, and picked a few to sample. She curled up in one of the big chairs in the living room and whiled away the day reading and listening to the soldiers talk. She took a nap in the midafternoon.

Her dreams were chaotic and she was in the midst of one where she was trapped in the spaceport terminal, trying to get to her family, who were on an upper balcony about to board a shuttle. In her dream the infected chased her, getting ever closer and she screamed and struck out as one touched her shoulder.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 2:56 am

CHAPTER SIX

“Hey, easy there, doc, it’s me.” Jeff sat on the edge of the bed, eyes full of concern. “Bad dreams?”

“Daymares.” Melly shivered. “My family—” She cut herself off. Her family had been okay in the dream, safe on their balcony. It was she who’d been in danger.

“We’ll be there as soon as we can,” Jeff promised. “I had Cody send a drone out that way but it’s at the limit of his range right now and we didn’t learn much. The area seems deserted though.”

“How did you know where I lived?” she asked. “Not that I’m not grateful but I am curious.”

“Samms and Cody are hackers. They can get into any system, anywhere. Samms looked up anyone with your last name, living in the vicinity of the city and there they were.” He rose to his feet, dashing her slight hopes they might be able to spend more time together in bed. “Sorry, doc, but it’s time to leave.”

She glanced past him to the windows where the sun was getting low in the sky but still bright. “I thought we were going to travel at night?”

“There’s a pretty big fire and it’s spreading in our direction. We need to move before we get cut off. Can you be ready in ten minutes?”

“Sure. I don’t exactly have much to pack.” She threw the covers back and enjoyed his

wistful gaze at her body. She was wearing a t shirt and panties, which weren't very practical in a life-or-death situation but she'd relaxed into the comfort of their current location. Melly gave herself a lecture to be more situationally aware in the future. There might not be time to get dressed and she didn't want to be running from the infected half-naked.

Once she was on her feet Jeff caught her to him for a hug and a quick kiss that became hot and bothered the longer it went on. "I wish things were different," he said with regret when he released her. "I wish we had the luxury of time. The things I'd like to do with you in this bed?—"

"We'll find another one," she said, kissing his cheek. "Let me get dressed."

"We'll be in the living room. Eight minutes now." He tapped his wrist chrono before adjusting himself in his utilities and left the room.

Melly had explored the huge closets when she got tired of reading earlier and had taken a few items she deemed potentially useful. Most of the garments and shoes were designer labels and meant for afternoon socials and balls and high society but there had been a few pairs of jeans, a couple of sweaters and other items she'd grabbed. She'd found an extra backpack in the boys' room, with a popular cartoon figure on it in bold colors and filled it with the new clothes as well as a selection of the toiletries in the bathroom. She expected her parents' house to be fully stocked with everything she might need but she had no idea how many more days it might be until she got there.

When she entered the living room with her two backpacks, Jeff took one from her and added it to the gear on the antigrav sled. He made quick work of helping her put on the battle armor. She was getting better at doing it herself with practice but he seemed impatient and brushed her fingers aside from the controls, finishing the task himself.

“All right, the roof awaits.” He took her hand and escorted her from the apartment, Zach following with the sled. Cody and Trent were waiting in the hall, weapons at the ready. The atmosphere was tense and Melly debated whether she should draw her blaster too. There couldn’t possibly be any infected on the roof and Jeff had assured her this level of the building was sealed off but the back of her neck tingled as she moved through the short corridor and up the stairs to the roof access.

It was windy up there today and the air was full of blowing embers and smoke from the many burning buildings. Coughing, she stared at the closest ones, most of which hadn’t been on fire the day before. “The wind is going to spread this like crazy.”

“Which is why we’re leaving now,” Jeff said. “Ready to make the jump with me?”

“No, but I will.” She gave him her hand and they walked to the edge of the roof, Cody and Zach had already stepped off into the void, the antigrav sled trailing behind. Trent and Samms were waiting for them to go first. Jeff picked her up and she closed her eyes tightly as he stepped off the roof into thin air. His antigrav kicked in and they moved slowly forward and ever downward.

We’re aiming for a point about two blocks away , he said over the subaural com. The air rushing by her ears would have made it impossible to hear anything he said out loud and she was grateful for the high tech device. The drones show no infected in that quadrant, or at least not right now.

When she hit the ground, Melly staggered and Jeff steadied her while she got her balance and drew her blaster. The men moved out in their usual formation, her in the center and she tried not to breathe too deeply of the smoky air. The surroundings were much the same as on the trek the day before but to her surprise the neighborhood became rundown and then really scary, with gang graffiti and ramshackle buildings which had clearly been abandoned before the outbreak ever happened. She glanced over her shoulder at the tower where they’d stayed, which

was visible in the distance, tipped golden by the setting sun. I guess if I'd walked the whole distance from there the change wouldn't seem like such a shock.

Here there were hardly any wrecked or abandoned vehicles and few bodies. The final days must have played out differently here than in the more upscale or industrial areas. As she walked she tried to imagine what it must have been like to be poor and preyed upon by gangs and then hit with the epidemic and subsequent horror. Her heart went out to the late residents. Melly reminded herself to be vigilant and not to be so in her head. Not to be a tourist as Jeff had termed her preoccupation yesterday.

No sooner had she reprimanded herself than three infected lunged at her from the alley she was passing. She choked off her scream and threw up one arm to shield her face, firing wildly with the blaster with her other hand. Jeff grabbed her and whirled her away from the huge, infected man clawing at her arm. Zach caught her as she stumbled. As she watched, Jeff plunged his combat knife into the infected's eye socket and the predator collapsed in a heap. The other two lay dead on the sidewalk, shot in the head or so she guessed. The world swam in front of her eyes and her knees buckled.

Jeff was in her face. "Did he break the skin?"

"I don't think so," she managed to gasp.

He swept her into his arms and set off at a dead run. Doubletime, men, he ordered on the com. The noise will bring more of them for sure.

I didn't scream, she said. Well, not much. Thanks for saving me.

Save the thanks until we're clear and we can inspect your arm. Jeff's tone was grim and he didn't meet her eyes.

Possible shelter up ahead, sir, on the right , Cody said.

Clear the building for us. We'll be there in two.

Melly heard the growling and eerie moaning and checked over Jeff's shoulder. They're coming. About three blocks behind us.

Can you run if I set you down?

Of course. She wasn't ready for him to put her on her own feet immediately but when he did she took off running as fast as she could go, heading toward Cody, who was standing half in and half out of a doorway, gesturing urgently. An infected came at her from the street but she brought her blaster up and fired at its glowing eyes and had the satisfaction of seeing the woman fall backward, face caught in a snarl. Now she was sprinting all out, conscious of the increasing noise from the horde behind and of blaster shots buzzing past her as the soldiers picked off the first wave of the infected.

She skidded as she came to the doorway where Cody waited and grabbed at his shoulder to save herself.

Inside and straight ahead to the stairs, he said, not breaking his firing rhythm. Watch your step.

Melly didn't question him. The place was evidently a bar and broken glasses and bottles littered the floor, with pools of blood everywhere. Several bodies lay bloated and disfigured but she detoured around them without allowing herself to absorb details. The stairs were behind the bar and she took them at a run, emerging onto a roof after climbing two flights. The second floor seemed to be apartments or maybe rent by the hour rooms and she heard thuds and moans behind several of the doors as she continued her ascent. Zach was waiting for her.

“I’m to get you out of here, doc. The rest will follow,” he said catching her by the wrist.

“I’m not leaving without Jeff,” she said, trying to break free. “We have to wait for him.”

“We have to obey orders, ma’am. The captain will be all right—he’s got more lives than a Terran cat. This’ll go better if you co-operate.” Zach dragged her to the edge of the building. “We’re gonna hopscotch about three roofs away, to a building Cody says is clear right now. You with me?”

Her one rule had been to do whatever Jeff and his men said, to not complicate their efforts, so reluctantly she nodded and walked with him to the edge. Zach lifted her as easily as if she’d been a doll and stepped off, directing their course to the next roof. He hit the surface at a run and launched them into the thin air again, repeating the process two more times before ending up on the chosen destination.

“Please, can we wait here and make sure the others get out okay?” she asked once Zach set her down.

“I don’t see any harm in you lingering a bit. We’re supposed to rendezvous here anyway. You wait here and I’m going to check the building for infected.” He tapped her hand. “Blaster at the ready, doc.”

“Oh, right.” She gave him an embarrassed smile. “I’ll be okay—I’ll keep good watch, I promise.”

“You’re doing fine.” With a snappy salute he turned and headed for the roof access door. “Cody is gonna hear from me if this place ain’t the haven he promised.”

Feeling sheepish, as if she was playing at being a soldier, Melly forced herself to do a

perimeter check, walking the edge of the roof and peering at the streets below. No infected, which was a relief. Then, having done her duty, she shifted her attention to the building three roofs away and prayed desperately for the Lords of Space to help Jeff and the other three men escape unscathed.

The quartet burst onto the roof and hurled themselves off, the anti grav sled following like an oversize dog, as the building below them exploded into flames, sending debris flying in all directions. Melly bit her fist to avoid screaming and took shelter behind a vent as chunks of wood and plaster and unidentifiable materials thudded around her. She peeked out and watched Jeff and his men complete the same trip she and Zach had taken a few minutes earlier, and ran to him as soon as he landed.

Opening his arms while the other three men grinned, he caught her, hugging her tight.

“I was so worried,” she said, “But Zach assured me you had extra lives.”

“All in a day’s work,” Jeff replied in a satisfied tone. “Are you okay?”

Nodding, she indicated the armor on her arms. “This stuff saved me.”

Building is clear to the ground floor, Zach reported. No infected. Seems to have been empty before the outbreak actually.

Stay there, we’ll be joining you momentarily and then we’re on our way again. Cody reports the fire crisped quite a few of the infected and the flames are blocking them from following us for now. Jeff took Melly’s elbow. “No time for a reunion, I’m afraid. We’ve got to be on the move. Conditions here in the city are getting worse by the minute.”

In the center of the group of soldiers, Melly trekked down the stairs to the first floor of the empty building, where Zach waited. She expected to go outside but Jeff held

her in place. "I need to check your arm," he said. "We have to know if you're okay."

She was sure she was fine but couldn't deny the necessity to confirm her status. Jeff indicated an overturned crate and she sat, peeling off the body armor on both arms. "Good thing this stuff is self-cleaning." There was a surprising amount of dried gore on it from her close proximity to the infected.

Two of the soldiers trained the lights on their gunsights on her arm, centering her in a blazing pool of illumination. She felt like a criminal under interrogation. Jeff knelt and examined her sweater sleeves. "I don't see any rips but can you take this off? And the shirt underneath. Keep the tee shirt on."

She wasn't happy to disrobe in front of the men but pulled her sweater over her head as ordered.

"No one but me will look," he said, giving the soldiers a glare.

"I appreciate the sensitivity. I know it's necessary to check the skin." The shirt was next to go and she was left in the thin tee shirt. Melly couldn't see beyond the bright lights but she was sure Zach and Cody were giving her privacy as Jeff promised.

The captain went over every inch of her bare skin on both arms and shoulders and then had her pull up the tee shirt so he could check her sides. "OK, you can get dressed again. Thank the Lords of Space the infected's claws didn't penetrate the armor." He pulled her to her feet as the lights snapped off and gave her a huge hug. "I'm sorry if I sounded harsh but I was so scared for you. I can't lose you, doc. I just found you."

Melly blinked away tears over his declaration, especially since he made it in front of his men with no hesitation, and her relief at not being infected herself now. She kissed his cheek. "I'd better hurry up so we can get out of here to some place safer."

Jeff planted a rushed but passionate kiss on her lips and stepped away. It took her less time to put the clothing on than it had to take off and she donned her battle armor while he watched. Then Zach handed her the blaster she'd been carrying and they were ready to leave.

Emerging cautiously onto the sidewalk, she was met with more smoke-filled air but no sign of infected. Behind her the buildings a few blocks away were a solid wall of fire and the roaring of the flames was deafening. The conflagration was drawing air to itself and the wind buffeted her as she moved ahead. After two blocks of fast walking, they came to an abandoned barricade of police and military vehicles, doors gaping open.

“Last stand?” she asked, surveying the scene with dismay. If even the combined planetary forces couldn't effectively fight off the horde, what chance did her small group or anyone else have?

“Probably withdrew to the police headquarters,” Jeff said. “We may find survivors there although I doubt it. It's another two blocks this way.”

They made the short distance without further incidents and paused in front of the stairs leading up to the entrance of the police HQ. Several dead bodies were sprawled like broken dolls on the risers and numerous stains and blaster burn marks gave evidence how the fight had raged.

Blasters ready, Jeff said. Two teams — Zach and Samms with me and the doc. Cody and Trent, you know what I want from the motor pool. Melly, stay tight on my six.

As the team ascended the stairs, she got as close to him as she could without running right into him. The doors or what was left of them, gaped open to give access to the lobby, which was a complete mess. No bodies here although pools of dried blood told her the carnage had been as bad as it was everywhere else in the city. Cody and Trent

split off, continuing straight through the lobby and out a rear door. Jeff led her and his team of two soldiers up the emergency stairs. The power was off in the building.

We'll start at the top floor and work our way down , Jeff said as he ascended. What I'm most interested in here is probably in the commander's office.

More weapons? Melly asked. Don't we have enough?

He gave the ghost of a laugh. More are always better in a last resort situation like this but no, I'm after intel. Any more information we can gather about the outbreak, what the authorities did, and whether there was any organized withdrawal from the city. Where can we find other survivors?

She guessed it made sense, to a military mind anyway. As far as she was concerned if they weren't here for more weapons and if they could take an armored vehicle right now, that would be enough of a win for her. Melly's focus was on getting to her family as soon as possible.

The upper floor of the building was more luxurious than she'd expected, with lush carpets and artwork on the walls. The ambiance was in stark contrast to the more utilitarian offices and workspaces on the lower floors. The battle didn't seem to have raged here, although she could hear the thumping against a closed door and the moans which revealed the presence of at least one infected, sensing their arrival.

Zach, check it out. If the tango is secure where he is, leave it alone.

Zach peeled off from their stack and headed in the direction of the sounds. Jeff scanned the wall directory and then led them to the commissioner's office. Melly paused on the threshold in astonishment. A holo flickered, filling the room, but what was being depicted she couldn't tell.

“Samms,” Jeff said.

“On it.” The soldier slung his blast rifle and seated himself at the huge Zulairian mahogany desk, where he proceeded to work the controls of the electronic accessories. “Sir, it’s running off battery power and about drained. This holo is from ten days ago.”

“Can you rewind and show us what was going on?”

“I can get maybe ten minutes worth.”

“There’ll never be a better time to check this out because we’re not coming back,” Jeff said. “Do it.”

The holo resolved itself into recognizable humans, seated around a large conference table. Melly saw the mayor, who’d been in charge of this city even before she left for medical school. His political machine was strong on the colony planet and he had been an effective administrator so he kept getting re-elected. In the holo he was haggard and drawn. The rest of the men and women were strangers to her. The participants all wore similarly exhausted and desperate expressions.

“So in summary, my people can keep the power on in about fifty percent of the zones, if we don’t take any more losses,” said a man to the left. “A cascading power failure is likely.”

“That’s what we’re here to prevent, among other unintended consequences,” said a woman seated next to the mayor. She was in Planetary Forces fatigues and a captain by her insignia. “My troops will protect the key infrastructure features once this group identifies them in priority order.”

She was sure overconfident, Melly thought.

“I’d like to give my report next.” A man in a white lab coat rose. “I need to get back to the hospital—it’s chaos there with all the new patients. Everyone who even thinks they might be sick is flooding into the emergency rooms and urgent care facilities in the city and the suburbs. We can’t provide adequate care for the genuinely ill, not to mention coping with those who have turned into those things.”

“Are we learning anything new, doctor?” the mayor asked in a hoarse voice. He sipped a glass of water and coughed, which earned him a side eye from the people sitting next to him and one woman scooted her chair away.

“I’ve appended my full report to the Minutes,” the doctor said, shoulders slumped. “To sum it up, the situation is totally out of control. No clue how the epidemic started although animal to human transmission is the best guess. It’s not airborne—yet—which is a blessing but any bite or even a scratch from an infected transmits the virus. I suggest mass evacuation of the healthy.”

“People are already clogging the roads, trying to get out.” The speaker was in police uniform and high ranking, Melly guessed. “We’re trying to enforce the quarantine but?—”

Suddenly there was a shriek from off to the side and the holo operator swung the lens around to catch the excitement. A woman in a dark blue business suit was crouched on the conference table, chewing off the face of the man who’d been next to her. Shots rang out from several directions as screams came from everywhere and there was a mad rush to evacuate the room. Melly saw the infected woman attack someone else. Her body shook from the impact of bullets and one police officer tried to stun her but she turned on him and tore his chest open. The scene became a complete blur and then froze in the spot where it had been when they entered the office.

“She must have known she was sick,” Melly said after a moment of horrified silence. “Why did she risk going to the meeting?”

“Denial is a powerful force, doc. So that didn’t end well.”

“They never should have met in person.” Although the episode happened weeks ago the needless waste of lives infuriated her. And with those in authority being taken out, of course the rest of the city spiraled into chaos.

Jeff studied the office where they stood. “Obviously the police commissioner didn’t make it back here. Coms and all the rest of the infrastructure else broke down in the city without anyone in charge.”

“So was the government enforcing a quarantine or were they trying to evacuate people?” Melly asked. “And evacuate to where? Surely the other cities were in the same condition.”

“Typical in a major crisis like this, competing agendas and confusion reign,” Jeff said. “If the authorities had more time they might have gotten a handle on things but I’m guessing the civilians wouldn’t have liked the extreme measures necessary though.”

Samms showed them a data disc. “The Minutes were being kept automatically and I’ve downloaded them. The medical report the guy mentioned is in here, plus a lot of other stuff we want to know, I’m sure.”

“Good work,” Jeff said. “See what else you can get from the coms and data repositories. The console in this office probably had access to everything. You know what I want.” He touched his ear. Trent, how’s it coming in the motor pool?

Fucking mess out here, sir, but we got two APC’s we can maneuver out of the wreckage. Fully charged combat models. A few updates old but serviceable. My guess is military surplus sent to the colony for the planetary protection force.

“APC’s?” Melly asked.

“Armored personnel carriers.” Jeff’s answer was terse. I’ll take them both. See what you can scrounge for recharges and grab any loose weapons or supplies.

A new voice came over the com and Melly recognized Cody’s tones. Sir, there’s a large group of infected coming in from the east. They’re congregating at the park across the roadway. I don’t think we ought to linger too long. My drones show more coming behind them.

The roadway in question was eight lanes, with a center divider and landscaping on both sides so Melly tamped down her panic. It would take the infected a while to get to them, if the horde decided to move in this direction.

All right, we’ll bug out in ten minutes max, Jeff said. We’ll take both APC’s — have them ready to roll as soon as I arrive. He looked at Melly. “Anything you need or want from this building, doc?”

“To leave?” she said in a joking tone. “The infected in the park make me nervous.” Her parents used to take her there to play on the extensive playground equipment when she was little and it was a favorite place for picnics and parties but she guessed today anyone unlucky enough to go there would be signing their own death warrant. The continuing apocalyptic nature of the tragedy which had unfolded here on Randal Four seemed unreal to her, despite the sights she’d seen. As if she’d wandered into a horror trideo and couldn’t get out.

“We’ll go in five minutes,” he promised. “Samms needs every second he can get to download data.”

“Doing coms reports now,” the soldier reported. “A couple of interesting broadcasts the police here were tracking.”

“Give me the details later,” Jeff said. “Once we’re rolling.”

Melly fidgeted, pacing back and forth in the office, averting her eyes hastily from the smiling family group depicted in a small holo on the bookshelf by the window. She didn’t want to think about the fate of those people, especially the children. Surely the commissioner had sent them to safety before things got really bad. She felt as if she should be doing something to be helpful right now but she had no idea what she’d be searching for. Time seemed to drag and she tried not to think about the horde in the park either. When Jeff clapped Samms on the shoulder and said, “Time to go,” she was at the door in a flash.

“Let us go first,” he said, unslinging his weapon and joining her.

Samms crammed one last data disk into his rucksack and joined them taking his position behind Melly. “Ready, sir.”

We’re on our way, Jeff told Cody. Have those engines hot .

The horde is drifting this way, better hurry, sir. Cody sounded as calm as always.

Melly wished the captain would go faster as they descended the stairs. When she emerged into the lobby she could hear the moans of the infected and took one horrified glance out the broken doors, to see the oncoming wave of predators flowing over the center barriers of the roadway like a tide of insects, coming inexorably in their direction.

Jeff grabbed her elbow. “Run.”

They sprinted through the lobby and out the rear door into a short hallway. Melly heard a few infected, faster than the others, pounding against the door into the corridor. Her adrenaline spiked and she was intensely grateful to find the rear door

propped open and Trent waiting for them. Jeff dragged her into the large parking lot and she saw the two gigantic APC's idling near the exit, side doors open. As she approached the one Jeff clearly wanted her to ride in with him, a small group of infected came around the corner from a new direction, entering the parking lot and heading for her and her companions.

As the soldiers opened fire, she belatedly remembered her blaster and stopped in her tracks, targeting a large infected man. Her shot went wild and Jeff grabbed her. Wordlessly he thrust her inside the closest APC and tumbled in after her, closing the portal with a slap at the controls. Infected hit the vehicle, clawing at the entrance even as Cody set the APC in motion. The closing door sliced off a few gnarled, clawed fingers and Melly swallowed bile as Zach crisped them to ash with a low intensity beam from his blaster.

The APC rocked as Cody accelerated and Melly fought her way to a seat.

"Buckle up," Jeff said with urgency from his position in front next to the driver.

The straps were complicated, her hands were trembling and the way the APC was maneuvering kept throwing her off balance. Melly figured she'd have more bruises when this escape was done. Once she was securely fastened in, she took a look at the vid display and wished she hadn't. There was a solid wall of infected coming at them. A loud noise came from overhead and a barrage of blaster fire arced out, mowing down the leading ranks of infected. She'd noticed a gun turret on top of the APC as she'd run toward it and guessed Zach must be up there, shooting.

The losses made no impact on the infected, who stumbled and crawled over the fallen and kept coming in a terrifying wave of contorted bodies and horrific faces. She closed her eyes to keep from crying at all the innocent people who were now those monsters outside.

“Sir, drones show this horde is several thousand strong.” Cody switched one vid to a drone’s eye view and Melly gasped at the sight of infected as far as she could see. “Even with the megablaster we’re not going to be able to cut our way through this mob. There’s no deterrence factor here, no instinct for self-preservation.”

“I hate to admit it but you’re right.” Jeff switched to the subaural com. On my signal, stop, cut the engine and go silent mode. We’re going to wait them out. If they don’t realize we’re prey in a can here the mob will move on. I hope.

“We’re simply going to sit here—” Melly’s protest was instantaneous, and she cut herself off at Jeff’s glare. She switched to subaural to continue because there was no way she wasn’t going to question this choice. She wasn’t in his chain of command and could be insubordinate if she damn well chose. We’re going to sit and let them do their best to get at us?

The APC powered down, the light and the vids going dark. Panic clawed at her. In the silence

Jeff unfastened his own safety strap and came to her, releasing her from the harness and pulling her into his lap. She curled into his embrace on the floor, clutching his shoulders.

This vehicle and the one behind us weigh tons. We’re surrounded by the highest tech, blast resistant combisteel. The infected can’t get at us with claws and teeth and even the weight of a mob won’t crush us. They hunt by sound and smell as far as we can tell, and maybe to a lesser degree by sight. There won’t be anything to see, hear or smell right now, just metal. We’ll be fine, I promise. He dropped a kiss on the top of her head. Sometimes the best military strategy is to do nothing but be ready to fight again later.

The sounds of the infected climbing over the APC and pushing past on either side

were terrifying. The vehicle rocked and she grabbed at Jeff in alarm but managed not to make a sound. Melly hid her face against his chest, not ashamed to show her fear. He rubbed her back and held her tight enough to quell her involuntary tremors. Melly wanted this to be over. She wished the vids were on so she could see how much more of the horde had to pass them by.

Drones show the crowd thinning, Cody reported as if reading her mind.

We'll have to sit for a few after the stragglers go past, so we don't draw them all here to us again with the engine noise," Jeff replied.

They sat for five more minutes before he gave the all clear and the command to move out again. Melly reflected on how such a short time period could crawl by like eternity. Jeff released her with a kiss and helped her into her seat as the APC accelerated. There was a shudder and a clanging noise as Cody rammed a group of crashed groundcars, sending the useless hulks spinning in all directions as the APC sped on its way.

All good back here, sir , Trent reported from the second vehicle.

"Orders, sir?" Cody asked as he continued to thread a course for the massive vehicle on the crowded road. The rear vid showed Trent hot on their tail in the other APC.

Jeff glanced at Melly. "Our next scheduled stop is the doctor's home but we may not get there until tomorrow, given the road conditions and the uncertainty of running into more mobs of infected. We're doing the best we can here."

She nodded. "I understand and I appreciate you taking me home." As if we'd been out on a date or something. Melly stifled a nervous giggle and forced herself to take in a long breath and hold it.

“If I find a likely spot to stop for the night, I’ll take it and we’ll reach your house tomorrow mid-morning.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

Melly had figured she'd be home by the end of this grueling day and the nightmare would finally be over but she'd reckoned without the terrible situation on the roads. Cody had to backtrack a few times when he wasn't able to bulldoze or blast a way through the tangle of groundcars and trucks. and go overland once or twice. They had to sit and wait out another large gathering of infected, although the second time wasn't as scary to her as the first experience. She had more confidence in the APC now. Why do you suppose the infected are all heading into the city right now? she asked as she watched the crowd pass on the vids.

"Swarming, like insects maybe?" Jeff said. "I mean, who knows what intelligence if any is actually powering them now."

"Answers, we need answers badly," Melly replied.

"I'm hoping the report we got from the interrupted mayor's meeting will provide a few of those," Jeff said. "Once we stop for the night I'm going to be digging into the details Samms downloaded for us."

Finally in motion again after the second group passed, Melly was astonished how exhausting it could be to basically sit in the APC and drive for miles. The vehicle wasn't built for passenger comfort, like a civilian groundcar and her back was aching from the unforgiving seat. She had a headache behind her eyes, aggravated by the constant sound of the powerful engine. They were out of the city itself finally and driving through mostly empty farmlands. Here there were no traffic jams, only a few isolated groundcars, trucks and farm vehicles abandoned in the middle of the road.

She watched agri robos hard at work in fields they passed, taking care of crops no one would ever eat. “What about all the poor animals?” she said out loud.

One eyebrow raised Jeff was plainly waiting to hear more details about where she was going with this topic.

“I just thought—what about all the farm animals? And cats and dogs and other pets, left in houses where their owners died or went infected.” She rubbed her arms, distressed by the mere idea.

“We can’t do anything about it,” Jeff said. “Our mission isn’t to rescue pets or to set herds of nutrient animals loose.”

Not for the first time she was struck by the terms he used. Jeff and his men didn’t act like retired veterans come to run a ranch. They seemed very much like soldiers on a current mission to her. She supposed it was because they were so recently retired and the situation on Randal Four must have struck them like being in combat or venturing into enemy territory. “But if we do find any?”

“We’ll make sure they can run free,” he promised, his smile lighting up his face.

“At this season, ma’am, as long as the nutrient animals are outside they should be alright,” Zach said from behind her, where he sat in a jump seat, ready to ascend into the turret and fire the megablaster cannon on an instant’s notice. “Plenty of grass for them to eat right now and farmers usually have stock ponds for water. Pets are another issue, can’t say much on that topic.” As Melly stared at him, he added, “I grew up on an agri- based world. My family farms.” He raised his arm and flexed his bicep. “All these muscles came from good hard work in the fields.”

“I see. Thanks for the pep talk.”

“Anytime, doc.”

“See if you can find us a nice abandoned farmhouse, or even a barn, well back from the road,” Jeff said to Cody. “I’m ready to stop for the night and we might as well be comfortable.”

The soldier acknowledged the order with a quick dip of the head and Melly guessed he was redirecting his small fleet of robo drones. He must be a cyborg, she thought, not for the first time. No ordinary human could drive this beast and direct all those drones at the same time. She’d never encountered a cyborg before—Cody looked like any of the other soldiers outwardly. There was prejudice in the Sectors towards cyborgs, she knew, but all she felt was curiosity and hope she was never called upon to give him medical care because she had no idea how to help a patient who was part machine. They’d had one hour long session on it in medical school and then the professor had said dismissively since all known cyborgs were in the military, and would be cared for by military medical forces, there was no need to spend any more time on the topic.

A few minutes later, after consultation between Jeff and Cody, they left the road and headed up a long driveway between lush fields of grain. Peering at the forward vids, Melly saw a trim green and white house come into view, with two large barns close by. The APC’s pulled up in front of the front porch and stopped in a cloud of dust.

She waited but no one emerged from the house. She could see the door was half open.

“Doc, I want you to wait here in the APC while we check out the situation and clear the house,” Jeff said, rising from his seat and taking his blast rifle from its holder.

“All right.” She caught his hand and gave it a quick squeeze. “Be careful—all of you.”

The men exited the APC and formed up with the two soldiers from the other vehicle in their convoy. Melly watched on the vids as the team worked their way around the back of the house. She was pretty sure they judged the place to be empty or the soldiers would have been less obvious about driving up to the front door but she supposed the caution was good and necessary. At least there didn't seem to be any infected in the vicinity.

She stared at the side vids, seeing how the once trim lawn was getting overgrown and a pretty garden was choked with the invasive weeds. The people who lived here had been happy, she was sure, until the outbreak came to ruin their lives. The place had all the signs of being a prosperous enterprise. In the distance she could make out a pasture and a herd of brown and white cows grazed placidly, which made her happy. At least the barns weren't full of dead animals, left to their fate.

Zach emerged from the front door and came to the APC. She waited for him to open the door—she'd been shown how to do it but told under no circumstances to touch the controls without a direct order from the captain.

“Captain Pearson's compliments, ma'am, and would you please come inside,” Zach said with a grin. “Might want to bring your things.”

“Are we staying here tonight then?”

“That's the plan. Nice big house. Power's off but Samms is working on repairing the solar power hookup and then we'll have running water anyway. Food's all spoiled in the stasis keeper without power but there are a lot of dry and canned goods.”

“I'm not much of a cook,” she said as she stepped from the APC and stretched, taking in deep breaths of the fresh air. The interior of the vehicle smelled like engines and oil and stale socks despite the air recycler working full blast. Her headache felt better immediately in the fragrant outside air. Eyeing the house, she asked, “Was there

anyone here?”

“No, ma’am. There’s a fresh grave in the backyard though and there was a dog at one time judging by the food and water bowls but no sign of it now.”

He was matter of fact, so she reached for her medical detachment, although the news made her sad.

“About the cooking,” Zach said as they mounted the stairs, “Cody’s got the duty like he always does. He volunteers every time. The captain didn’t expect you to cook. In fact, I was supposed to give you his compliments and would you meet him in the upstairs office after you get settled in your room.”

“My room?” She paused after entering the house, taking in the homey expanse of living room, with a huge couch and two well worn recliners side by side, an entertainment center, shelves of books and holo discs. There was a hand-hooked rug on the floor, in soft colors which complemented the furniture cushions and the drapes. A giant fireplace took up one wall, with family holos and old-fashioned stills lining the mantel. All the surfaces and knickknacks were dusty but Melly could tell the place had been well cared for prior to the outbreak. She blinked away tears. It was harder to contemplate borrowing this house, which had clearly been a home, than it was to use the high end condo, which felt so much like a hotel.

“Ma’am?” Zach touched her elbow gently. “We’ve cleared the house. There won’t be any unpleasant surprises. Captain said you could have your pick of any room on the second floor.” As she glanced at him, he indicated the staircase in the hallway beyond the living room and Melly moved toward it. “If you need anything, doc, remember the subaural com, just call us.”

“I—I will.” She paused on the first landing. “Where did you say Jeff—the captain was?”

“There’s an office on the third floor, ma’am. You can’t miss it.”

Dinner in an hour, Cody announced to all on the comlink. Pasta and sauce from a can but there are a lot of fresh spices.

Melly ascended to the second floor and walked along the corridor. The bedroom doors were all open, which she appreciated, letting her know there were no infected waiting to attack. There was a huge master bedroom with handmade quilts and an abundance of crocheted and hand stitched pillows with clever sayings and massive wooden furniture. She saw a bathroom door beyond the bed. I feel like Goldilocks in the old fairy tale , she said over the com, not caring if they all heard her. One bedroom is too big and the other is too small and so on . Only the bears won’t be coming home.

She could smell the faint scent of the perfume the lady of the house had favored wafting from the doorway and turned decisively on her heel to continue further along the corridor. There was no way Melly was spending any time in a room where it was if the true owner had merely stepped away for a moment.

The next two rooms were obviously guest rooms and she guessed had perhaps been children’s rooms at one point. She picked one with a blue décor and a minimum of decoration, although there were a pile of the pillows she’d have to toss on the floor if she was actually going to sleep. She put her backpack on the bed, rummaged through it for a few personal items and walked into the bathroom between the two guest rooms to freshen up a bit. Then she headed to the third floor to find the captain.

He was seated behind a massive, scarred wooden desk, with piles of records and papers moved off to the side. She appreciated that he hadn’t merely swept the owner’s work to the floor even though nothing mattered now. Jeff had a data reader and a holo base open and was scrolling through an endless series of items on the former. Jeff held up one finger, asking for her patience and Melly waited as he

continued to peruse whatever he was examining so closely. She looked around the room, which was decorated with a haphazard mix of awards for the superiority of the Moellar Family Farm in various categories, family photos and clever sayings with an agricultural bent, crocheted onto plaques. Another cozy testament to the life which had gone on here prior to the outbreak.

She sighed heavily.

“Sorry to keep you waiting,” Jeff said, no snark in his tone. “I’m trying to get my bearings in this mass of Minutes Samms downloaded for me at the police building.”

“Oh no, I wasn’t impatient,” she protested, clearing a stack of farming magazines off a big chair and seating herself. “It’s harder for me to stay detached in this house than it was at the condo, especially knowing you found a grave out back.”

He studied her, eyes narrowed. “I totally get what you’re saying but this was our best bet for a safe place to stay tonight, off the road, secluded, no infected.”

Not wanting to discuss the topic any further she pointed at the data reader and asked, “What can I do to help?”

“I need two things, doc, actually. One, can you go through the house and collect any medical items you find—the owners seem to have been elderly so there might be a few things you could use—and meds.”

“Why?” she asked in puzzlement. “I have my kit and I know your medic brought a kit, plus whatever’s in my bag on the antigrav sled.”

“It’s going to be a long time if ever before this planet is resupplied with anything,” Jeff said, his face in a sympathetic expression over her confusion. “We need to gather what we can as we go. I know you have supplies and I’m grateful but we don’t know

what we're going to run into out there. Meds, food and a few other essential items are on my list of items to forage when we can. We might as well start now."

"You're thinking long term, aren't you?" She couldn't decide whether to be reassured or dismayed.

"We've blundered into a post-apocalyptic situation which none of us were prepared for. We've done okay so far and if we can get to our ranch, we have a cache of supplies which were delivered a month or so ago. I got a confirmation on the drop shipment before we arrived so the early phases of the outbreak didn't affect planetary shipping. Not knowing how things will go from here on out, we have to take opportunities to resupply as we find them."

She was surprised although not sure why. "Your ranch? Is that where you're going?"

Now Jeff was caught off balance. Eyes narrowed, he said, "You're coming with us, doc. And yes, the ranch is my destination for right now, after we stop at your folks' place tomorrow."

"I'll have to see what my parents want to do," she said firmly. "I can't abandon my family. And the situation may be better there."

As if he wanted to argue with her, Jeff took a deep breath and then paused for a second. She was sure his next words weren't what he wanted to say originally. "Let's focus on the immediate task at hand, okay? The second thing I need help with is the medical report attached to the Minutes. I figure you'll be better at making heads or tails of it than I will." He offered her a data disk.

Melly took it, enjoying the little spark of attraction between them as their hands touched for an instant. "What am I looking for? What do you need?"

“I’m going to conduct a briefing for all of us after dinner, get the team re-oriented to the overall situation. I’d like you to contribute to the briefing with whatever you find to be highlights in the damnably dense report. Anything helpful, anything cautionary, anything about where government resources may have withdrawn to or been relocated. You’ll know it when you see it, doc. You’ve got a cool head on those shoulders.” He picked up a second data reader and handed it to her. “The APC’s come equipped with all sorts of handy gear, including these. You’re welcome to work in here if you’d like. The desk is plenty big enough.”

“Thanks.” She cleared a corner away from the space he’d claimed and set up the reader. “I picked the blue room by the way, in case you need to find me later.”

He chuckled. “Message received, doc. I never want to lose sight of where you are. Thanks.” He made no comment about her choice of bedroom.

Satisfied the two of them were on the same wavelength when it came to extracurricular activities, even if they weren’t seeing eye to eye on her coming along to the veterans’ ranch site, she inserted the data disk and began scanning the report, which was quite lengthy as Jeff had warned. Soon she was so absorbed in the information she was reading she probably wouldn’t have noticed if an infected had wandered into the room. Dr. Brisendine had been thorough and even though the details were depressing it was a breath of fresh air to be immersed in her own world of medicine. She searched for as many hopeful indications as she could but positive notes were depressingly few.

Zach interrupted them with a respectful knock on the door frame. “Begging your pardon, sir, ma’am, but dinner is served. Did you want us to set aside your portions?”

“We’ll come join the team now,” Jeff said, making the decision for both of them, although left to herself Melly would have remained in the office making notes from the report. He extended a hand to her, which she took, enjoying the warmth of his

fingers curling around hers and they followed Zach to the stairs.

There wasn't a space big enough for them all to eat in the kitchen so they sat at the large dining room table, clustered at one end with Jeff at the head and Melly at his right hand. Cody or whoever was helping him had gotten out the everyday china, with a pretty floral design. As she dug into the steaming pasta and sauce with appreciation, Melly glanced at the huge sideboard and china cabinet where a complete set of fine, gold trimmed dishes was displayed artfully. She was glad the soldiers hadn't chosen to use those. She felt as if the lady of the house was right around the corner and might appear at any time and she didn't want to disappoint her by their behavior. Swallowing the deliciously spiced food, she gave herself a lecture on how the stress of the entire situation was causing her to think strange thoughts. The house isn't haunted. The owners aren't coming back and I need to concentrate on the job Jeff gave me so I'm ready for the briefing . "This is amazing," she said to Cody.

"Better than the survival rations anyway," he said with a self deprecating laugh. "Seconds anyone?"

The men all helped themselves to more and Melly was glad Cody had obviously taken their big appetites into account when he made dinner. There wasn't much conversation. She supposed the guys were concentrating on the hot meal and really, what could they all talk about except the outbreak and the infected, both of which were depressing. Asking them personal, make-conversation questions seemed wrong too though. Dessert was a plate of obviously homemade goodies, including cupcakes and cookies. The latter were a bit stale but sweet. Melly washed it all down with fresh water from the farm's well and then pushed away from the table.

"If you'll excuse me, I'd better get back to the report if I'm going to be ready for the briefing."

"Want me to walk you up there?" Jeff asked.

“I’m fine. The house is clear and there aren’t any infected in the vicinity, right?” She checked with Cody, since he was the drone master.

“Small group straggled by about three miles away but they showed no interest in coming after us,” he reported. “I think we’re far enough off the road and any other people to stay under their sensors. Or whatever the infected use to find prey.”

“See you in an hour then. Are we doing the briefing here?” she asked Jeff, indicating the dining room.

“Only place in the house big enough,” he replied. “Except the living room and I prefer to have a table.”

She nodded and left the room, climbing the stairs to the third floor and re-entering the office. Her notes and the report were waiting so Melly didn’t waste any time diving in.

She reread the salient points for the third time, checked her notes on what she wanted to share, not that she planned to keep any secrets from Jeff and the others but the captain had been pretty clear about the level of detail he wanted. There were still a few minutes until the time set for the meeting downstairs so on a whim she got out her handheld and called her family home.

This time the com connected and she was astonished but grateful as her father’s voice gave the standard greeting to leave a message. “Dad, Mom, this is me, Melly. I’m on Randal Four and I’m on my way home to you with a group of soldiers?—”

There was a harsh buzzing sound and the signal dropped. She tried again to no avail and sat with her head down, the device in her hand on the desk, tears flowing.

“Hey, you okay?” Jeff walked in, coming straight to her and going to his knees beside

the chair. “What’s wrong, sweetheart?”

She waved the handheld at him, sniffing and dashing away tears with her free hand. “I got a signal, so I called my family. It went straight to voicemail but hearing my Dad’s voice on the outgoing message was so wonderful. So reassuring.”

He rose to his feet and pulled her from the chair into his arms, where he folded her into a comforting hug.

“They’re going to be there, I know it,” Melly said stubbornly, not sure if she was trying to convince Jeff or herself. “I have to get there.”

“Tomorrow, I promise,” he replied, kissing her cheek. “I hope for your sake they will be in residence and doing fine.”

“But you’re not optimistic. I know.”

“Optimism right now is a luxury,” he said. “But I’d like nothing better than to be wrong and have the chance to meet your mother and father.”

“And my kid brother,” she reminded him. “Mike. Well, Michael Benjamin Jericho to be exact. He’s ten now. He was so little when I left for medical school but we stayed in touch. It was worth the cost of interstellar coms to exchange holos and hear all about his life at school. He plays all kinds of sports too, you know. He’s terrific at tisba.”

“Can we set this aside until tomorrow and go brief my team?” he asked after a moment of silence.

“Of course.” Melly went on tiptoe to plant a kiss on his lips and broke free to grab her notes from the desk. “I’m ready. Did you want an executive summary right now,

first?”

“Any game changers? Anyone find a cure for this?”

Shaking her head, she had to lay it out. “Nothing so hopeful.”

“Tell it to all of us at the same time then.” He linked his fingers in hers and they headed out of the room.

The atmosphere in the dining room was serious. The Moellars hadn’t been coffee drinkers, which was hardly surprising given their occupation as farmers and the level of income that probably generated. Nowhere near enough for indulging in the rare Terran coffee. The kitchen shelves held plain label synthcaff though and the men were nursing mugs. Melly had opted for herbal tea and was using a teacup from the wedding china, in a defiant mood now, wanting the dishes to be enjoyed by someone for what was probably the last time ever, given the way things were going.

“All right,” Jeff said, rapping his knuckles on the table. “Current sitrep?”

Cody spoke up. “Drones out on a three mile perimeter, nothing coming our way.”

Nodding as if satisfied by the status, Jeff turned to her. “Doc, I hereby give you the floor—tell us what you found in the huge medical report.”

“With footnotes no less.” She sipped her tea. “Maybe the most surprising thing was they had a name for this on Old Terra. A researcher dug up the fact early on in the outbreak.”

“The ancestors had this on the home world?” Trent was incredulous. “I never read about it in any history class.”

Melly shook her head. “It was a dead end, forgive the pun. Apparently for them this scenario was an entertainment genre.”

“Those people should have come to Randal Four and lived it,” Samms muttered, grabbing a cookie and dunking it in his synthcaff. “Not much entertainment value.”

“The ancestors called the infected zombies. Lore was they could only be stopped by a head shot or a big enough blow to the head to destroy whatever’s left of the brain.” Melly found it fascinating the ancestors had actually enjoyed thinking about a post-apocalyptic world like the exact situation she was living through with no enjoyment whatsoever.

“Which we already know,” Jeff said, drumming his fingers on the table. “Fascinating as this is, can we get to more current news, doc?”

“Of course, sorry. According to the records, the first cases of this mysterious virus occurred in the highlands up north, in a small town called Hastings Corner. Patient Zero appears to have been a five year old child who said he was bitten by a stray cat. No evidence of rabies or other feline-related viruses. Five other people in town fell ill at the same time and three had been bitten or scratched by a cat as well.”

“Not to self—avoid cats,” Cody said.

“The vector could be any warm blooded animal,” Melly said, “Although there weren’t any later reports I found mentioning animal bites in that locale. Transmission switched over to human to human. The boy ran a very high fever, appeared to die and then reanimated, biting his family members and the attending doctor and nurse in a wild frenzy, judging by the incident notes. At that point everyone from the town who was sick was airlifted by the military to the main hospital in the city we just left. The authorities quarantined the town but then there were similar incidents in three other rural communities. A visitor to one of the towns flew home on a commercial shuttle,

unaware they were contagious and turned on the flight, biting the people who helped restrain them.”

“I can see the pattern,” Jeff said. “It gets out of control given the slightest chance and people don’t want to believe they’ve got the killer bug or they hide it until it’s too late.”

“Odd it started in rural towns,” Samms commented.

“Makes you wonder, doesn’t it?” Jeff responded, raising his eyebrows.

Melly shifted her gaze from one man to the other. “You think this was a manufactured virus? Someone was testing it, using innocent men, women and children as lab animals? Who would do such an unforgivable thing and why?”

“Excellent questions, doc,” Jeff said. “Were there any answers in the report?”

“No, this line of speculation never arose.” She thought it over. “Or was suppressed or redacted.”

“We’ll table it for now then.”

Melly suspected Jeff and his men knew facts she didn’t but decided now wasn’t the time to press for answers. “Symptoms are the same as we’ve seen for ourselves in Paulson at the cargo warehouse—high fever, much higher than a human can normally survive, violent nausea, convulsions, apparent clinical death and then reanimation with the glowing eyes we’ve observed and the overwhelming desire to eat raw flesh and kill anyone in the vicinity. All traces of the previous personality disappear as does any higher functioning such as language or the ability to perform tasks, not even simple ones like opening a door.”

“You said there was no cure and no vaccination?” Jeff prompted.

“A small group was working on it at the university biosciences and medical lab and I believe they might have been making progress. Dr. Brisendine was irate to learn they’d disappeared overnight recently, spirited away by unknown parties. He was going to demand answers but of course as we all saw on the holo of the meeting, he never got the chance.” Melly shook her head at the missed opportunity. So frustrating to know there had been research which might have helped and then was cut off for unknown reasons. “Oh and before I forget there had been reports the time from being bitten to turning was decreasing drastically as the virus mutates.”

“Anything else?” Jeff asked.

Mentally reviewing her notes, she said, “One other thing—the authorities set up a camp for the uninfected who were coming into the city and flooding the hospitals seeking reassurance or treatment for their loved ones. It was at the city’s municipal stadium and had extensive resources as well as military medical staff and security. I strongly urge we check it out.”

“Already done, doc, and the results weren’t encouraging.” Jeff nodded to Cody. “Show us.”

“Captain found mention of the place in the Minutes so I sent drones to get an overview,” the soldier said.

Melly blinked and there was a holo in the middle of the table, showing the stadium from above and then zooming in ever closer. She gasped and closed her eyes at the terrible scene of carnage—bodies on the field and in the seats. Before she averted her eyes she saw a few infected roaming the stands and lumbering through the playing field.

“My guess is the guards didn’t screen well enough, let in a few people they shouldn’t have and when those victims turned, uncontrollable mayhem happened,” Jeff said. “The military medical facility in the parking lot is much the same scene, totally deserted except for the truly dead.”

Shaken, she sipped at her now cold tea. “I guess the only other relevant facts I gleaned are that a few patients simply die from the virus and don’t reanimate at all. And again as we’ve seen, if the infected ravage the body of an uninfected drastically enough, the victim doesn’t reanimate either. The authorities increased the mortality rate estimate from 95% to 99%. Based on preliminary data the indications are about 1% of humans can be bitten and not become infected. Of course they might die from side effects of the bite or scratch if not treated promptly but the virus itself never takes hold. That’s what the research team was focusing on, trying to develop a formula to replicate what the 1% were born with in their DNA. The exact sequence was in the notes, so if I had the right equipment I could test us or anyone else to check on immunity status.”

“Can you work on the cure, doc?” Jeff asked, leaning forward.

She blinked in astonishment. “Me? I’m a newly licensed general practitioner, not a research scientist. I’m not even a specialist in any remotely applicable branch of medicine. I suppose if I had a formula and instructions for a cure and the right ingredients, I could follow it and create a vaccine or an antidote.”

“Cody’s a good cook—he could help you,” Trent said, slapping his friend on the back. Everyone laughed and Melly was relieved at the way the joke broke the tension in the room.

“We’d need a lab,” Melly pointed out. “Can’t whip up a complicated substance like this would be in the kitchen of a farmhouse. But there aren’t any notes in the report with details of what the researchers were doing. Probably too esoteric and

complicated for the audience Dr. Brisendine had at the meeting we saw.”

There was a brief silence before Jeff spoke up again. “Our job is to not get bitten or scratched. We’re not testing our luck on being among the 1% and I’m tabling any further discussion of us making a cure. Samms, you’re up.”

“Using the APC’s comdeck, I searched for anyone broadcasting anywhere on the planet,” the soldier said crisply. “There’s a recorded message on a four hour cycle offering shelter, food and medical help, originating somewhere out in the remote territory. Caught flashes of what might have been military traffic, again in a remote area on the other side of the third biggest city. A few civilian rigs making calls with old style tech.” He shrugged. “They mostly sound pretty desperate. Isolated. One with a good strong signal cut off in the middle of a broadcast and I gather the infected had broken into their bunker. Never came back.”

“Log them all. See what you can find on the military traffic. We might want to try hooking up with them in coming days,” Jeff said. “Anything else?”

“Yeah, a real strong, encrypted signal blast, probably carrying a fuck ton of data.” Samms looked around the table and Melly could tell he was about to deliver a bombshell piece of information. “Sending offplanet.”

He got the reaction he was probably hoping for as the group exclaimed in surprise.

“Not the emergency warn off beacon?” Melly asked even though she was sure Samms was too much of an expert to be confused.

“Definitely not,” he said. “This signal is tightly focused and going to parts unknown.”

Jeff didn’t seem interested in any more information on the mystery signal. Melly wondered if his attitude was because she was there or whether this was related to

whatever he and his men were really doing on Randal Four but she didn't ask. Military secrets weren't her concern.

"There's an obstacle on our way to reaching your home tomorrow," Jeff said to her, taking her by surprise. "Cody, show her the holo of the bridge."

"Sent my drones to check out the route for tomorrow and found this," the soldier said, gesturing at the table. A holo of the Danna River bridge sprang into being.

She blinked. "That can't be right. What the seven hells happened to it?"

The bridge ended midspan in a mass of broken, contorted roadway, struts and support wires. A ground truck dangled off the end, threatening to plunge the rest of the way into the torrent. Groundcars and other vehicles were jammed into all lanes of the bridge, and clearly there had been a mass exodus underway. The center span was missing completely, although when she forced herself to pay attention to the details she observed pieces of it in the river, impeding the flow.

"Did it collapse from the weight of all the cars?" she asked in bewilderment.

Shaking his head, Jeff said, "It was deliberately blown. Could have been the authorities, trying to stem the outflow of potentially infected or it could have been insurgents from the communities on the other side of the river, to keep the horde out."

Melly sank back in her chair, stomach in knots. "But we have to cross the river to get to the suburb where my parents live. What are we going to do? Return to the city and try to steal a flyer?"

"Good idea but fortunately no. We found a place upriver where the flow is less and although the bridge there was destroyed as well, we think we can get across in the APC's."

“Now you’re telling me those hulking metal boxes can float ?”

The soldiers exchanged amused glances and Samms stifled a laugh.

“Not exactly,” Jeff said patiently. “They can wade across or even make it submerged if the water isn’t too deep. The vehicles can be made airtight for a short period of time.”

Melly examined the new holo which Cody had placed next to the first. The river did appear narrower and more placid at the new spot. She ignored the broken bridge in the new locale. “If this is the Sanmira Crossing, it’s miles out of our way.”

“No choice,” Jeff said, not unkindly. “I wanted you to be prepared for the detour tomorrow.”

“Thank you,” she gritted out although at the moment she wasn’t feeling grateful in the least. The necessity for more delays on getting to her family tore at her. “Are we done?”

“Sure thing, doc. We’ll be leaving bright and early so get a good night’s sleep.”

She could sense Jeff’s eyes on her as she left the room, heading for the stairs and her temporary bedroom. Behind her a discussion broke out about the interplanetary signal Samms had found but Melly didn’t care about any of that right now, unless help was coming to Randal Four as a result which didn’t seem likely.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The old house was fairly silent in the night, only mild creaking, and there were the sounds of nightbirds outside. Jeff completed his circuit of the grounds and headed inside, ascending the old staircase inside carefully in his heavy combat boots. He'd learned there was one riser that squeaked like a banshee when stepped on wrong. At the second floor he made his way to the door of the blue bedroom, which stood slightly ajar. Pushing it open, he saw the room illuminated by a gentle nightlight. Between that and the glow of the moons through the window, he didn't need his night vision to admire Melly's sensuous curves as she slept. Since she'd invited him to her room earlier, he'd hoped she might be awake but he knew she needed her sleep.

He leaned against the door frame to savor the view although he felt a little bit like a creeper. She'd invited him to her room, hadn't she? He was grateful to the Lords of Space yet again for allowing him to meet her and to save her at the spaceport. She was a rare woman and he couldn't believe how lucky he was she was attracted to him as much as he was to her. He suspected he was falling in love, which scared and excited him. The life of a Sectors Special Forces operator didn't lend itself to forming romantic relationships and he'd never been serious about any woman before Melly. He wasn't an unfeeling jerk—he'd made sure the woman he was involved with understood things were strictly temporary until he left on his next deployment, which was always pending. There were plenty of women whose only interest was bragging rights for having been with a Special Forces operator and who didn't want more than a night or two anyway. He'd gotten tired of such experiences—physical release was all well and good but he'd started to long for something else, a deeper attachment, to know he mattered to a partner as much as he cared for her. To be anchored in the ever-shifting world.

He'd never met anyone like Melly before.

Of course the middle of an apocalypse wasn't exactly the ideal time to foster a serious relationship but he was going to try.

She wore an old tee shirt and a pair of panties, lace this time, and had thrown the covers off in her slumbers. Her blaster lay on the nightstand next to the bed and he approved her caution, keeping the weapon close. Maybe she was listening to the warnings he kept trying to give her.

He couldn't begrudge her the optimism about what they'd find when they finally arrived at her house tomorrow, misplaced though it was, but he was glad to see she wasn't being willfully unconcerned. This was a dangerous world they'd arrived on, nothing like he'd expected and certainly not at all like the home she'd left when she went off to medical school.

She murmured in her dream, stirred and sat up, stretching sleepily, giving him a smile that made his heart pound. "Hey. I wondered when you'd accept my invitation."

Jeff stepped into the room. "I'm doing my rounds, checking up. You probably need your sleep?—"

"Not more than I need you," she said, her voice inviting, laced with a teasing tone. She reached for him and Jeff moved to the bed, sitting on the edge. Melly wrapped herself around him and lifted her face for a kiss, which he was happy to provide. The embrace lasted quite a while, their tongues dancing and hands roaming, before she broke it off to stare at him in the dim light. "I can be quiet if you can. The guys are asleep on the first floor or outside on guard duty, right?" She slid her hand inside the waistband of his pants and fondled his aching cock. "You're entitled to downtime too, captain."

“It’s a few hours until we change the guard, so yes I’m not on duty exactly.” He struggled to resist the effect her below the belt massage was having on him as she stroked and played.

Melly withdrew her hand, which drew an instant protest from him but she swept the covers back and patted the bed invitingly. “It’s a nice firm mattress, big enough for two. Especially two like us who want to be united as one.”

“I want that—I want you in every way I can have you.” He rose and pulled off his t shirt.

“It’s so damn sexy when you do that,” she said, reaching up to stroke his abs, lingering over the scar of an old wound. He had more than a few, despite having been run through the rejuve resonator by the military doctors more than once “Such a guy thing the way you whip the shirt off.”

“It’s sexy when you take off your shirt too,” he assured her as he sat to remove his boots and socks.

“Oh, like this?” She was almost purring as she pulled the garment up and over her head and threw it aside, revealing her bare breasts. “Need any help?”

Between his own eagerness to be with her and Melly’s determined efforts to unfasten his pants and set his aching shaft free, Jeff was naked in short order. His arousal stood hard and proud, ready for her attention and she obliged without another word, sucking him into her mouth and proceeding to do things to him he couldn’t resist. She hummed while she had him at her mercy and Jeff was afraid he was going to come right then. The tingling in his balls grew insistent and he pulled away from her.

“I need to be inside you now ,” he said, laying her on her back and coming over her. His cock probed the vee of her thighs, which Melly helpfully parted to give him

access. Jeff rubbed the tip of his shaft up and down her soft folds, enjoying how wet and aroused she was. He took himself in hand and entered her, going balls deep with one thrust since she was so ready.

Melly arched her back and breathed a sound of pleasure that inflamed him. She was hot and tight around him, providing resistance with her inner core muscles which heightened his passion, and she moved her body in perfect time with his as he pumped in and out. She had her legs locked around his butt, holding him to the task and the furred points of her breasts against his chest emphasized the passion she was feeling. He moved one hand to caress the pearl of nerves hidden in her folds and Melly shattered, climaxing so hard he was swept along with her in a whiteout of sensation and strong emotion. True to her promise she bit her lip and kept her cries of satisfaction locked inside. Deep in her most private places, Jeff felt the pressure of her body milking his for the hot seed, and was overwhelmed at the way the two of them had united into one. He collapsed onto her for an instant before taking his weight on his elbows.

Staring into her flushed, beautiful face, he said, “I’ve never felt like this before. You’re a special person, Melisande Jericho and I’m the luckiest bastard in the Sectors, to be here with you right now.”

“Kiss me,” she said, pulling him down.

Lips locked, they indulged in a long, drawn out kiss, and then he rolled onto his back, bringing her with him to rest against his shoulder. Although he regretted losing the haven of her body for his cock, he wanted to hold her and savor the comfort of simply being with her in the postcoital glow. He’d do anything required to keep her safe from the chaos this planet had fallen into.

When Melly woke up in the morning, a little sore from the night’s activities, which had included a vigorous round two, Jeff was already dressed and gone. She didn’t

take his absence amiss, remembering he'd told her he had to do another tour of the premises before dawn. She stretched and sat up, the rumpled sheets reminding her of the comfort they'd found in each other. Jeff banished her nightmares when he came to her bed. He was a pretty special guy and she couldn't believe her luck in meeting him, although granted the circumstances were hardly ideal. He was a skilled lover, considerate and creative. Not to mention well endowed. Stretching like a cat she would have purred in satisfaction if she could. No complaints from me. Jeff took delight in every aspect of her body, which was pleasing since she was occasionally a bit insecure about certain things, like the ample nature of her curves. Jeff relished them, lingering over her breasts as if he could never get enough and claiming her hips and derriere cushioned him perfectly when he was deep inside, doing dirty and delicious things to make her see stars and comets. Multiple orgasms had worn her out in the best possible way. He could be sweet and he could turn on the alpha male eroticism and Melly loved it all.

She did a few quick isometric exercises in bed to alleviate the effects of the unaccustomed activity of the night before, then rose and went to take a quick shower before getting dressed. Sparing a glance for the bed, she sighed, pulled the sheets and comforter level and then she packed her things and headed down the stairs, leaving her pack in the living room beside the couch.

Cody was in the kitchen, flipping pancakes. He waved a spatula at her. "Morning, doc. Captain wants to leave in an hour. We're keeping an eye on a mob of infected that may intersect our route to the river so we haven't got much time." Without asking he stacked three giant pancakes on her plate and handed her a bottle of syrup. "Sorry there's no bacon but I have scrambled eggs if you'd like."

Fork already in its way to her lips, Melly paused. "Eggs? I thought you said the food in the stasis keepers had gone bad?"

He winked. "The Moellar farm has a big flock of chickens. I strolled out there this

morning after the damn rooster woke me up with all his noise and robbed the nests, got a few sharp pecks but the old biddies decided they liked me when I spread fistfuls of feed for them.”

“I don’t want your bravery to be in vain,” she said with a smile. “Dish me up some eggs by all means.”

Cody obliged with a smaller plate full of fluffy scrambled eggs and she dug in. “You’re my last customer, doc, so if it’s all right with you, I’m going to catch a shower and go help with the APC’s so we can depart on time.”

“What’s wrong with the APC’s?” she asked in alarm.

“Nothing, don’t worry. Just doing a bit of maintenance and rearranging items in the cargo compartments. Routine,” he assured her. Dumping the pans in the sink, he walked out with a wave.

The kitchen was eerily empty without anyone else there so Melly rushed through the rest of her breakfast, wondering when they’d have a hot meal again. At my house, silly. Dad’s got solar power for backup.

When she brought her dishes to the sink, she hesitated. Despite the dire situation it felt wrong to leave a mess behind. Quickly she loaded the dishwasher and started it, hoping the cycle would complete before the power went down again. No one would be here to maintain the connections if there was any problem. Standing at the counter she glanced out the door and was delighted by masses of colorful flowers so she checked her chrono and then walked through the antipug screen and onto the back porch. The garden was extensive and she walked along the border enjoying the perfume and the accompaniment of songs from the birds in the hug trees shading the lawn. She walked around a corner and saw the grave ahead.

Pausing in midstep, she swallowed hard and retraced her steps to the flowers, picking a handful of the ones with easily broken stems and no thorns. Then she walked to the grave and contemplated the hastily written inscription on the board serving as a marker.

“Betty Marie Mollar,” she read out loud. “Beloved wife, mother and friend.”

Tears in her eyes she sank to her knees in the lush grass beside the grave and laid her floral offering on the fresh mound of dirt. “Thank you for letting us use your beautiful home,” she whispered, tears coming to her eyes.

“We found her husband in the barn,” Jeff said from behind her, footsteps cushioned by the grass. “We think he opened all the stalls, set the herd of cows free in the big pasture and let the chickens fly loose and then killed himself.”

She rose to her feet, stiff from being cross legged on the damp ground. Jeff came to help and pulled her into a hug. “They had a good life here,” he said. “Many happy years from the looks of it.”

“Was he infected?” she asked.

“Hard to tell from the condition of the body, but I’m guessing yes. She got sick first, maybe even turned and he did what he had to do, for both of them.” Jeff’s voice was full of compassion.

“Promise me you’ll do the same,” Melly said fiercely, locking eyes with him. “If I get bitten or scratched swear to me you won’t let me become one of those things.”

There was silence between them but the feeling wasn’t awkward in any way. She could tell they were in agreement, if unhappy about the fact.

“I give you my word. It would be the hardest thing I ever did, sweetheart, and my life would be over too once it was done. Like Mr. Moellar. The light would have gone out.”

She rested her head on his chest and sighed. “But you’d fight on, wouldn’t you? You wouldn’t give up. Promise me that too. If—if anyone else is still alive and uninfected on Randal Four, they need you.”

“Melisande, you have to make me the same promise,” he said gently. “If something happens to me?—”

Melly shook her head violently and put her fingers over his lips. “Don’t even say it. We’re going to get to my family’s house and we’ll make plans from there and it’ll all be fine.”

Jeff stared at her as if sorting through various responses and then kissed her cheek. “Sure. Are you ready to go? Got all your things? We’re moving out now.”

“I left my backpack in the living room.” She took his hand and they walked toward the house in a companionable silence.

I feel like we took vows but not the normal kind. This is a screwed up world we’re in but I’m glad Jeff’s here with me. Melly squeezed his hand as they ascended the broad stairs to the porch and Jeff gave her a genuine smile and a side hug.

“We’ll be fine, doc, you’ll see.” He walked away in the direction of the vehicles and she ran into the house for her things. When she emerged, Zach was waiting for her.

“You found a friend,” she said in surprise, looking at the large brown and white canine seated at his side. “Wherever did you pick up the dog?”

“In the barn, standing guard,” he said a little uncomfortably. Probably because of what the faithful dog had been guarding—the body of his former master. “Had a big old bag of kibble torn open so he hasn’t been going hungry. Took me a while to win his trust. Name’s Buddy according to the tag on his collar.”

Melly let the dog sniff her hand and then once he’d licked her thoroughly, she petted his head. “What happens to him now?”

“The captain said we could take him with us. He’s real well behaved.” Zach was eyeing her with a frown and shifted from one foot to the other. “I just...sometimes I get feelings, you know? And I gotta a feeling we’re going to need Buddy. Doc, can I ask you a favor?”

“Sure but I don’t know much about dogs,” she said with a laugh, trying to absorb the fact Jeff had given permission to take the dog. She was astonished he’d agreed but it pleased her no end.

“He’s kinda limping on the left forepaw. I know you’re a people doctor not a veterinarian but could you—would you take a look?”

“You realize I’d be breaking the law if I do?” She winked to show she wasn’t upset and took the sting out of the comment.

Zach did an elaborate survey of the completely empty landscape around them. “I don’t think those laws are in effect anymore, doc.”

“Sure, I’ll do a quick exam. I hate to see an animal suffer. Bring him over to the steps.” She retraced her path to the porch and sat on the third riser.

When Zach walked Buddy over to her and had him sit, he ordered the dog to shake hands and he raised the paw in question with no hesitation.

Melly took it in hand and leaned in close to peer at the pads. “If he bites me you’re in big trouble,” she warned Zach. “Wait a minute, there’s something sharp here.” She ran her thumb over the spot and Buddy whimpered. “Most likely a spikehog spine. He must have been messing with one recently. They shed their spines as a defense mechanism. I’ll have to check his mouth and face as well. I’ve got to remove any I find and it won’t be pretty.”

“Thought you said you weren’t a vet?”

“I’m not but I helped my Dad more than once when our family dogs mixed it up with spikehogs and he had to pull the quills.”

She did a thorough exam, marveling at how patient the dog was. Peripherally she was aware of the other men gathering in a circle to watch her but her concentration was all for her four-footed patient. “Good boy,” she said, patting Buddy’s head. “Maybe three quills in his muzzle, none in the mouth, thank goodness and the one in the paw. If I don’t extract them now they work their way into the body and do immense damage. It’s a painful way to go.” She checked with Jeff, who was watching her with an expressionless face. “It won’t take long, since there are so few quills.”

The captain turned to Zach. “Tell me again we need the dog? Or should we put him out of his misery?”

“I have that feeling, sir.” Zach rubbed the back of his neck. “Same one when we were about to get ambushed on Boronna Three. And when the tangos sneaked into the base on Quidly One and?—”

Jeff held up a hand. “I believe you, soldier. Your feelings or hunches or whatever they are have proved themselves too many times in the past.”

“If Buddy co-operates, I can do this in about five minutes,” Melly said, anxious to

keep the poor dog alive. She was confident she could handle the procedure.

“You have what you need to take care of it?” Jeff asked.

“Yes and without putting much of a dent in our own supplies.”

“Today is all about you, doc,” he said with a sweeping gesture. “If you want to take the time before we head out to your folks, I’ve got no problem waiting a few minutes.”

“I probably need two of you to hold him,” she said. “It’s not exactly painless although I’ll give him a numbing agent. And an antibiotic. Most people don’t realize many of the same drugs we use on humans can also be used on animals. Not all though but I’ll do what my Dad developed as tried and true methods which always worked.”

“Was he a vet?” Zach asked.

“No, just self taught on a lot of subjects.” She was busy setting out the equipment and injects she’d need. Calculating the doses for Buddy took a minute but she settled on the same ones she’d use for a small child. “He’s an engineer and he consults for most of the big companies on the planet. He does offworld consulting too.” Talking about him gave her a pang—her parents and her brother had to be alive and waiting for her. Melly donned gloves and ran the decontam ray, added a mask and indicated for Zach and Cody to get a good grip on Buddy.

The next few minutes were tense but she kept telling herself it was like treating a young child, who wouldn’t understand what she was doing either. Zach kept up a reassuring stream of chatter in a low voice, patting the dog and telling him what a good boy he was. Cody kept silent but his hold on Buddy was firm but gentle. Most of the spines came out easily enough, telling her the encounter with the spikehog

must have been recent but the last one in Buddy's muzzle was stubborn. The spines had hooks at the ends so she was forced to inflict damage as she yanked them out. By the time she got the last one and laid it aside on the stair she was sweating and the dog was trembling and whimpering. She gave him the medinject of antibiotic, cleaned the wounds and sealed them and said, "All done."

"You have a nice bedside manner, doc," Jeff said. "Well done. Are we good to go now?"

"It's not what I paid all those credits to learn in medschool," she said, patting the dog on the head. He didn't seem to hold a grudge, licking her face., "But I'm glad I could help."

Zach carried Buddy to the APC and Melly started to gather up the extracted spines and other trash.

Jeff stopped her with one hand on her arm. "Leave it, doc. We should get going."

Melly decided not to argue with him this time. She closed up her medkit and tucked it in the backpack, which Jeff took from her, slinging it over his shoulder easily. When she stood up he gave her a hug and a kiss on the lips and then led her to the waiting vehicle. Cody already had the engine revving. Buddy was curled up on a seat in the rear and she gave him a couple of pats before moving to her own seat.

Five minutes later the APCs were rolling down the long Moellar driveway, leaving a cloud of dust in their wake. From her seat Melly watched the big farmhouse recede in the rear vids until it was no longer visible and then with a sigh she focused on the forward screens instead and settled in for a long day of driving, with a reunion with her family at the end.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 2:56 am

They were stopped in a small park off the two-lane highway. Melly and the others in her APC were crowded around the vids, staring at a steady stream of infected crossing the road ahead.

“We’ll have to wait for them to pass before we make it to the river and try to cross,” Jeff said, shooting her an apologetic look. “Could take an hour or so given the size of the group.”

She returned to her seat and dug in her pack for a snack. “It’s okay, I totally get it. I don’t want to be in the middle of any more infected mobs, not even if we are safe inside the APC. After we do get across the river it’s only two more hours to get home.”

“Barring further unforeseen problems,” he said. With a shrug he immediately apologized in response to her glare. “I can’t help being pessimistic. Comes with the job.”

Melly waved the ration bar in the air as she chewed and swallowed. “It’s okay, I’m used to you now. We balance each other—I’m probably too optimistic and you’re on the dark side.”

Everyone laughed as Jeff acknowledged her comment with a muttered, “True.”

“Well I’m an optimist,” Cody announced with a grin. “As long as my drones ain’t showing any more infected coming, you’ll only see me in a good mood.” A holo came to life in the well of the APC, showing a few infected stragglers at the end of the mob and then the landscape was clear beyond them.

Soon enough the APCs were on the move again and Melly leaned forward in her seat to watch as they approached the river. The bridge was a tangled mess as she'd seen before and abandoned cars littered the road. Cody pushed through where he had to and detoured to avoid other tangles until he paused at the riverbank, which was a gentle slope to the waterline. Melly remembered this was a popular spot for launching individual mini boats and rafts during the summer months due to the easy access to the water.

"Sensors show a pretty smooth riverbed here," Cody said, studying the readouts. "Flow isn't too heavy, depth is good." Checking with Jeff, he added, "It's about a hundred yards across."

"You think we can make it?"

"No problem." Cody patted the panel in front of him. "Gracie may not be the most up to date model but she's tough."

"Gracie?" Melly had to choke back a giggle. "You named this hulk?"

The soldier made a great show of being insulted at her question but his upbeat tone took the sting out of it. "Of course. Can't ask the lady to do her best for us if we won't even name her."

Assuming this was a soldier's superstition, Melly swallowed her mirth and nodded. "I see. Of course."

"Safety restraints," Jeff said, fastening his own as he spoke. "Once we're in the current there may be rough parts."

She heard him checking with Trent in the vehicle behind them over the subaural com and wondered briefly if the other APC had acquired a name as well. She was tempted

to ask but decided this wasn't the moment for lightheartedness. She got a death grip on her seat as the APC tilted and headed down the sloping bank to the water. She had a flash of panic when the vids showed the water coming up over the hood and submerging them. The vehicle shuddered as it moved into the full force of the current and Cody wrestled with the controls, visibly working hard to keep them on course. The engine whined and spun up.

"Is an APC really meant to go into the water?" she asked, raising her voice to be heard, forgetting the subaural com in her fright.

We'll be fine , Jeff replied . It's not their primary mission but they're tough machines and Gracie can handle it. You don't see us leaking anywhere, do you?

As if his words were a sign, a tiny gusher burst through a seam near the window, even though the shutters were up. Melly gasped and rushed from her seat to avoid being soaked. Did you jinx us?

Jeff and the soldiers were laughing. Not likely. We'll clean up on the other side.

Zach moved to stuff a rag into the spot where the water was jetting. Sorry about that, doc. Maybe Gracie didn't appreciate your doubting her.

Unsure if he was serious or not, Melly didn't respond. She took the seat next to Buddy, who was watching with his ears cocked at an alert position. Petting his silky fur was soothing and she decided they'd needed the dog for this if nothing else.

"You're better than a tranq inject," she whispered into his ear. "Good dog."

It seemed to Melly the river crossing took forever and her nerves were tied up in knots the entire time but Gracie didn't spring any more leaks and eventually the APC clawed its way up the opposite bank. Jeff called a halt and the group exited the

vehicles so the soldiers could do a visual inspection of the dripping metal boxes. Melly took Buddy for a short walk on a leash, Zach having packed up all the dog supplies he could find at the Moellar home before they left.

She enjoyed the fresh air and Buddy enjoyed the new scents and leaving his own on all suitable places.

Don't wander too far, doc, Jeff said from where he was standing next to the APC's . Just because there aren't any mobs of infected here there could still be individuals. And where's your blaster?

Realizing he was right and she was being too casual, she tugged the dog away from his latest fascination with a tree and hastened to rejoin her companions. Melly left her blaster in its holster at her hip, confident the dog would let her know if danger approached. Trent and Samms were on guard duty, weapons drawn, while Jeff and the other two men did their inspection.

"Are we good to keep going?" she asked, praying the answer would be affirmative. Being so close to home now was torture. Soon she'd have her answers about her family's fate.

"Two more minutes," Jeff said, walking over to join her. "They might not be home, you know."

"If my parents needed to leave, they'd have written me a note." Melly was confident. "They knew my arrival date. And then we can follow them to wherever they might have gone."

The captain didn't agree immediately but she chose to ignore his silence. She was well aware he wanted to get to their ranch site and whatever gear and supplies he had cached there in their cargo pods but Melly assumed he'd oblige her again and take

her to her family if they had left the area for safer conditions elsewhere. After all, Jeff wanted to find survivors and people in authority—he'd said so multiple times.

Ten minutes later she and the others were back inside the APCs and on the move again. Cody's drones were scanning ahead and behind for traces of the infected and finding nothing, which was reassuring.

"Not as many population centers on this side of the river, or at least not here," Melly said. "The nearest big city is several hundred miles away."

The closer she got to home, the more excited she became and also the more apprehensive. Surreptitiously she tried her handheld again but the call didn't go through. She couldn't even finish picking the address to send the com to before a harsh beeping cut her off and the screen flashed white static at her. "Can you send a drone or two ahead to my house?" she asked Cody, raising her voice to be heard over the engine, forgetting the subaural com until too late yet again. Using the near telepathic device didn't come naturally to her the way it did to the soldiers.

Already done on the captain's orders, he replied. The area appears deserted, doc.

Oh. Well thanks for the effort. Melly slumped against the back of her seat and stared at the vids. As the APCs got closer to her home and then entered the actual neighborhood, she grew tense, sitting at the edge of her seat and then standing, balancing against the motion of the APC, one hand on the frame of the driver's seat to help.

Doesn't look good, doc ," Jeff said as they passed a series of closed up houses. Many had big red or yellow X's on the doors, signifying illness or death inside.

Three homes in a row were burned to the ground and the one next to them was smoldering. She knew the owners of all of them, or at least who had lived there when

she was young. Melly tried to ignore the bodies in the street, not wanting to see anyone she knew, much less her family. A car was crashed into a tree, power lines were down...the whole neighborhood was eerie and abandoned. Nothing moved other than their two vehicles. Melly saw a cat streaking away from one house and remembered the original vector for the virus was suspected to have been cats. But where did they acquire it?

“This is my street,” she said in excitement as the APC made a sweeping turn to the left. “My house is at the end of the cul de sac.”

Jeff spun his chair to face her. “When we get there, my men and I are going in first. We’ll clear the house while you wait in the APC, understand?” His voice was stern.

Melly swallowed hard. Although she hated the idea of anyone else going into the house before her, after all the events of the past few days she couldn’t protest on anything but emotional grounds. Locking down her first protest, she nodded.

Cody pulled into her driveway, Trent right behind in the second APC and Melly watched the vids eagerly, expecting her family to emerge from the partially open front door. The drivers maneuvered the big transports into position for a rapid getaway and then Cody cut the engine. The silence was startling.

“Groundcars parked in the garage,” Zach said.

“Yeah, noticed that.” Jeff glanced at her. “Could mean nothing.”

“Please can you go inside now?” she asked, voice breaking. Faced with the reality of her silent home, Melly was terrified and losing hope.

He squeezed her shoulder as he passed her on his way to the exit, Cody right behind. Zach had already unsealed the portal and stepped outside, blaster at the ready. The air

wafting in was smoky and held the stench of death, causing immediate nausea in Melly's stomach. Buddy shifted uneasily and a low rumble came from his chest. It was the first time he'd exhibited any caution or concern and she gripped the leash tightly.

The portal closed and she watched through the windshield as Jeff and the others formed up into a stack and went into the house as if expecting to be attacked, weapons drawn.

"No," she said, scarcely aware she was speaking. "It'll all be fine. They're here." Melly kept her focus on the dog, who licked her hand. "They have to be. Please don't shoot my family by accident." She knew she was being unfair to Jeff and his men, who she trusted implicitly but her mind couldn't stop visualizing wild scenarios.

There were no messages over the subaural com and Melly was afraid to ask questions, suspecting she wouldn't like the answers. Impatience mixed with dread flooded her mind. As long as there was no bad news, she could have hope a few minutes longer. She prayed to the Lords of Space her family had evacuated although the groundcars parked in the garage were a bad sign. Jeff emerged from the front door, heading in her direction, his face set in grim lines. Melly retreated to her chair, trying to breathe against the pressure mounting in her chest. The portal slid open and he stepped into the APC.

"Melly?" His voice was soft.

She swallowed hard and stood up, walking into his open arms and laying her head on his chest, tears already dripping down her cheeks.

"I'm sorry, sweetheart. Your parents are dead."

The world spun around her and only his strong embrace kept her on her feet.

“You—you’re sure?” she asked.

“We found them in the largest upstairs bedroom. She’d turned and he?—”

A wild desire to deny the truth of what he was saying caused Melly to put her fingers on his lips. “Don’t. Don’t say it. I want to see them.”

“No, you don’t. It’s bad, honey.” He stared into her eyes. “I know you’re a doctor and all but this is your family. You don’t need this vision—keep your memories of them as they were.”

Shock over the loss encased her in ice and she couldn’t speak over the pain in her heart. Finally she found words. “Can we bury them?” she asked, impelled to do the one final kindness she could arrange.

He heaved a huge sigh. “Do you think it’s safe for my men to handle the—to do a job like this?”

“The medical report said the virus dies within twenty-four hours of the infected being terminated,” she said. “Please? I can’t bear to think of leaving them where they are and driving away.”

Jeff studied her face for a long time, his own impassive. She got the impression he was balancing competing mission priorities against her very human desire to take care of her parents in the only way remaining to her. “All right, as long as the area stays clear, I’ll ask for volunteers. I’ll help.”

“I can do some of the digging too,” she said. Afraid to form the words she forced herself to move on to the next pressing topic. “And my brother?”

“No sign of him in the house. Your Dad left a note addressed to you.” Jeff pulled a

folded sheet of paper out of his pocket and handed it over.

Her hand was trembling so hard she almost dropped the precious paper. Jeff guided her to her seat.

“Take your time, sweetheart. I’ll be right here when you’re ready to go inside.” He leaned against the driver’s chairback.

Melly reached for his free hand and gave it a squeeze before unfolding the note, which had been sealed shut. It was hard to read with tears falling and she sniffed and brushed the moisture away impatiently. The paper was stained and torn at one side. Her father’s writing had always been bold, clear and strong but this note appeared as if it had been written by an old man scribbling, using the last of his strength.

“Melly, if you’re reading this, I’m so sorry your mother and I aren’t here any longer to help you. We tried to hold out but this plague is everywhere. Your mother succumbed yesterday but not before infecting me. I’m going to do what needs to be done. Know that we’re so proud of you and all you’ve accomplished, and will do in the future. I pray you can survive this horror our planet has become and help others to survive. You were the little girl rescuing lost kittens and taking care of people and I wouldn’t have it any other way. We love you to the moons and beyond, sweet girl.” It was signed Mom and Dad in wavering cursive. There was a line scrawled across the bottom in a different color of ink. “Mike is in the shelter.”

She took a deep breath and rose from her seat so fast she got dizzy. “My brother! He’s alive.”

Jeff took one step and stroked her arm. “Where, sweetheart? Not in the house—we searched.”

Melly pivoted and rushed to the portal. “In the shelter. I told you my Dad was

perpetually preparing for disasters and one of the things he did was dig into the hillside to build a refuge of last resort. The note says my brother is in there.” She slapped the control again because the door was moving too slowly to suit her and then squeezed through the opening before the panel had fully retracted, scraping her elbows as she went. She broke into a run as soon as her feet hit the ground, heading along the side of the house and toward the open land beyond. Buddy loped after her, barking wildly.

She heard Jeff cursing and over the com he said, Zach, Cody, with me out back. Doc’s little brother may be alive in some kind of a shelter.

Melly ignored everything, intent on reaching the hidden entrance to the family shelter, which her father had placed in a grove of trees to prevent anyone from finding it from above. The door leading below was camouflaged and as Jeff and the two soldiers he’d summoned arrived, she was dragging the camouflage nets aside. The men helped her and in a moment the access was revealed. It was a solid, plain door, with no markings to indicate what lay below. There was a closed box at one corner and Melly laid her hand on it, palm down as her companions watched.

“Persona lock,” she said, “Set for our family’s DNA markers.”

Jeff drew her back a step or two as there was a loud click and the box opened. A few simple controls were inside and she had to take a deep breath and calm herself enough to remember the proper sequence to open the actual door. She fumbled her first try and managed to get the code right on the second attempt. The panel slid aside, revealing stairs leading into the ground.

“We’ll go first,” Jeff said in a tone that brooked no argument. His grip on her upper arm was tight. “Zach, take point.”

Buddy was nosing around the small clearing and barking. Cody caught the dangling

leash and gave it to Melly. “If you don’t want him running off better hang onto him.”

She nodded, taking a deep breath of the air coming from the refuge. It was musty but there was no smell of death. As soon as Jeff released his hold and entered the tunnel she crowded right behind him. “Mike!” she yelled as she ran down the stairs, causing deafening echoes. “Mike, it’s me, Melly. And I brought friends.”

Buddy barked as if to emphasize her point.

Jeff held up a hand and they halted. “I know you’re anxious but keep it down, doc.”

The tunnel leveled out and since it was short, lit now by the lamps attached to the soldiers’ blast rifles, she could see the sealed door at the end. In a few hurried steps she was there, pushing Zach and Jeff out of the way. “I can open this like I did the outer door.”

“You can’t get in here,” said a quavering voice from the hidden speakers. “Whoever you are, you’d better go away. I—I’ve got a weapon.”

“Mike, it’s me, Melly,” she repeated. Hoping the audio feed was working. “We’re here to rescue you.”

Could he have a weapon? Jeff asked in her head.

My Dad stored all kinds of supplies in there so yes, it’s entirely possible. Out loud, she addressed her brother again, “I’m going to open the door so please don’t shoot us.”

There was no reply so she punched in the code. As soon as she hit the final key and the door began to cycle, Cody grabbed her and put her behind him. Jeff and Zach did their best to flank the door in the narrow space available and when the door was

partially open, they burst through.

“Don’t shoot him,” Melly screamed, terrified. “Let go of me,” she gritted out, struggling in Cody’s grasp.

All clear, captain? Cody asked, maintaining his hold.

Clear, let the doc come inside .

Rubbing her arm, Melly rushed away from Cody and stepped over the threshold. It was dim in the shelter but she saw her brother standing between Jeff and Zach and the next instant he came barreling into her like a freight train.

“It is you,” he cried. “Dad said you’d come but it’s been so long and it’s so bad out there?—”

She held him tight. “I’ve been trying to get here for days. Are you all right? You didn’t get sick or —or bitten?”

“Mom—Mom bit Dad,” he said in a choked voice. “And then I didn’t see her again. He was sick but he brought me out here and told me to stay until I ran out of supplies or you came, sis.”

Wordlessly she hugged him and they cried together while Jeff and his men stood aside respectfully. Trailing his leash Buddy circled around Melly and her brother and whined, pushing his cold nose against her arm and then Mike’s. The boy startled and pulled away from her, so she let him go.

“Is this your dog?” Mike asked, going to his knees and letting Buddy sniff his hand. The dog was all over him, wriggling in excitement, trying to sit in his lap, even though the animal was about the same size as the boy. “What’s his name?”

“This is Buddy,” Melly said. “He’s kind of all of our pet right now.”

I think I know why Zach was so sure we had to bring him, Jeff said over the com. He obviously thinks your brother is his human.

“Who are these guys?” Hugging a still ecstatic Buddy, Mike stared at the soldiers.

“This is Jeff, Zach and Cody,” she said, indicating each man. “They’re my friends. We met at the spaceport and they saved my life. They brought me here to find you...and Mom and Dad.”

The three men murmured quick greetings. Jeff stuck out his hand and gravely shook Mike’s. “We should get you out of here into the fresh air, kid. You did a great job hanging out in here and waiting for your sister.”

“I was scared,” Mike said, voice shaking a bit. “When Dad...when he brought me here and then when he left me alone. I had my books and my games on the handheld and at first I could see what was going on outside but then yesterday the vids failed.” He closed his eyes for a second. “I think being cut off was okay with me actually. Those—those people came through here a few days ago and they were like monsters from a trideo. I saw them chasing a person and—and...”

Page 10

Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 2:56 am

“There aren’t any infected here now,” Melly said, interrupting when Mike’s words stumbled to a halt. And we all have weapons to keep us safe, plus we’ve got cool military groundcars to drive around in.”

“I wanted to go help the person—it was our neighbor Mr. Corock I think—and I got out one of Dad’s blasters.” He pointed at a weapon lying on the shelf next to a narrow bed. “But I was afraid to open the door.”

“Sensible of you,” Jeff said, squatting to be at eye level. “Sometimes one soldier no matter how brave can’t fight all the bad guys. And you had your orders from your Dad. You did good.”

“Mr. Corock wouldn’t have wanted you to get in trouble for him,” Melly said, patting his shoulder. “Besides, he might have been able to outrun them.”

Mike shook his head side to side slowly. “He didn’t.”

Buddy licked his face and the boy laughed. “Ewww, dog kisses.” He got to his feet, holding the leash. “Now what, sis?”

I don’t want him to see the bodies, Melly said, remembering the com this time in her anxiety to keep her brother from further trauma.

“Tell you what,” Jeff said, talking to Mike. “Can you stay in here a little longer and show Zach and Cody whatever supplies you’ve got? We can load up anything useful into the APC’s and take it with us when we leave later today.”

“Sure, I can do that. There’s still lots of food. I ate all the sweet stuff.” Mike had a guilty look on his face. “But I ate fruit too. And cereal, I swear. And?—”

“It’s all right.” Melly took his hand. “In an emergency like this the food rules go out the window. We get it. We’ll try to readjust to eating more normally tomorrow.”

“Are we going with you?” Mike asked Jeff.

“Of course, trooper. We wouldn’t take your food and leave you behind.”

Mike nodded, frown clearing from his face. “A group of men tried to break into the house and steal stuff before Mom got sick. Dad shot one in the arm and they ran away.”

Realizing how much trauma her brother had endured chilled Melly, as did the thought that she was now his parent basically, to protect in this uncertain world. She made a vow to herself to put Mike first at all times and keep him safe.

You’re not alone in this , Jeff said in her head. He touched her elbow . I’m here for you and him, and my guys will protect him with all they’ve got. We’re all a team, doc.

“All right, you two are on foraging duty with our new recruit here,” he said out loud to the two soldiers. “You know our priorities. Stow whatever you decide we need in the cargo compartments. Doc and I are going to the house to help Trent and Samms. I’ll let you know when the coast is clear to bring the boy back.”

“And Buddy,” Mike said, clutching the leash. “We’re not leaving him behind.”

“Of course not.” Melly leaned over to kiss her brother on the cheek, which he tolerated, shyly giving her a peck too, and then she followed Jeff out of the shelter

and down the corridor to the outside. The fresh air hit her lungs like a Spring breeze and she took a deep breath.

“I’m glad your brother survived,” Jeff said as he emerged from the tunnel. “He seems like a good kid.”

“He is,” she said, heart simultaneously full of happiness her sibling had survived and she had at least one member of her family alive, yet weighed down by crushing grief for her parents. “Thanks for not asking him for any more details of exactly what happened here.”

“Nah, he’ll tell us on his own time. The guys are nearly done with the grave so in about ten minutes we’ll be able to have whatever rites you’d like and then I figure we can spare an hour to pack up supplies and for you and Mike to go through the house for whatever you want to take. Pack light though. The APC’s don’t have infinite capacity for cargo.”

“And where are we going exactly?” she asked, stopping and facing him.

Jeff raised his eyebrows in surprise. “We’re headed for our homestead out in the wildlands. The ranch, remember? Once we get there we can regroup and assess the entire situation, decide what makes the most sense to do next.”

“What if I don’t think Mike and I should go chasing off into the wildlands with you? I have to make decisions with him in mind now too.”

“I respect that fact.” Closing the gap between them in two rapid steps, Jeff put his arm around her. “If you think I’m going to leave you and the boy here to fend for yourselves, you’re not clear on the situation. Or on the feelings I have for you. Feelings I thought we shared.”

She stared at the grass, part of her mind marveling at how nature kept doing what it always did, bugs crawling, plants growing, when the entire world was falling apart for the humans. Eventually she raised her eyes to meet his gaze. “What are you and your men really doing on Randal Four? And don’t tell me about your retirement and all that bullshit. It seems obvious to me you and your team are still on active duty. What’s at the ranch?”

Jeff maintained his embrace but lifted his head to the blue sky and swore. “This is what I get for falling in love with such a smart woman.”

Rocked by his choice of words, she blinked. “You’re in love with me?”

“Oh yeah, lady, I’m a total goner for you and have been since about day one. I was trying to take things more slowly but this damn planet doesn’t give us any breaks, does it?” He spotted a bench with an attached sunshade close by and led her to it, waiting for her to sit before joining her. “I’m not asking you to make any declarations—I know I’m going too fast—”

“Shut up and kiss me,” she said, grabbing his shoulder and pulling him closer. When he touched her lips with his, she parted to allow him entry and then explored the warmth and spice of his mouth in a dance of emotion. He pulled her onto his lap and the embrace became even more passionate until finally he pulled back with obvious reluctance. “Now isn’t the time, I know, but damn, I want you.”

“Likewise,” she said with a laugh. “But don’t think you can avoid my question by getting me all hot and bothered here, soldier. What are you doing on my planet?”

Jeff studied her, obviously debating with himself as to what he could share. A muscle twitched in his clenched jaw. “Okay, I think I’m gonna break my oath today and reveal my secrets, but you’ve got to keep it strictly to yourself, understand?”

Biting her tongue not to make a sarcastic remark as to who else was even alive for her to tell besides Mike and inform Jeff she wouldn't burden a child with military secrets she settled for a crisp, "I get it."

"Yes, we're on active duty. We do have a ranch to homestead, like I keep telling you. The idea was we'd go undercover as new arrivals, veterans with acreage, and gradually work our way into society up there in the wild lands. This is a long term operation."

"But why? What's happening on Randal Four that needs an elite team of Special Forces guys to investigate?" She took a deep breath. "Did you know this outbreak was going to happen? And no one warned us?"

He shook his head immediately. "Our orders would have been different if Command had known at the time the epidemic was happening. No, the rumors out here in the far Sectors are there may be elements of the population on certain colonies working with the enemy. My men and I would have presented ourselves as ideal candidates for the separatist movement. They like to recruit ex-military and the hope was over time we'd be invited to join."

"Mawreg here?" Melly couldn't wrap her head around the idea.

"No, probably several client races, maybe even undercover themselves masquerading as human. There was intel the enemy was trying this new tactic to see if they could persuade colonies to rebel, to secede from the Sectors. There was also intel the enemy might be experimenting with new technology and new ways of eradicating humans from worlds they wanted for themselves. I was instructed to explore both possibilities."

"Do you think the virus causing the infected is an alien creation?"

“Could be. It’s one thing I want to track down. It’s a clumsy way to take out a planet’s population with a lot of inherent risk for the creators unless the aliens are immune to the virus and can control the infected but the enemy don’t think the same way we do. Their risk calculations could be totally different. And the word is they have an entire civilization of mad scientists up to no good at their beck and call. The Khagrish.”

“Never heard of them,” she said, leaving his lap and leaning against the bench back. “This is the stuff of trideo suspense thrillers.”

“I know.” His grin was rueful as he gestured around them. “But so is the situation we found ourselves in. At the ranch we have certain...capabilities shall we say. I can try to get in touch with my own contacts. Whatever is blocking the interstellar coms on this planet shouldn’t be able to affect the com rig I’ve got in my cargo pods at the ranch site.”

“How far away are we from this place?”

“A week maybe, depending on what we find along the way. We’ve had relatively easy sailing so far and we can’t expect our luck to continue, especially if there is an alien presence on the planet. We’ve got to stay below their sensors.” He studied her face. “I can keep you and Mike safe, I give you my word.”

Melly stared at their linked hands. “You’ve proven I can trust you over and over since we met. I just needed the truth about what brought you here.”

Grave’s dug, sir , Samms’s voice intruded. Should we bring out the bodies?

“How did they get it done so fast?” Melly asked. Her chest was tight with unshed tears.

“Your Dad had a mini backhoe and you know my guys are no slouches when it comes to operating heavy machinery. What shall I tell them? This is your show.”

She took a moment to consider the question. “I’m thinking mostly of Mike and what I want him to see. It seems best to me to bring him over once the—the...once my parents are...” She stumbled over the words and pressed her fist to her chest. The reality of her loss was crashing in on her again.

Go ahead and do the interment, fill in the grave, Jeff said. I’ll bring Melly and her brother when you’re ready.

Melly sat in silence, soaking in the comfort of his embrace until the soldiers let them know the work was done. Then she rose, smoothing her tee shirt and pants and finger combing her hair. “Let’s get Mike and get this over with.”

Zach, Cody, Mike and the dog met them at the rear of the house and she took her brother’s hand. They walked slowly around the corner and out into the yard to the spot chosen for her parents’ final resting place. The soldiers had chosen a place in the shade of a massive, local tree. The freshly dug grave was startling against the green of the lawn.

Jeff stood behind her and his men formed a line behind him as Melly and Mike took their places at the edge of the grave. Samms handed her a hastily gathered bouquet of flowers from her mother’s overgrown garden, which she accepted with grateful surprise.

She didn’t know any standard words to say over a grave so she spoke what was in her mind. “We’ll miss you more than I can say but I give you my word to take good care of Mike and keep him safe. I love you, Mom and Dad, and I need you and I don’t know how to manage without you, but I hope wherever you are now is peaceful.” Her throat choked up and she laid the bouquet on top of the mound of fresh smelling dirt.

She remained kneeling, tears flowing and Mike stood next to her, one hand on her shoulder.

“Love you, Dad, love you, Mom. I’ll be a good boy and I’ll take care of Melly, I promise.” He sniffed and Melly pulled him into her arms.

Behind her Trent began to sing in a deep baritone voice. Melly didn’t recognize the song but it was slow and comforting, all about grace and hope. When he was finished, there was silence, broken only by the sound of the breeze and birds chirping in the trees. Melly wiped her eyes and got to her feet, Jeff stepping in to help her.

“Thank you for everything,” she said to him, but addressing all five of them. “And thank you for the song—it was beautiful.”

“Traditional, from my home world,” Trent said. “Supposedly came from Old Terra.”

“All right,” Jeff said, tone switching to no nonsense command. “Sitrep?”

“Still no infected in the direct vicinity although a group is roaming in the further part of the subdivision,” Cody said promptly. “We shouldn’t linger.”

“Can you and Mike be packed and ready to go in fifteen minutes?” Jeff asked Melly. “The guys and I can help. Nothing too big or bulky. Changes of clothing, blankets, any supplies you or he might need, medicines?—”

“My dad made us do evac drills once a year,” Melly said. “Remember, Mike?”

“Yeah, he’d get us up like in the middle of the night and time us.” The boy glanced at the house behind them. “My go bag is already in the APC. I don’t want to go in there.”

“We won’t be coming back,” Melly said, “Or not for a long time at least. You should go through your room and see if there’s anything else you want to take besides what you had in the shelter.”

“I’ll go with you, pal,” Cody said. “You can show me the collection of military models you were telling us about. We can pick the best one and pack it up to go.” He held out his hand and after a brief hesitation Mike took it.

“Buddy needs to go in the APC now,” Jeff said. “Let’s organize our loose ends here.”

Zach took the dog’s leash from Mike and headed off.

“Fifteen minutes to go through the entire house?” Melly said as she and Jeff followed Cody and her brother. “Even my father gave us more leeway.”

“We’ve been here too long as it is,” Jeff said bluntly. “Looters aren’t likely to risk taking on five armed men with APC’s but I’ve got that itch at the back of my neck again. Says we need to get gone.”

“I don’t have much here anymore,” she said as she entered the house. Melly stopped in the living room and stared around her.

“Maybe in your parents’ room? A holo or two? Toiletries? She have any clothes you can take? It gets damn cold in the highlands where the ranch is located.” He kissed her forehead. “I know this is hard, doc and I admire how well you’re holding up. The guys cleared the bed.” He left unspoken the thought of what the sheets and blankets had been used for.

“All right.” Melly forced herself to trudge up the stairs, Jeff behind her. “My parents converted my room into a crafts room for my mom so there’s nothing in there I’ll need.” She heard Mike and Cody talking as they passed his bedroom door. “There’s

no telling what he'll bring, you know."

"He's a kid, he needs some stuff." Jeff shrugged philosophically,. "Cody has younger brothers so he'll steer the selection process. Any medications your brother needs?"

"No, he's been blessed with great health," she said, forcing herself to walk into the master bedroom. She tried not to glance in the direction of the bed but went straight to the bathroom to gather up useful items. Zach brought a backpack upstairs for her and Melly tried to put herself into the right frame of mind to accomplish what Jeff was asking her to do. She grabbed a couple of holo decks with family photos. Walking into her mother's huge closet was hard. The scent of her perfume permeated the air but Melly forced herself to sort through the clothing rapidly and take a few practical sweaters, tops and jeans. Fortunately she and her mother had been almost like twins, wearing the same sizes as adults.

Jeff picked up a pair of sturdy walking shoes and some boots. "These would both be good."

"Fine, pack them." She went into the bedroom and walked to the bureau, taking out underthings and a nightshirt or two, plus rolled up socks.

Then she made her way to the jewelry box. Gritting her teeth, she flicked it open and picked through the tangled mess to find a few special pieces with sentimental value, including a necklace her father had given her mother when the couple were first dating. "I assume they were buried with their wedding rings." She turned and saw Jeff looking stricken. "It's all right, I prefer it that way." She took a ring her mother had always laughingly promised she would inherit because as a child she'd been fascinated by the central opal and the fires it contained.

"I'm done here. I can't stand this another minute," she said, walking past Jeff and out the door. Screams of grief and frustration built in her chest but there was no time for a

breakdown now and she wouldn't fall apart in front of her brother.

Jeff squeezed her shoulder as he walked past, carrying the backpack. Five more minutes and we roll, he said over the com.

Melly entered her father's study and was overwhelmed by the scent of the feelgood he enjoyed smoking, which lingered in the carpet and drapes no matter what her mother did to clean the room. She surveyed his desk and started opening drawers as fast as she could. "I want his special pocketknife for my brother to keep," she said, sensing Jeff in the doorway. "Here it is." Slipping the knife into her pocket, she snatched up another holo disc and walked to where the captain stood. "I'll grab a couple of things in the living room as we go out, okay?"

He took the disc from her and tucked it into the backpack. "Whatever you need, sweetheart."

"I'm sure I'm forgetting all kinds of things," she said over her shoulder as she descended the stairs. "And there are a lot of things we won't be needing that Dad used to make us grab, like the data records for the house title, birth certificates, their marriage certificate, etcetera."

"Yeah, the bureaucracy here is pretty much washed up," Jeff agreed.

The roar of the APC engines initializing gave her a spurt of adrenaline. She hesitated. "Did the guys check the kitchen for food?"

"Trent gave it a quick once over, grabbed a few things. Cody said they took quite a bit from the shelter before sealing it back up." He tapped the chrono on his wrist. "Time, doc."

"This will only take a second." Melly ran to the cabinet against the far wall and took

two small figurines, handing them to Jeff before she opened the doors on the bottom half with a firm push and plucked out more holo discs. “I can’t take them all so this representative sample will have to do.” She dropped one and chased after it as the disc rolled under the nearest chair.

Infected at the end of the block, Cody said. Couple dozen . Mike says he knows a few of them. Kid’s getting kind of upset.

We’re coming. Jeff took her arm as she tried to fish the last disc out of its hiding place. “No more time.” He drew her out of the living room and onto the porch, placing himself between her and the oncoming group of infected as they ran to the APC.

Melly couldn’t force herself to avert her eyes and recognized a few faces, even as disfigured and grotesque as they were now. Neighbors, one of her old teachers, her Dad’s best friend and hunting buddy...her steps slowed as she gaped at the oncoming group. Jeff picked her up and practically flung her into the APC, where Zach waited to guide her into her seat. The vehicle was already moving as the captain threw himself inside and closed the portal.

Although he was belted into the safety restraints, Mike leaned into her. He was shaking and Buddy was whining as he anxiously laid his head on the boy’s knee. “I thought we were going to leave without you,” he said to Melly as she sat down.

“We’ll be okay, pal,” Jeff said as he made his way to the co-pilot’s chair. “Nothing can get at us inside here and we don’t leave anyone behind. Especially not Melly. We’ll be clear of this in a few minutes and on our way.”

“Did you see Mrs. Flynn?” Mike asked Melly after the captain reassured him. “Her whole family got sick and Mom was helping them. Dad was so mad at her but she said it was what good neighbors do.”

Melly had heard her utter the homily many times. “Yes?”

“And then one of the Flynn kids bit her and that—that was when she got sick and things got really bad.” Mike rested his face against Buddy’s furry neck and Melly could only rub his back and try to be comforting as they drove away from the only home he’d ever known.

CHAPTER TEN

As the APCs made good time along the central feeder road for the subdivision, Melly bit her lip and debated the wisdom of what she was going to demand. Finally she squared her shoulders, drew a deep breath and said, “We need to make one more stop before we hit the open highway and head for your ranch.”

Jeff did his move with the chair so he could stare at her. “You have more family you forgot to tell us about, doc?”

“Nothing like that. And no old boyfriends to check on either.” She guessed the latter was his unspoken question.

The captain didn’t acknowledge her gratuitous reassurance. “What are you proposing then? Where do you want us to divert to?”

“Eastern Community Hospital.” She waited for his reaction.

“There’s nothing there, doc, you know that. The hospitals got overwhelmed early in the outbreak and I doubt anyone managed to survive. The medical professionals were on the front line and got slaughtered unfortunately.”

“You yourself said I was possibly the only doctor left on the planet and after what we’ve been through I’m inclined to think you’re right. I didn’t bring much in the way of medical supplies with me and I bet your medic’s kit might contain a little more but if I’m going to help people we may find out there, I need as much equipment and as many medicines as I can my hands on. The people may be gone from the hospital—”

She swallowed hard. “But the things I need will be there. I’m sure.”

Jeff’s gaze was intense and Melly forced herself to maintain her focus on his eyes. She wasn’t going to give an inch on this.

“Probably a lot of infected there,” Cody said. “Risky to go in. Shall I task a couple of drones to check it out, sir?”

Glancing at him, Jeff nodded. “If and it’s a big if, I decide we can do a sortie at the hospital, we’ll go. But it’s going to be fast and the instant I deem conditions to be unsafe, we’re out, no matter what we did or didn’t manage to collect.”

“Fair enough. I’ll make a list. I volunteered for hundreds of hours at this hospital and my primary mentor was on staff there so I know the layout.” She grinned. “As lax as they were about their systems, my old ID number might even work to get me into the controlled meds lockers.”

“We can open those, no worries,” Zach said behind her, in his seat beside the gun turret.

Mike tugged at her hand. “Dad said he wouldn’t go the hospital for any reason. He said it would be a snake pit. You shouldn’t go either, Melly.”

“The soldiers will protect me,” she said with genuine confidence. After the events of the past few days she knew what Jeff and his men were capable of and felt secure about her safety. “I have to do this, Mike, so I can help people we meet along our route. Doctors take an oath and I need to live up to mine.”

“Like a D’nvannae Brother?” he asked.

Laughing, because being a doctor was as far from being an assassin serving the alien

Goddess of Flames as a person could get, she asked, “How do you know about them?”

“It’s one of my favorite trideo series,” he said with enthusiasm that dimmed a moment later. “Well, it was. I know some people think D’nvannae are only bad guys but they do good deeds too.”

“You’ve got the concept of taking an oath right,” Jeff said, ruffling his hair a bit. “And your sister is pretty stubborn besides.” Turning to Cody, he said, “Take the offramp to this upcoming rest area. We’ll take a look at what your drones find and plan our approach.”

Satisfied, Melly sat back and began assembling a quick list of items to search for on her handheld. Jeff might have agreed to this trip but he wouldn’t give her much time. She kept reprioritizing as new needs came to mind.

“Stars and comets, doc, we can’t load the entire hospital into the cargo compartment,” Zach said, reading over her shoulder.

“I know we won’t get all of it,” she admitted. “But it’s a start.”

The APC made a sweeping turn and came to a halt, although Cody kept the engine idling. A holo sprang up in the well of the vehicle, eliciting an exclamation of awe from Mike.

“This is a composite of what my drones are seeing,” Cody explained. “No telling what the situation is inside.”

Surveying his results, Melly had a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach. Abandoned vehicles surrounded the hospital, including a phalanx of military groundcars and trucks. As she’d come to expect, bodies were everywhere and she

supposed inside the hospital the scenes would be even more horrific. Too late she realized she should have kept her impressionable brother from seeing all this. “Mike stays in here with the dog.”

“Absolutely,” Jeff agreed. He made a slashing motion with his hand and the holo winked out. “Where will the supplies you want be located, doc?”

“A lot of what I could use would be in the emergency room area but the central pharmacy is on the fourth floor and my top priorities on my list would be there.”

The holo shifted as Cody redirected his drones to focus on the ER. Ambulances with open doors crowded the parking bay next to the bright red doors but nothing moved.

“I don’t like it,” Jeff said. “Not one bit. Cody stays in the APC with the kid and keeps overwatch with the drones. We’ll attempt to enter through the ER. Second priority will be to reach the fourth floor and the pharmacy What kinds of meds are you going for, doc?”

“Antibiotics primarily. Painkillers. Things I can use if I have to perform surgery. Bone menders. A portable all body scanner if we’re lucky. There may be one in the ER.”

“We can run that off the APC battery,” Cody said.

“A lot of what I’m hoping to find I’ll know it when I see it,” she said finally.

After a long pause Jeff gave the order to proceed to Cody and Trent in the second APC. The drive to the hospital in the heart of the small community took longer than it should have due to the congestion on the roads and fires burning in various places. The closer she got to her destination, the more her dread grew and she questioned herself sharply. There was still time to abandon the quest and Jeff would be pleased if

she changed her mind. But what would she do if they came upon a pocket of survivors and people needed help and she had nothing but the bare essentials in her small medkit? Her resources would be quickly exhausted and probably help only a fraction of the patients.

The captain's voice interrupted her disordered thoughts.

"Battle armor on. We're approaching the hospital." Jeff rose to put his on and Melly got hers out of the backpack. Mike was fascinated with the whole process as she triggered the impermeable substance to cover her legs and arms. She drew her blaster and checked it, which further awed her little brother.

"Can I have a weapon?" he asked Jeff. "And cool armor like she has?"

"If we get into a battle in the open where we need all hands shooting, then yes you'll get my spare blaster. If you're an observer here in the APC, then no. Weapons control, you know," the captain said with a wink at Melly.

She shuddered to think of a situation where her ten-year-old sibling had to shoot infected predators to stay alive. "We'll all work hard to prevent it from being the last resort," she said firmly.

"Yes, ma'am." Jeff smothered his amusement and moved past her to the portal. Zach joined him and Melly gave Mike a hug, patted Buddy on the head and took her place behind the men.

As soon as the portal opened, she smelled the stench of death, as well as acrid smoke. Blaster at the ready, she stepped out of the APC and waited while Trent and Samms joined them. She was surprised Jeff wasn't leaving one of them inside the second APC but decided not to ask any questions. The men were putting themselves on the line to accomplish her goal and she was grateful.

Power was off at the hospital and the ER doors had been left gaping open, blocked by a pile of bodies, which seemed to be infected and uninfected mixed in a heap. A fierce battle had occurred here and she hoped at least a few humans might have escaped. Jeff led the group past the site of the last stand and slid inside the building. The ER waiting room was dark and many of the chairs were upended and strewn around, bearing mute witness to the panic. Jeff shot out the lock on the door leading to the ER treatment area and Melly followed him inside, two soldiers at her back.

Zach broke off from the stack to grab an empty laundry cart which lay overturned on the floor beside the first patient room. “We can toss whatever you find in here, doc and wheel it right on out to the APC.”

“Good idea.” She got her bearings and hastened down a righthand corridor. “Supply room is this way.”

Jeff cursed and came after her, the others right behind. “Stick with me, doc. No solo trips.”

There was a thump right next to her and Melly screamed and sidestepped as a massive infected hit the glass door imprisoning it in a patient cubicle. If the creature had known how to open doors, it would have had her.

“Leave it,” Jeff said with barely a glance. “It can’t get out.”

She wasn’t so sure, given the way the man was banging his head into the glass over and over, trying to get at them but she sped up and reached her destination in a few more steps. There was an abandoned, portable medscanner on a wheeled platform right next to the storeroom door. “We need to take this.”

Zach shouldered his weapon and carefully put the scanner into the laundry cart. “Should I take this out, captain?”

“Wait and see what else doc finds in the storeroom.”

But when she opened the door, Melly was shocked to find mostly bare shelves and a jumble of items on the floor. The decontam seals on many were broken, meaning the contents would no longer be sterile. Disappointed, she managed to find six medpacks and a couple packages of bone mender to add to the scanner in the cart. “I guess I’d better get to the fourth floor and hope for better luck there.” She was scolding herself for not realizing the hospital would have used up most of its supplies trying to help incoming patients and of course there had been no resupply once the epidemic took hold.

Leaving the less than productive storeroom she headed for the door to the stairs at the end of the hall and Jeff caught her arm. “One of us goes first, always.”

Trent slipped past her as Zach retreated with the cart, which he couldn’t spend time maneuvering up the stairs anyway. Melly hoped she could find another one on the fourth floor.

Stay with the APC’s once you’ve stowed the gear, Jeff ordered Zach. Don’t come back inside. We’ll be on our way out soon.

Stairway is clear, sir,” Trent reported from his position at point . I hear banging on the door a couple floors up but not where we want to go.

We’re on your six now. Jeff checked with Melly. I don’t suppose you’ve changed your mind, doc?

She shook her head decisively, adrenaline overcoming her fear of being cooped up in this infested building. We need these things I’m after .

Without another word he pushed through the door and began ascending the stairs

cautiously, hugging the corners, blast rifle ready. Samms came so close behind Melly he nearly stepped on her heels but she was glad to have him there. She had her blaster ready, reminding herself to take head shots or else go for the knees. If they did get attacked, she could only hope the repetition drill would help her remember to be effective with her aim.

At the landing for the fourth floor, Trent and Jeff flanked the door and the latter opened it slowly. Utter silence greeted them. With a nod, Jeff went inside, Trent right behind and Samms gave Melly an encouraging tap on the shoulder. Her mouth was so dry her throat ached but she forced herself to hasten through the door.

This way, she said on the subaural com, reluctant to break the ominous quiet with her voice. Fortunately she had spent so much time here as a teenage volunteer she knew her way even in the gloom. As she passed a gurney with a cadaver under a sheet there was sudden movement as the infected sat up and lunged for her as if he'd been wearing a cheap Halloween costume. The predator's claws scrabbled against the battle armor on her arms and she screamed as she tried to twist and get away. Jeff stepped up, placed the barrel of his blaster against the infected's head, entangled in the sheet and fired a single quick pulse. The creature's brains splattered against the wall and it collapsed, one hand dangling.

Jeff yanked her away from the gurney and the men concentrated their lights on her in a repeat of the scene a few days ago.

"It didn't scratch me," she said, voice shaking. "The armor saved me again."

"I don't like the way this is going," Jeff said, taking her arm. "Get us to this pharmacy, doc, and let's get out of here."

Melly was more than happy to hasten through the corridors and do as he asked. The pharmacy door was broken as if someone had forced their way inside. She could see

the shelves and containers of meds beyond which were a jumbled mess and pills and inject ampoules were scattered across the floor.

“Why would the infected do this?” she asked, advancing into the mess with a sinking heart.

“Human looters, doc,” Jeff said.

“But—”

“There’s not enough time to ponder the issue.” He interrupted her sternly. “Is this the only med vault?”

“Yes.” Trying not to step on too many containers, she made her way to the counter and climbed awkwardly over to get into the pharmacists’ area. About to put her feet on the floor, she gasped and recoiled. “There’s a body.”

Jeff and Trent climbed over through two other service counters and briefly examined the corpse to make sure the person was actually dead. “Shot,” Jeff said.

Melly was angry and appalled that in the last breakdown of civilization here someone had committed murder to steal drugs but there was certainly nothing she could do about it now other than send a quick prayer to the Lords of Space for the victim. Jeff helped her get down while avoiding the body and she moved to the aisles of drugs beyond. There was no longer any organization—the containers had been knocked to the floor or jumbled together and she stared at the clutter in frustration. “How am I going to find what I need in this mess?”

“Grab what you can. We’ll do the same and we’ll sort it out later, when we stop for the night,” Jeff said pragmatically.

Looking toward the rear of the room, she was relieved to see shelves which appeared undisturbed. “You guys scoop up unopened containers only, please. I’ll check out what’s back here.”

The pharmacists had used little carts when pulling orders and she took one of those. It had a bent wheel squeaking with every rotation but the others were tangled together in a jumble of metal so she made do and hoped there were no infected around to be drawn to the noise. The thieves hadn’t had time to clear out the entire pharmacy and she was pleased at what she was finding. She made two trips to the front to add her loot to the collection the soldiers were making and was perched on a stepladder trying to reach vital antibiotics on a top shelf when Zach’s voice came over the com with a terse warning.

Tangos approaching from the north, two pickup trucks, about ten guys, heavily armed. A couple of them appear drunk or high. Clearly a raiding party.

Reposition the APC’s for maximum range and field of fire. We’ll be right down. Jeff ran to where Melly stood on her ladder and lifted her to the floor in a quick motion. She barely managed to hang onto the box of injects and protested.

“But I only need another couple of minutes?—”

“Time’s up, doc. Remember my rules of engagement. We are out .”

Tangos approaching the front entrance to the hospital, on the other side, Cody reported. Looks like they’re unaware of our presence.

We’ll try to keep it that way. Jeff’s response was terse. We’re not here to fight raiders. Entering the stairs in two minutes.

He didn’t loosen his grip on her arm as they fled, taking the bulging cart the soldiers

had been using to collect meds with them. Melly couldn't help but glance over her shoulder ruefully at the entrance to the pharmacy, wishing she'd had even a little more time to gather what she needed. She wondered how Trent planned to get the cart with their cargo down the stairs but he attached a small antigrav pad to the underside and the overflowing container followed him.

"Pay attention to the stairs, doc," Jeff chided her as they passed through the door and stood at the top of the long flight to the ground floor. "Stick to Samms like glue. Trent and I'll be right behind."

Even though the group was moving so fast she was afraid she'd fall and roll down the stairs, Melly thought the descent was taking forever. She wanted to be out of the deserted hospital and safely in the APC driving away more than she'd ever wanted anything. The idea of facing off against human raiders was more disgusting than battling the infected. At least the latter were too mindless to know what harm they were doing.

Tangos entering the building, Zach said. Tracking sensors indicate they're heading for the stairs you're using.

After the drugs too no doubt. Jeff acknowledged the update and stopped at the second floor. We're going to cut through here and descend on the other side of the building, he said. Samms, check it out.

They waited while Samms cautiously entered the door, closing it behind him. Seconds later Melly heard the sound of his blast rifle and then Samms burst through the door, breathing hard. Jeff tried to slaw it behind him but the weight of a group of infected pressed against him. "Get on the goddamn door," he yelled.

Melly retreated, taking charge of the antigrav cart, while Trent and Samms joined Jeff in the effort to get the door closed. Infected on the other side clawed at them and the

growls and moans were deafening in the small space. Palms sweaty she got a better grip on her blaster. What would she and her friends do if the monsters got through? They could climb stairs—she didn't know if she and the soldiers could get away fast enough.

Samms was hacking at the arms preventing the door from closing and she wanted to throw up as first one and then another fell to the floor, leaking viscous black fluids which carried a terrible odor. His efforts paid off as Jeff and Trent managed to slam the door and latch it.

“Won't hold for long,” jeff said. “First floor is our only egress. Doubletime!”

Trent stood aside to allow her to pass with the cart, which he didn't offer to take. At the bottom Melly stepped off the stair in front of the door to the ER wing and Jeff grabbed her. “Stay right behind me. The bad guys know we're here now with all the noise. We may have to fight our way out.”

Sluggishly her brain offered a partial solution. “Take a left instead of going right. There's an auxiliary ambulance entrance for overflow situations and we can go out there.”

“Quick thinking which may save our bacon.” Jeff glanced at his two soldiers and then yanked the door open.

She expected a hail of bullets or blaster fire to greet them but there was nothing. Jeff ran in the direction she'd suggested and Melly rushed to keep up. Med packets were slipping off the cart but there was nothing she could do about it, resisting the temptation to stop and pick them up. As she reached the alternate exit right behind the captain, there was a yell from the right and then the barrage of weapons fire began as the other group of scavengers saw her party from across the ER receiving bay.

Keep moving, don't stop no matter what, Jeff ordered as he and the two soldiers took cover behind the counter and returned fire.

I'm not leaving you , she said stubbornly.

He turned to her, the emotion in his eyes so fierce Melly recoiled. Yes, you are. Obey orders, doc. You have to survive. Get outside and run like hell to the APC's. We'll be right behind you, I promise .

Leaning forward he pressed a hard, desperate kiss against her lips and then gave her a shove in the direction she needed to go. Melly stumbled, caught her balance and fled, the tethered cart behind her. An impact on her left arm nearly knocked her over but she managed to keep moving through the shock and pain and made it outside a moment later. The APC's were heading in her direction, repositioning for a better pickup and she ran as fast as she could toward safety. The unwieldy cart slowed her down but she wasn't going to leave their hard-won treasure behind.

She took his heart with him. Jeff wanted to watch her run for safety but the intensity of the ongoing firefight forced him to direct his attention to the task at hand. The shooters on the other side were sloppy for the most part, with bad aim, but there were at least a few who knew what they were doing. His biggest concern was whether any of them would think to double back through the building and attack from the rear. Trent, got any surprises we can hand these guys?

Is there ever any doubt? I come to all parties prepared.

Jeff and Samms fired a withering stream of covering fire as Trent lifted up from cover just enough to throw a force grenade across the room. Fire in the hole!

Ducking for cover as the explosion pounded the room, Jeff wished he had a full suit of battle armor. The concussion shook him, shrapnel and bits of unidentifiable debris

rained down on his head, which he was protecting as best he could with his arms, and his hearing blanked out. A force grenade at such close range wasn't usually recommended but there'd been no other choice. Retreat, he said over the subaural com, glad it was wired directly into his brain and not his ears.

Samms, made the move first, with Trent rising smoothly to follow him as Jeff fired his blast rifle across the room in case anyone on the other side survived. Still firing, he retreated to the door and ducked outside. Trent and Samms were waiting and the three of them broke into a run toward the vehicles. There was no sign of Melly or the cart so Jeff assumed she was safe inside the lead APC.

Can't we ever catch a break? Trent said as a wave of infected came around the corner behind their transport.

We are making a hell of a lot of noise. Jeff had to grin as he ran.

The turret on the second APC swiveled and a stream of incandescent blaster fire worked its way across the oncoming mob. Trent increased his speed and headed for that vehicle, which had stopped its forward progress as Zach switched his position from driver to gunner. Samms clambered into the first APC and Jeff waited to make sure Trent safely boarded the other one before he got into the vehicle and slammed the door control. "Get us out of here," he said to Cody at the controls, even while taking grateful note of the fact Melly was indeed safely in her seat next to her brother.

His hearing was spotty but the dog's excited barking penetrated the static. "Can someone please quiet the damn dog down?"

Mike left his seat to sit next to Buddy and whisper in his ear.

Jeff sank into the co-pilot's chair with a sigh of relief and set his blast rifle in the sheath at the side. Melly rushed to him, placing her fingers carefully on the side of his

face and turning him so she could examine the cuts and bruises. She touched his ear, which he realized was bleeding. “I’m okay,” he said. “Nothing serious. We were too close to the blast for comfort but it was the only way. Too much firepower on the other side and if they’d gotten behind us that would have been the end of our excursion.”

She leaned over and kissed him carefully on the lips. “I’m so sorry—it’s all my fault for insisting we stop here for medical supplies.”

He closed his eyes for a moment in relief they’d managed to roll away from the scene with no casualties. “Now we know there are definitely survivors and some of them have organized into gangs, we’ll have to be a lot more careful. No more shopping expeditions, doc. Or at least none with a lot more preplanning and preparation.”

“No argument from me.” Melly stepped away to fetch her small medkit. “Let me take care of these cuts. I think you might have a piece of shrapnel embedded in this one on your cheek.”

“It’ll make a nice scar for you, captain,” Cody said from beside them. “You’ll attract the ladies, all dangerous and scarred up.”

“Hey,” Melly said, giving the soldier a small shove. “His days of attracting the ladies are over. I don’t share.”

Cody laughed good naturedly and Jeff pulled her into his lap, mindful of the child behind them. He kept the embrace fairly mild but he did collect a deeper kiss than her first one. “I like being claimed by you, doc.”

“Let me do my work,” she said with a chuckle, rising and opening her kit.

Attention caught by a deep groove on her battle armor, He grabbed her arm to

examine the ding more closely. “You okay, doc? Looks like you got shot. Any other wounds?”

“I didn’t move fast enough, I guess. It’ll probably bruise spectacularly but nothing’s broken.” Melly grimaced and flexed her arm slightly. “Hurts like a bitch but I’m not complaining. This armor you gave me has saved my behind so many times already on this trip of ours. I’m grateful.”

Jeff let her work on the cuts and bruises and sat stoic as she removed a long metal splinter from his cheek. The body armor had protected him somewhat but he had the feeling he might have a few more superficial wounds on his back.

“I’m going to want to check all of you once we get to a place where we can stop,” she said when she finished, threw the trash into the APC’s recycler and did a decontam on her hands.

“We’ll find a place,” Jeff said. “Not too many houses or farms along the route we’ll be taking so we’ll probably camp out under the stars. The APC’s aren’t too comfortable for sleeping.”

“Not too comfortable for riding either,” she said with disdain as she took her seat. “But vastly better than walking.” Melly cast a longing gaze at the overflowing cart which took up much of the available floor space. “I can’t wait to sort all of this and see what I have. Where did the scanner end up?”

“Zach stowed it in the second APC’s cargo compartment before all the excitement started up,” Cody said. “It’s safe, doc.”

“I like the APC,” Mike said. “It’s so cool. Like in the Stellar Sam Squadron trideos.”

“You’re younger than me,” Melly replied with a grin. “You’re more resilient. I’ve got

older bones and muscles and my body doesn't appreciate the poor shock absorbers on this behemoth."

"Drones out on the perimeter," Cody said. "No pursuit, sir, nothing but open road ahead of us."

Jeff acknowledged the information and sat back to watch the vids as they drove out of the suburban area. There weren't too many stalled groundcars or wrecked trucks in this quadrant and he figured they'd make good time. He glanced over his shoulder at Melly and couldn't help smiling. Never expected to find a good woman to love on this mission but she was everything he'd ever wanted in a partner and more. The assignment to Randal Four may have morphed into a real clusterfuck with this epidemic, the infected hordes and possible alien intrusion but he felt like a winner nonetheless. He'd keep her and her brother safe and figure out a way he and his men could accomplish the spirit of their orders given all the new factors at play. Just let him travel safely to their ranch site, fortify the spot and get the time to take a breather and regroup. That was all he was asking of the Lords of Space today. He'd figure out his next steps later.

With Melly by his side and his team watching his six, there was nothing he couldn't overcome. This planet of last resorts wouldn't defeat him—he and his companions would find a way to bring the situation under control and lessen the threat to the Sectors.

But for now all he wanted was a clear road and a safe place to camp for the night. Was that too much to ask?

Page 12

Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 2:56 am

Melly checked on Mike one more time, finding him asleep in his small tent in the center of their circle, Buddy curled up next to him, under his favorite blanket, which she'd grabbed from their house before leaving, and his small dinosaur pillow tucked into the crook of his arm. She was satisfied he'd had a good dinner, even if it was mostly survival rations and juice. Buddy gave her a look as if to say, "Everything's fine, I'm on duty here."

Rubbing her arms because the night air was chilly, she walked away from the tent and joined Jeff at the edge of their encampment, where he was seated on a log, studying a map holo. "Your brother okay?" he asked as she sat next to him.

"Sound asleep, with Buddy on overwatch."

"He's a good kid, tough. I'm glad we found him today."

"It was just today, wasn't it? The day seems like it was a year long." She rubbed her aching arm and Jeff was immediately concerned and attentive.

"Did you take something for the pain?" he asked.

"I did and it's making me sleepy." Melly figured she was lucky her arm wasn't broken. Whatever the raiders had shot her with had packed quite a punch. The body armor saved her but hadn't cushioned the blow enough. Still, she wasn't complaining. She leaned against him. "It's so peaceful here but are you sure we're safe? Sleeping in the open doesn't feel like a good idea, no criticism intended."

"No offense taken," he assured her, closing his holo and putting his arm around her.

“Remember we didn’t pass any houses once we were out of the city so it’s not like I turned up my nose at a four star hotel or anything. Cody has his drones deployed and he’ll get an alert if anything bigger than Buddy moves in our direction.”

“He’s a cyborg, isn’t he? I keep meaning to ask and then the next crisis hits and I get distracted.”

There was a brief silence before Jeff said, “Since you’re our doctor I guess he won’t mind me confirming your guess. Yeah, he had it bad in a spaceship crash and the special medicos rebuilt him once he agreed to the terms. He’s got extra capacity he has to keep occupied or he gets twitchy. The way he juggles the fleet of drones is only part of what he’s capable of doing. I’m lucky to have him on my team.”

“Terms?” she asked.

“Military service for the rest of his life basically. He doesn’t get to retire.”

“How is that fair?” Melly was immediately angry on Cody’s behalf.

“The Sectors doesn’t care about fair. They care about beating the Mawreg and their client races, destroying them if we can. Anything’s fair to them.” Jeff’s voice was matter of fact. “The powers that be take the greater good and survival of our entire galactic civilization and weigh it against a few guys with hardships and the balance tips. Cody says he doesn’t have regrets which is what’s important.” He gave a soft laugh. “Anyway it may not matter what he signed up for now.”

“Why do you say that? Do you think we aren’t going to survive?” Alarm thrummed through her because the one thing she’d counted on since the first day at the spaceport was Jeff’s unflinching insistence they’d make it through this apocalyptic situation.

“Oh we will. The guys and I will make sure we all survive, as much as it’s humanly

possible to do so. But you have to realize even if the virus was cured tomorrow, hell even if all the currently infected could revert to their previous states?—”

“Which can’t happen,” she interrupted, driven to point out the medical truth.

“No, I agree, but even if there was a cure tomorrow the Sectors would probably quarantine Randal Four forever. No one is going to risk bringing what happened here to the rest of the worlds.”

Melly considered his words and couldn’t disagree.

“I’m not saying they’ll completely abandon us. I imagine there’ll be humanitarian drops but we’re going to be on our own for a long time.”

“I’m glad you’re here, with me,” she said, nuzzling his cheek. “We’ll manage.”

“Hell yes, we will. And once we get situated at the ranch and can start doing the job we came for, or at least a modified version of it, if we can find the fuckers responsible for the tragedy and keep them from doing this to any other planet, I’ll be satisfied.”

Whatever Melly planned to say next got interrupted by a huge yawn which made Jeff chuckle and he kissed her. “I think it’s bed for you, doc. You can barely keep your eyes open and we’ll be leaving at first light.”

He helped her to her feet and hand in hand they strolled toward their tent. Melly had been a little surprised Jeff had been so matter of fact that the two of them would be sharing a tent together when the camp was set up. To be fair, none of the soldiers had even blinked and she’d told Mike privately Jeff was her boyfriend, which he’d accepted without protest or questions. Mike had a bit of hero worship going on right now for Jeff and the others. She was happy to be part of an acknowledged couple with Jeff—the relationship made her feel secure and happy despite all the tragedy

around them, including the loss of her parents. Jeff was her life raft, her support and her love.

“No extracurriculars tonight, I promise,” he said as they walked. “Much as I might want to spend another few hours exploring the pleasures of making love to you—and I’ll never get tired of that, I give you my word—you need your rest. We’ll have plenty of time together in the future.”

“Aren’t you on duty anyway?”

“No, Cody and Trent are on watch right now and Samma and Zach will take the next shift. We’re keeping a two man patrol tonight because we’re out in the open. We also have sensors on in the APC’s, establishing a boundary in addition to the perimeter the drones are keeping clear. I’ll have to go touch base with the guys at the changeover but I’ll do my best not to wake you.”

“How can they drive all day and keep watch all night?” she asked. “I mean, I was on call around the clock plenty of times as an intern and resident but I could catch a few winks here and there.”

“We’re used to being sleep deprived. Besides, I’ll take a stint as a driver tomorrow. It’ll all work out. You’ll see. We’ve done this before, here and there in the garden spots of the galaxy.” His tone was sarcastic.

Bending to enter the tent, Melly said, “Someday you’ll have to tell me about those past missions.”

Jeff sounded a little grim. “Maybe someday. Maybe a watered down version of a few of them. You don’t need those stories and images in your head, sweetheart. What we do isn’t pretty or for the general population to know about.”

“But necessary,” she said, catching him in her arms.

“If I can keep civilians like you and Mike safe, then yes, everything I’ve done had its purpose and I have no regrets,” he said honestly.

After kicking off her shoes, Melly lay on the mattress and Jeff joined her once he’d toed off his boots and set them neatly next to the ‘bed’. He pulled the covers up over both of them and spooned her, one arm around her waist to hold her close.

“You’re an expert cuddler,” she said drowsily.

“Only with you.” He kissed the side of her neck. “Go to sleep and try to have good dreams, doc.”

Safe in his arms, that’s exactly what Melly did. No nightmares about what she’d been through, no night terrors about what might lie ahead.

Only the sweetest of dreams about her beloved and their future together.

Thank you for reading ARRIVAL (PLANET OF LAST RESORT BOOK ONE)! I hope you enjoyed the adventure (and, of course, I’d love a review if you have time and the inclination to write one. Even a few sentences would be much appreciated. Or a rating! Authors relish reader feedback).