







# Survival Instinct

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**Category:** Fantasy

**Description:** A nurse and an alien battle for trust in a devastated world

Laurel is a nurse working in her hometown hospital when disaster strikes. Aliens from planet Progg-Res attack Earth, vaporizing most of the population from huge spaceships. Then ground troops march town to town, house to house, eliminating the rest.

Laurel survives by hiding out in a cave, living day by day hoping to evade detection. After many months of quiet, she dares to venture out.

And finds a critically wounded Progg man in the woods. Instinct tells her to finish him off, but she can't bring herself to kill in cold blood. Besides, he's going to die anyway. However, she worries that leaving his body for his comrades to find will bring them too close to the hiding place that has served her well, so she drags the Progg's body back to the cave.

Unfortunately, the alien scum survives and throws her into a dilemma. She can't keep him prisoner forever, which means she has to release him and risk her life—or kill him.

Death at the hand of the enemy is an honorable one, but to his shame, Grav doesn't want to die. Although he's an aide to the admiral in charge of the Earth campaign, he's never killed anyone, never even discharged his vaporizer. But he doesn't think that will matter to the young human woman who took him hostage and looks at him with revulsion in her eyes.

The only thing he can do is try to build a rapport and convince her he's harmless in hopes she'll see him as a person and not one of the hated aliens who killed her family. If he can't, he's afraid he's in deep trouble. Because he suspects she won't release him. Which only leaves one other option.

Can two people bitterly divided by fear and loathing bridge the gap and trust one another so they both can survive?

**Total Pages (Source):** 18

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:30 am*

Somebody had shot the alien bastard dead. Chin-to-chest, gray and unmoving, it slumped against a denuded oak on a bed of frosty dead leaves. A red, frozen stain encircled a hole in its chest.

“Score one for the home team. I hope it suffered,” Laurel said with satisfaction.

There’d been several “gunshots” in the night, which she had attributed to branches breaking after the ice storm. Rain, followed by a deep freeze, had coated trees in heavy ice.

Icicles formed by the freezing rain dripped from its ears and nose, and the bristly hair on its head looked like it would snap off if she touched it. Not that she would. The very idea of touching the thing gave her the creeps.

After many months of self-imposed isolation, she’d ventured from her hideaway. Stumbling across the alien revealed it still wasn’t safe to move around. The area between her shoulder blades prickled with wariness.

The Progg are like cockroaches. If you see one, there’s more you don’t see. I’d better leave.

And keep my mouth shut! After a solitary year, Laurel had begun talking to herself. It had become a habit, but in the quiet, sound would carry. A whisper could be heard like a shout. At the tail end of winter, no birds or insects sang yet—assuming they were still alive.

Better get out of here.

But macabre curiosity had her peering closer. She'd never seen a Progg in the flesh. No one had and lived to tell about it. She'd only seen images and videos on the internet, taken from afar, early in the invasion before the world went dark.

She eyed the bloodied chest wound. They bleed red. Huh.

Careful not to touch it, she bent to study its face. It had heavy, brutal features, its savagery etched into flesh and bone. The head was bald, except for the mohawk band of bristles. In the pictures, they'd had silvery, almost-glittery skin, but death had dulled this one's to gray.

Craaack!

She jumped as a tree broke under the weight of ice. Or maybe another one got shot. One can hope.

But that would mean there were more of them in the area. Did they return to the places they'd vanquished?

If she'd been home the day they vaporized Springfield and the surrounding area, she would have perished along with her parents, her brother, friends, and former coworkers at the tiny rural hospital where she'd been a nurse.

She studied the woods for movement and listened for the crunch of footsteps on frozen leaves but detected only the distant snap and crack of breaking branches. Even if there weren't aliens in the vicinity, walking in the woods when trees were snapping wasn't the brightest idea.

But she couldn't stand the cabin fever anymore. She'd had to get out of the cave and figured right after the extreme weather would be the safest time.

She eyed the alien balefully. It appeared to be male. She patted her dad's gun holstered to her hip. If it wasn't already dead, she would have shot it. Her former caring nurse-self would have been horrified at the idea of taking a life, any life, but that was before the Progg had decimated an entire civilization.

The creature's presence and the implication there could be others in the area compromised her hideout. Camouflaged by brush, the cave wasn't visible to the naked eye—not the human eye, anyway—but that didn't mean the genocidal bastards didn't employ heat-seeking technology to root out survivors. They hadn't missed a single individual in her hometown she'd discovered when she'd mustered the courage to search a few weeks after the massacre.

I need to get back. She had to decide whether to bug out or hunker down and wait it out. Unfortunately, a decision had to be made without any information. Were the aliens passing through or settling in? It had appeared from internet images that when they attacked a city, only people and other living creatures got vaporized. Buildings and infrastructure were left intact, giving her the impression they intended to occupy the world they'd conquered. But she could only guess. Without people to keep the electrical grid up and running, communication systems and electronics had gone kaput months ago.

Would this one's buddies come looking for him? He'd been felled by a bullet, so there had to be at least one other human in the area, which could be problematic in itself.

She couldn't assume all survivors were good guys; some weren't. Human colluders had assisted the Progg in finding stragglers. They'd sold their souls to save their skins. The alien might have been killed by a colluder who'd turned on him. It should have known better than to trust someone who'd betray his own people. If they'll do it with you, they'll do it to you.

She kept a bugout bag packed and ready to go. She'd return to the hideaway and decide whether to leave or stay.

"Sweet dreams in hell, asshole!" She kicked the alien's body.

It groaned, and the head shot up. Bluer-than-blue eyes met hers.

Laurel screamed.

She tore through the woods, slipping and sliding on frost-covered pine needles and oak leaves. Alive, alive. It's alive!

Shit! Shit! Shit! Run! Run!

\* \* \* \*

Bleary-eyed, Grav watched the human flee. She must have been the one who'd attacked him. He'd been passing through the woods when there'd been a loud crack, and then his chest lit up on fire.

Zok , he hated this planet.

The GM should have passed on this one. The Governing Ministry knew that now, but that didn't help those left behind. He'd been told he would be extracted after the plague no longer posed a threat, but he had his doubts. Too many months had passed without a word. The GM might have decided sacrificing a few individuals would better benefit the empire than coming back for them.

He fumbled for his vaporizer and found it gone. She took it. He cursed.

I need to get up. She might decide to finish the job. He'd noted a firearm strapped to

her leg. She should have killed him when she'd been standing over him. A Progg wouldn't have hesitated.

Do it once. Do it right. Leave no survivors. The principle ingrained in childhood had enabled the GM to expand the empire to more than twenty-six worlds.

His chest hurt. He assumed his body would expel the embedded foreign object, but what if it didn't? Was this how he would die?

He wiped his face, knocking loose icicles. He had no idea how long he'd been out here. Hours at least. He eyed the bright sky through the tree branches. The day star had been on the rise when he'd set out through the woods to avoid the icy roads.

I have to get up. She might come back.

Although primitive, if Earth weapons hit a vital organ, it could be fatal. The humans' primitive defense systems had been no match for the Progg's advanced technology. Unfortunately, no one had counted on Earth's secret weapon. The plague.

Most of the humans had been eliminated, leaving their planet ripe for the taking, except it had been contaminated, rendering it unlivable. Worse, the contagion had been carried to Progg-Res, killing untold numbers.

Do it once. Do it right.

This campaign had been an abject failure. If the responsible parties survived the plague, they would be executed. A Progg pitied no one, but Grav thanked Zok he wasn't on the scouting team that had identified Earth for takeover.

He touched the wound on his chest. His life fluid had frozen when it hit the frigid air, which probably had prevented him from bleeding out, but his body couldn't expel the



object until he got warm.

Gritting his teeth against the pain, he forced himself to his feet. His vision grayed, and his knees wobbled. He clung to the tree trunk for support and waited for the dizziness to subside.

He should track the woman down and eliminate the threat, but he doubted his ability to do so. Do it once. Do it right. Better to wait until he could see better, walk straight.

The best he could do was widen the distance between him and her. Letting go of the tree, he staggered away.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:30 am*

Laurel pushed aside the thick evergreen bushes covering the entrance and dove inside the cave. “Oh god, oh god.” She sucked in huge gasps of air. Her heart pounded so hard and fast, she could almost see her heavy jacket move. This kind of stress could cause an elderly person with a heart condition to go into cardiac arrest. Except, they’d all died during the invasion.

“The motherfucker is alive! It could have killed me!” She didn’t used to talk to herself, but she hadn’t spoken to or seen another person in a year. She needed to hear a human voice, even if it was her own. Thinking out loud had become a habit.

She unholstered her dad’s gun, released the safety, shoved her hood off, and listened by the entrance for footfalls. She doubted it could follow her in its condition, but recent historical events had proven erroneous assumptions could kill you. When enormous spaceships appear in the sky and block the sun, don’t presume the visitors come in peace.

Hearing only her own ragged breathing, she removed her jacket and collapsed into a chair, keeping the handgun within easy reach on the adjacent side table.

“I screwed up.” Lizard-brain activated, she’d run pell-mell to the “safety” of her lair. Having assumed control again, her cerebral cortex pointed out she might have drawn a road map to her location. The ground was frozen solid—it wasn’t like she’d left footprints in the snow, but she’d snapped quite a few twigs and kicked up leaves and pine needles.

That wasn’t the only way she’d messed up—she’d missed the opportunity to finish the bastard off. “Why didn’t I shoot it? Obviously, I’m more ‘flight’ than ‘fight.’”

Hugging herself, she rocked. “What am I going to do? Leave? Or lie low?”

If she left, where would she go? Where would she hide? Not in a house or any building when the Progg were on the march!

Caves were the best places to hide, and southwest Missouri was home to a lot of them. But she didn’t know where any others were, except for the tourist sites like Smallin Civil War Cave and Fantastic Caverns. If she went to one of them, she might find other survivors. However, they might not appreciate a drop-in. She wouldn’t trust somebody who showed up unannounced. He could be a colluder.

“Better to call first,” she joked. Without electricity, she couldn’t even charge her phone to play games or look at her photos.

As she thought about it, she remembered billboards along the highway advertised the tourist caves. All the aliens had to do was follow the signs.

So, tourist attractions were out. Houses were out. Earth had become a veritable buyer’s market of vacant move-in-ready homes. Priced to sell—free! The attack, which had vaporized people, had left all structures intact.

She imagined that Amish homes would likely be well stocked and suited for a life without electricity. They’d never had electricity. The town of Seymour was the closest, and formerly the largest Amish community in the state.

However, she would never feel safe in a house again, not even her parents’ home, which was a short hike through the woods. After blasts from the massive spaceships vaporized entire city populations, regiments had marched through the smaller townships. Like homicidal missionaries or genocidal political candidates, they had gone house to house, neighborhood by neighborhood, town after town. Not even Big Creek had been saved.

What made this cave a natural hideout was that nobody knew about it. It wasn't on any topographical map. Located on the undeveloped parcel adjacent to her parents' twenty acres outside of Big Creek, she and her brother had found it when they were kids exploring the woods. At some point, it had been used by a doomsday prepper—because it had been stocked with all kinds of survival supplies.

They'd kept mum, never revealing what they'd discovered, so they could sneak away to drink beer stolen from the garage fridge and escape the parental units when they got too parental. She had a feeling Brent used to bring girls to the cave, too, having found a pair of panties once. Then they grew up, moved out, got busy with jobs, and she forgot about the cave.

Until the invasion happened and she suggested the family could shelter there. At first, her uber-honest, rule-follower dad had been averse to using it because it technically belonged to somebody else.

“This is a matter of survival, Dad! Besides, nobody has been there in years!”

As the situation had grown more dire, and with her mother's support, she and Brent had convinced their father to agree to go there.

They waited too long. “Mom, Dad, Brent, I miss you so much. God, I wish I'd insisted we leave when the alien ships first appeared. You'd still be alive.”

Back then, she—and everyone else—believed Earth's militaries could do something! However, the aliens quickly took out the military bases and major cities.

Why, why, didn't I leave the hospital sooner? Misplaced loyalty had kept her working. She'd been dedicated to the patients when she should have been more committed to her family. Brent, a police officer in Kansas City, had been the same way, reluctant to leave the city unprotected. But if she had quit earlier, maybe he

would have also. He was in KC the day it was vaporized.

She'd have to live with the guilt for the rest of her lonely life.

She suspected a prior owner, rather than the one on record, had been the prepper or the landowner would have used the cave himself. Fortunately, she and Brent hadn't touched the nonperishable food or the survival gear when they were kids.

From the entrance, a passage descended and then widened into a large chamber. Linked by short passages, two other rooms spoke off the main one.

The prepper had obviously intended the outer area to be used as a gathering space by furnishing it with a sofa, a table and chairs, and the recliner she sat in, which no doubt had been reserved for the "man of the cave." The larger of the smaller chambers contained a bunk bed and two singles pushed together, supporting her guess the prepper had planned for a family. The third room was used for storage, its shelves loaded with supplies and equipment.

Unlike the tourist caverns, this one wasn't limestone but granite, which meant no water seeped in from the surface, so the inside stayed dry as a bone. It also stayed temperate. Like Smallin and Fantastic, the interior temperature never varied much from 60 degrees Fahrenheit, a huge plus during the winter when temps sometimes dropped below freezing and during the summer, which always got oppressively hot and humid.

She surveyed her hideaway, devoid of any personal touches. There had been no time to collect keepsakes or mementos of her family. Other than how-to survival guides the prepper had left, the only books in the cave were dog-eared romance novels left over from adolescence. They'd been read and reread.

Romance and marriage could only be found in novels now. There would be no knight

in silver shining armor to sweep in and rescue her. Thirty years old, she would never marry, never have kids—never have sex again. “I’ve become a hermit nun.”

Before the end of the world, she’d lived in an apartment near the hospital. She’d already quit work but had gone to retrieve Brent’s girlfriend’s grandmother from St. Louis when the town of Big Creek and its outskirts had been hit.

She’d lost so much, and now she had to abandon her safe space? Where would she find a place as well hidden and well stocked?

“It might only be a cave, but it’s my home. It’s all I have left!”

Unfortunately, having seen her, the alien now knew a survivor existed. She had to prevent it from alerting its compadres. Even if it succumbed to its injuries, they would find the body and realize people were in the area.

“I have to dispose of the body. If it’s not dead, I have to kill it.” She donned her jacket and grabbed the gun.

\* \* \* \*

It’s gone! Her heart stuttered with alarm. The alien had vanished. She gripped the gun so tight her knuckles ached. If it was well enough to move, it could come for her. I gotta get out of here.

Why didn’t I kill it when I had the chance?

Craaack!

Laurel practically leaped out of her skin as another tree snapped under the weight of ice. Her head jerked up, and there, perhaps fifty yards away, she spotted a gray lump.

Alien? Or boulder? The ground in these parts was rocky. Cautiously she picked her way toward it. Before she got halfway there, she saw it .

It lay facedown on the frozen ground, hands dug into the frost-covered leaves as if it had tried to get up. It had three fingers and two opposable thumbs on each hand. From the lack of blood or exit wound on its back, she surmised the slug was still inside its chest.

“First one didn’t do the trick. Let’s try another one.” After releasing the safety, she pulled the slider to chamber the bullet and aimed at its head, peering down the sights. Her hands shook, but at this close range, it would be impossible to miss. A red bead danced on its skull.

Squeeze the trigger. Do it. What are you waiting for? For it to kill you? Kill somebody else?

Perhaps no one else had survived, but she continued to hope others had hunkered down in a safe place. There were other caves, bunkers, mines, underground tunnels where people might have escaped the death rays.

The alien scum had murdered damn near everyone on the entire planet. They didn’t deserve to live. And this one could pose a threat to her. She had to kill it.

While agreeing in principle that a person had the right to defend himself with deadly force, she’d never imagined herself killing somebody under any circumstances. She hadn’t owned a gun. The automatic pistol had belonged to her dad, who’d insisted she and Brent learn how to use guns since he’d kept them in the house.

Pull the trigger. Do it.

Killing it when it lay facedown, half dead already seemed more like a cold-blooded

execution than an act of self-defense.

She lowered the handgun.

Maybe nature will run its course and finish it off soon anyway. Or it will get a massive infection and die a slow, painful death.

It might even be dead, in which case, shooting it in the head would be a waste of good ammo.

She'd thought it dead until it had moved. It hadn't gotten far, but it had moved. What if it survived?

As if proving her point, it groaned.

She jumped. It clawed at the ground, pushing itself up and rolling over. She raised the pistol. The bead of light danced between those startling-blue eyes. She recognized resignation in its gaze. It knows I intend to kill it.

Intense anger surged through her as she remembered her parents, her brother, everyone she fucking knew, every single one of them dead, while this thing lived.

She squeezed the trigger.



## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:30 am*

Grav couldn't move. He regained consciousness spread-eagled on a flat surface, arms and legs tethered to posts.

But I'm alive. He felt shamefully relieved. There was honor in dying in defense of the empire, but he discovered he valued his life more than honor.

The female had intended to kill him, but she hadn't. She'd discharged her weapon, firing into the ground next to his head, causing his ears to ring painfully. Why had she spared his life? Had the situation been reversed, a Progg wouldn't have hesitated to eliminate her. One did not let the enemy live.

Do it once. Do it right. Leave no survivors.

Instead, she'd brought him here. Wherever here was. Drifting in and out of consciousness from pain, he had only a hazy recollection of being dragged on some sort of sled across the rocky, frozen ground. He lifted his head and spotted the sled leaning against the wall.

He'd peeked inside enough dwellings to recognize this wasn't a common habitat. A lamp smelling of oil cast a shadowy glow, enabling him to see rough walls of speckled gray stone, the domed ceiling the same, the floor covered by hard-packed dirt. No windows. No doors, only a wide opening. Cave, probably. It was an obvious place to hide. Vaporizers penetrated walls of wood, glass, plaster, even a layer of brick, but not solid stone many ruqa thick.

The Progg had conducted a thorough geological scan of the planet. Aided by human informants, eventually the teams would have gotten to the caves and underground

hiding places to root out the stragglers—but before that could happen, the excrement hit the turbines, and the GM aborted the campaign.

Were others living here? He noted two other beds besides the one he lay on, which appeared to be a double-decker; his wrists and ankles were tied to the posts holding up a top bunk. Had someone helped her bring him here? He weighed no less than twenty yemps , not an easy pull on a sled. He didn't recall seeing anyone else—just her, but he'd been out of it a good part of the time.

He yanked on the restraints, but the ties held fast. The effort hurt his already cramping chest. The cave's warmth and his own body heat had relaxed his muscles, enabling his body to begin to expel the foreign object.

“You're awake. Still alive. Pity.” The woman entered with a kit of some sort, and he got his first good look at her. Humans were hirsute, although not as much as some furry four-legged Earthlings roaming the planet. This one had a full head of dark-brown hair falling to mid-back, a fringe covering her forehead, and a slender arch of hair over her dark eyes. She lacked the luminescence or the scales of other alien races, leaving her skin smooth. He'd noted that human coloring ran the gamut from very pale to very dark; she was in the middle.

Standing over him in the woods, her weapon trained on him, she had seemed much larger. Having shed her bulky outerwear, she appeared less imposing, considerably smaller than him. He could overpower her—if not restrained and injured. And if she wasn't still armed. The weapon was holstered on her hip.

She settled on a chair by his bed and surveyed him with loathing. Unflinching, he met the scrutiny but wondered with some trepidation what she would do next, what the kit contained.

Hatred he understood. Vanquished peoples retained long memories of their suffering,

hence the necessity to kill everyone—eliminate survivors who might regroup and foment a rebellion.

The Progg didn't hate any of the beings they vanquished—they viewed them merely as obstacles to the expansion of the galactic empire.

“Do you understand what I'm saying?”

Every word, but he kept his expression blank.

More could be learned by remaining silent, like finding what she had done with his weapon. It was coded specifically to him, so she couldn't use it, but he needed it back. Without it, he was defenseless. There was no telling when he'd get off this planet—if ever.

Before every campaign, communication broadcasts of the targeted planets were studied to learn the planet's vulnerabilities, capabilities, and languages in the event faux diplomacy were required. Rank and file didn't need to understand or speak to the native population, but as an aide to Admiral Drek, the Earth campaign commander, Grav might. His translator chip had been updated with common Earth languages.

“You're a tough bastard. You should have died. I wish you had. I should have killed you.”

Why didn't you? he wanted to ask.

“I'm an idiot. I couldn't do it,” she said.

She lacked ruthlessness, then. Good to know. Such a weakness could be exploited.

“I guess being a nurse is too engrained in me. I’ll have to work on that.”

He understood nurse to be a type of health care provider. On this planet, medical care had been administered by well-intentioned but fallible people. It astounded him that humans hadn’t switched to medical artificial intelligence like everyone else. Of course, if they had, they would have cured their diseases, and that would have changed everything.

She expelled a sigh of self-disgust. “I have no idea what I’m going to do. I can’t kill you.”

Good news, although he’d suspected as much, or she wouldn’t have gone through the effort of dragging him here. She would have shot him again, which begged the question, why hesitate to finish the job?

Unless she wasn’t the one who tried to kill him?

“But I can’t let you go, either.”

Not-so-good news, although it didn’t come as a surprise.

“It’s kind of like grabbing a tiger by the tail. Once you got it, you don’t dare let it go.”

She opened the kit. He didn’t recognize any of the stuff inside. “I once had a patient who killed his ex-wife and two-year-old daughter. He was running from the police when he crashed his car. They brought him to the hospital. We treated him, of course.

“Doctors and nurses don’t separate people into good and bad, deserving and undeserving—we provide medical care to all. Some deserve to die, but we still try to save them because that’s our job.”

She got up and pulled the light, along with the table it rested on, close to the bed. Next, she snapped on a bright-purple glove, calling his attention to her five-fingered hand.

He had yet to encounter an intelligent, dominant race without at least one opposable thumb. All animals had the ability to fight, but you couldn't rule your world unless you could manufacture and grasp weapons to overpower a stronger opponent.

At some point, you developed weapons enabling you to progress beyond risky hand-to-hand combat. That's when you could begin to dominate the galaxy.

She donned the other glove and then wiggled her fingers. "These are more for me than you. I don't care if you get infected—hopefully you'll die anyway. But the idea of touching you with my bare hands creeps me out." Her mouth drooped at the corner.

Her disgust stung in a way her animosity didn't. An important aide to a decorated admiral, he was considered quite a catch on his planet, experiencing no lack of females who attempted to curry his favor, eager to bear offspring with him.

From the kit, she extracted a sharp double-bladed instrument and cut through the front of his tunic exposing his blood-smeared torso. He could see the lump formed by the foreign object.

She frowned. "Odd. It looks like the bullet lodged just under your skin."

It would have been odd if it had happened that way. However, the projectile had gone deep. His body had been working it to the surface.

She set the metal tool on the lamp table then brought up a jug and soaked a white pad with a clear liquid from the pitcher. Water? It smelled like it. He licked his dry lips,

realizing how thirsty he was. But rather than offer him a drink, she swiped roughly around the chest wound.

“I can see the bullet,” she murmured. “I’ll bet I could extract it with forceps.” She palpitated the area around the entry wound with her gloved fingers—and the bullet popped out.

Her jaw dropped. Her expression of surprise was almost comical. She picked up the slug and eyeballed it. “Looks like it came from a .38.” Her assessment confirmed his hunch she hadn’t been the one who’d shot him. She plunked the slug onto the table.

The injured site bled, but not copiously, his body having worked to seal the wound from the inside. She dabbed at the seeping injury with a dry white pad. “I suppose I should disinfect this as best I can. That’s what a medical professional would do. Not that I’ll ever practice my profession again.”

She grabbed a bottle marked antiseptic and sought his gaze. A tiny smile played at the corner of her lips. “This may cause a little discomfort.” She uncapped the bottle and splashed the wound with the pungent-smelling contents.

“Pikur zok vinik okum !” A string of curses erupted from his mouth. He would have vaulted from the bed if he hadn’t been tied down.

“Oh, did that hurt?”

“Fuck, yeah, it hurt!” he burst out in her language.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:30 am*

Laurel blinked. It took a second for the implication of the outburst to register. Then she leaped to her feet. “You speak English!”

“And many other Earth languages.”

“You...you...” she sputtered, apoplectic. He’d lied! He’d understood every word she’d said! What did I say? She had no idea what had come out of her mouth; she’d just been talking to herself the way she always did. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

She snapped the first aid kit shut. The gunshot wound should be stitched or at least bandaged, but he wasn’t bleeding much, and right now, she didn’t care. Fuck him! She stomped out.

Inside the main chamber, she paced. Un-freaking-believable. He’d let her go on and on, never once indicating he could understand. But what did she expect from an invader? Eavesdropping on her private personal mutterings had to count as the least of his crimes. Why had she assumed he didn’t understand her just because she asked? Of course, the bastard would lie.

“I never should have—”

Dammit! Talking to herself would be a hard habit to break. I shouldn’t have brought him here.

But she couldn’t leave his body for his comrades to find.

Why couldn’t the fucker have died like he was supposed to?

Apparently, his injury hadn't been as serious as she'd thought. Another assumption! But even if a bullet missed his heart and lungs, who the hell survived a gunshot wound to the chest without medical intervention?

An alien, that's who.

The bullet had popped out on its own.

I really do have a tiger by the tail. She remembered saying that. She couldn't let him go, but she couldn't keep him zip-tied to the bed forever. How long would the plastic ties hold him? How strong was he? He looked quite muscular. What if when he recovered—which seemed to be happening fast—he broke the tie or pulled the post loose?

I could leave. She could grab her bag, clear out, and let him starve to death. But she couldn't do that either. If she didn't have the cajones to shoot him dead in the woods, she couldn't leave him to succumb to a slow, painful death, even though he deserved it.

Having a conscience sucks sometimes.

She'd wanted to end his miserable existence. He deserved to die. But she'd stared into his blue-blue eyes and couldn't do it. She'd fired into the ground near his head. Then, in a super-idiot move, she'd run to the cave, grabbed the travois, and then dragged his body home.

What am I going to do?

Maybe I don't need to decide today.

As long as he's restrained, I have time to think about it.



However, time wouldn't alter reality. Her options boiled down to two: leave or kill him, slow death or fast one. This wasn't like trapping a skunk in a cage. She couldn't just open the door and run like hell.

In bringing him here, she'd only postponed the inevitable.

Until she decided how he would die, maybe she could extract some info from him. She paced, twisting her hands. The alien gave her the creeps, and she didn't feel up to this. I'm no interrogator. Brent would be much better at this than I am.

At the thought of her brother, the resolve to see this through to the end hardened. This isn't about me; it's about all the other potential survivors and all the people who have died . I have to do this for them.

First off, she should try to find out how many aliens were in the area or if he'd encountered people. She assumed he'd killed them. Except one, obviously, had gotten away and shot him.

Why had Earth been attacked in the first place? The answer wouldn't change the devastation, but a desire to understand why burned hot inside. The senselessness gnawed at her. It was like when somebody shot up a school and killed innocent children. Why? Why?

She didn't expect him to volunteer information, but maybe a hint would slip out. Stifling her revulsion and shoring up her courage, she marched into the chamber.

Blue eyes met hers with a flash of relief. Obviously, he'd feared she'd abandoned him.

I considered it, asshole. I still might.

There was something disturbingly gentle about his blue-blue eyes. Almost...innocent. They didn't look like the eyes of a killer. His eyes should be red or yellow, filled with malice and hatred, not baby-blue and filled with relief.

I'm making assumptions again. Eye color indicated nothing. Infamous serial killer Ted Bundy had had blue eyes.

She tore her gaze away and did a quick visual inspection of the zip ties. Still secure.

Uncertain how to proceed, she sat in the chair.

The chest wound had nearly closed up. At this point, she was only a little bit surprised. "You heal fast."

"Yes."

"Pity."

"You'd like to see me dead."

"Yes."

"You're not the one who shot me. You had the chance to kill me, but you didn't do it."

"I still might."

"If you don't kill me, what do you intend to do with me?"

"I haven't decided yet." She still faced the same conundrum. Kill him now or leave him to die a slow death. She shouldn't have an issue with either option, but she

couldn't get past her personal moral roadblock.

She'd become a nurse to help people in a meaningful, personal way. She'd never envisioned a patient like him.

She had no problem with the government executing sociopathic serial killers or other irredeemable murderers, but she wouldn't be able to administer the lethal injection or flip the switch on the electric chair. Maybe that made her hypocritical rather than moral.

"While you decide, could I have a drink of water?"

He had the nerve to ask for something? "Why should I give you anything?"

"It's up to you."

Dehydration would kill him faster than hunger. A human could go only three days without water. I could dehydrate him to death. Just her luck, the bastard would linger. As much as she wished him dead and wanted him to suffer, she couldn't stomach watching him die.

She shifted her gaze to the water jug on the table. "There's water right there."

He lifted his gaze to his restrained wrists.

Shit. "I'm not letting you up." The very notion propelled her out of the chair as if he would lunge for her. He probably was thirsty, but if she untied him, he would kill her. Asking for water might be a ruse. She couldn't trust him.

She stomped out, angry at herself. Dammit. I didn't think this through. How am I going to give him food and water? What about when he needs to use the bathroom?

All creatures—Earthlings anyway—have to excrete waste in some way. She had no idea what kind of plumbing he had under his gray-green clothing, and damn sure didn't want to find out. Alien junk. Ugh.

She rubbed her face in frustration. Could I have made the situation worse for myself? She hadn't factored in the complications. Hadn't realized by dragging him home she'd been acquiring a prisoner. He was supposed to die!

What am I going to do? She couldn't risk untying even one hand. He could grab her.

I can bring an alien to water, but I can't let him drink.

But I can't keep him NPO. NPO or nil per os was a Latin medical term that meant "nothing by mouth."

"Wait...wait...maybe...maybe it's still here!" She sprinted into the storage room. Rooting around on the shelves, she found the travel mug with a straw she'd used as a teenager to bring drinks into the cave. "This will work."

Returning to the alien, she filled the mug with water from the jug. "Here." She held the mug close to his mouth.

He stared at it blankly. "How am I supposed to drink?"

"You suck on the straw! The tube sticking out?"

"Oh." He lifted his head and closed his lips around the straw. Blue eyes widened slightly, and his throat moved as he swallowed. He drank for a long time. He really was thirsty. She noticed his chest wound looked a little pink but otherwise had healed up. Damn, he heals fast. Something to keep in mind.

He drank half a mugful before he pulled away. “Thank you.”

She blinked in surprise. So, the Progg practiced social courtesies.

Or maybe he thanked her because he knew she would expect it, in which case his faux gratitude amounted to manipulation. Why else would he concern himself with social conventions? The aliens hadn’t bothered to introduce themselves before attacking. There’d been no attempt at diplomacy, no formal declaration of war.

If not for the cryptic message, PROGG COMING, received from the Federation of Alien Beings weeks before the invasion, Earth wouldn’t even have known what the invaders were called.

Of course, social etiquette would be antithetical to the goal, wouldn’t it? You might develop empathy and not victimize people at all.

She did not respond with the perfunctory “you’re welcome” to his faux thanks. She wouldn’t lie. He was not welcome. Nor could she say, “No worries,” or “No problem.” He’d become a very big, worrisome problem.

Tomorrow, she’d figure out how to let him eat. She didn’t dare release his wrists, and she damn sure wasn’t going to play nursemaid and spoon-feed him. For now, she’d get herself something to eat. Maybe a solution would come to her.

She plunked the half-empty travel mug onto the little table. Maybe she’d give him another drink later. The more he drank, the more he’d need to urinate—if, in fact, he urinated. Maybe he secreted waste through his skin. Ugh. Another reason not to touch him.

“My name is Grav,” he said as she reached the passage.

She didn't answer. She didn't desire to know his name. It was bad enough she'd begun thinking of him as "he," rather than "it."

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:30 am*

Grav eyed the container of water and licked his dry lips. He was thirsty again, but it was just as well he couldn't get to the water because the urge to urinate had become painful.

From the tenor of her breathing, the woman had fallen asleep after tossing for hours. His own slumber had been fitful due to his uncomfortable spread-eagled position, hunger gnawing at his belly and a painful urge to urinate. The healed chest wound itched.

Light from the lamp spilled over his bed, but hers, across the room, remained in shadow. But there'd been enough light for him to see her slip her weapon under the pillow and slide into bed fully dressed. She'd kept her shoes on, as if she needed to be prepared to flee at a moment's notice.

Her smell disturbed him. She exuded an odor he'd come to associate with Earth's inhabitants. Until her, he'd never met a human face-to-face, but their habitats were marked with their stench. But the human odor mingled with the woman's unique botanical signature into a scent that was...not unpleasant.

He'd offered his name to elicit hers. Not because it mattered what she was called—although he was a tad curious—but to gain a concession. Little capitulations would lead to bigger concessions toward the ultimate aim of getting her to release him or at least lower her guard and give him an opportunity to escape.

That's why he'd asked for water. He had been thirsty, but mainly he needed her to say yes to something. Small yeses led to bigger yeses. Yes, I'll loosen those ties so they don't cut into your wrists. Yes, I'll let you up so you can urinate.

Best-case scenario, he would prefer to get loose while she was gone. Then he'd have time to search for weapons. He eyed the handgun butt jutting out from under her pillow. Hopefully, there were others stashed away. He would need some way to defend himself. Few humans were left, but the survivors would have a score to settle. They wouldn't have the reservations about killing him like the woman. One had already tried.

He flexed his fingers, tugging at the restraints.

An effortless campaign had collapsed into the worst disaster in Progg history. The takeover had proceeded as planned. The air assault had eradicated humans from major and medium cities and military installations, and ground troops had landed to raid small towns and rural areas.

Always hands-on, Admiral Drek moved with the ground troops. While the troops finished cleansing the area, Grav had been sent ahead to scout out a new base of operations, i.e. a dwelling worthy of an admiral, when the commander had messaged him that he was shuttling to the command ship for medical treatment. Drek had developed some unusual symptoms: sore throat, sneezing, runny nasal passages, malaise.

Grav offered to accompany him to the ship, but Drek had instructed him to remain. "I won't be long. When I return, we'll need a new location."

Those were the last words the admiral spoke to him.

If Grav had gone with Drek, he might have prevented the tragedy. He likely would have died, but he might have saved millions of lives if he'd pressed the admiral to enter quarantine.

But either Admiral Drek had refused to isolate himself, or no one had dared to



suggest it.

With the med unit unable to cure the foreign disease, the admiral had passed the contagion to everyone aboard the command ship—including some senior officers who'd departed for the home world shortly after greeting the admiral.

Not only had the entire military wing assigned to the Earth Campaign been taken out, but millions on Progg-Res had perished, the largest loss of life ever sustained. Worse, it hadn't occurred through battle but through negligence, failure to take common-sense precautions.

Do it once. Do it right.

Had the admiral lived, he would have been court-martialed and executed.

Which raised the question: If Grav got rescued, what would happen to him? Would he be deemed responsible for failing to prevent the tragedy by allowing the ailing admiral to return to the command ship?

In the four months since that fateful conversation, Grav had received only two communiques—the shocking one that Drek had died and others aboard the vessel were ailing, and an even more disturbing one several weeks later from the GM that the disease had spread to Progg-Res, the Earth campaign had been aborted, and any remaining ground troops would be extracted when it was safe to do so. He'd been instructed to avoid humans and their dwellings, but to kill any he happened to come into contact with to prevent contamination. There'd been no further comms, and his requests for updates had gone unanswered.

Now, he'd lost his comm device. It had been stolen along with his weapon.

He suspected he couldn't go home—but he didn't see how he could remain on Earth

either. He guesstimated 95 percent of the Earth's population had been obliterated, but that still left an angry, vengeful 5 percent. He eyed the sleeping woman. Who had she lost, he wondered. A mate? Parents? Siblings? Children?

Unaware the invasion had been aborted, she didn't realize it was probably safe to return to her home—as long as she remained vigilant. There remained an unknown number of Progg who, fearing the contagion, would kill any humans they came into contact with—including the ones who'd been promised safety in exchange for their assistance.

Grav had assumed that after cleansing the last town, the ground troops under the admiral's command would have remained in place, awaiting further orders. But Grav returned to the location and found it deserted.

Most likely, they'd sickened too and had shuttled to the ship for treatment, only to die. They could have been absorbed into another unit and moved on. Or they could have deserted and scattered. Not everyone agreed with the methods used to build the empire; new recruits sometimes balked.

An air assault was clean and easy. You didn't see the targets. Ground troops came face-to-face with the populace. They had the technology to cleanse the entire planet from the air, but vaporization killed all living creatures—people, animals, birds, fish, insects, microorganisms. A global assault would have obliterated the ecosystem. Who desired a dead planet?

As the admiral's aide, Grav had never taken a life, never participated in a raid, but knowing what occurred had bothered him more than it should until he hardened himself to it. There was nothing he could do to stop it. It was the way of his people.

He studied the woman with the enticing scent. Having looked her in the eye, he couldn't take her life.

Like she hadn't been able to take his.

At least, not yet.

By happenstance, their paths had collided, locking them into a twisted fight for survival.

His shoulder joints were killing him. Thirst he could deal with. Hunger he could ignore. But the pressure in his bladder had grown unbearable. If she didn't wake soon, he'd soil himself. He couldn't wait any longer.

"Hey! Hey! Wake up!"

\* \* \* \*

"What the fuck?"

Laurel jolted upright, her dream vaporizing like people on a doomed planet. Her mind awhirl, she'd lain awake for hours. It seemed like she'd just fallen asleep, and then her prisoner had the nerve to wake her up? Clearly, he didn't understand his role here.

Vainly, she tried to recall the dream, sensing a significance, a message. Something about...chains? Dammit.

She scowled at her hostage. No, not a hostage, a prisoner. A hostage got traded for something. Grav was a dangerous albatross. Who'd woken her up.

"I have to urinate," he said.

"So, urinate." She swung her legs over the side of the bed. She needed to pee; she could imagine how badly he needed to go.

“Please,” he said.

“I’m not letting you up.” She got to her feet and slipped her gun into the holster. She left the chamber and went into the storage room where she kept the portable composting toilet and relieved herself.

Upon returning, she scrutinized him with growing frustration. Allowing him to soil himself was not a good long-term or even intermediate-term solution. And unless she kept shoving a straw in his mouth and spoon-fed him, she would have to figure something out.

Chains... The remnant of the dream drifted through her mind. What did it mean? Their fates were now chained together?

He twisted on the bed, probably trying to relieve the pressure on his shoulders. He couldn’t go anywhere, thanks to the zip ties. The prepper had purchased a mega-sack of the plastic ties. Police officers had used them when they arrested a big group of suspects and didn’t have enough handcuffs. To get them off, you had to cut them off.

Chains...

“A chain! That’s the solution!”

She ran to the storage room, grabbed the ginormous sack of zip ties, wire cutters, a bucket, and a tape measure. After setting the items on her bed, she measured the distance from the posts on the bunk bed to the table beside it.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

“Calculating.”

She returned to her bed and made three zip tie chains—one for his left wrist, a longer one for the right, and a short one for his legs. When the chains were complete, she shoved a handful of zip ties into her pocket and approached her prisoner. After moving the chair and water jug out of the way, she attached new zip ties to the two front bedposts then slipped a plastic strip under each of his wristbands and attached them to a chain. Next, she connected the chains to the just-added bedpost tie.

“I’m not trussed enough?”

She retrieved the wire cutters and the bucket, placing the latter next to his bed. After chaining his ankles together, she released his legs from the post with a snip of the wire cutters.

At the head of the bed, she cut the original ties from the posts. He was now chained to the bed. He could feed himself and urinate, but he couldn’t escape. As long as she stayed out of reach, she would be safe.

Groaning, he lowered and flexed his arms. “Thank you.”

She pointed to the bucket. “For you to urinate.”

She watched while he sat up to ensure she hadn’t given him too much leash. She supposed he might be strong enough to drag the entire bunk bed, but he wouldn’t be able to get the bed through the narrow cave entrance. Satisfied she’d secured her prisoner, she went to make a cup of coffee. I can’t believe I took care of his needs before I even had my coffee. She heated water on an alcohol camping stove while she retrieved the instant coffee and a couple of power bars.

Taking her cup, she went to check on her prisoner. He was sitting up. He’d used the bucket. She eyed the amount of urine. He really did have to pee. She deposited the power bars on the table. “Food,” she said, and snagged the travel mug. It was empty.

He'd finished off the water. She refilled it and set it on the table.

Immediate problem solved, she sat in the chair out of reach, sipped her coffee, and contemplated him. He looked a little less gray today, a little more silver, the chest wound healed. What does it take to kill these bastards? People did survive gunshot wounds, but not like this. The bullet just popped out of him. They can't be invincible. Nobody is invincible. Not even vampires and zombies. If you hammer a stake into a vampire's heart or cut off a zombie's head, they die.

Except those creatures were fiction. This monster was real.

"What are you drinking?" he asked.

"Coffee."

He wrinkled his nose. "It smells...pungent."

"And it smells better than it tastes. Coffee is an acquired taste." She chuckled and then scowled, angry at herself. There was nothing amusing about this situation. This wasn't a chat with a friend or a casual conversation with a stranger. It was a confrontation with the enemy.

He stood up, and her heart nearly leaped out of her chest, but he rocked on his heels, and she realized he was stretching his legs. Still standing, he tore the wrapper off a power bar and hesitantly bit into it. He made a face. "This is an acquired taste, too." He swallowed and washed it down with a drink of water. "Actually, it has almost no taste. You regularly eat this stuff?"

Power bars did taste like cardboard, but he had some nerve complaining about the food. He was damn lucky to be fed at all. She fumed. "Only when our planet is invaded, and we can't get regular food."

Thanks to the prepper, she had buckets and buckets of freeze-dried meals: beef stroganoff, spaghetti with meat sauce, chili, chicken fettuccine, mac and cheese, scrambled eggs with hash browns, and more. If she desired other rations, she could shop at any house or market in the area. Perishables had long since spoiled, but getting food wasn't an issue. At least not yet. Ten years from now, twenty years, might be a different story. Assuming she survived that long.

Heat. Ample light. Electricity. A hot shower. That's what she needed. The cave stayed at 60 degrees Fahrenheit, but that was still chilly. The oil lamps didn't light the chambers bright enough, and she needed to conserve the oil. Had they been prescient as teenagers, she and Brent wouldn't have used the oil lamps so much. But they'd burned through the fuel like somebody else was paying the bill. Somebody was—her future self.

Now, she had to keep the light on around the clock to monitor her prisoner.

If she dared to fire up the generator, she'd have electric heat and light, but because of the harmful fumes, she'd have to place the machine outside .

Since everyone had died, the world had gone eerily silent. No traffic, no planes, no sirens, no lawn mowers, no yelling kids playing ball. No barking dogs. Pets had been vaporized with their owners. In the dead of winter, wild birds and cicadas didn't sing, coyotes didn't howl, crickets didn't chirp.

In the silence, the growl of the generator would travel for miles.

The Progg or a colluder would hear it.

Plus, she'd need to get gasoline. There was none in the cave. She assumed the red jugs in her parents' garage were full, but she preferred to save the fuel in case she needed to flee in the car. The vehicles should be gassed, but she couldn't count on

being able to get fuel once she was on the road, especially in rural areas. She'd have to go to town for gasoline for the generator, and every foray in the open increased the risk of detection and death.

Again, she wished she knew how many aliens were in the area. How great was the danger? "Are you alone?" she asked.

"No, I'm with you."

Was he trying to be funny? Her lip curled with annoyance.

He sat on the mattress to eat a second power bar. Although he posed no threat while in chains, she felt more comfortable when he was sitting.

"Tell you what," he said. "I'll make you a trade."

"You're in no position to negotiate." She downed the last gulp of cold coffee.

He finished the power bar in silence.

She held her tongue. I get what you're doing. She stood up to leave. I won't play your game. You are not in control here. But she wondered what he would trade for. Another power bar? Something better to eat? Why not just ask for those things? He hadn't hesitated to ask for water or to be able to relieve himself.

She reached the chamber exit.

He spoke. "I'll answer your question if you answer one of mine."

She turned. "What's your question?"



“What’s your name?”

What difference did it make? His curiosity made her wary, but what harm would it do? If by telling him her name, she could find out how many Progg were in the area, that would be a good exchange.

If he told the truth. He might lie.

She could, too. She could give him a fake name. But that would be silly because it didn’t matter at this point. Hell, she could give him her full name, her mother’s maiden name, her birth date, and her social security number, and it couldn’t hurt her. But aliens? They could kill her.

“My name is Laurel Knight,” she said.

“Laurel,” he repeated. “Do you want me to answer your previous question, or do you have another?”

She inched into the room, mulling over how best to ask her question, open ended or yes or no. Numbers would be a big help, but what if he didn’t have them? “Are there other Progg in the area?”

“I don’t know,” he said.

“You fucking asshole! That’s the last damn thing you get from me!” He could die of thirst and drown in his own piss for all she cared. She whirled around, stomping for the exit.

“Laurel, wait! I don’t know because I got separated!”

She froze. Turned. “What?”

“I got separated from my unit. They either moved on or shuttled to the command ship. So, yes, I’m alone, but are there others in the area? I don’t know. I’ve been looking for them.”

She scanned his face. He appeared earnest, sincere, but how could she be sure? She had a pretty good lie detector, could tell most of the time when a patient lied about how he got injured or whether he’d been compliant with medical instructions. But she mustn’t presume alien expressions and body language conveyed the same meaning.

“Have you been through Big Creek—the town?” she asked.

“I passed through it.”

“Nobody was there? No Progg?”

“No one. I didn’t walk every street of the town, but I did see quite a bit of it while trying to find food.”

He could be lying. Even if he told the truth, other Progg could show up at any time like he had. But the tension in her shoulders relaxed. She felt more comfortable about venturing into town, getting more clothes, stocking up on drugs and medical supplies she might need in the future.

She might even risk running the generator. But, what if a colluder heard? What if they were still working with the Progg? “Any humans?” She wiggled her itchy nose.

“I didn’t see any. But somebody shot me.”

“Why were you on foot?” She rubbed her nose.

“The fuel cell on my ground crawler died a few months ago. Without equipment, I

couldn't recharge it, and I couldn't get any of your vehicles to work."

He probably had no idea cars needed a key. Her vehicle, parked in her parents' garage, was gassed, the key under the floor mat, ready to go in the event she needed to flee and had time to get to it.

She'd never considered getting in the car and driving. Why put herself out in the open and vulnerable to the death rays? Where could she go that would be safer or better equipped than the cave already stocked with supplies? Back roads would be passable, but freeways and major highways would be clogged by smashed vehicles. Cars had crashed into each other when the drivers and passengers disappeared.

She felt a sneeze coming on. "How did you get separated from your unit?"

He pursed his lips. "Not important." He reached for the water and took a drink.

Not so fast, asshole. His avoidance indicated the answer to her question was significant. "No, tell me—" Laurel sneezed.

Once. Twice.

She opened her eyes to find Grav's face frozen into an expression of abject terror. And then he went nuts.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:30 am*

She's infected with the plague!

Admiral Drek had reported he'd been sneezing frequently before succumbing to the disease. Later, the GM's communique had warned what symptoms to watch for.

Oh, Zok, how long has she had it? What's the incubation period? How is it spread? By air? By casual contact? The GM hadn't provided any answers. I could already be infected!

He tore at the restraints.

"Stop it! What are you doing?"

"Stay back! Stay back!" His heart thundered in his chest.

"What the hell is wrong with you?"

He yanked at the chains, kicking over the bucket of urine.

"Stop! Grav, stop!"

He wrenched at the chains so hard he pulled the bed away from the wall and toppled the table. The lamp shattered, and the oil burst into flames. Burning oil spread across the floor. Flames leapt into the air, and thick black smoke filled the chamber.

"Jesus Christ!" Laurel whisked a blanket from the bed, flung it over the flames, and smothered the fire. The cave plunged into darkness reeking of char, burnt oil, and hot

urine.

He heard scuffling. She was on the move, but he couldn't see her. Don't come any closer. I don't want to die. He continued to yank on the restraints. Changing strategy, he grabbed ahold of a bedpost and shook it. He couldn't drag the bed out of here, but he could carry a couple of posts and worry about freeing himself later.

A light clicked on, and he was spotlighted.

"Don't come any closer," he growled, trying to sound menacing, but he had nothing to threaten her with. They both knew it.

"Okay." She sat on the bed on the other side of the room. "Do you want to tell me what is freaking you out so bad that you nearly killed us both?"

"I didn't freak out." But he had. Faced with the prospect of death, he'd panicked. Trying to control his breathing and racing heart, he said as evenly as he could, "You're sick."

"Sick? Sick how?"

"You're infected with the plague."

"No, I'm not!" She screwed up her face. "What plague? There's no plague that I'm aware of."

"The one that killed Admiral Drek." And everyone else. Was that a tickle in his throat? Was he getting stuffy?

"Who's Admiral Drek?"

“The Earth campaign commander. I was his aide. While I was away, he fell ill. They shuttled him to the command ship, but the med unit couldn’t save him.”

“That’s how you got separated.”

He didn’t reply, realizing in his panic, he’d already said too much.

“What were the symptoms?”

“Sore throat, runny nasal passages, fatigue, chest congestion. Sneezing was one of the first signs.” The admiral had sneezed during their last conversation. Drek’s voice had sounded nasally, too.

“Ah...” She nodded. “You think because I sneezed, I’m ill?” She regarded him, shaking her head. “First of all, I am not ill. I probably sneezed from dust in the air. We are in a cave. Many things can bring on a sneeze—dust, black pepper, spicy food, and allergens like pollen, dander, mold. And rhinoviruses like the common cold.

“Your admiral couldn’t have died from a cold. Everybody gets them, and they recover. It’s no big deal. It’s not dangerous.”

“Maybe not to you,” he said, realizing he handed her the means to kill him without bloodshed. Maybe he was already dying. The common cold was not common to them. They had no immunity, and the med unit had been unable to fabricate a treatment.

He shouldn’t be talking about this. Admitting the leader of the campaign had died exposed a vulnerability. Thank Zok he hadn’t told her any more—like how many millions of his people had perished and that the takeover of her planet had been aborted as a result.

Those stranded on Earth were in a precarious position. While handheld vaporizers were more effective than guns, the Progg were outnumbered by a no-doubt vengeful surviving populace. They would be hunted. That's what happened to him; he'd been ambushed by a vengeful human.

For his safety and his fellow Progg, the humans had to believe a major threat still existed.

"Besides," she said. "I haven't been around anybody to catch a cold. It spreads by touching a contaminated surface or breathing droplets from an infected person—"

"Like from sneezing—"

"Yes, but I haven't been in contact with a single solitary person in over a year. More likely, I'll get a disease from you. So, calm the fuck down." She glowered at him and then surveyed the singed blanket and the puddle of urine and then scowled some more.

Narrowing her eyes, she cocked her head. "Why did you call it the plague?"

"I couldn't think of the word in your language for disease," he improvised and swore silently. I must guard my tongue, watch my words. He was ashamed of his panic, the behavior unbecoming a Progg. He felt a little calmer after her explanation, although his concerns were not completely erased.

He had a hunch how the admiral had fallen ill. The regiment had been working with a human informant to ferret out possible hiding places. The informant must have been infected and passed on the disease.

Earth's best weapons had been ineffective against Progg superiority. Annihilation had been a foregone conclusion.

Except the humans had won. The mighty Progg had been defeated by their own hubris, by failing to take precautions because they didn't think they had anything to fear. A minor, common disease posing no threat to the native population had been their downfall.

He prayed to Zok she was telling the truth about not being ill. What if she's sick and doesn't know it yet?

She regarded him steadily while shaking her head then spun on her heel and left the room, taking the light with her. He sank onto the bunk and held his head in his hands. Would she come back? What would happen now?

Long minutes passed before she returned with a whisk on a pole, a flat tray with a handle, and a couple of lamps. Grav stood up.

"Sit down," she ordered.

He eyed her warily.

"Sit down, or I'll breathe on you," she threatened.

"You said you weren't sick!"

"I'm not, but you can't be a 100 percent sure, can you?"

He sat.

"Don't freak out, but I'm going to clean up your mess."

He scooted to the foot of the bed as she approached.



“Battery-powered, no oil.” She positioned the lamps close to his bed—but not as near as before—and proceeded to carefully lift and then roll up the blanket. She pulled a large, thin black sheet from a pouch in her shirt. As she did so, some of the strips she’d used to tie him to the bed fell out of her pocket. She shook out the sheeting, opening it to a large bag.

She stuffed the blanket inside then swept up the glass shards, depositing them in the bag.

After righting the table, she plunked his water container on top of it and motioned to the bucket.

He picked it up. The urine had soaked into the hard-packed ground. The odor would linger for a long time. Hopefully, I’ll be able to escape and won’t have to smell it for very long.

Hands on her hips, she eyed him. “Trust is in short supply. You don’t entirely believe me when I tell you I’m not sick, well, I’m not convinced the Progg haven’t moved into Big Creek.

“So, I’m going to check out your story. If you’re telling the truth, I’ll be back. If you’re lying, and I get vaporized, you’re going to starve to death. Now, is there something you wish to tell me before I go?”

“I told you the truth.”

“Fine.” She marched out, taking the black sack with her. He eyed the white strips she’d dropped on the floor. Better wait a bit.

A minute later, she stomped in, dropped several of the dry, tasteless food bars onto the table, topped off his water, and left again.

He hoped, for his sake, she didn't encounter anybody.

He'd told her no lies, but he hadn't told her the whole truth. Having searched months for his people without success made it unlikely she would encounter a Progg but not impossible. Like he had, someone might enter the town to find food. He prayed to Zok that didn't happen because if it did, he'd kill Laurel, and Grav would starve.

The strips on the floor called to him, but he held back. Give it more time. Make sure she's gone.

He didn't wish to die by any means. He never realized how much dying terrified him. Protected by military superiority and blessed with a strong constitution assisted by medical intelligence, he hadn't had to face death. When you always won, you had no idea what losing felt like.

Within a short period of time, he'd been shot, possibly had been exposed to a fatal illness, and now faced starvation.

I hope she's not carrying the plague. He eyed the white strips. Enough time has passed. It's safe.

He leaped off the bunk and snatched up the white ties. He tested the strength, pulling on one with both hands. Too strong to break. He inserted the tip into the hole. It just slid around. He tried again another way. It locked.

Ah...simple, but ingenious. Insert one way and little teeth caught, and it couldn't be undone. Insert it backward, and it could be removed.

Unfortunately for Laurel, she'd allowed him too much freedom of movement.

Compassion will undermine you every time.

He lifted a corner of the mattress at the head of the bed. Metal rails supported wooden slats upon which the mattress rested. He ran his hands along the rail. Smooth. No help there. He placed the ties on a slat and lowered the mattress.

He inspected the bedposts. No rough edges. He tore a food bar open and grimaced as he bit into it then set the others on the mattress and placed the water on the floor away from the urine stain. He lifted the metal table onto his lap. Very lightweight. No wonder he'd knocked it over so easily.

No sharp edges. He tested the sturdiness. He might be able to break off a leg but doubted he could do anything with it before she returned. She'd be sure to notice a table with a missing leg.

He set it down. As he bent to retrieve his water, he spied a long, big silver object under the bed pushed to the far side.

By raising the mattress, he used his feet to drag it forward and out from under the bed. A ladder. The flat rungs, their sharp edges bent downward, were screwed in. To his delight, the screws on the lowest rung were loose. He undid the screws and pulled the rung loose.

He shoved the ladder under the bed. While finishing off the power bar, he eyed the chain, contemplating which would be the least noticeable link. Then he began sawing on the link with the sharp rung, keeping an ear cocked for Laurel's return. If she went to the town, she should be gone a while, but he couldn't count on it.

After a couple of minutes of sawing, he'd achieved no headway. This is going to take time.

All I have is time.

He continued sawing. It felt seditious, treasonous to admit even to himself that he would miss her when he left. I hope you survive, little human.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:30 am*

Trust, but verify. The Russian proverb had been made famous by a former president. Decades dead, Ronald Reagan hadn't been around to witness the apocalypse, but his words lived on. She would go to town to verify if Grav had been telling the truth.

She stopped first at her parents' home. She approached the stone-and-clapboard farmhouse with caution, ducking through the trees to view it from all angles. It appeared undisturbed. In a year of hiding, she'd dared to venture to the house only twice for some needed supplies. She hadn't gone to her own apartment in town at all.

She would have expected the murderous intruders to occupy Washington, D.C., Boston, New York City, London, Paris, Prague, Rome, not nowheresville, Missouri, USA. But they'd marched through small towns, farms, and ranches, so maybe they preferred the small-town lifestyle.

But if the coast was clear, she'd be able to get out more, gather more supplies and food. She craved anything not freeze-dried. She wouldn't need to be so quiet. She could run the generator, warm up the cave with an electric heater. She could drive to town, which was why she'd stopped at the house—to get her car.

The world had gone deadly quiet. Afraid the enemy might hear the motor, she hadn't attempted to use a vehicle before. Making noise still worried her, but if she did encounter the enemy, she'd be better able to outrun them in a car than on foot.

Leaving the bag with the oil-soaked blanket in the trees, she pulled her gun and sprinted to the side door, entering into the laundry room. Creeping into the hall, she listened. Not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse.

It was so quiet she probably could hear a mouse. The refrigerator wasn't humming or dropping ice into the receptacle. No heating unit switched on and off. No phones chimed with an incoming text.

Gripping the handgun tighter, she tiptoed toward the great room. From behind the wall, she peered into the space. The living room, kitchen, and dining room were vacant. "Hello? Anybody here? Hello?" she called and prayed she didn't get a reply.

Not getting one, she stepped into the main room and crossed to the other side of the house to check the bedrooms. The four doors off the hall were shut. A good sign, but not conclusive. The last time she'd been in the house, she'd taken care to shut the doors, hoping if aliens entered, they wouldn't bother to close them, and she'd be able to tell if the house had been breached.

Room by room, she hid behind the wall, pushed the door open, and peered inside the two bedrooms and a bath. Lastly, she came to the master bedroom at the end of the hall. Vacant. She expelled a shaky sigh of relief and holstered her weapon.

Two suitcases sat next to the king bed. Her parents had been packed and ready to run as soon as they heard the aliens were headed their direction, but they hadn't acted soon enough. Everything had happened too fast.

The master suite still smelled like her dad's aftershave. Most men stopped splashing on aftershave a few decades ago, but not her dad. Her mom loved the scent of his cologne because he'd been wearing it when they met, so he continued to wear it well past its fashion-end date. As a teenager, she'd been embarrassed. "Do you have to put that stuff on? People a mile away can smell you." As an adult, she'd found it endearing.

Now, the scent was heartbreaking. She left the room before she started to cry. She would never again be enveloped in her dad's warm embrace. Never talk to her mom

or her brother. Maybe never talk to anybody except the alien.

I can't kill him. I can't release him. I can't keep him. I don't want to leave. What the hell am I going to do?

She passed her old bedroom, which had become the guest room when she moved into her own place, and her older brother's, which her mom had wasted no time in converting to a craft room when he left home. "Geez, Mom, could you at least have waited until I got down the front steps?" he'd joked.

"I need to ensure you don't boomerang back. I plan to enjoy my empty nest years," she'd said, but her parents would have welcomed either of them home in a heartbeat if they'd needed help.

She fled the memories, moving into the great room again, noting how dust motes danced in the sunbeam shining through a skylight. A year's worth of dust coated every flat surface. Trekking across the living room, she'd left footprints in the dust on the dark hardwood floors. Her nose itched, and she felt a sneeze coming on.

"Achoo! Achoo!" She sneezed into the crook of her arm. "Good thing Grav isn't here to demolish the house."

She couldn't believe how he'd freaked. Thank goodness she'd got the fire put out. She could have lost everything. They could have died!

He'd feared she'd had the plague before correcting his wording. He hadn't had any trouble coming up with the right words until then.

A top commander had died because the Progg lacked immunity to a harmless Earth disease. Could more of them have died? A lot of them? Chances were the leader would have spread the rhinovirus to others before realizing he was ill. Was that why

Grav referred to it as the plague? Because it had spread?

Maybe the commander hadn't contracted a cold but the flu. Symptoms were similar, but influenza killed hundreds of thousands of people every year, and historic flu epidemics had killed millions.

Maybe the admiral got COVID. Her spirits brightened. Did that make her a bad nurse? Oh, well.

After a final glance around the house, she entered the garage. In the corner, she spied two five-gallon red jugs of gasoline. Her dad had been prepared—for all the good it did him.

She pressed the garage door opener, but nothing happened. “Well, duh. No electricity.” There had been when she'd parked her car last year. She disconnected the door from the opener and lifted it manually.

The car fob was still under the floor mat where she'd left it in case she needed to make a quick getaway and didn't have time to get her keys. She settled in the driver's seat and pressed the start button.

Click. Click. Click. Click.

“Shit!” Dead battery.

She dashed into the house and rustled up her mom's spare keys and climbed into her mother's SUV. “Please start; please start.” She pressed the starter.

The vehicle purred to life.

“Thank goodness.” Even better, the car had a full tank of gas.



After backing out of the garage, she got out to close the door. Leaving the car idling in the driveway, she retrieved the trash bag and flung it into the rear of the vehicle. She would have to dump it somewhere, but it felt wrong to leave it in the woods. I should have brought the other trash. She didn't produce much garbage, but she'd collected a sack of food wrappers.

Driving along the gravel lane, she encountered only a few stalled vehicles before she reached the paved road.

As she'd expected, smashed and stalled cars blocked the on-ramp and were scattered helter-skelter across the highway. Drivers and passengers had been vaporized while attempting to flee, but the vehicles had kept running until they hit something or ran out of gas. She'd expected as much, but the sight still came as a shock. It looked like a scene from a religious movie about the Rapture. All good Christians have been beamed up to heaven.

And then there's me. Never a believer, she wasn't going to start now.

Navigating the obstacle course on the highway would be challenging at best. She swerved around a pickup truck and headed for the scenic farm road. As she drove, she scanned the fields, keeping her eyes peeled for movement and other signs of life. She spotted no aliens or humans; however, a reassuring abundance of deer grazed in the fields. The animals are coming back. At least they didn't kill everything.

When an area got vaporized, all pets and wildlife died, too. Charlie, her parents' black lab, had been killed. She knew all the animals at the Dickerson Park Zoo in Springfield and the cats at the National Tiger Sanctuary in Saddlebrooke—located in the vaporization zone—would be gone.

On the outskirts of Big Creek, she stopped at a gas station and tossed the bag into the dumpster. "No trash pickup today." No trash pickup ever.

She proceeded to Big Creek.

Her hometown resembled a Hollywood studio movie set, rows of building facades with a few cars parked along the curb for props. Arriving at the empty town on that fateful day, she'd heard the sirens blaring—and had raced to her parents' house to find them gone. Praying they'd escaped, she'd run through the woods to the cave.

Vacant.

The sirens were silent now, having petered out with no electricity to power them.

The scarcity of automobiles here and the clutter on the highway showed people had been vaporized from the air as they fled. Tears slid down her cheeks as she drove slowly through the devastated town. "I hope the Progg all got colds, the flu, and COVID!"

Storefront-window placards valiantly proclaimed, WE SHALL WIN, DEFEAT THE ALIEN BASTARDS, and LONG LIVE THE RESISTANCE. Although fearful, people had remained determined through the end.

American and Missouri state flags drooped from their poles outside the post office. No wind today. Most of the ice had melted, too, she noted—and then fishtailed around a corner as she hit a patch of it.

The Progg were gone—but would they return to the scene of the crime? That was the big question. Smaller, but no less important question: What had drawn Grav to the area?

She braked alongside a two-floor green building. Big Creek General was a tiny rural hospital of twenty-five beds. People needing major surgeries or specialized care went to Cox Medical Center or Mercy Hospital in Springfield, but Big Creek General

served most of the medical needs of local residents with a caring heart and community-minded spirit. Patients weren't just organs or conditions requiring treatment or a way for the physician to get another Mercedes. She'd been proud to work there.

I should get some antibiotics, pain relievers, and medical supplies. There was no point stockpiling a huge amount because medications lost their potency over time and expired meds could be dangerous. But, it wouldn't hurt to have some on hand for as long as they were good. The prepper had left supertankers of OTC pain meds, but they'd expired a decade ago. She could check the pharmacy, too.

But that's for another day. Today was a brief reconnaissance mission, and it didn't seem wise to leave her prisoner unguarded for too long.

A couple of blocks from Big Creek General, she parked outside the hospital annex, aka her apartment building. Most of its residents had worked at the hospital in some capacity. It was so close Laurel had walked to work every day.

Fortunately, her mom had a key to her apartment on her ring because she'd left hers under the mat in her car.

She climbed the stairs to the second floor and let herself into her unit.

The apartment remained as she'd left it—not an item out of place, and like her parents' house, covered in dust. She dragged her finger across the bar separating the functional kitchenette from the living space. She'd eaten her solo meals at the bar rather than at the small table.

On her days off, she'd go out with friends to Springfield or hang out at her parents'. While the apartment hadn't been a home, just a place to crash, a pang of loss ricocheted through her. She'd been robbed of whatever possibilities life would have

offered.

She slid the patio door open and stepped onto the tiny veranda to survey the street and its environs, peering over rooftops. The hospital and the apartment complex were the sole two-story buildings. The town sprawled in front of her, tragically still and quiet. Life would forever be divided into before and after.

“It’s just me and the alien.” Her murmured comment sounded loud in the silence.

Except, somebody had shot him. Had the shooter moved on or remained in the area?

She went back inside and got her binoculars then studied the area again. Not a single solitary sign of life. Good —because that meant no Progg, but bad because deep down she’d been hoping somebody alive remained. Somebody human. She’d hoped that some people, like her, had been gone the day Big Creek had been vaporized and maybe returned.

Would it ever be safe to live in the open again? And what about the colluders? She assumed more of them had survived. They may have had advance knowledge of which towns were targeted and would have steered clear.

With a heavy sigh, she went inside.

She collected some clothes, tossing into a duffel three pairs of jeans, a pair of leggings, four warm shirts, pj’s, underwear, socks, and her running shoes. Then she removed two of the jeans and substituted more leggings. She had to wash clothes by hand in water hauled bucket by bucket from the creek. She used a mechanical clothes wringer to squeeze out the excess water, but denim took a long time to air-dry.

When she’d fled, she’d had only the clothes on her back and a few changes of clothing in the bugout bag she’d grabbed from her car.

She collected a few personal items, toiletries, and some novels—she'd read and reread all the romance ones from her teenage years. "I'll have to drop by the library one day." She gave the street a final perusal and then left the apartment.

"Can't leave the alien unattended for too long. He already lit the cave on fire."

Guarding a prisoner had become a big pain in the ass. While he'd been truthful about the town, she didn't doubt those blue-blue earnest eyes concealed more secrets than they revealed. Now that she'd had time to think about it, she wondered if he'd been as freaked out as he appeared. Maybe it had been an act. Maybe the admiral hadn't died at all.

"But he knocked over the oil lamp and started a fire," she mused as she walked to her car. "Maybe he was trying to get me to release him."

"Hell of a risk to take. We both could have been killed. Maybe he felt it was worth the risk. Or he knew I'd save him since I didn't kill him when I had the chance."

"I still have a chance to kill him." She could go back to the cave and shoot him in the head.

She shuddered. It would be cold-blooded murder, not self-defense. If I do what they do, then I'm no better than them.

She drove away, vowing to return soon for medical supplies and books. Besides novels, she'd get some survival manuals, home remedy books, and edible-plant field guides.

Most of her books were on her eReader, and its battery was stone-cold dead.

Except ...if the aliens weren't around to hear, she could use the generator. She'd have

electricity for light and heat and charging stuff. It would make life much more comfortable.

What I wouldn't give for a hot shower. She'd never take hot water for granted again.

She'd been reduced to sponge baths and a weekly "sun shower" in the metal washtub she used for laundry. To save potable water, she hauled water from the creek to fill the shower bag, heating it first, pot by pot, on the alcohol or propane stoves. By the time she got enough water heated to fill the bag, the first batches had cooled off. Showers were lukewarm, labor-intensive affairs.

Survival was a never-ending camping trip. She used to love to camp when she could go home afterward, and when she still had the option to check into the Hilton.

"Ungrateful much? Billions have perished, and I'm upset about a tepid shower?"

She redirected her thoughts to what she did have. The ability to use the generator—

"Oh my god! Mom and Dad have a generator!" She could run the well pump, fill the water tank, get the water heater running, and take a hot shower in less time than it took to haul water from the creek.

Excited, she pressed the pedal to the metal and sped to her parents' house.

\* \* \* \*

"Oh, my god." Laurel groaned as she stood under the glorious hot spray. She could stay here forever—or at least until the water ran cold, except she'd left her prisoner alone for much longer than intended. Reluctantly, she shut the water off and stepped out of the stall.

She couldn't forget how he pretended to not speak English and doubted using plague had been a simple language error. Freudian slip, more likely. He'd freaked when she sneezed, which suggested whatever the admiral had caught had spread to others.

Then again, as she'd already considered, maybe the panic had been a ruse.

"I don't know what to believe anymore," she said as she toweled off.

She dressed in fresh clothes from her apartment, combed the tangles out of her long hair, and blew it dry. Her brunette hair hung to the middle of her back, having grown a good six inches. The ends were a little straggly—she needed a trim. She jotted a mental note to do it the next time she came for a shower—which would be soon. No more hauling water from the creek for baths and laundry. She could bring her dirty clothes here and use the washing machine. When she depleted the fuel for the generator, she could siphon more out of the cars in town.

"I'd better quit dawdling and go tend to my guest."

She deposited her dirty clothes in the laundry room and left through the side door.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:30 am*

Almost there. Almost. Only a slender thread kept his left arm tethered to the bedpost. Grav had considered which limb to free first and had decided to work on the left arm, sawing at the chain closest to the one encircling the bedpost.

And...got it! The rung cut all the way through the plastic. He pumped his left fist in the air, the loose chain dangling from his wrist. He'd worry about how to get the chain off after he escaped. He reconnected the dangling chain to the bedpost by inserting a tie the "wrong" way so it looked connected but could be removed.

Legs or right arm next? Once both arms were free, he could escape at the first opportunity—but being hobbled would slow him down. However, once unchained from the bed, he could search for a better implement and cut all the bands and be totally free within minutes.

Arm, he decided, and started sawing on a plastic link. He hadn't expected to make this much progress—but he hadn't anticipated her being gone so long. The town wasn't that far away. She should be able to walk it in a little over an hour. What could be taking so long?

Now that he had a means to free himself, he no longer worried about starving to death if the woman encountered his comrades. But he hoped nothing bad had befallen her.

As Drek's aide, Grav had moved with the ground troops, but as "support staff," his duties did not entail direct contact with the enemy. However, the argument, "Not my job" would be considered moot if anyone discovered he'd come face-to-face with a human and failed to act. Although the takeover had been aborted, allegiance to the empire required he kill any survivors he encountered. They would expect him to kill



Laurel. Progg did not leave loose ends.

He had the ability to kill her now. With an arm free, he could snap her neck or grab her weapon and put a bullet through her chest.

The idea turned his stomach. Perhaps he felt she'd earned the right to live after fighting so hard to survive. Or maybe because killing her seemed senseless. The Progg didn't kill to kill. They eliminated their opponents painlessly and instantaneously—to gain something. Nobody suffered. Except maybe the survivors, but there weren't supposed to be any.

He heard a scuffling. She's back! Relief washed over him, and he shoved the rung and the spare ties under his mattress.

When she appeared, he was sitting on his bunk, studying his toes.

"Oh, good. You're still here," she said with what sounded like sarcasm.

"Couldn't leave without saying goodbye," he fired off, getting to his feet. "You changed clothing." She'd left wearing faded-blue pants, a black shirt with a pouch in front and a hood on the back. She'd changed into tight gray pants and a long-sleeved gray-and-white striped shirt. Same weapon though. It was still strapped to her hip.

Her hair looked...fluffier.

He sniffed. "You smell different." He detected the musk of human, and her own fragrance, but new odors, not unpleasant, not exactly, partially masked her natural scent.

"I went to my apartment in town. Got some clothes." She brushed her hands down her arms and averted her eyes. "Took a hot shower." Her gaze snapped to his. "But

thank you for insinuating I smelled bad.”

“I didn’t say that.”

“Are you hungry?”

“Yes.” He resigned himself to another flavorless food bar. They tasted worse than field rations, which he’d never had to eat because as the admiral’s top aide, he got served whatever Drek ate. Since he’d been on his own, he’d foraged for food. Some of it had been so disgusting he couldn’t force it down, while some of it bordered on tasty. He had learned not to open the glass cases in the grocery stores. Good Zok, the stench.

“You’re making a face,” she said.

“I’m recalling the spoiled food in the grocery stores.”

“Yeah, you don’t want to open any freezer doors.” Her light, almost-musical laughter caused an inexplicable pang of pleasure and guilt.

He had nothing to feel guilty for. While his people had almost erased an entire civilization from existence and had caused hardship and suffering for the survivors, the hegemony of the strong over the weak was the way of the galaxy.

Powerful planetary nations had been conquering weaker ones since beings took to the stars. Without galactic allies and lacking the technology to defend itself, but being highly habitable, Earth had been a prime target. If the Progg hadn’t invaded, someone else would have. The Progg just got there first.

To their detriment. They’d paid the price with a pyrrhic victory. Earth rulers had had a secret weapon and didn’t even know it.

Laurel left, taking the metal bucket, returning with an empty pail and a spade. Keeping an eye on him, she scraped at the floor where the urine had spilled and dumped the smelly dirt into the bucket and took it away.

“Thank you,” he said gratefully. Removal of the layer of dirt didn’t completely eliminate the odor, but it had reduced it.

“You’re a pain in the ass.” She set a commode at the head of the bed. “Use this.” She moved toward the exit. “I’ll get us something to eat.”

While she was gone, he tried out the commode.

When she didn’t return right away, he began to wonder. Had she left the cave? Had they run out of food bars? That wouldn’t be bad, except he had to eat. He’d begun to wonder how far she’d gone to get food, when she brought in two plates, one delicious-smelling, the other he prayed wasn’t intended for him. “Are you an herbivore or a carnivore?” she asked.

“We do not eat animals,” he said, repulsed by the idea.

“Oh, that’s where you draw the line?” She settled the good dish on the table in front of him. “I had a feeling you’d be difficult. Rigatoni with marinara sauce. No meat or cheese.

“Fork.” She slapped down a flimsy utensil that would be useless as a weapon. She was cautious but not careful enough. She’d forgotten about the ladder under the bed.

“Thank you for the vegetarian meal.” Her consideration surprised him, as did the fact that she intended to eat with him. She settled on the other side of the room with the foul fare. He could smell the meat, but he wouldn’t hold it against her that she ate animal flesh.

“You’ve already knocked over a bucket of urine. The last thing I need is you getting sick and puking all over the place,” she said.

The mention of sickness reminded him about the sneeze. He scrutinized her for signs of illness. She appeared healthy—even more robust than in the morning.

“No more sneezes?” he asked.

“None you need to worry about.”

That didn’t sound reassuring, but with a fatalism, he realized there was nothing he could do about it. Just my luck I’ll escape and then die of an Earth disease like Admiral Drek.

They ate in silence for a while.

“What do you intend to do with me?” he asked.

She took a long time before replying, “I don’t know.”

“You could let me go,” he suggested.

“So you could kill me?”

“I wouldn’t do that.”

She snorted.

“You’re going to keep me forever?”

“I haven’t decided what to do.”

You could kill me. He refrained from suggesting that option, although objectively, for her, it was the best one.

“Did you have a good day?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“There was nobody around—like I said.”

“No. Not so far.” She tucked her hair behind her ears, drawing his attention to the long, gleaming tresses. He itched to touch her hair and see if it was as soft as it looked. Progg groomed their coarse, quill-like hair into a strip over the top and the back of their skulls.

“Do the Progg return to the towns they’ve already been through?” she asked.

“Generally...not,” he replied cautiously. The situation was complicated, and surprisingly, he cared about her safety. “But you should remain vigilant in case someone passes by.”

She blinked. “You sound like you’re warning me.”

“Like you said, if something happens to you, I’ll starve to death. I wish to keep my meal provider alive,” he replied. He had the means to free himself now. What happened to her didn’t matter. Except, it did.

“Your concern is touching.”

No, it was disconcerting. One did not sympathize or empathize with the enemy—even if a takeover campaign had been aborted. Especially not then.

Danger to her and others, although greatly reduced, still existed. Ground forces didn't revisit areas they had cleansed, unless they had reason to believe stragglers remained, which rarely occurred because the Progg were thorough. Do it once, do it right. However, the unexpected retreat had left a wake of uncertainty and chaos.

An unknown number of Progg remained on Earth, their frame of mind and intentions a mystery. Would they follow their last set of orders? Had they even gotten the same communicate he had? As the admiral's chief aide, he enjoyed a status the rank and file did not have.

A certain number might have deserted their posts before or after the retreat. The GM never admitted publicly to desertions, but having worked alongside Admiral Drek, Grav knew it was a problem. However, just because a man deserted didn't mean he'd be friendly to humans. While some deserters were conscientious objectors opposed to the cleansing, others were scofflaws and cowards unsuited to military service.

He studied his guard, fascinated by the vibrancy of her hair and how her mouth and throat moved when she chewed and swallowed. Her particular scent, growing more enticing, wafted across the chamber.

It surrounded him, beckoned him to inhale and record the aroma as an indelible memory. A Progg's hypersensitive olfaction was an atavistic remnant harkening to One Million PT, the pre-tech era. On smell alone, he could track her, locate her wherever she went. Thankfully, he found the odor pleasant. Too pleasant—but he avoided dwelling on his emotional reaction.

Having a single opposable thumb on each hand didn't hinder her dexterity. She wielded the fork and other implements with ease. Then again, humans would craft tools to fit their hands.

"Did you see any other humans in town?" Was the one who shot him still around? Of

course, he hadn't been shot in town but in the woods.

She hesitated. Then: "No."

Was she telling the truth? Or did she wish to hide the fact she'd encountered others? Nothing was simple or straightforward anymore. He sighed.

She stared at him with a question in her eyes.

"You and I do not share much trust," he said.

She snorted. "On that, we can agree."

After they finished their meals, she collected his plate and the harmless fork. "You are no longer gray. Your skin is silver again."

He glanced down. His shirt, which she'd cut open to tend his wound, hung on his frame, leaving his chest bare. She was right. His natural luminescence had returned. "How did you know this is normal for me?"

"In the early days, there were news videos." Her lips tightened, and she left the room.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:30 am*

Laurel dropped the black packet onto Grav's bed.

“What's that?”

“Cleansing wipes. For personal hygiene.” The prepper had left a plastic tub of biodegradable wipes, which she had been using when she didn't feel like hauling water from the creek.

Four days had passed since she'd dragged the albatross to the cave and a couple of days since her first hot shower in a year. She'd been washing up with a cleansing cloth and fantasizing about her next hot shower when it occurred to her that she'd failed to provide for her prisoner's hygiene. She assumed the Progg cleaned themselves in some way.

“Don't want him to start to stink. I have to live with him—at least for a little while longer,” she'd muttered.

Now, he opened the package and sniffed. “No scent!” He looked pleased.

“That's good?”

“We have a sensitive sense of smell. The odors on Earth are overpowering.”

Maybe you shouldn't have invaded, then. “The wipes are used by campers and hunters who don't want perfumes. Put the dirty ones in the commode.” She averted her gaze from the gratitude in his arresting blue-blue eyes.



Most creatures have eyes. Predators have eyes. Does the gazelle think, ‘Gee, that lioness intending to have me for dinner sure has pretty eyes’?

But eyes as blue as his appeared innocent, and, when filled with gratitude or humor, made him seem deceptively harmless. She had to keep reminding herself who he was, what he’d done—what his people had done. He’d claimed to not have killed anyone, but did that matter? She had to blame somebody—why not him? He may not have done it himself, but he’d aided and abetted it.

“You can clean up while I get breakfast.” She stomped out of the chamber. A prisoner wasn’t entitled to privacy; however, the prospect of catching a glimpse of alien junk disgusted her.

Mostly.

She’d gone into nursing because she wished to help people in a meaningful, personal way. The schooling was affordable, the career portable, and employment prospects excellent, but if she’d indulged her curiosity and secret whim, she would have become a medical researcher.

So, she couldn’t help wondering how his plumbing differed from human. Thus far, the only differences she’d noted between him and her people were the two thumbs on each hand, hair like a porcupine, and silver skin that grayed when he was ill.

And the odd smile. It had taken her a while to realize what was “off” about it. He had no canines! Given the aliens’ predatory nature, she would have expected sharp, lethal fangs, but he had a mouthful of blunt teeth. Having learned he was a plant eater, the lack of canines suddenly made sense.

His teeth were meant for cutting and grinding plant material, in contrast to omnivore humans who had teeth for cutting, grinding, and slashing meat.

The murderous aliens who had decimated an entire race of beings were vegans who wouldn't harm a hair on a hare's head. Go figure.

"Check your assumptions at the door, girl." She rifled through the tubs of packaged survival rations and the shelf of canned goods, trying to find something edible for him. Yesterday, she'd fed him oatmeal with freeze-dried strawberries. Unless she gave him the same today or more power bars, she had few options. Typical meatless breakfast foods still contained animal proteins from eggs, milk, or cheese.

"Well, duh. Why do I assume he has to have breakfast?" There was no reason other than culture to reserve certain foods for a specific time of day. "Besides, he should be happy I feed him at all." She emptied a survival packet of chili beans sans meat into a pan, added water, and set it on the two-burner alcohol stove.

While it heated, she whipped up some reconstituted eggs, added powdered cheese and dehydrated mushrooms for an omelet. She fixed a cup of instant coffee for herself and then loaded all the items on a tray and carried it in.

He's getting room service now.

"Here." She slapped down his bowl of chili, pissed that she'd become his personal maid, mad at herself for creating the problem, and angry at him for having cleaned up and looking almost attractive because of it. All traces of the dried blood were gone, leaving his skin even more luminescent. Or maybe what infuriated her was his stupid, appreciative, vegan smile.

How dare he be thankful! The asshole!

Without another word, she stomped to her side of the room. No longer hungry, she ate for the nourishment while glowering at him.

She analyzed her anger. Why did his gratitude piss her off? Would she prefer him to be ungrateful and rude? Unless she starved him, which she didn't have the stomach to do, she had to feed him. It would be insult to injury if he acted like everything she offered was his due.

Gratitude humbles him. Humility made him likable and weakened her hatred.

Or maybe that's the game plan—act sweet and nonthreatening, so I'll trust him and release him.

Fat chance!

Releasing him would make her life easier—but only in the short run. Cutting him loose could spring back to bite her in the ass later. While she believed he wouldn't hurt her if she let him go, she couldn't risk the long-term, unpleasant repercussions. He could encounter another Progg and tell him where he'd been.

Presuming she found a solution to the Grav problem, then what? Could she stand spending the rest of her life alone in a cave? Did she dare move into her parents' house? She'd have more physical comforts there, but could she bear living with the memories? Plus, the house could be seen from the road. The light and generator noise would be a beacon.

The interactions with Grav had exposed the depth of her loneliness. She'd gotten so desperate for company she was willing to converse with a Progg.

She couldn't spend the rest of her life in solitary confinement. She had to reconnect with other people. Venturing out would mean taking risks, but it had to be done. She could start with Big Creek. The town had looked deserted, but people could be hiding in any of the buildings or living nearby and scurrying to town for supplies. Somebody had shot Grav. But would hooking up with others make her more vulnerable? A

group provided a bigger target than a lone individual.

Since the invasion, she'd only been living day to day. Taking Grav prisoner had caused her to think about the future again.

"The food is good," he said.

She didn't answer.

"You're angry."

"You think?"

"I do think that, but I don't know why."

"You wouldn't understand."

"Not if you don't tell me," he said.

"Don't be so reasonable!" she snapped.

"How would you like me to be?"

Unlikable. She needed to despise him. She would never forgive the Progg, but her hatred toward this one was dissipating.

"I'm mad because I'm stuck with you!" she snapped. Why did that sound petulant rather than righteous? She had a right to be angry—the Progg deserved every ounce of opprobrium.

"You could let me go," he suggested.

“You’d like that, wouldn’t you?”

“Yes.”

“Not gonna happen.” She paused. “Just out of curiosity, what would you do if I released you?”

“Try to find my people.”

That’s what she was afraid of. “And then you’d lead them here.”

“No. I only wish to go home.” He sounded defeated.

She cocked her head. “You can’t leave until the invasion is over, I take it.”

He didn’t answer but scraped out the last of his chili in the bowl.

He’s hiding something.

Well, duh. Of course, the enemy is hiding something.

Given his luxurious accommodations and service at the Laurel Cave Hilton, he had no incentive to volunteer any useful information unless she tortured it out of him—and that wasn’t an option. Having a conscience sucks sometimes.

She tried a different tactic. “Tell me about yourself, your life on your home world.”

He looked wary. “What do you want to know?”

“How old are you?” She started with something innocuous.

“Our planet takes longer to revolve around our star than yours does, but on my world, I’m thirty-three years old.”

“Do you have siblings? What do your parents do?”

“I have at least one sibling. A brother.”

At least? How could he not be sure of how many siblings he had?

“My parents both served in the military, but I don’t know if they still do,” he added.

“Why not?”

“I was a child the last time I saw them. I haven’t seen them in twenty-seven years.”

“You haven’t seen them in over a quarter century?”

“Children aren’t reared by their biological parents but the ministry.”

“Ministry, like a religious order?”

“No, the ministry is what we call our government. Children stay with their parents until age six when they are sent to ministry education centers.”

Indoctrination camps explained a lot. The Progg never had any chance to develop empathy. “And you never saw your parents? You didn’t go home? They didn’t come to see you?”

“There are annual visits. But my parents never came.”

She gaped, appalled. “Never?”

He shrugged. "I wasn't the only one without visitors. My parents had fulfilled their duty. I was still at the MEC when my younger brother arrived." His mouth twisted. "He was much tougher than I had been at his age."

What did he mean by tougher? She sensed a deeper story there.

He continued. "Then I graduated at sixteen and entered the required military service, and I never saw him again either."

"Sixteen? That's hardly more than a child." Of everything he said, that should shock her the least. In the United States, a person could join the military at seventeen with parental consent or eighteen without. Generally, however, enlisted recruits were in their early twenties.

"We are adults at sixteen. We're required to serve for ten years," he said.

"But you stayed."

He nodded. "When my ten-year required enlistment ended, I didn't know what else to do. Early on, I got lucky to be assigned as an assistant to Admiral Drek's aide. When the aide left the military, I got promoted. To be an admiral's aide is a favored and favorable position. I never had to fight, and being so close to the admiral, many perks came my way."

"A cushy job."

He winced. "If you choose to see it that way."

"How do you see it?" she countered.

"I suppose you're right."

“With Admiral Drek dead, where does that leave you?”

“With an uncertain future.”

“Wouldn’t they reassign you?”

“Well, they can’t while I’m here.”

She recognized the evasiveness of the joke. “You said you’d gotten separated from your unit,” she reminded him. “Why haven’t you been reunited yet?” The story didn’t add up. She found it hard to believe a militarized society controlling every aspect of an individual’s life would lose track of an admiral’s aide because said admiral had passed away. While she had no military experience, she couldn’t fathom waging an annihilation campaign without excellent communication—especially since they had deployed ground troops. They had to be in communication to know everyone’s location to avoid vaporizing their own people, didn’t they?

“The situation got...a little chaotic after the admiral died.”

“One person’s death threw everything into chaos?” Didn’t he have a second-in-command who could step in?

Nobody should be that important or indispensable. Not even the very top person. The president of the United States had a veep waiting in the wings. And if the VP died with the prez, then the speaker of the House of Representatives stepped in. If he died, then president pro tempore of the Senate took over. If she was gone, then the president’s cabinet members in predetermined order assumed the position.

Of course, the constitutional line of succession had been rendered moot since all elected officials had perished, and few citizens remained to govern anyway.



Short of an apocalypse, there should be somebody who could pick up the reins. But far be it from her to tell him so. Rule of thumb: When the enemy fucks up—don't stand in his way.

Let the aliens put themselves at risk. Sooner or later, somebody would take them down. Eventually, they'd encounter someone more powerful, maybe someone with a secret weapon.

"I said a little chaos—not that everything was in chaos," he said.

"A little chaos is an oxymoron."

"I don't understand."

"It means either the situation is chaotic or it's not."

"I don't want to talk anymore." He pressed his lips together.

Getting close to the truth, am I? "Fine." She collected the dirty plates and left the chamber.

\* \* \* \*

Laurel marched away, leaving him to stew in painful memories and uncomfortable emotions. Grav hadn't thought about the MEC in years. Once he'd adjusted to the homesickness, the strict regimen, and the harsh discipline, he'd done all right, but he never liked to revisit the past.

When his mother had deposited him at the ministry education center, he'd cried. The ignominious display of emotion had landed him in solitary confinement. He had no recollection of how long he'd been locked up, but it probably had been days. It had

taken him a while to figure out that as long as he continued to sob, they wouldn't let him out.

The first Annual Visit Day, he'd waited for his parents, certain they would come. They hadn't. He'd almost broken down into tears but managed to keep it together. The next year, he waited again. Another no-show. That's when he realized they were never going to come. Having fulfilled their duty to the ministry, they were finished with him.

He was eleven years old when his brother, who'd been a baby the last time he'd seen him, arrived at the MEC. He'd been prepared to ease Rok's transition, guide him, protect him, but his brother hadn't needed him. At six years old, Rok was already everything the MEC sought to develop and that Grav wasn't—stoic, tough, emotionless.

He thanked Zok every day he'd been assigned to a support position rather than combat, where his weakness would have been exposed. He didn't have a stomach for killing people, not even vastly different beings. He supposed it was easier from a spaceship, when all you had to do was lock onto a city and open fire. Poof! Mass annihilation. Clean and simple. You never had to see the people you'd killed. It would be like they'd never existed.

But to march house to house and kill the stragglers face-to-face would make him sick.

Grav had never fired his weapon in the line of duty. He'd practiced at the MEC range as required, but that was the last time he'd drawn his weapon.

Which made the prospect of repatriation terrifying. With Drek dead, he'd become a nobody and could be assigned to combat. If he faltered on the battlefield, he'd be executed by his own comrades. Weakness jeopardized the entire unit.

He was a disgrace—he needed no further confirmation than the sharp pangs of guilt he felt for not telling her the invasion had been aborted, and the major danger had passed. He shouldn't feel any guilt for the omission. He owed his loyalty to the empire, not some human woman.

But it bothered him to withhold information that would ease her mind, allow her to regain some semblance of a normal life.

However, if she connected with others of her race and told them, the situation could be perilous for him and his fellow Progg. If the surviving humans regrouped, they could stage an ambush. A gun was no match for a vaporizer, but as long as the Progg didn't see the shot coming, the humans would prevail.

Whoever had attacked him had taken his weapon and comm device. His assailant wouldn't be able to use either—both were programmed to him—but it left Grav with no means to receive communiques from the GM.

Not that there had been any in the preceding months. But the crisis had to be settled by now, didn't it? Without his device, his only hope of getting off Earth was to reconnect with another Progg.

As soon as she left again, he'd get to work on the chains.

Meanwhile, he'd enjoy her company. When she wasn't probing painful emotional wounds, he looked forward to the time spent with her. Her appearance fascinated, her voice entranced—even when she was angry, which was quite often—and her scent beguiled. Earth was a cesspool of noxious odors, but Laurel wasn't one of them. He felt inebriated by her scent.

Intensely curious, he wished to learn more about her parents, her siblings, her life before the invasion. The next time they spoke, he would steer the conversation in that

direction. Besides, getting her to talk about herself would prevent her from probing into his life.

He realized he would recall his captivity with great fondness.

## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:30 am*

Grav dipped into a deep-knee bend, careful to avoid dislodging the chain attached to his arm. He'd been doing what he could to stretch and exercise—marching in place, doing lunges and knee bends, and cautiously flexing his arms.

A clap of thunder reverberated through the cave, and he jerked, unmooring his arm from the bedpost. The loose plastic tie went flying, landing next to the bed, but out of reach even with one arm free. Hurriedly, he grabbed the last tie from under the mattress.

In his haste to reattach the chain before she caught him, he accidentally reattached it the right way—rechaining himself to the bed.

“Pikur zok vinik okum!”

Now, he had to start all over. Worse, if she noticed the tie on the floor, he'd be screwed. Even if she didn't realize the implication, he needed the tie to connect his arm to the bedpost once he freed it again. Could he maybe reach the tie with the ladder rung?

All he could do was hope she left before she noticed.

On another crack of thunder, Laurel appeared. He averted his gaze from the telltale tie. “It's raining like a mother out there,” she announced.

He'd experienced the area's weather. Rain often poured down in a deluge, drenching him in seconds.

“I’d planned to go to town again, but that’s out,” she said.

Pikur zok vinik okum! He grimaced.

“Tired of my company already?”

“Not at all,” he countered. “I was hoping we could talk some more.”

“What do you want to talk about?”

“You,” he replied.

“Me?”

“I’d like to know more about you.”

She planted her hands on her hips. Today, she wore a pair of tight blue pants that molded her limbs and a rather attractive long-sleeve shirt printed with some sort of vegetation. Flowers, he decided. “Why should I tell you anything?” she asked.

“Maybe to build empathy for your people?”

She snorted. “Don’t insult my intelligence. You don’t give a fuck about my people.”

But I give a fuck about you. I give too many fucks. His weakness. A character flaw. Because he cared about her, he’d begun to care about the other survivors. But she would never believe him. “Then how about a way to pass the time?”

“I have things to do to pass the time.” But she sat.

“Do you have siblings?” he asked, starting with the question she’d asked him.

“I had a brother,” she replied bitterly, and he realized his screwup. There were no safe topics when her life and world had been forever altered for the worse.

“Older or younger,” he forged ahead. He had nothing to lose at this point.

“Older. He lived in Kansas City. He was a police officer.”

“Is that near here?” he asked. He didn’t know the names of Earth’s cities. He doubted anyone in command did either. Names didn’t matter. They scanned for the largest population centers and hit those first.

“About 200 miles away. He’d planned to come here, but he was dedicated to his job. We’d watched the big cities fall. Kansas City is the most populous city in Missouri, but it’s a hick town in the middle of nowhere compared to New York or LA or Chicago. He thought he’d have time to get out.

“I was FaceTiming with him and his girlfriend when they were killed. One second, they were there—the next, they weren’t.”

Oh, Zok, her brother died in front of her. The death would have been instantaneous and painless, but that wouldn’t lessen her anguish. He had no way to express his genuine regret. She wouldn’t believe him, and any condolences would not be well received.

“What was his name?” It seemed important.

“Brent.”

“You loved him very much.”

Her lip curled. “What would you know about love?”

“Nothing,” he admitted. His people had learned of love by monitoring Earth broadcasts prior to the campaign launch. They’d mocked the sentimentality. In hindsight, he realized he had desperately craved the love of the mother who’d abandoned him. He’d adored the baby brother who’d become an automaton even before entering the MEC.

“Brent’s girlfriend was worried about her grandmother who didn’t drive. She lived outside of St. Louis. I promised Lillian I’d get her grandmother.

“Then Brent and Lillian got vaporized. I raced to St. Louis, but I was too late. Everybody within a fifty-mile perimeter of the city was dead. The interstate was gridlocked by people trying to flee. I took to the back roads, avoiding towns with any significant population. It took an entire day to get home. My parents had waited for me before going to the cave—and they paid the price with their lives.” She glowered. “So, what else do you want to talk about?”

“I’m sorry.”

“Fuck you.”

\* \* \* \*

The rain showed no sign of abating. By the evening of the second day, she was about to lose her mind and decided she would venture out the next morning, no matter what the weather. She might only get as far as her parents’ house, but she had to get away from Grav.

With this much rain, Big Creek, the town’s namesake, had probably overflowed its banks and flooded the low-water crossings, if not the bridge. The main highway wouldn’t be flooded, but she couldn’t get through because of the cars.



She'd done her best to avoid him, except for bringing him meals—delivered silently—and sleeping—fitfully. Neither books nor solitaire could hold her attention for more than a few minutes. Thoughts and emotions replayed on a loop. She was stuck on a hamster wheel and couldn't get off.

Their conversation about Brent had reignited survivor's guilt. She'd been saved by a fluke. Why hadn't she insisted everyone seek shelter sooner? Why hadn't she made her parents go to the cave before she left for St. Louis? She'd known the Progg were closing in! They'd just hit Kansas City, killing Brent and Lillian!

She'd wept for the townspeople, friends, and her hospital coworkers who'd perished. But the death of her parents and brother had devastated her. She and her family had made a stupid, fatal error in judgment—they'd figured they'd have time to flee because the Progg would march on Big Creek like they had hundreds of other small towns, and they could follow the progress reports on social media.

Big Creek was an insignificant speck on a map.

But Springfield, Missouri wasn't. After hitting Kansas City and St. Louis, alien spaceships had vaporized Springfield, and its environs.

Her entire family was gone. A normal life and future gone. Hopes and dreams gone.

Grav said he was sorry ?

The apology hit like a blast of ice water on a bad tooth. What the fuck good did being sorry do? It couldn't bring back her family and the billions of others who perished. It didn't restore her freedom and peace of mind. She'd forever be looking over her shoulder and peering around the corner. An apology couldn't restore the electricity, the transportation system, communication, agriculture, the availability of medical care. She could bandage and suture a wound, dispense medications until they expired,

but she couldn't take a simple X-ray. No electricity.

What somehow made it worse was that she believed he was sincere in his own way. She'd seen the sympathy in his disconcerting eyes.

Until today's conversation, she'd begun to feel compassion for the scared little alien boy. Her parents had died waiting for her, and his couldn't be bothered to visit him once a year. His people parented like sea turtles, leaving the hatchlings to fend for themselves. The oppressive, repressive, loveless culture had produced remorseless annihilators.

Before his apology, she'd sensed Grav was different and didn't share the Progg's murderous intentions, that maybe he had a conscience. But maybe her judgment was skewed? Maybe she'd fallen into a twist on Stockholm syndrome. He was the prisoner, she the guard, but she'd started to see him as having been wronged.

How dare she empathize with the enemy who'd killed her family and destroyed civilization?

Yet, she'd always rejected the notion of original sin, that people present and future bore the debt of transgressions committed by their ancestors. She'd judged people on their deeds not the actions of others. To require future generations to pay for crimes committed by people long dead did not serve society. Such action had fueled centuries of resentment, strife, and warfare.

If she still believed that way, how could she in good conscience convict Grav of atrocities he hadn't committed? He hadn't fired on the cities.

She needed to get out, get away, be alone to settle her mind. There was no place in the cave where she wasn't hyperconscious of him. She'd give the weather one more day to clear up.

“Tomorrow, no matter what, I’m going out. If I have to swim across the creek, I’ll do it!”

## Page 11

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:30 am*

Grav watched Laurel leap from the bed and race out of the chamber. She returned about ten minutes later in a coat and boots, her ever-present accessory strapped to her hip.

“It stopped raining.” She tossed some power bars onto the table and refilled his water. “I’m going out. Don’t wait up.” She whirled for the exit.

“Laurel, wait! I need to tell you something.”

He’d thought about it all night long and decided to tell her the whole truth.

He would be committing treason, but what did it matter at this point? He doubted there was a tribunal left to convict him. The conquest of Earth had destroyed Progg-Res, if not the entire empire.

“Later.” She disappeared into the passage.

“The invasion is over!”

He didn’t think she’d heard, but she reentered. “What did you say?”

“The General Ministry called off the invasion. There will be no more air assaults. The ships have returned to Progg-Res.”

She blinked slowly, her body otherwise still. “Then why are you here?”

“Because I got left behind.”

“Just you?”

He shook his head. “I assume others got left behind, too, but officially the conquest is over. There will be no more air assaults, no more cleansing of small towns by ground troops.”

“Why are you telling me this? How can I believe you?”

Because? Because, on some gut level, it seemed like the right thing to do. The truth would be his parting gift to her. Knowing the campaign had been called off couldn’t bring back her family or anyone else who died, but it would give her more personal freedom and perhaps greater peace of mind. “Because time will prove it. The GM pulled out and left standing orders to avoid the towns and not approach any humans. However, individuals you encounter still pose a threat. If you see any, steer clear.”

Her brow furrowed with confusion while her face darkened with anger. “Why?” She shook her head. “Why halt the invasion? You were winning.”

“No, we lost.” His throat clogged up. Allegiance was so ingrained he struggled to reveal a vulnerability to the “enemy.”

“When Admiral Drek fell ill and shuttled to the command vessel, he infected the entire crew. Before they realized the severity, some of them had left for our home planet where they spread the disease. My last communicate from the home world reported millions had died, and millions more had sickened.”

“You’re saying we caused a pandemic?”

“Yes. It devastated our world. I don’t know if those of us left here will ever be able to go home. I was informed I would be extracted when it was safe to do so, but I’m beginning to doubt that will happen. I haven’t received any communication in

months—and whoever shot me took my communication device. I may not have a home world to return to. There are other planets in our galactic empire, but I suspect the GM—or what remains of it—will wish to avoid any possibility of infecting those worlds.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me! Why didn’t you tell me earlier?” She folded her arms.

“Because I didn’t trust you—”

“But you trust me now?” She arched her eyebrows.

“More than before anyway.” She hadn’t killed or tortured him. She’d fed him. “I can’t undo the past, but I can ease your future. I had received orders to avoid humans, if possible. I assume others received the same orders. That’s why I camped in the woods instead of in the town where I would have been more comfortable.

“But they will have to enter towns at some point to find food,” he warned. “The likelihood of an encounter is drastically reduced, but not zero. If you do encounter someone, fearing the plague and retribution, he will shoot you on the spot.”

“Lovely. How is that any different than before?”

“Because there won’t be regiments storming the towns, seeking out survivors. There will be no more air assaults.”

“So, when I found you in the woods, if you hadn’t been half dead, you would have killed me?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never killed anyone before,” he admitted. If his life had been threatened and he’d had the means to defend himself, he might have killed her.

“So, it’s over—except that it’s not.” She pivoted and left.

He waited until he was reasonably certain she wasn’t coming back and then, with an aching heart, he lifted the mattress to get the ladder rung.

It wasn’t there.

\* \* \* \*

Her feet sank into spongy ground as she marched through the woods.

Could the invasion really be over? Could survivors come out of hiding? Reoccupy the towns? If the Progg had orders to avoid humans, wouldn’t they steer clear of reinhabited towns? Grav said he trusted her—“more than before”—but could she trust him? What if his revelation was a ruse to get humans to show themselves?

A wet branch snapped in her face. Pay attention! Loss of vigilance was exactly what she needed to be careful of. The threat, although greatly reduced, wasn’t over.

Gut instinct said Grav was telling the truth. It jived with what she’d suspected when he’d first mentioned a “plague” had killed the admiral—that maybe the commander had spread his illness to others.

But if she trusted him, and he was lying, it could be fatal.

But to be able to relax a little...to let go of the heavy weight of fear...

She exhaled a shaky breath.

The irony. They had defeated the invasion not with missiles but with sniffles. It was possible a runny-nosed toddler had vanquished the enemy.

Her feet took her to the spot where she'd first found Grav. If I had killed him, I wouldn't have found out Earth had won. Some win. Billions had perished .

How many people are left? she wondered. Had any major cities escaped vaporization? Medium-sized ones? Were there enough people with the skills to get systems and services running again? How long ago had the invasion been called off? She should have asked him.

Perhaps some people had figured out the danger had passed or decided to risk moving into the towns and had reestablished communities. Some may have met their own helpful alien who'd given them the news. Or caught one and tortured the truth out of him. Were posses roaming the country searching for the invaders?

Something would have to be done with the aliens. As Grav had admitted, they were still a threat, and justice must be served! Those billions of deaths needed to be avenged. Just because Earth had sent the enemy home with a deadly little parting gift didn't even the score. She'd dispatch every last Progg straight to hell.

Minus one.

Grav.

He had given her hope.

She did believe him. She did trust him— more than before , the same as he felt about her.

After the shock of the revelation wore off, her first reaction had been anger. You couldn't have told me this a week ago?

But she quickly realized she wouldn't have believed him, would have assumed it was



a trick. Even now, it seemed incredible, and a tiny vestige of doubt remained.

But, in tending to him, she felt she'd gotten to know him, understood him a little. He might have snowed her big-time, in which case, she'd have to applaud and say, "Bravo, superb performance," because he'd succeeded in undermining her hatred. He got me to see him as a person, to like him.

I have to let him go. If he's not a threat to me, I have to release him.

She'd cut him loose, send him on his way with some food. Then she'd pack up the SUV and go find other people.

With a pang, she realized she would miss him when they parted.

I hope nothing bad happens to him.

\* \* \* \*

Tramping through the wet woods had soaked her pants up to the knees and dampened her upper half. She decided to delay showering but don dry clothes before going to town .

At her parents' house, she left her mud-caked boots in the garage before going inside. She tested the kitchen faucet. As expected, the water in the hot water tank had gone cold since she'd showered several days ago.

After refueling the generator, she rolled it outside to ventilate and then plugged the cord into the circuit breaker panel and powered up the house. Electricity from the generator could heat the water while she went to town. Then she'd enjoy another hot shower.

In the meantime, she could do a load of laundry. She always washed clothes in cold water anyway. She hung her wet jacket to dry and then changed into jeans and a sweatshirt of her mom's, before dumping her wet things and the dirty clothes she'd brought with her into the washer. The machine filled and began chugging away, normalcy in action.

Could there be a happier, more hopeful sound?

Her heart ached with grief as she emptied her parents' suitcases onto their bed. She'd deal with their clothes later but needed the bags. She donned a jacket of her mom's, grabbed the empty suitcases, put on her shoes, and drove away.

The creek had risen but was still passable, and the SUV splashed through the low-water crossings with no trouble. Everything is going my way. Lady Luck is with me.

Driving along, she jotted mental notes of what to collect. More clothes, winter and summer, sentimental personal items, drugs, and medical supplies. She'd go to her apartment first then the hospital.

Feeling much more confident and unafraid, she cruised every street of Big Creek, honking the car horn. But either no one lived there anymore, or they feared showing themselves. Her happy mood dipped a little. Not every town will be like this. She gave herself a pep talk.

There were close to 20,000 cities, towns, and villages in the country, many of them tiny little burgs of a few thousand or a few hundred that would have been low priority on the hit list. There had to be other survivors—especially since she now knew the invasion had been called off before it had been completed. Besides, whoever had shot Grav had come from somewhere.

She wiped her feet on the mat in the foyer of her apartment building then went up to

her unit where she filled one suitcase with clothing, reserving the other for medical supplies. She also dug up a tote bag to bring to the hospital.

Through the wide public entrance, she entered a desolate lobby. A wave of homesickness and loss swept over her. Her nursing career had been such a major part of her life and identity; her coworkers had been her friends. Her squeaking shoes sounded loud in the silence as she walked the familiar path to the nurses' station.

She could picture the people she'd worked with and the memorable patients who'd passed through. She grieved for two nurses in particular, both former high school classmates. She remembered with fondness the capable but ditzy Nurse Ding-a-ling, whose not-so-nice nickname had been bestowed upon her by Dr. Pompous Ass. He was an excellent physician but a jerk of a human being. She thought of the housekeeping staff and janitors, the aides, the dietician, and the medical social worker. The hospital had been an employment mainstay for the entire area.

Trying to envision what she might need, she filled the suitcase with boxes of rubber gloves, a couple of blood pressure monitors, several thermometers, syringes, gauze, tape, a stethoscope, shears and scissors, alcohol wipes, and splints. With the bag nearly full, she zipped it up and wheeled it down the hall toward the drug supply closet. I hope I can open it.

The cabinet opened with an electronic lock that recorded who accessed it. As a control, every nurse had a unique passcode. It had a backup battery, but a year had passed. How long would the battery last?

Upon reaching the drug supply closet, she saw accessing the cabinet wasn't going to be a problem.

The door had been pried open. Boxes and vials lay scattered across the floor. Somebody had gotten here first. "Well, shit!"

She sorted through the detritus and quickly identified what was missing—narcotic painkillers. “Addiction lives on in the apocalypse.” Most likely, the little pharmacy in town had been hit, too. How long ago had this happened? If it had been raided months ago, that was one thing. But if the theft had just occurred, the person could still be in town or even in the hospital.

Just my luck, the first person I meet is a strung-out junkie.

She listened for footsteps as she hurriedly scooped up antibiotics, antivirals, nonsteroidal anti-inflammatories—the thief hadn’t been interested in ibuprofen-type pain relievers—antinausea medications, decongestants, cough suppressants, and antihistamines and shoved them into the tote. She could only guess at what kind of help the survivors might need.

For the first time since the invasion, she’d found a sense of purpose. She could resume nursing and help the survivors. Some of them would need medical care.

If she was really lucky, she’d encounter a physician. They could team up. She could learn a lot. In the new normal, she’d be able to do more than just nursing, advance to an unofficial physician’s assistant.

She hooked the tote over the handle of the suitcase and unholstered her gun.

Don’t ever pull a gun on anybody unless you’re prepared to use it, her dad’s warning echoed in her ears as she walked quietly and quickly down the hall. Although she hadn’t been able to shoot Grav when he lay helpless on the ground, she wouldn’t hesitate to defend her life against an imminent threat. But hopefully, the sight of a weapon would deter an attacker.

With a sigh of relief, she got to her vehicle unscathed, loaded in the supplies, and drove away.

\* \* \* \*

Laurel left the medical supplies in the SUV but brought in the suitcase with her clothing. She was anxious to change. Wearing her mom's garments smelling of her, resurrected too many painful memories.

The washing had finished, so she transferred the laundry to the dryer. As soon as it was done, she'd head back to release her prisoner.

Funny, she'd been in such a quandary over what to do, and now the answer had resolved itself. Letting him go was the right thing. She had no fears he posed a threat to anybody. More likely, he'd be the one at risk from humans seeking vengeance.

She envisioned bitter battles between survivors and stranded aliens. Intellectually, she knew hatred was a weapon with the barrel pointed at the individual holding it. Hatred corroded from within, doing more damage to the person clinging to the animosity than the object of it. Festering resentments had fueled centuries of injurious tribal conflict.

But how did you forgive the unforgivable?

She'd absolved Grav of blame because she believed he personally had not committed any atrocities. He'd told her the truth about the end of the invasion. But she could not foresee ever forgiving those who'd massacred innocent people.

But if a lone woman and a Progg who had distrusted and feared each other could reach a détente, then maybe a glimmer of hope remained.

You're too trusting, too idealistic, her brother's gentle criticism rang in her ears.

Not anymore, brother dear.

Leaving the clothes to tumble, she strode across the house to the bath. As the shower warmed up, she unbuckled her holster and set the gun on the sink vanity, and undressed, dropping her clothes on the floor. Steam probably wasn't the best for the weapon, but once wouldn't hurt it.

She stepped into the hot shower. It was as glorious as before. Smiling, she lifted her face to the spray, feeling like an actor in a shampoo commercial. They always looked so happy while water shot in their faces—she'd tended to grimace a bit. Not today. This could be a million-dollar shower for the way she was grinning.

Shampooing her head, she shivered at a sudden draft and turned into the hot spray.

She could have stayed until the water ran cold, but she had a prisoner waiting to be released, although he didn't know it yet.

With a sigh, she shut off the water. While drying herself, she realized she'd left the suitcase with clean clothes in the laundry room. She donned the robe hanging on the bathroom door hook and wrapped a towel around her head. She grabbed her mom's clothes from the floor. They were still mostly clean, but she'd put them in the laundry room to wash later.

About to enter the living room, she sniffed. What do I smell?

Her gaze riveted on muddy footprints . I took off my shoes.

Her blood ran cold. My gun was on the bathroom counter, wasn't it?

“Achoo!”

She whirled around and stared down the barrel of her own gun. The man behind it wiped his nose with the back of his free hand. Stringy, greasy hair hung from his

mostly bald head while a long, dirty beard obscured most of his acne-scarred face. She caught sight of a neck tattoo under an open filthy fatigue jacket.

“What do you want? Food? Clothes? A car? I’ll give you whatever you want.” She managed to keep her voice steady, but her legs wobbled. Don’t kill me. Please don’t kill me.

Wouldn’t that be tragically ironic—to survive the invasion only to be murdered by a human? And if he killed her, he’d get a two-for-one special. Grav would starve to death. She had to stay alive for both their sakes.

“Sure, I’ll take all that since you’re offerin’ so nicely—but I’ll start with you. Let’s you and me go in the other room,” he said in a nasally voice.

“No, don’t. Please, don’t.” She shook her head. “You don’t need to do this.”

His laugh turned into a coughing fit. The hand holding the gun shook and dipped.

She swung out her right arm and knocked the gun from his hand. It went flying across the hall. She threw the clothes in his face and ran.

She didn’t get more than a few steps before he tackled her, his weight slamming her to the hardwood floor. “Fucking bitch!” He grabbed her hair and slammed her forehead against the floor, but the towel that had fallen off her head cushioned the blow.

Laurel screamed.

“Scream all you want, bitch. There’s nobody to hear you.” He yanked up her robe. She felt cold air against her naked buttocks.

She screamed and thrashed, trying to throw him off. A hard blow to her temple rocked her head on her neck. He's going to kill me.

She felt him fumbling. He was unzipping his pants.

No. No. She bucked. Oh god, oh god. Tears sprang to her eyes.

Crack!

Her ears rang with the sound of a gunshot, and wetness splattered over her. Red rain. Blood. Her assailant collapsed.

The weight lifted, and the assailant's body sailed across the room and slammed into the wall. Collecting her robe around her, Laurel rolled over.

Grav stood there.



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*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:30 am*

“Grav?” Laurel blinked and burst into tears. Great heaving sobs shook her body. She wrapped her arms around herself and rocked. “H-h-h— Y-y-y—”

He couldn’t understand what she was trying to say.

He felt sick. Had he gotten to her in time? Had she been hurt? He felt so helpless. He didn’t know how to provide the comfort she needed. His people did not comfort one another, and certainly not the foe. But he didn’t think of her as the enemy.

Moving slowly to avoid scaring her, he knelt on the floor. “You’re safe. I promise you’re safe.”

To his shock, she flung herself against his chest and hugged his neck. Awkwardly, he closed his arms around her. Her body shook; tears dampened his throat. He’d never seen anyone cry with their whole body shuddering and shaking.

Adults never wept. Only small children did, and they quickly learned not to.

He rubbed her back in what he hoped was a soothing gesture. Her robe was wet and sticky with her attacker’s life fluid and brain matter, and the man’s sickening stench clung to her, but right now that didn’t matter. He had to take care of her.

Thank Zok she’d had other weapons stashed. He’d appropriated one, figuring he might need it. He hadn’t realized how messy firearms were. They didn’t give you a clean kill like a vaporizer. On the other hand, he couldn’t have used a vaporizer if he’d had one. Because of the physical contact between her and the attacker, she would have been killed, too.

“I’m o-kkk-ay. It’s ju-just a reaction,” she sobbed.

She didn’t sound okay, and the way she continued to cling to him belied her words.

Scooping her up, he got to his feet and carried her to the couch. He sat and settled her on his lap, the better to hold her, keep her safe. He set the gun on the cushion beside him. He didn’t think he’d need it again, but he hadn’t figured he’d need it so soon in the first place. He’d taken it mostly for insurance.

Gently, he caressed her back and arm, murmuring nonsense in his language. Progg-Res had no vocabulary to express tenderness or concern.

Gradually her tears slowed and then ceased.

She lifted her head. Spikey wet lashes framed swollen eyelids. She expelled her breath in a sigh. “How did you get free?”

His mouth twisted. “A ladder under the bed had a loose rung with a sharp edge.” The rung had only fallen to the floor, and he’d been able to retrieve it. Then he’d sawed feverishly at the restraints. Once his arms were free, he’d hobbled out and searched the cave. He found knives and firearms.

“I never looked under the bed. I’m surprised you didn’t just go.”

He’d intended to but surrendered to an overpowering urge to see her one last time. Thank Zok. What if he’d left? His life fluid ran cold. “I had to say goodbye—and thank you for your hospitality.” His mouth twisted in a wry grin.

The tiny answering grin made the emotion bloom in his chest. Then she said, “I was coming to release you.” Her gaze shifted to the body, and she shuddered. “How did you find me?”

“The ground was wet and mushy after the rain. You left footprints a blind man could follow.” He’d tracked her to the house where he watched from outside for a while. He’d feared if he barged in and startled her, she might shoot him.

Then he heard her scream.

“I need to take a shower. Wash him off me.” She slid off his lap. He missed the contact immediately, but a shower was a good idea. She reeked. The man smelled as bad as his intentions.

Her gaze riveted on the mud tracked across the floor. Then she looked at him. “Um, would you stay until I finish showering? I need to lock up the garage, the house.”

“I’ll stay as long as you need me,” he said. “I can lock up while you shower.”

“Okay. Leave the generator running. I’ll need power until I go. You can pull the garage door down with the cord. There are bolts on the big door that slide into the wall.”

“I’ll take care of it.” Primitive mechanical devices couldn’t be too hard to figure out. No one needed instructions on what to do with a hammer. “After you shower, would it be okay if I took one?” In holding Lauren, the male human’s blood and odor had transferred to him. He stank, too.

“Of course.” She started to move away but then stopped. “Did you bring that? Is that your bag?” She pointed.

He followed her gaze to the mottled silver pack on the floor next to a chair. “It is mine—but I didn’t bring it. I lost it when I got shot.” He narrowed his eyes at Laurel’s dead attacker. “He must have been the one who shot me.”

“I would guess so.”

Grav retrieved his bag. It stank like the man. He opened it and dumped out the contents onto a low padded table to see what might have been taken. “My vaporizer! My comm device!” he exclaimed, relieved to have both in his possession again. His clothing was gone though, and nothing else in the bag belonged to him.

But Laurel recognized the stuff. “These are from the hospital!” She pointed out small vials of pills. “Oxycodone, hydrocodone, fentanyl, morphine, dilaudid—he picked out all the good stuff.”

“What do they do?” he asked.

“They’re for pain, but addicts take them to get high.” She picked up a handgun and checked it. “Not loaded—and I don’t see any ammo.” She looked up at him. “Maybe he used his last bullet on you. He stole my gun from the bathroom while I was in the shower. I came out of the bathroom, and he pointed the gun at my head.”

“Where’s your weapon now?”

“In the hall somewhere. I knocked it out of his hand.” She dashed into the hall, returning with her handgun and an armload of clothes. She set the clothing on the sofa. “I’ll have to dispose of his body.”

“I’ll take care of it.” He pointed his vaporizer at the body and fired.

Poof! It disappeared, leaving only the hole in the wall where the body had hit. Blood splatters had vanished, too.

“How...effective,” she said. Her grim expression caused him to regret his hasty attempt to fix matters. I should have thought it through. Instead, he’d reminded her

what his people had done.

“I’m going to take a shower.”

“I’ll lock up and then stand guard.”

She twisted her hands. “Um, if you want to leave, it’s probably okay as long as the house is locked. I’ll be all right. I doubt anyone else is out there. He obviously came alone.”

“I’m staying,” he said, and her entire body relaxed with relief.

“Thank you.”

“I can clean up out here while you’re bathing, if you like.” Blood and gray bits of brain matter mixed with the thick dust on the floor. A clean spot marked the area where the attacker had pinned Laurel to the floor.

“You don’t have to do that.”

“If it will help you, I want to,” he said.

“You’re going to use your vaporizer, aren’t you?”

He hesitated. “Unless you know of a better way.”

“It won’t vaporize the furniture or the hardwood floors, will it?”

He stifled a small smile. “No.”

“Okay, thank you.” She disappeared into a passage off the main room. Moments

later, he heard a door close and a lock slide into place.

Confident she was safe and secure, he went out to the garage to close and bolt the sliding big door then reentered the house. After locking the door behind him, he checked all other points of egress. He found a side entry unsecured and locked it.

In the main room, he switched settings on the weapon and swept the invisible beam over the floor. Red and gray matter disappeared. The dirty footprints remained, but he remembered how she'd cleaned the cave floor after he'd knocked over the urine bucket. After a quick search, he located a broom, dustpan, and paper towels, which he dampened, and erased the footprints. He emptied the dustpan outside, locking the door again.

His comm device showed no new messages from the GM—not that he'd expected any. It had been months since the last one. It was looking more and more like the GM had decided sacrificing those marooned would best serve the needs of the empire. Or perhaps the entire General Ministry had succumbed to the plague. Perhaps there was no one alive to remember anybody had been left behind. He had no way to know how widespread the devastation had been.

I'm not getting off Earth any time soon. Maybe never.

He sniffed his pack then dropped it, rubbing his nose to wipe away the stench. No way could he carry an object smelling so foul. Not that he needed a sack. He only had his weapon and his comm device, which he carried on his person, anyway. However, he rued the loss of his clothes, especially his extra shirt. It was cold outside. The one he wore hung in shreds since Laurel had cut through it to examine the gunshot wound.

That seemed like a long time ago. He smiled as he recalled how she'd splashed a liquid on the wound—and how it burned. She'd relished his discomfort. Their

relationship had changed a lot since then.

He believed her when she said she'd been intending to release him.

Zok, I'm going to miss her.

The bathroom door clicked open, and within seconds, his nose detected familiar, pleasant fragrances.

“Grav?”

“Yes?”

“Uh, could you get my suitcase from the laundry room? My clothes are in it.”

“Okay...uh...what's a laundry room?”

She chuckled. “It's the room off the hall by the garage.”

“The one with the spinning machine?”

“Spinning machine—oh, yeah, that's the clothes dryer.”

“I'll get the bag.” He trotted to the laundry room and collected the gray suitcase. In the hall on the other side of the house, she poked her head out from behind a door. Anger tightened his muscles at the purpling knot on her forehead. He wished he could kill the man again—this time with his bare hands.

“Here you go.” He rolled the bag to her.

Steam and pleasant fragrances wafted out of the bathing room and around her. She

widened the door enough to take the bag. A large fuzzy cloth was wrapped around her middle. He spotted deepening bruises on her bare arms and legs. She dropped the robe splattered with the man's organic matter onto the hall floor. "I need to get rid of this. I won't ever want to wear it again." She ducked inside.

She emerged in fresh, clean faded-blue pants, a nubby long-sleeved shirt, and lace-up shoes. Her weapon was holstered to her hip. Gleaming wet hair hung down her neck. She pushed her suitcase into the hall. "I'll dry my hair and then you can shower."

She dropped her gaze to the robe. "Let me get rid of this first."

"It stinks," he said. He smelled, too, and looked forward to getting clean.

"I'd ask you to get a bag from the pantry, but you'd never find one."

He followed her to the food prep area, relieved to see her moving with confidence.

"You did a good job cleaning up," she noted. "Thank you."

In a walk-in closet, she rooted around until she found a box, out of which she pulled a large black bag. She was right. He never would have found it, wouldn't have known what to look for.

Outside the bath, she made a moue of distaste, picking up the robe with two fingers and trying to get it into the bag. He leaped forward to help her, holding the bag open. "What will you do with it?" he asked.

"Toss it in a dumpster, I guess. That's all I can do."

"Let me put my pack in there." He retrieved the contaminated bag, glad to be rid of it. He could have cleansed the items with the vaporizer, but he had no way to recharge



the weapon, so he didn't want to use it unless it was absolutely necessary.

He leaned on the doorjamb, fascinated as she dried her hair with a handheld gun blowing hot air. The Progg had all-in-one sanitizing units. You stepped in. Minutes later, you stepped out clean and dry. It did everything but dress you.

Finally, she finished. "Your turn." She scrutinized him. "You don't have a change of clothes, do you?"

He shook his head.

"Let me see what I can find. My brother has some stuff here. He's more your size than my dad."

She entered another room off the hall and emerged with a pair of long, pull-on gray pants, a pair of very short white pants, a thin short-sleeved white shirt, and a long-sleeve heavier gray shirt. "I found some sweats. And some underwear."

"The white goes under the gray?" he guessed, taking the clothes.

"Yes." She nodded. "There's shampoo, body wash, and bar soap in the shower." Biting her lip, she said, "I'll, uh, let you get to it." She smoothed her hands down her sides, lingering on the holstered weapon. "I'll...wait in the living room."

She's scared. Afraid to be alone.

"Maybe you'd prefer to join me in the bathing room?" In truth, he didn't feel entirely comfortable leaving her outside. She'd said the locked house would be secure, but anyone with determination could force his way in. He'd noted the flimsiness of the locks.

“No...no, that’s all right. I’ll be fine. I let down my guard, and I shouldn’t have. I can take care of myself. I’m a little jumpy right now. I’ll have to get used to being on my own after you leave, anyway.”

“But you don’t have to right now,” he pointed out. He hated leaving her alone, hated to leave her at all. Getting free and reconnecting with his people had been his sole goal, but he was strangely reluctant to be parted from her.

She let out a quiet exhale. “Okay, then. If you don’t mind?”

“I don’t mind at all.”

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:30 am*

Grav's bulk took up the space in the bathroom, but, rather than being oppressive, it eased her jumpiness and tension. Only that morning, she'd had him chained to the bed. However, she hadn't viewed him as a physical threat for a while.

She hated feeling weak and vulnerable. She shuddered to think of what would have happened if he hadn't appeared. The sexual assault served as a brutal wake-up call to keep her guard up and not take safety and security for granted. She'd left the house wide open. Never even thought to lock up.

Irony drummed a repetitive beat in her brain.

A fellow human had tried to rape and murder her—and a Progg had saved her.

Grav's arrival still stunned her. He'd had a chance to escape but had chosen to help her instead.

Impressions and feelings had shifted. Sure, he was still silver, had bristles for hair, and hands with two thumbs, but he didn't seem quite as alien as he had before. And those blue-blue eyes held compassion and concern.

"I'm all right," she said to reassure him. Better with you here. Amazing really, how much she trusted him. He could have left at any time—or killed her and the rapist, scoring two humans for the campaign. She recalled him saying he'd never killed anyone before. Now he had. In defense of her.

"Let me show you how to use the shower." She pointed out the hot and the cold and the knob that switched the stream from the faucet to the showerhead. "Turn the water

on first before you get in—let it heat up a bit,” she said. From the cabinet, she got a clean towel, which she set on the vanity. Then she lowered the toilet lid and sat down, averting her head so he could undress with a modicum of privacy. She felt a little silly and awkward, but gawking as he dropped trou seemed like a violation. There’d been enough violations today.

Clothing rustled and hit the floor. The shower curtain scraped across the rod. Water came on. Ten seconds later, the curtain closed.

He groaned.

“Feels good, huh?” She looked forward again.

“Zok, yes!”

She fingered the sore bump on her forehead. The injury could have been so much worse. If not for the towel-turban, the scumbag would have cracked her head open when he slammed her face-first into the floor. She didn’t regret his death even a little. The world, especially now, was better off without human predators. Unfortunately, there were probably more like him, and law and order had been relegated to the past. Everyone would have to protect themselves.

And there were still the colluders to worry about. Maybe her attacker had been one.

She couldn’t just sashay up to a settlement and assume she’d be among friends or be welcomed. Every interaction would be fraught with apprehension, but unless she became a hermit, she had to try to reach out. People were not meant to live alone. She hadn’t realized how much she’d craved contact with other people until Grav came along.

She assumed when they parted, he would try to find his people and wait for an

extraction.

The idea of Grav and her joining forces flitted through her mind, but she discarded it as unworkable. Teaming up would create more problems than it solved and guarantee they got rejected everywhere—if not killed outright. No human community would take him in; no Progg would accept her. Even if they did, she would never live among the aliens who'd murdered her people. She could not, would not forgive. Grav was an exception.

Serendipity had caused their paths to cross, and an unlikely bond had forged.

She would miss him and would never forget him, but they would have to continue on their respective paths alone.

The shower curtain ripped back, and a naked Grav stood there flashing an impressive ridged male member. Her hand shot up to cover her eyes, and she averted her head. "Geez! Give me some warning—like shut off the water!"

Well, that answers that. He's not that different from human men. Except...is he missing testicles? She resisted the urge to peek.

"I didn't realize there was a proper order. Sorry." The water shut off. She heard him step out.

"Are you decent?" she asked after a moment.

"Yes."

She looked at him. He was drying his face with the towel. "For god's sake! You're still naked!"

“I didn’t know decent meant clothed.” He wrapped the towel around his middle.

Nope, no testicles. Did Progg not have any? Had Grav been turned into a eunuch? Or were his gonads internal rather than external?

Testes were outside the body because sperm production required a lower temperature. Maybe his normal core body temp was cooler than a human’s. That might explain why hypothermia hadn’t killed him when he lay injured outside during the ice storm.

Perhaps males weren’t needed for reproduction; maybe his race reproduced some way other than sexually. What if his penis was just for urination? That would be a shame. Her preoccupation with his male anatomy surprised her. He was an alien! And she’d almost been raped. She doubted many sexual assault victims wanted to think about male sexual organs, human or alien.

Except, fresh out of the shower, stark naked, Grav still made her feel protected and comfortable. He wasn’t deliberately flashing. “Your people don’t have any inhibitions about nudity, do they?” she asked.

“No, why would we?” He shrugged.

Questions swirled, but now was not the time to carry on a discussion. “Tell me when you have your pants on.” She turned her face away.

The room went so silent she could hear the water dripping from the showerhead.

She risked a glance. His posture had stiffened.

“What?” she said.

“The sight of me offends you.”

“What? No!”

“You seem to be unable to bear looking at me.” He swallowed. “I do not look human.”

“No, no. It’s not that. I was a little embarrassed, not offended. We’re modest about our bodies. We don’t generally show ourselves unclothed to someone unless we have a sexual relationship with that person. I was trying to give you some privacy.”

And some asshole tried to rape me.

“Oh.” His vegan smile looked sweet. “I will try not to embarrass you, then.”

“It’s okay. Really.”

“Your head was injured.” He eyed the bump.

“I have a knot. It’s sore, but it’s okay.”

Still draped in the towel, he donned the jockey shorts and sweatpants. They were a little short, but not bad. “Okay now?” he asked.

“Okay.” Her discomfort made her feel silly. She was a nurse! She saw a lot of naked people. Maintaining a professional detachment had never been a problem.

He dropped the towel and donned the undershirt then the sweatshirt. The latter stretched taut across his torso, the sleeves hitting above his wrists. Grav was broader in shoulder and chest than Brent.

Once, she would never have given her brother’s clothing to a Progg. Never.

Grav didn't count.

"I'm sorry about cutting up your shirt," she said. "We can wash your pants if you'd like."

"That would be nice," he said.

She collected their used towels, the clothing she'd been wearing, and his pants, and, pulling her suitcase, went to the laundry room. He seemed fascinated by how the washer worked, gazing rapt as she dropped in a cleaning pod and started up the machine.

"How do your people clean clothes?" she asked.

Rolling his shoulders, he averted his gaze.

"Did I ask a forbidden question? Is laundry top secret?"

"No. I didn't wish to make you uncomfortable." He sighed. "I doubt secrets matter anymore. The CCU—clothing cleansing unit—is basically a vaporizer. In fact, the CCU was invented first, and then the General Ministry recognized its weapon potential."

Her mouth twisted. "And the rest is history."

"Something like that." He didn't deny it.

She eyed the harmless washing machine chugging away. I'm sorry I asked. Don't dwell. Don't dwell. She bent and removed her clothes from the dryer. "I'll fold these and put them in my suitcase. Oh, there's a tote bag in the rear of the gray car in the garage. Would you bring it in?"



He trotted off to do her bidding and returned with the bag. “What’s all this?”

“Drugs. I need to add the pills we found in the asshole’s pack.”

“I’ll get them.” He left and brought back an armload of pill bottles.

She transferred her folded clothes to the gray suitcase and stashed the pills in the tote. “Are you hungry? Do you want something to eat?” She couldn’t send him on his way on an empty stomach—she’d only left him a few power bars this morning.

“Yes!” he said. “I would.”

“Let’s see what I can rustle up.”

In the kitchen pantry, she perused the cans, boxes, and jars. “I got spoiled living in a house with a walk-in pantry,” she said. “My apartment has an efficiency kitchen. The pantry is a single cupboard.” She lifted her shoulder. “Not that I needed more. I worked such crazy hours I didn’t cook often.”

I got spoiled having a normal life.

“So, you didn’t live in this house?” he asked.

“Not in years, but I grew up here. My parents bought it when I started kindergarten—when I was five.” She brought out a jar of peanut butter, strawberry jelly, a packet of Club crackers, canned peaches, a can of tuna, a jar of mayo, and a box of saltines.

His eyes widened. “We’re going to eat all that?”

“Not all of it, and some of it will have to be thrown out after it’s opened, but there’s

nothing I can do about that.” There was little waste with survival rations; they came individually portioned into meals.

He moved toward the refrigerator. “Why is this humming?”

“Don’t open that!”

He froze. “I wasn’t going to.”

“That’s a refrigerator. It keeps perishable food cold or frozen—but the power has been off for a year. It’s one giant mold culture right now. Your sensitive nose wouldn’t be able to handle it—I don’t think mine could either.

“By the way, would you help me move it away from the wall? I should unplug it to save the draw on the generator. I could turn it off, but I’d have to open the door.”

He helped her roll it out from the wall, and she pulled the plug. Humming ceased. They pushed it back in.

She got out utensils, a plate, and a bowl.

“Here’s the deal.” She held up the peanut butter jar. “You spread this on Club crackers.” She set the jar, the crackers, and the preserves by his plate. “Then you put jelly on top of it. If you prefer—I won’t judge—you can eat the peanut butter straight from the jar. Peanut is a legume with a lot of protein. The jelly comes from fruit. It’s sweet.

“We have peaches for dessert. Go ahead, eat.”

“Aren’t you going to eat?”

“I’m having tuna. I have to mix it up.”

“I’ll wait for you.” He took a seat at the bar.

She hated opening a whole jar for a single meal but even sealed, mayonnaise had a limited shelf life. Wasting it would be not using it at all. Conscious of his scrutiny, she drained the tuna and emptied it into a small bowl then added mayo, dried diced onion, and lemon pepper and mixed it all together. She’d eat it with the saltines.

She got water for them both and joined him at the kitchen bar.

His nose wrinkled. “Your food has a...pungent odor.”

“Fishy,” she said. “Because it’s fish.” She scooped some tuna salad onto a cracker and took a bite. Tuna had never tasted so good. She made a note to get more from the store before she left town. She’d probably get sick of eating it, but tuna offered a great source of protein, and it would last a while. She could pick up some little packets of mayo from the diner in town.

He opened the jar of peanut butter and made a face.

“Oh—you need to stir it up. The oil separates.” She mixed it for him then scooped out a spoonful and offered it to him. The way his mouth worked reminded her of a dog eating peanut butter, lapping, lapping, lapping. She laughed.

He swallowed. “Sticky.”

“Jelly will help it slide down easier. Try the peanut butter on a cracker with jelly.”

She ate another tuna-topped saltine and watched as he prepared a cracker. He took a hesitant bite. Blue-blue eyes lit up with pleasure.

She grinned.

“This is good!”

“PB&J—the staple of children everywhere until allergies became a thing.” Shit, what if he’s allergic? She hadn’t given any consideration to food allergies. All food would be by-guess-and-by-golly with him. At least she had Benadryl in her pharmaceutical stash—assuming a human drug wouldn’t harm him.

But he’d be on his way soon, and his health and well-being wouldn’t be her problem. His impending departure depressed her more than it should. “Before you leave, we should go back to the cave. I can give you survival rations to take with you.” She knew which ones he could eat.

“I can’t carry much. I can’t use the pack I had.” He wrinkled his nose.

“I can give you a knapsack.”

“Okay, thank you, then.” He smeared more peanut butter and jelly on a cracker.

“You can take the peanut butter, too.”

“I would like that.”

She considered suggesting he stop at the diner in Big Creek and get some packets of jelly but doubted he’d know what to look for and probably couldn’t tell the diner from the bank. If he found a restaurant, he could end up with mayo, mustard, or rancid butter.

“Can you read my language?”

“No.”

“Take the jelly, too.” She hesitated to load him up with a bunch of heavy jars, but two wouldn’t be too bad. “How have you been getting food? How can you tell what’s safe for you to eat?”

“By scent, mostly. I can smell if it has meat in it.” He glanced at her empty tuna salad bowl and grimaced.

“Ready for dessert?” As she divided the canned peaches into two bowls, she heard the washing machine shut off. “The clothes are done. Can your pants go in the dryer?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know.”

“You could end up with pants to fit a Ken doll.” She glanced at the battery-operated clock on the living room wall. She was shocked it was already after five o’clock. “Your pants won’t be dry for a while—and not tonight if we air-dry them. It will be dark in a few hours.” Outside the kitchen window, the shadows were long under the partially sunny sky. “Do you want to stay another night? You can get a bright-and-early start in the morning.”

“That depends.” Blue-blue eyes twinkled. “Are you going to chain me to the bed?”

Only if you like it that way.

She couldn’t believe the flirty retort that popped into her head. Bondage wasn’t her thing, and she could not, would not contemplate any sexual activity—even in jest—with a Progg, no matter how much she enjoyed his company or how attractive she found his physique. She scrubbed her eyelids to erase the image of him stepping out of the shower, water sparkling on his silvery skin. His magnificent—

“What would be the point? You’d only get loose.” She followed his quip with one of her own. It still blew her away that he’d found a means to free himself. Thank god he did.

“Then yes, I’d like to stay,” he said, and she let out a silent sigh of relief. I’m still jumpy. He’s protection. The reluctance to see him leave had nothing to do with enjoying his company and their fledging friendship.

“Let me take care of the clothes.” She took a breather by hanging his pants on a rod in the laundry room. Good grief, I’m doing my prisoner’s laundry. She shoved the rest of the stuff in the dryer, realizing she’d need to add fuel to the generator if they spent the night in the house.

Reentering the kitchen, she took her seat at the bar again. “Eat.” She motioned.

He dug into the peaches with an expression of bliss. She wondered what kind of food he’d been eating that made canned peaches such a treat. Maybe it was only the novelty of human food. Most everything she’d given him had met with his approval, except for the cardboard power bars, although he’d eaten them. Did anybody really like those?

“Will we spend the night here? Or go back to the cave?” he asked.

“Funny, I was thinking about that. The cave is hidden. The house is better defended,” she analyzed aloud. “With the doors locked, someone would have to break in, which would cause a racket, so we’d have warning. And there are multiple escape exits.”

The scumbag had just walked in—but that was her fault for leaving the garage door up.

“The cave has one way in and out, and we could be cornered. On the other hand, to

my knowledge, nobody knows it exists. It's not invisible, but it's not eye-catching, either." It wasn't on topological maps. She'd checked when she'd first presented to her parents the idea of using it.

"The house is in plain sight. Anybody on the road can see it." She felt like a fish in a fishbowl even with the blinds drawn. "Plus, if we keep the generator running—and that would be the primary reason for staying in the house—it can be seen and heard."

In addition, the house had been desecrated. She'd almost been violated here. She felt the attacker's presence like an evil aura. "We'll spend the night in the cave," she decided.

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:30 am*

They hiked through the woods, carrying the suitcases, being unable to roll them over wet, mushy ground. Grav had offered to take both of them, but Laurel had insisted on lugging her own.

Although he had surprisingly fond memories of the cave, he thought the house would have been a better choice—for the reasons she had outlined—doors that locked, multiple exit points, and amenities like hot water and light. However, he'd only stay one more night, anyway; he'd be leaving in the morning. If part of him wished she'd ask him to stay, he understood why she didn't. They'd reached a truce, but he was still a Progg.

He sensed she didn't feel safe in the house anymore after what had happened.

He shuddered at how close he'd come to losing her. Her death would have haunted him for the rest of his life—and he'd continue to worry about her after he went on his way. He cared about this woman. When she'd taken him hostage, his goal had been to get her to empathize with him—instead, he'd come to empathize with her. He felt her pain at the loss of her family, her people, her way of life. He hadn't had a direct hand in the global massacre, but he'd facilitated it by supporting those who had. He felt like a monster.

“A penny for your thoughts,” she said.

“What's a penny?”

She chuckled. “It was a one-cent unit of currency. Our government stopped minting the coins because they cost four times more to make than they were worth. Most



people didn't use cash anyway, but the saying lives on."

The cost of sharing his thoughts would be greater than the ideations themselves, but fortunately she chose not to pursue the conversation.

Surreptitiously, he studied her. The purple knot stood out on her forehead, stark evidence of how close she'd come to dying. Outcomes often hinged on the tiniest detail. Change a single factor, change the end result.

What if he hadn't been able to reach the ladder rung that had slipped off the bed slats? What if it had taken him longer to free himself? What if he hadn't followed her to her parents' house? What if he'd arrived much earlier or much later?

In preparing for the invasion, they had learned of the planet's violent history, how the Earthers had fought among themselves, the powerful, advanced factions conquering the vulnerable, less developed ones. Grav recognized parallels between humans and Progg, the only difference being the Progg targeted other worlds, not their own.

Besides fearing she might run into his people, he worried about her encounters with her own.

They slipped behind the camouflage brush and entered the cave. Warmer than the outside, it was nowhere near as comfortable as the house. Light filtered through the bushes into the entry passage and the main chamber, enabling them to see, but Laurel lit an oil lamp. "Don't knock this over, okay?"

"Okay," he said, chagrined. He remembered his panic at thinking she had the plague.

She removed her coat and slung it over a chair. "Come with me." She beckoned.

Carrying the oil lamp, she led him into the supply chamber where he'd found the gun

and a knife to cut the leg chains. Shelves filled the room with only enough space between them to squeeze through. Much of the stuff remained a mystery to him.

She found a backpack. “Will this work?”

“Work for what?”

“For you to carry stuff.”

He remembered she’d offered to give him a knapsack. She hadn’t wasted time finding one. She is eager to see me leave. “It’s fine,” he replied glumly.

“I’ll pick out the meatless meals. Power bars would be the easiest to pack, but I know you don’t like them.” She sorted through tubs, selecting a half dozen pouches. “You add water to these. If you can heat it up, it will be better, but I’m guessing you can eat it cold.” She deposited the pouches in the pack and then tossed in a half dozen power bars. “Better than nothing.” She handed him the pack.

In the main chamber, she put the jars into his pack and draped his laundered, wet pants over a rack. “These should be dry by morning.” Before stuffing them in a suitcase, she’d placed them in a plastic bag.

“You’re set to go!” she said brightly.

“Great.” I don’t want to leave. She didn’t feel the same, hastening his departure. He half wished he hadn’t freed himself, but if he hadn’t, she would be dead. “What will you do after I’m gone?” he asked. “Will you stay here?”

She shook her head. “I can’t live like a hermit for the rest of my life. I have to find other people—but cautiously. More cautiously than I would have before.”

“Caution is good,” he agreed. “Being armed is better.”

“Caution and I will be inseparable.” She patted the weapon on her hip.

That reassured him a little, but their parting still made him sad. Once she left, he would not know where to find her. He would never see her again.

He sent up a silent prayer to the Powerful One. Please, Zok, send me a reason to stay longer.

\* \* \* \*

He spent the night in his “own” bed like old times, except he was unrestrained and had his vaporizer under his headrest.

Laurel slept soundly across the room, her pistol under her pillow. He suspected hypervigilance would become the new normal. But she’d fallen asleep right away, and he liked to think her easy slumber was due, at least in part, to his presence.

If her heightened caution had been enforced by the violent assault by one of her own, other survivors all over Earth lived in unnecessary fear of the next attack. Until now, he’d never considered the toll on the survivors—the Progg ensured there were none. Rarely did they lose a battle. This was the first time in a hundred years.

The omnipotent force had met an invincible foe—a common virus. So steadfast their confidence in their military superiority, they’d failed to take precautions.

Nothing had gone the way it should. The only bright spot had been meeting Laurel. He wished he could undo the devastation to her world and bring back her family, but he couldn’t.

He couldn't see her in the dark, but he heard her gentle breathing and smelled her enticing fragrance. Sleep well, Laurel.

At long last, he drifted off.

\* \* \* \*

He smelled the rain even before they pushed aside the heavy brush and peered outside. Thunder rumbled, and lightning flashed across the dark morning sky.

"It's raining buckets!" Laurel exclaimed.

Indeed. If not for the protective overhang of rock, they would have gotten drenched in seconds.

"You're going to have to spend another day," she said. "You can't go out in this."

Thank you, Zok. Hiding his smile, he sent a silent prayer of gratitude to the Powerful One. He didn't know if his god had sway over Earth, but it never hurt to credit him with any blessings received, whether he was responsible or not.

They returned inside for breakfast. They both ate a granular substance called oatmeal. He'd had it once before, but this time it contained sweet bits called raisins , which he rather enjoyed.

"How about we play a game?" she suggested afterward.

"What kind of game?" The only games his people played were war games. He did not wish to play those with her.

"Card games, checkers, Monopoly ." She shrugged. "If you can't read, Scrabble is

out, and there isn't enough time for you to learn chess well enough to have fun at it."

They played all three of the ones she suggested. After a few losses in poker, he had the cards memorized and won every hand.

"I'd take you to Vegas—if it still existed," she said. "We'd clean up."

Remembering what had been played and discarded, and what remained was easy.

He won most of the checker games, too.

Laurel read off what was printed on the Monopoly board and its game cards, but even though he'd memorized everything, he still lost, since much of the outcome relied on chance. By a roll of the dotted cubes, Laurel snapped up BOARDWALK, PARK PLACE, and PENNSYLVANIA, NORTH CAROLINA, and PACIFIC avenues. Then she filled her squares with little green houses and red hotels and bankrupted him.

"I don't like this game," he said petulantly when she scooped up all his play money and the deeds to his properties. He lost his hotels, his houses, and the MEDITERRANEAN and BALTIC avenue properties themselves.

"You don't like losing." She laughed.

"Winning is better," he agreed.

Monopoly reminded him of the galactic campaigns. Winner took all. Except in the Earth version, the Progg had owned hotels on Broadway, and Earth had the low-rent Baltic Avenue, and Earth still won. Because of a random roll of the dice had produced a virus. Go to jail. Go directly to jail. Do not pass Go. Do not collect \$200.

“What kind of games do children from your world play?” she asked.

He cleared his throat and then took a sip of water. “Children do not play.” Sometimes children would be caught playing, but adults would quickly punish the behavior.

“What do children do?”

“They attend school to learn how to be adults and serve the empire.”

“That’s...sad.”

“Why is it sad?”

“Because it sounds like children don’t get to be children.”

“Why would anyone want to be a child?”

“Because it’s a time of wonder and freedom!”

“Wonder and freedom—” don’t secure victories or build empires . He hated to spoil the convivial mood with the brutal truth. “Wonder and freedom...are insignificant in the grand plan,” he said.

“Only because you haven’t experienced them.”

“I can’t deny that.” But he failed to see how wonder and freedom would have improved his life.

As the day marched on, and the inevitable separation drew closer, his ebullient mood took a dive. The thunder and lightning had ceased, and the rain had slowed to a light mist. There would be no more reprieves. I should have been more specific in my

request to Zok.

For dinner, she opened a couple of pouches. He ate vegetarian vegetable soup ; she had macaroni and cheese .

They played a few more games, but he couldn't concentrate, obsessing over his impending departure. Then came the moment he'd been dreading—she announced she was tired and was going to bed.

He was tired, too. A heavy weariness enveloped his entire body, yet he hated to sleep because the time would woosh away, and then he would wake to morning and be forced to leave.

“Good night, Grav,” she said as she climbed into bed. It wasn't goodbye, not yet, but it sounded like it.

“Good night, Laurel,” he replied dejectedly.

He tried to stay awake to remain aware of her presence, but weariness took hold, and he fell asleep.

He awoke once with an oddly scratchy throat. He drank some water, but it didn't help. He rolled over and went to sleep.

The next time he awakened, Laurel stood beside the bed. “Hey, sleepyhead! It's almost 10 a.m.”

“It is?” Exhausted as if he hadn't slept at all, he forced himself to a seated position. His throat felt raw.

Her eyes narrowed. “Are you all right?”

He felt like he'd been run over and trampled, but a frisson of pleasure raced through him when she pressed her hand to his forehead. "Tired. Throat hurts."

Then Grav sneezed.



“Here, take this,” Laurel said.

Grav could barely sit up to take the over-the-counter cold medicine before sinking exhausted onto the pillow. He huddled under three blankets, shivering and shuddering. She had no idea what to do for him other than treat the symptoms and hope she didn’t kill him with the meds. Whatever he had—cold, flu—raged through his system like Progg marching through a defenseless town.

Grav had caught “the plague,” possibly the same virus that had killed the admiral.

Yesterday morning when he’d sneezed, she’d tried not to get too concerned, telling herself and him that a sneeze was just a sneeze, but he’d also complained of a sore throat, so she’d insisted he stay for another day. This morning, he had no appetite, but she tried to keep him hydrated with water, orange juice from a mix, and vegetable broth.

Concerned how the meds would affect his system, she’d treated him homeopathically at first, giving him honey for the sore throat and employing steam from a heated kettle for the nasal congestion.

It hadn’t helped, and he’d worsened so quickly she could no longer fool herself that his condition was minor. By nightfall, she’d resorted to over-the-counter meds, lozenges for the sore throat, a decongestant for the stuffiness. Still wary of a possible adverse reaction to foreign chemicals, she resisted administering an all-in-one cold remedy because if an ingredient was harmful to his biochemistry, she needed to know which one so she could stop it.

By this morning, he'd become lethargic, his fatigue so great he could barely move. His skin had turned ashen. Chills wracked his body. He shivered and shuddered so violently she feared he was having convulsions at first. His condition serious, there was nothing left to lose, so she dosed him with every cold and flu medicine in her pharmaceutical arsenal.

She'd never seen cold symptoms like this. Of course, she'd only been guessing that was what the admiral had, so she had no way to know what Grav suffered from.

But she knew who'd infected him—the man who'd attacked her.

In hindsight, it was clear he'd been sick. She remembered his nasal voice, the sneeze, and the coughing fit that had enabled her to knock the gun from his hand. Then Grav dragged him off her, and later handled the pack and everything the man had touched.

I don't want to lose you. Please, don't die. Please, don't die. Fight, Grav, fight!

She couldn't stand that he might die because he'd rescued her.

Sitting by his bed, she pressed her hand to his forehead.

"Your hand feels good," he murmured, not opening his eyes.

She leaned over and touched her lips to his forehead.

"That feels better." His mouth curved into a slight smile.

"You feel a little...warm," she said. Burning hot.

"I feel hot and cold." He shivered.

“I’m going to take your temperature.” She swiped the forehead thermometer against his skin.

A hundred and five point one! That can’t be right.

These forehead thermometers aren’t that accurate.

But they weren’t usually that far off.

“This isn’t reading you accurately.” She maintained a level tone. “I’ll try another kind.”

Adrenalin spiking, she retrieved the oral digital thermometer. “Put this under your tongue. Keep your mouth closed.”

She waited the requisite time then read it.

The same. A hundred and five point one.

A temp that high could lead to brain damage and organ failure. But her patient wasn’t human. “What’s a normal body temperature for you?” She used her calmest nursing voice, trying not to reveal her alarm.

“I don’t know.”

Maybe Progg ran hot. Maybe one oh five was normal.

Except the admiral and others had died from a “cold.” What if they’d died of organ failure caused by fever? “Your temperature seems a little elevated. I’m going to try to lower it.”

How? How? The acetaminophen she'd been giving him for body aches hadn't reduced the fever. Try ibuprofen? She gave him a tablet to take.

I wish I had ice!

She wished they'd stayed at the house. Not that she could do any more there than she could here. It would take a while to freeze water. Even the hospital would have been a bust. Auxiliary power had long since fizzled and without electricity to power the medical equipment, it was just a big building with a lot of beds. The only benefit to the hospital would be the availability of oxygen if he had trouble breathing—

Don't think that!

Focus on the immediate need. I have to get his fever down. If this had happened right after the ice storm, she could have broken ice off the trees or chipped it out of the creek.

The creek! After the big freeze with the weather still chilly, the water in the creek should be cold.

"I'm going out for a little bit. I won't be long." Please don't die while I'm gone. Please don't die at all.

He coughed. "Okay."

She donned her coat and stuffed some plastic zipper bags in the pocket. She sprinted the half mile to the creek. Icy-cold. Perfect! She filled the bags, pressed them closed, and ran to the cave, arriving out of breath, her chest tight.

A mile run would have been easy-peasy before the invasion, but after a year of inactivity, her physical fitness had suffered. But her gasps and chest tightness were

caused by more than a lack of fitness. This morning, she'd awakened with the start of a sore throat and could tell a cold was coming on. But her situation wasn't dire.

She tore off her coat and dashed to her patient. His skin, already ashen, had gone grayer than gray, and he lay deadly still.

"Oh, my god! Grav!" She shook his shoulder.

He groaned and opened his eyes.

Her knees wobbled, and she blinked tears of relief.

"Sorry, I had to wake you." She held up the water-filled bags. "Let's put these under your arms to help lower your body temperature."

Major blood vessels were located under the skin in the armpit—in humans. An ice pack under the arm helped to dissipate the heat. Hopefully his vascular anatomy was similar.

She pulled back the covers, removing two of them all together. He'd complained of chills earlier and shivered like he was freezing, but if he had a fever, a ton of blankets would lock in the heat.

She placed a bag under each arm.

He hissed. "It's cold!"

"I'm sorry. We need to try this." She re-covered him with a single blanket. "Go to sleep."

She kept the forehead thermometer handy. It had read the same as the oral one, and

she could monitor his temp without waking him. After fifteen minutes, she retook his temperature. It had inched up a fraction. Shit.

“Laurel?” Fever-bright, glassy blue-blue eyes sought hers.

“Yes?”

“I’m going to die, aren’t I?”

“Not if I can help it.”

“I’m sorry.” His head moved on the pillow. “An apology is...inadequate, can’t atone...for the devastating loss, but I am truly, truly sorry...for what my people did to your people and for the part I played.”

“You’re right—it can’t.” Anger and grief mingled and roiled. Step on someone’s foot, steal from them, even cheat on a spouse—those acts could be forgiven. Genocide was unforgiveable. Perhaps hundreds of years in the future when the death and devastation had faded into a historical footnote, there could be redemption and forgiveness. But not when the agony was fresh and raw.

However, she had forgiven Grav for being a Progg—because she believed in his innocence, that he hadn’t so much as lifted a hand to another person. Throughout history, soldiers in wartime had been known to commit atrocities, slaughtering innocent women and children. Did that make the entire military guilty? Every individual from that country? No. For that reason, she could forgive Grav.

And she recognized the unsaid message. He was saying goodbye.

“I’m not giving up,” she said. “And you shouldn’t either.”

He didn't hear. He'd already fallen asleep.

Throughout the day, she remained at his bedside, leaving only to get water from the creek. Besides the cold packs, she bathed his face and draped wet cloths over his forehead.

When he awakened—usually from the hacking cough—she would try to get him to drink, but he would only take a few sips. She took his temperature at regular intervals, and dosed him with cold and flu medicine, but mostly she held his hand and stroked his bristly head. Even his hair seemed ill—limp, flat, more coarse than bristly.

The fever broke after several hours, dipping by a half degree, and continuing to ease downward until it plateaued at 101. She removed the ice-water bags then to make him more comfortable but continued to monitor his temp.

She tried to take heart from the fever reduction, but as it was the only sign of improvement, she feared the virus still rampaged, doing who-knew-what to his body.

It was like the old joke: The treatment was a success, but the patient died.

He hadn't urinated all day. So ashen, he resembled a corpse. His breathing labored; she didn't need the stethoscope to hear the congestion in his lungs.

She dosed herself with cold medicine. She felt like shit, but he needed her, and she could tell her situation was a typical cold. She'd had lesser ones, and she'd experienced much worse.

Ten days ago, she would have cheered at his suffering, prayed for his death so she could mark a point on the cosmic scoresheet for humanity. She couldn't do that now. She owed her life to him, but, setting that aside, she'd come to understand him a little

bit, to care about him. To like him.

When, if , he died, she would grieve. Until the invasion, she'd been an idealist, one who focused on the good in people. She'd never been naïve—at least she didn't think so. She'd been aware criminals and sociopaths committed horrible, depraved acts. However, she hadn't believed, as some did, that bad acts were the result of evil , a profound irredeemably wicked supernatural force.

Until the Progg came.

The invasion that killed billions and devastated a civilization had shattered her convictions. Only evil could explain the global massacre.

Grav, in his small way, had begun to restore her core convictions. He was decent. Others of his kind must be, too. He couldn't be the lone exception. His decency had given her hope, shining a pinpoint of light in a bleak, dark existence.

If he died, so would hope.



## Page 16

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:30 am*

Grav awakened to find Laurel slumped over his bed, holding his hand.

I'm still alive!

He had vague recollections of her bathing his forehead, stroking his head. Whenever he'd awakened, she was there. He had solid memories of her insisting he swallow some nasty, syrupy concoction, the sweetness unable to mask the underlying bitterness. He trusted her, believed she was doing her best to help him.

His arm felt heavy as he raised it to stroke her hair. Soft strands clung to his hand.

Her head shot up. "You're awake! How do you feel?"

"Like I was run over by a ground crawler—so, better." He cracked a smile.

"Let me take your temperature." She pressed a device to his forehead. "Still 101. Maybe that's normal for you." She bit her lip. "Maybe the worst is over."

"I like to think I've avoided the worst." The worst was death.

"You sound a little better."

She sounded hoarse and stuffy. He scanned her face. She looked exhausted. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine." She shrugged and tucked her hair behind her ears. "I got a little touch of what you have—but I'm fine!"

Alarmed, he eyed her. “Are you sure?”

“Positive. The virus doesn’t affect me the way it did you. Now that you’re awake, can I get you anything?”

“Could I have a drink?”

“Of course!” She picked up the water vessel. “It’s empty. I’ll have to refill it. I’ll be right back.” She left to get the water.

He flung off the covers and swung his legs over the side of the bed. He stood up, and his knees almost buckled. His legs weren’t strong enough to support him. He staggered the two steps to the commode and relieved himself.

Legs wobbling, he turned to get into bed.

Laurel returned. “You shouldn’t be up.”

“I had to urinate.”

“You peed?”

“Buckets,” he said.

“That’s great!” She smiled for the first time.

“If you say so.” He did feel better though. But it was a bigger relief to collapse into bed. He rolled onto an elbow when she handed him the water. Thirstier than he’d realized, he drank half of it. “My throat isn’t so sore anymore,” he said.

“You seem much stronger, too.”

“I do?” He felt incredibly weak.

“Two days ago, you couldn’t have gotten out of bed.”

“I’ve been sick for two days?”

“Four. You sneezed for the first time four days ago.”

“Four days?”

She nodded. “Do you remember me putting bags of cold water under your arms?”

“Vaguely.” Reality and dreams had become confused.

“That was the day after you sneezed for the first time. Your temperature was sky-high—at least by human standards. I brought it down with the cold water, but you were pretty much out of it after that. You seemed incoherent a lot of the time, rambling on and on, repeating the same thing.”

“What did I say?”

“No idea. You were talking in your language.”

“Did I apologize to you, or did I dream it?” Certain he would die, he’d desperately needed to convey how he felt.

“You did do that.” She sat in the chair. “We can talk about this when you’re feeling better. For now, just understand that I don’t hold you responsible for the massacre, but I can’t forgive those who are. An apology can’t begin to compensate for what happened.”

“I did not mean to imply that it did.” He could feel a cough coming on and took a drink of water. “I need you to know I do not share my fellow Progg’s sentiments. I care deeply for you, Laurel.” He had to tell her. It had almost been too late.

“I care for you, too. I was so worried about you.”

He started to reply, but then a paroxysm of coughing shook him. When it subsided, he had a mouthful of revolting mucus.

“Here.” She pressed a soft paper into his hand, and he spit into it.

“You’ll cough for the next few days. It seems to be productive—you’re expelling mucus, so that’s good. I’ll get you some tea with honey. That should help. At night, I can give you a cough suppressant so you can get some sleep, but in general, it’s better to expel the phlegm, and I’m still hesitant to give you human drugs. I don’t know if they helped you—or if you survived despite them.” She stood up. “I’ll go brew the tea.”

“Could I get something to eat?”

“Of course!” Her face lit up like he’d paid her a wonderful compliment.

“That pleases you?”

“It’s another sign you’re getting better. I’ll get it right now.” She left.

His face split into a grin. I care about you, too. Those simple words meant the world to him. But would it be enough to make her want him to stay?

She returned with a hot drink. “Here’s the tea. I’m heating up a lentil soup for you.”

The soothing tea tasted much better than the syrupy stuff she'd poured down his throat. By the time he finished it, she had the soup ready.

It was delicious.

He tried to stay awake, but fatigue claimed him, and he fell asleep. He awakened once but saw Laurel asleep in her bed, so he rolled over and drifted off again.

\* \* \* \*

The next day, he felt much stronger, although still weak and shaky and prone to fits of coughing. However, he got up, and, under Laurel's watchful eye, walked around. He helped her heat their meals, and they played Concentration, an easy game due to his keen memory.

They played more poker, with him winning every hand. "Are you cheating?" She eyed him suspiciously.

"No." He didn't explain. He liked winning. It went against his nature to throw a competition. But he relished spending time with her, engaging with her, and suspected she wouldn't play with him if she knew she'd never beat him at memory games. She taught him to play backgammon, and they tied, 1-1. But then he'd started to flag, and she was too, so they went to take a nap.

\* \* \* \*

"How are you feeling?" she asked the following morning.

He considered faking a relapse. He'd awakened, if not good as new, at least more robust and energetic. The coughing had tapered off, and he'd gotten a good night's sleep. By tomorrow, he'd be well enough to leave. He did not look forward to his

departure.

“Better. How about you?” He scanned her face. She appeared healthier, too.

“I’m good.” She paused. “You’ll be able to leave soon, I guess? Find and reconnect with your people?”

“Yeah.” Ask me to stay.

“Any idea when?”

He didn’t want to go. She gladdened his heart. Lifted his mood. Her smiles and laughter brought him joy; the most casual touch was bliss. She’d tended to him during his illness, and one of his biggest regrets was that he’d been unaware of her touch most of the time.

Although he feared dying, he’d go through it all over again, if it would buy more time with her. He’d rather live another week deathly ill with her than a healthy lifetime without her.

He didn’t know if he would like other humans, but he preferred her company over that of his own people.

But she didn’t feel the same.

“Tomorrow,” he replied.

“Your bag is packed and ready to go, but I’ll add some extra rations and some cleansing wipes.” She pivoted and marched out of the room.

\* \* \* \*

Laurel fled to the supply room before she burst into tears.

She'd become attached to the spikey-haired alien lug with the blue-blue eyes. She didn't want him to leave. She'd tried to feel him out, see if he'd be receptive to staying, but his emphatic answers showed he was eager to go.

She grabbed packets of wet wipes and vegetarian meals from the tubs and dashed away tears with the back of her hand.

She thought they'd become close. But not close enough apparently for him to abandon his people and stay with her.

How can I blame him? He might like me a little, but that doesn't mean he'd like other humans—or that they would like him. If he stayed with her, she'd be condemning him to a life of distrust and hostility. Of course, he would wish to rejoin his own people.

Would she be willing to live among the Progg to be with him?

No. So, how could she fault his choice?

But couldn't he show some regret, some ambivalence? I wouldn't be like, "Hey, it's been real. Thanks for the memories," and walk away like he meant nothing.

God, I'm going to miss him.

She blew her nose on a tissue. At least I can blame my red eyes and runny nose on the cold. Squaring her shoulders, she pasted on her best chill nurse-face and left the supply chamber. If she only had one more day with him, she didn't want to miss a second.

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*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:30 am*

“We could go to my parents’ house. You could shower before you leave,” she suggested. Pathetic! She’d do anything to delay his departure.

She’d tossed and turned all night, finally falling asleep in the wee hours of the morning. When she awakened, feeling hungover, she’d found him dressed and ready to go. She’d offered to make breakfast, but he’d said he’d helped himself to a power bar.

Did she need further proof of his eagerness to leave?

“Thank you, but it’s best if I get an early start. I used the wipes. They work well.”

“I did put some in your pack.”

“I saw.”

“They’re biodegradable.” She rubbed her hands together. Even after she’d first dragged him back to the cave, their interactions hadn’t been this stilted and uncomfortable.

“Thank you for the wipes. For the food. For saving my life.”

“I have a hunch you recovered on your own.”

“Well, you were there.”

I couldn’t let you die alone. By some miracle, he’d pulled through. “You saved my



life. I owe you.”

“You don’t owe me anything.”

She pressed her tongue to the roof of her mouth to prevent herself from crying. There’d be plenty of time for a pity party when she was alone. Lots and lots of lonely time.

“Well.” He shrugged into his pack.

“Well,” she replied.

“Goodbye, Laurel.”

“I’ll walk you out,” she said.

He didn’t dawdle but rushed out the neck of the cave and pushed through the covering brush.

The morning air held a frosty chill, but the sun shone brightly, and there wasn’t a cloud in the blue-blue sky. It looked like the start of a beautiful early spring day. A perfect day for leaving. I hate sun.

“Goodbye, Grav.” She gave him a stiff hug, resisting the urge to cling.

“Be well.” He strode away.

Well, this is it. Her throat clogged with tears.

I survived a fucking apocalypse, and I’m going to let him walk away without a single word? Without a fight? When did I become such a coward? “Don’t go!”

He halted. Turned.

“Don’t go. I have no right to ask you, but I’d like you to stay—with me.”

He moved toward her. “I only wanted you to ask me.”

Her lips quivered. “What are you saying?” She had to be sure they were on the same page.

“I don’t want to leave. I wish to stay with you.”

“Really?” Her eyes filled with tears. “F-for how long?”

“For as long as you’ll have me.” He broke into a big smile.

“What about your people?”

“Why would I want them if I can have you?”

“Oh, Grav.” She launched herself at him, and he caught her in an awkward hug, like he didn’t know what to do with his arms. She pressed her lips to his in an exuberant, happy kiss. He stiffened, and blue-blue eyes widened, but he tightened his arms.

“What about your people? Won’t I complicate your life?” He peered down at her. She hadn’t realized how tall he was. Most of the time he’d been with her, he’d been flat on his back.

There were still many details, way more important details than height to learn about each other, but they had the time.

“You’re willing to go with me when I try to find them?” she asked.

He nodded.

“Complicated is the new normal. I’d rather have you and a complicated life than live a simple life without you.” She looked up at him. “Let’s go inside.”

In the cave, he shrugged his pack and dropped it with a satisfying thunk . Laurel couldn’t stop grinning. He wants to stay!

She shuddered at how close she’d come to letting him walk out of her life because they both had waited for the other to say something first. Note to self: Ask for what you want. Don’t expect him to guess.

She wasn’t naïve. Hooking up with him would complicate a reunion with her fellow humans. It could be dangerous—people might shoot first, ask questions later. They would have to be extra cautious. But if she’d been able to accept him, hopefully once she vouched for him, others would, too. And she wanted him at her side on the journey called life.

Blue-blue eyes sparked with speculation. “That thing you did...”

“What thing?”

“Pressing your mouth to mine.”

“Kissing?”

“That’s what you call it?”

She sighed. “Let me guess: Progg don’t kiss.”

“No, we don’t.” He shook his head.

Well, shit. Overjoyed, she hadn't stopped to think; she'd just reacted. We do have much to learn about each other.

"I would like to do it again."

"You would?" Her lips curved.

"Yes. I liked it very much."

"Well, then..." She curled her arms around his neck. "Let me show you what a French kiss is," and proceeded to show him.

"You have some strange but wonderful customs," he said when they came up for air.

She took his hand and led him to the sofa. "Speaking of strange and wonderful customs, I need to ask you an important question."

"What is it?"

"Do your people have sexual intercourse?"

"Of course. That is how we reproduce." He cocked his head. "You wish to have a baby?"

She would not consider having a child until she could bring him or her into a safer world. It remained to be seen if their two species could produce offspring together—but she didn't want to find out until their two species could manage to coexist without killing each other. "Uh, no. At least not for a while," she replied.

"Oh." He looked crestfallen. "That's disappointing. Sexual intercourse is very pleasurable. But I accept your decision."

Oh, for goodness' sake! "I take it you don't have sex just for fun?"

"Progg don't do anything just for fun."

She should have guessed. She nudged him in the ribs. "You didn't used to do anything just for fun. Stick with me—I'll show you a good time." While they adjusted to the new paradigm and got to know each other a little better, she'd make a trip to the pharmacy. Maybe he couldn't impregnate her at all, but she wasn't going to risk it at this juncture.

"More fun than cards?" he asked.

"Much more." She kissed him. "Just wait and see."

## Page 18

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:30 am*

One week later.

Grav carried a box of books from the house and settled it into the small trailer hitched to the vehicle. “Last container,” he said.

“Good, because we’re out of room,” she said.

The admiral hadn’t been a light traveler either.

In the past week, they’d prepared to leave the area. She’d taught him how to drive, and they’d gone to town for medical supplies, drugs, clothing for him, additional ammunition for the weapons, some how-to books, and gasoline, which they’d siphoned out of parked cars. She’d already had a tent, sleeping bags, a camping stove, portable lights, a paper atlas, and other equipment, some from the cave, some from the house.

“A lot of towns may have supplies, but we can’t count on it,” she had explained. “Looting started to occur during the invasion, and survivors will have rifled through stores—just like we did. Once we get into an area with people, supplies will be scarcer. I don’t want to have to scrounge for necessities.”

“Understood,” he said.

He slipped his arm around her waist, and his heart skipped a beat as she leaned into him. Progg weren’t physically demonstrative, but he didn’t think he’d ever get tired of touching her or being touched by her. It had become his greatest source of joy. Until meeting Laurel, he hadn’t realized how it felt to be happy. He’d never been

happy before.

And last night? The single most euphoric experience of his entire life. They'd had sex. He'd had to wear a condom over his member because Laurel said her birth control wasn't effective yet, but the experience had rocked him to the core. His people had been missing out to limit intercourse for reproduction!

Or maybe they did it on the sly and didn't admit to it. There was no official ban on seeking sexual gratification, just strong social sanctions against it.

He couldn't imagine anyone experiencing the kind of pleasure he had with Laurel and not wanting to do it again and again. He started to get hard.

"Are you thinking about sex again?" she asked. "I created a sex monster."

"You did. I have a lot of lost time to make up for." He eyed the sinking sun. "We missed our early start." They'd had to pack, unpack, and rearrange the vehicle and trailer to fit in all the stuff she insisted they needed. Then they'd had to run back to the cave for items she'd forgotten.

"How about we get an early start tomorrow morning? We're all packed up. We can just jump in the car and go," he suggested.

"You want to have sex again is what you're saying."

"One for the road." He'd been learning Earth idioms.

She laughed.

Zok, he loved her laugh. He loved her.

"Make it twice for the road, and you've got a deal." She wrapped her arms around his

neck.

\* \* \* \*

Thank you for reading Survival Instinct .