

# **Extinction**

**A novel**

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COMPLETE

## Chapter 1

The room was dark and had an odd odor. The man had lived in it for a very long time, but he didn't smell it anymore. He didn't even really see it anymore. He had a vague recollection that in the beginning he had scanned its every surface, pored over every inch of every wall, floor, ceiling, and looked into all the corners trying to find escape. But escape did not live in this room. Yes, there were openings, but they were closed to him.

The dim memories that remained told him that the walls were metallic, cold and dark, and buffed to a matte finish to prevent reflections from intruding into the gloom. The floor was wooden, heavy planks stained a deep brown with a coarse grain. The planks were cracked in some places, revealing deep rents in the grain, but the stout wood was thick and offered no hope of egress for the man.

The ceiling was high overhead and could not be reached, nor even seen clearly in the dim light. But he knew that there were metal bars mounted to it, stretching horizontally from one wall to the other, and over them was the metal ceiling itself, composed of the same cold, dark material the walls had been crafted from.

In the entire room there was but one door and no windows. The door was heavy. He had seen it open on a few occasions, but in most cases the people who came to the door interacted with him through the meshwork grille and a sliding drawer. Seldom, a smaller door with its hinges in the grille would open for them to be able to touch him directly. The weave of the mesh was coarse and the wires that made it up were thick.

He remembered a time of strength. A time when he could have rent the meshwork of the grille with ease and laughed as he did it. It had been a long time since he had laughed, but he could barely remember a time when he had laughed loud and long. A laugh of amusement at the folly of his surroundings and those around him who thought they could tame his power.

He had not always lived in this room, or even one like it. Before he had been brought here he had lived somewhere else. That place had been nicer. He had been fed properly and provided with many of the things he needed. Not all of them, of course. There were some things he knew he would never have again after they had discovered his secrets and brought him, forcibly, to these places.

A noise came from the hallway outside the door. The man did not bother to look up. He was lost in thought, lost in memory of the place he had been before he had been brought to the room. There had been others of his kind there and they had been permitted to interact periodically, but never for too long. Their power might have been enough to overcome the safeguards put in place to contain them if they had been allowed to be with one another for too long.

A rat scurried along outside his door. He could not see it, but he knew that it was there. And then it was gone. They were watching. He knew that they were watching. But he resolved himself not to give them the satisfaction of looking up, of reaching out to the rat.

Once upon a time he could have controlled it. He could have willed it to do his bidding, it and others like it. Such was his power. Physical strength. Mental capability. And style. He had had style and charisma and influence that was the envy of those around him. Perhaps that was what had led to the downfall. The envy of those who did not have what he had and desired to know why and how that could be ... corrected.

Another noise from outside the door. Again the man did not look up. How long had he peered through the grille at the hallway, looking for some weakness, some avenue, some unnoticed flaw in their security? He could not remember. Other men would come sometimes and talk to him, and he tried to influence them. Once he could have held a dozen of them at bay with nothing more than the power of his mind, but now he had no such power over them.

His eyes strayed, involuntarily, caught perhaps by a glint, but more likely it was a random movement brought about by boredom and a reflex to some imagined movement. They fell upon his clothes. A simple black gown. Loose fitting and beginning to show wear. He allowed himself a small, wistful smile as he imagined himself at the height of his glory, dressed in the highest, richest fashions of the day.

Yet another noise, this one louder. It was the door at the end of the hall. The entire space was dimly lit, but the man had very keen eyesight in darkness and had seen the hallway countless times before. It was long and, while he could not see one end, the end closest to him had a door. What lay beyond the door he did not know because the light on the other side of it blinded him. Continuing on past his room, he could not see very much, but he knew there were other rooms like his. He had reached out with his mind to try to contact whoever lived in them, but he could not reach them. He had called out to them, and for a time there had been answers, but the answers were always unsatisfactory and so they did not call out to each other very much. And then the answers had stopped altogether.

The door at the end of the hall had opened and the light had come flooding in. Despite the matte surfaces of the metal and the dark nature of the material, he still winced at the glare. The door closed and he could hear the footsteps of someone approaching and the rolling of small wheels. They stopped at his door. He did not look up.

“Subject number 58175, stand up and approach,” said a voice. It was a man’s voice. It sounded tired and the sentence it uttered sounded tired as well. Rehearsed, repeated, and ingrained into a routine. The man in the room did not move.

The man on the outside of the door sighed. “Subject number 58175, stand up and approach,” it repeated. The man in the cell looked up. In the darkness he could still see him clearly. His brown moustache, recently trimmed based on his memories from a few days previous, his balding head, his white coat with two pens in the pocket. He could not see his hands, but he knew from experience that the man would be holding a clipboard. The rolling noise had come from a small table on wheels that held his instruments.

“You have trimmed your moustache,” the man in the cell said. The man on the other side of the door looked flustered, but said nothing. The man in the cell grinned, showing his white teeth. He remembered a time when the man with the white coat would not have dared come to see him alone. Those days had passed quickly, though.

“Approach,” the man in the white coat repeated again.

The man in the cell hesitated a moment, and then rose from his crouch where he had been leaning against the wall. He was tall, impossibly thin, and had a black head of hair that looked disheveled. The man in the white coat could barely see a silhouette against the matte finish of the walls as he opened the small door in the grille.

"You still wear that, after all this time?" the man in the cell asked. The man in the white coat reflexively reached for the device pinned to his lapel. A small, dim light winked on and off from the device periodically.

"Of course," the man in the white coat replied. "I am cautious."

The man in the cell chuckled lightly. Respect. He still had his respect. That was something, at least.

"You know how this goes, Alin," the man in the white coat continued. "Hold out your arm and let's get this over with."

"How much more do you think I have to give?" asked Alin, the man in the cell.

"I don't know," the man in the white coat admitted. "But I have my orders."

Alin permitted himself another wan smile and then rolled up the sleeve of his black robe. He extended a long, pale, thin arm through the small door in the grille. The man in the white coat made a note on his clipboard and then placed it on the table nearby. He then picked up a small cylindrical instrument with a glass phial attached at one end. He laid the device lengthwise, parallel to the thin arm before him, against the pale skin and watched as the phial filled slowly with a deep red fluid.

"What of Sorina?" Alin asked as he, too, watched the fluid fill the phial.

The man in the white coat hesitated briefly and then replied "Subject 66893 is no longer a part of this study."

Alin's eyes glinted briefly, but then they strayed to the device the man wore on his white coat and relaxed once more. There was nothing to be done.

"I was once human, you know," Alin said matter of factly.

"But you aren't now."

"No, I am not."

The phial finally reached its capacity and the small device emitted a soft beep and detached itself from Alin's dry skin. The man in the white coat set it back on the table, picked up his clipboard and made another note.

"All done. Subject 58175, retreat."

Alin withdrew his arm from the grille slowly. He seemed to be considering something, but then thought better of it. The small door closed and the man in the white coat retreated back down the hallway the way he had come. Alin turned his back so that the glare of the light from the doorway would not blind him again and walked slowly to the center of the cell where he rested his arms on a large, oblong wooden object that was raised a few feet off the floor.

“Sorina,” the man in the cell whispered. He glanced to his left. She had been right there. On the other side of the wall. What could they have done together? What could they have done outside this prison? But it was no use. She was gone. He raised the lid of the wooden oblong and climbed inside, nestling into the dry earth within, reached up to close it over top of himself, and closed his eyes to sleep.

## Chapter 2

Darryl leaned in and peered at the test tube as a tiny blue flame danced beneath it. He rotated one of the three lenses attached to his regular eyeglasses into place and refocused his eyes on the now-magnified image. Things seemed to be going well. The fluid in the tube was bubbling as he’d expected it to and he was almost ready to add the new substance he’d concocted the night before. Just a few more minutes, he mused.

Straightening up, he allowed himself a moment to take stock of the setup as a whole. The last experiment had been ruined by letting a piece of tubing come unanchored from the stopper in the flask and he couldn’t allow that to happen this time. He scanned the entire setup. Every glass tube, every rubber stopper, every plastic tube got a visual once-over. He even inspected the wooden table top to see if there were any stray bits of water or other tell-tale signs that the experiment might not be proceeding according to plan.

He’d been working on this for five years and was closer now than he’d ever been, but a setback now would be catastrophic as he was out of the crucial reagent that was the cornerstone of his theory and getting more would be costly. No, more than costly. It would be impossible. But everything seemed to be in order.

Turning from his apparatus, Darryl listened now to the bubbling coming from the flasks and tubes and pipes. He’d run this part of the experiment so many times before that he was attuned to every part of it and could tell instantly just from the sound if anything was amiss. He heard the steady drip of condensation, the most fragile part of the process, and knew that everything was well. A few more minutes.

He walked across the wooden floor to the window and peered outside at the cloudy autumn day. The leaves danced in the wind, swirling along the sidewalk. Half-naked trees stood nearby looking scruffy and unkempt. If they had been bare they would have been sinister and forboding come the twilight of the evening in a few hours, but as it was they just looked undignified. He idly wished the cloud cover would break up to let a little more light into the room. As the day wore on, it would become more difficult to work in the darkness and he could not afford the energy it would take to turn on the lights. Unless his experiment worked.

The very thought sent shivers up his spine and gave him gooseflesh. If his experiment worked he could turn on the lights. He glanced briefly at the bulb overhead that had spent more of its time in the socket dark than illuminated. It amazed him that there had been a time when people could turn on lights in every room in their house and leave them on. Here he was in an industrial facility and if he turned the lights on it came out of his paycheck. But energy had always been a finite resource. That fact had both started and stopped the last wars. Before people fought over energy and resources. They still fought over those things, but they did it differently now. Economically. Use energy to control more energy and you controlled the world.

He heard a plunk behind him and whirled around to look at his apparatus. Striding purposefully back across the room, his heavy black boots thudding across the bare floor, he looked for the source of the unwanted sound. Not again. Not when he was so close.

Tubing was still correct, flasks were still stoppered, tubes were still suspended, some over the small blue flame, others immersed in cooling water. The outlay of energy just to set this up was more than he could afford, but he had assured his superiors that the payoff would be worth it. It didn't need to produce limitless energy, it just needed to produce more than he'd put into it. The law of conservation of energy stated that he couldn't create it from nothing, but he could convert it from other sources. So far he'd had three failures and one equipment malfunction. The equipment was wearing down from the repeated experiments, but he couldn't replace the whole thing. The best he could do was a patch here or a patch there, replace this tube, switch out this flask, put an adhesive on that cracked tube and hope the whole thing held together.

At last he discovered the source of the noise. It was the same as the last time. The spring was bent and wasn't springing back the way it was supposed to. He corrected it and watched it for several seconds to see if it would continue normal operations and then, satisfied that it would, he checked the final mixture at the end. It was a pleasing blue color, just as it was supposed to be. The last time this had happened it had turned a frightful orange and he'd had to shut the entire contraption down before it exploded and turned the expensive collection of glass and plastic into cheap shards.

It was time. He nervously licked his lips and pulled on a pair of cracked leather gloves. *These were brand new*, he thought to himself, *and they're already almost worn through*. That was the trouble. Things had to be made and energy was expensive. Good, fast, and cheap. Pick two. That was the mantra of every manufacturer in the world. Anything of any kind of decent quality was probably made by the person who owned it and they'd never give it up. He'd bought these gloves two weeks ago at a store and they were already in danger of developing holes in them. And they weren't exactly what he'd call cheap, either, but they'd been cheap enough. With a little luck he'd be able to afford new ones. With a lot of luck he'd be able to make it so everyone could afford new ones.

He picked up a dropper with a vivid green liquid in it that he had drawn in preparation a few hours ago and dreamed of what he hoped to accomplish. A net gain in energy from a common, renewable substance. And once energy was common again, a surplus could be built, and once a surplus was built they could all afford to ... but he was getting ahead of himself. One thing at a time.

Raising the dropper over the blue liquid in the flask he squeezed the rubber bulb gently and watched through his special magnifying lenses as the green droplet fell into the bubbling mass beneath it and waited for a reaction.

He waited a few seconds longer. Nothing happened. He frowned and gingerly squeezed the bulb again, allowing a second droplet to fall. The liquid in the flask immediately changed to a pale amber color and ceased bubbling immediately. Darryl licked his lips. That was unexpected, but it didn't appear to be volatile.

Just then the door to his workshop opened with a bang. Darryl jumped and ducked under the table that the apparatus sat on, realized that that probably wasn't the safest place in the room, scurried across the floor, and took refuge behind a large wooden desk, trembling.

“Can’t believe it, just can’t believe it,” raged the newcomer, a tall woman with extremely long blonde hair pulled into a loose ponytail. She wore a long leather coat, light brown boots with thick soles that just made her even taller than she already was, tight beige pants, and a leather belt encrusted with various small metal tools. She stomped around the room for a moment, unable to focus her attention on anything and waving a newspaper around. Darryl winced with every step. He had no idea what the amber liquid in the flask was or what it might do if jostled.

“Harriet,” he called out gently, “please calm down...”

“Don’t you tell me to calm down, Darryl!” she bellowed. “Where are you, anyway? Have you seen this?” she cried, slamming the paper down on the desk Darryl was hiding behind.

“I’m behind the desk,” he said, as calmly as he could. “And you may want to consider joining me.”

She paused and grinned. “What, here at work?”

Darryl rolled his eyes. Weren’t men supposed to be the insatiable ones? Sometimes it was all she thought about. “No,” he said evenly. “It’s just that I’m in the middle of an experiment and I’m not sure what’s going on with it at this exact moment.”

Harriet looked around at the apparatus and saw the amber liquid still sitting above the small blue flame. It looked entirely unagitated.

“What, you mean this setup over here?” she asked, striding towards it.

Darryl cringed.

“Yes, that’s the one.”

Harriet peered closely at the liquid and then extracted a small magnifying lens from her belt and examined it more closely. Then she turned the small blue flame off and watched as the liquid slowly curdled into a gelatinous substance.

“Huh,” she said. “Never seen anything like that before.”

Darryl risked a look over the edge of the desk and saw her bent over looking at the flask. It didn’t seem like it was ready to explode, but you could never tell with these things. On the other hand, if it did explode then that would mean that it was certainly packed with energy.

“Harriet, could you come away from that for just a moment?” he tried again.

“Hmm?” she said, still examining the amber substance through the lens. She absently extracted another instrument from her belt and began to remove the stopper with it.

“Harriet? I don’t think that’s such a good idea. I kind of was working on an energy experiment...”

“Yes, yes, I know,” she mumbled. She’d gotten the stopper out and was now reaching the metal instrument in her hand down into the flask as if to try to extract a bit of the gel that was continuing to dry out right before her eyes.

“Could you at least put on some safety goggles?”

She reached the gel with the tool and scraped a bit of the substance off the top and began to bring it slowly out of the flask. It was looking a little more orange now, and Darryl was really starting to get nervous. In his mind’s eye he could just see the whole thing erupting in a massive fireball, consuming them both and burning down the whole building. Concrete wasn’t in use anymore and sprinkler systems were something from history, so the whole place was effectively a tinderbox. It was part of the risk of working there. Of course hardly anybody else knew what he was working on, so they weren’t exactly *aware* of the risk, but it was still part of it.

Harriet examined the sample on the end of her probe for a moment and frowned. She glanced back at Darryl.

“What did you put in this?” she asked.

Darryl looked embarrassed. “A few chemicals, some cellulose, a mixture of certain types of bacteria, and...” he trailed off.

“And what? That sounds like your usual energy formula, but it never actually does anything. What was the secret ingredient this time?” she asked skeptically.

“Chlorophyll,” he mumbled.

“Chlorophyll?” she repeated.

Darryl nodded, just the top of his head appearing above the desk as he did so.

Harriet smirked and popped the now-orange substance into her mouth. Darryl leapt from behind the desk and dove towards her. He wasn’t sure what he was going to do, but he couldn’t just sit there any longer. When he got across the room to her she was laughing.

“I don’t see what’s so funny,” he said, perturbed.

“Have a taste,” she offered, reaching the probe back into the flask and extracting another glob of the orange substance. “Come on, here comes the airplane,” she said, floating the instrument in front of his mouth, waiting for him to open it.

“I don’t...” he began, but the moment his lips parted she seized her opportunity and shoved the orange blob into his mouth. He gagged for a moment, but then a realization hit him and he smacked his lips.

“Congratulations,” she said. “You’ve successfully synthesized carrots.” She giggled.

Darryl scowled and spat the bit of synthesized carrot out into a nearby bucket. Harriet laughed even harder.



"I don't see what's so funny," he said. "There was no telling what that was, you could have died by eating it like that."

"Oh, come on. I know the theory is sound. Chlorophyll helps plants make energy, but with that concoction there was no way it could have had the result you wanted. It was always going to be carrots."

Darryl slumped over to the desk and sat down in the wooden chair that sat next to it and put his head down on the flat surface. The coarse grain of the wood began to etch indentations into his forehead and he vaguely thought about the threat of splinters, but he put it out of his mind as he raised his head and then hit it against the surface again more roughly.

"I'm a failure," he intoned.

Harriet tilted her head and smiled at him. "Yes, but you're MY failure," she said, coming over to him and putting an arm around him. She sat down on the narrow chair seat next to him and he moved slightly to make room for her.

"It's a good theory," she said consolingly. "The old fossil fuels were the results of millions of years of energy from the sun being stored by bacteria and other life forms and then slowly curing. You're just trying to speed it up."

"You know what else is a good theory?" Darryl mumbled, his head still on the desk. "Nuclear energy. That was a really fantastic theory."

Harriet didn't answer right away. The problem, of course, was that nuclear *energy* was a perfectly fine theory that worked exactly the way it was supposed to. The problem wasn't the theory, the problem was people and the alternate uses that nuclear energy could be put to. Albert Einstein had famously said that he didn't know what weapons World War III would be fought with, but World War IV would be fought with sticks and stones. The implication, of course, was that mankind would devastate themselves so thoroughly as to either get themselves back to the stone age or else wipe themselves out altogether and some new species would rise to dominance and have to start all over.

What Einstein hadn't reckoned on was space travel preserving the original technology. Not only had World War IV been fought with smart bombs and tactical nukes just like World War III had, but so had World War V. After that things calmed down a little because most of the energy sources it takes to wage war on that scale had been depleted. Technology had advanced quickly, as it always does during war, but no new sources of energy were discovered and eventually the pace of battle outstripped the various nations' ability to fund it from an energy point of view.

These days the focus for most people was on durable goods. In a way, society had indeed regressed back to homemade clothing and utensils, but enough minds had survived to make these things better than they ever had been before.

"Yes, it was," she finally replied. She didn't really know what else to say. She hated when he got like this. Normally he was full of his own kind of energy, always looking for the next big thing and often

finding it. The fact that it wasn't appreciated by most everybody else was secondary. He made things that made their lives easier and that was what counted.

Darryl picked his head up off the desk. Little grooves and indentations were in his forehead and he rubbed them to try to smooth the skin back out as he looked up at Harriet next to him.

"Carrots," he said scornfully. "I hate carrots."

"They have energy in them," she offered helpfully.

"But not enough. Do you know how much I burned through just to make that? If I'd ended up with the entire room full of carrots it still wouldn't have been enough. Now what?"

"Start again," she said, just as she always did. "You'll get there."

Darryl grunted. He clearly wasn't so sure.

"What were you so upset about when you came in here?" he asked by way of changing the subject.

Harriet started. She'd totally forgotten about what she came in here for and now that she was reminded, the anger started to build in her again.

"Did you see this?" she asked roughly, reaching across the desk and picking up the newspaper she'd come in holding. She smoothed it out on the desktop to reveal a large headline.

LAST REMAINING VAMPIRE DIES IN CAPTIVITY it screamed from the front page. In slightly smaller letters underneath CHURCH REJOICES, BUT RESEARCHERS MOURN.

Darryl sat up a little straighter and peered down at the rest of the article.

*The last remaining vampire died today, the newspaper said, following a lengthy battle with a mysterious ailment that doctors and researchers were unable to adequately identify or treat. "It was like he just slipped away," said researcher June Tessita, who had been the creature's caretaker for the last 50 years. "It is a terrible day for us all."*

*But not everyone shares that opinion. The Reverend Charles G. Manning released a statement to the press and the followers of his Church of the Divine Light saying that the passing of the "member of the damned," as he put it, was an indication that the salvation of mankind was proceeding according to schedule. His only complaint was that the researchers at the Facility for the Preservation of Rare Species had actually taken the vampire in and cared for it.*

*"They should have destroyed it immediately after taking delivery," Manning said. "Its presence was a blight upon the Earth and should never have been tolerated."*

*As most everyone knows, vampires were once the scourge of mankind. Their prodigious mental powers and ability to change shape made them difficult to combat. In their natural habitat, which was any kind of darkness, the vampire had keen senses, extreme physical strength and speed, and a charisma that only those with exceptionally keen minds were able to fight off. The battle with vampires reached a*

*stalemate for centuries as mankind learned their few weaknesses; stakes through the heart, fear of sunlight, revulsion at the sight of religious symbols by believers, and a need to rest during the day in the soil of their home country which made travel more difficult for them and helped to contain them geographically.*

*In 2567, however, roughly two decades following the fourth World War, two discoveries were made that would change human relations with vampires forever. The first was the perfection of storage of natural sunlight. The development was originally intended to be a solution for the energy crisis of the time by storing sunlight before using solar cells to convert it to electricity. In the end, this process did not yield enough energy and the process was scrapped, but it proved to be an effective deterrent to vampires who had built up a resistance to other sources of light including fire and incandescents. Outside of industrial settings where the cheaper metal halide lamps could still be used, the device proved a remarkably effective portable instrument that allowed hunters to approach vampires with the knowledge that they had a ready defense available.*

*The second discovery, later that year, was the process of remote animation. Originally developed for robotics programs, the project was shelved in 2499 in response to the Treaty of Mars which forbade the use of humanoid robotics against actual human opponents. It was later brought back as a way to animate and control brain-dead patients who had donated their bodies to the war effort. The still-living bodies could be controlled remotely, thus bypassing the Treaty's provisions while still allowing a thinking operator to enter combat without risking their own body by using one that no longer had its own consciousness.*

*With these two new weapons in the war against the undead, the vampires were quickly subjugated. Further advancements brought about machines that could dampen the vampire's mental abilities, thus rendering much of their power null, and vampires were rounded up worldwide into camps first and later into zoos where they went on public display. Conditions in the early years were questionable and eventually sweeping reforms were passed regulating the care and feeding of vampires, usually over the objections of the Church who felt that vampires should be exterminated rather than kept.*

*After years of contentious battles from both the Church and human rights groups who cited the vampires' origins as human beings before being 'turned' at some point in their lives, vampires were removed from the living collections of all zoos worldwide and their stocks were turned over to research facilities. Human rights groups collectively howled that this wasn't much better, but conceded that we had much to learn from vampires. Various lobbies attempted to set up preserves and reservations for vampires, but with World War V now looming on the horizon, those issues were often tabled.*

*During the war, vampires were slaughtered by the hundreds to prevent them from using resources that were needed during the war effort. They were tried as a combat technique a few times, but once they hit the battlefield and escaped the range of the machines that dampened their powers, most made a bid for freedom and were eventually rounded up. It took several years before they were all accounted for, but government and independent research facilities now assure us that every last one of the undead was retrieved and incarcerated.*

*The last vampire, Subject number 58175, or Alin as he preferred to be known, ceased all metabolic function and crumbled to dust yesterday morning at 7:33am, local sunrise. Even though he was in a completely light-proof room the timing cannot be coincidental and investigators are looking into what could have been a contributing factor. The exact cause of his ailment preceding the final events are*

*unknown, but researchers are doing what they can with blood samples collected in the days leading up to the vampire's demise and with the remaining ashes.*

Darryl sat back after reaching the end of the article. He knew Harriet felt that vampires should have gotten better treatment, that they were only acting within their own set of behaviors just as dogs and cats and even humans did and that they shouldn't have been confined in the ways that they were, but he'd never built up the level of passion that she had. As far as he was concerned, the loss here was research opportunities. He would have loved to have gotten his hands on some vampire blood.

"Can you believe that?" Harriet said, letting her ire build up again.

"Well, yeah, I can," Darryl said. "People have always hated vampires. And with good reason, I might add," he added. He knew that comment wasn't going to go over well, but it was how he felt and she could get over it.

"Ok, so they drank people's blood, but were there NO other solutions? Preserves, synthetic blood, and dampeners around the edges of their territory. There, problem solved."

"It was never that easy and you know it," Darryl said. He felt her arm remove itself from around his shoulders and he knew this argument was about to go badly for him. "People weren't being rational," he tried. "They wanted revenge. You remember that whole argument about vampires paying reparations."

"Yes, I do," Harriet replied getting up. "It was stupid then, and it's stupid now. No, actually, it's not stupid now. It's academic because we just destroyed the very last one of them. They're extinct now and there's no coming back from it. Just like the tiger. Just like the elephant. Just like half the damn species on this planet because of our wars and our short-sightedness."

There really wasn't any arguing with her when she got like this. They'd been together for ten years, married for 7 of them, and he still didn't have a grasp on how to cope with her own personal energy when she got fired up about a subject that he really didn't have any opinion on. From his perspective the loss of the tiger and the elephant were tragic because they were beautiful, noble animals, but in the end it was, as she said, academic because the ecosystem was completely screwed up anyway thanks to the techniques of modern warfare. What difference did it make if a top predator was removed from the food chain when three quarters of the prey species had gone with it?

Harriet stood there and seethed for a moment, waiting for his response. When it didn't come she said "You know what, you don't care. I knew that when I came in here. I'm not sure what I was thinking. You've never cared and you're never going to. I don't know why I put up with it, frankly. Why don't you spend the night with your carrots."

With that, she turned and strode out of the room, her boots thudding along the wooden floor, the door slamming shut behind her. Darryl sat stunned, not sure what had just happened.

### **Chapter 3**

Steam hissed slowly out between two fittings at the local power plant. A man wearing a deep brown leather jacket that came down to his waist and fitted him snugly readjusted the goggles he was wearing. Damn things kept riding together on the bridge of his nose and could get uncomfortable pretty quickly if

he didn't keep adjusting them. Trouble was that he needed both hands at the moment and using one of them to work with his goggles wasn't really a good option at the moment.

"You ok, Art?" asked his colleague. Art nodded, which turned out to be a bad move as the sweat running down his face caused the goggles to slip again as his head moved. The fitting continued to leak steam. He could see little dollar signs forming in the vapor.

"Yeah, I'm fine, just can't seem to figure out what the deal is here." He'd tried sealing the leak with a clamp to start, which hadn't worked at all, and then had tried to seal it up with epoxy, but the temperature and moisture were interfering with the chemical reaction necessary to make a good bond. He couldn't understand what was going on and why this was being so difficult. Why couldn't something be easy for a change?

"Why don't you try what I suggested?" his colleague asked.

Art sighed. "Because the pipe is made of PVC and if we use the torch on it, it'll melt," he replied.

"Sounds like a good thing to me. Melt that sucker up and it'll bond real good."

"Ok," Art said, conceding, "but I don't know how to use the torch," he lied. He knew very well how to use the torch, but this was Sean's cockamamie idea, he could darn well do it himself.

"Sure, you bet," Sean said, pulling his own goggles over his eyes and picking the small torch up. He looked at a digital readout on the device that showed how much propane was left in it and made a small tick mark on the side of the bottle. Using the torch was like burning money, but since it was effectively money that was leaking out of the fitting then it was a tradeoff.

Taking the striker out of his back pocket, Sean turned the knob that released the precious gas and lit the torch. Quickly he moved to point the flame at the place where the fittings met one another and watched as the old PVC began to bubble and flow. He extracted a small screwdriver from a toolbelt he wore and used it to start shaping the plastic, mounding it in the general area that the leak was coming from, gradually lessening the amount of time he kept the flame in contact with the surface. Slowly, the leak began to subside as the newly reshaped material started to harden as it cooled down below its melting point, until at last the leak stopped altogether.

Sean shut the torch off and checked the readout again. He swore.

"Nearly 100 cc's used there," he grumbled, making another tick on the side of the bottle next to the first one.

"Sucks, but considering we were losing about 1000 cc's of steam every five minutes that was going, I'd say it was a good tradeoff," Art replied. He was impressed. He knew Sean was good with the torch, but he'd probably have used 500 cc's of propane if he'd tried to do it himself and that amount would have required a good deal of paperwork.

They both put their goggles back on top of their heads and admired the handiwork.

"Think it'll hold?" Sean asked.

"It better. Chuck says there's two more just like it over in sector three," Art replied.

Sean rolled his eyes. The whole place was falling apart. And if it fell apart, the country might go with it. One of the last functioning power plants in the midwestern United States and it was nearly leaking steam faster than they could make it.

"How'd we get here?" Sean asked idly as they began to gather up their tools.

"Bus for me," Art replied.

"Really?" Sean asked sarcastically.

"Yup. Number six bus. Or did you mean we as a species?"

"Nevermind. I should know better than to try to have a serious philosophical discussion with you. Or to even ask rhetorical questions."

Art grinned. The truth was he quite liked debating politics and philosophy with Sean, whose flaming red hair stood out as a stereotype of his Irish heritage. Europe and the United States had been enemies during the last war, but when that one was over a lot of people took a few steps back and started asking what they'd been doing. Or at least the ones here on Earth. Europe's allies in space hadn't been so quick to forgive and everyone was nervous that the Planetary Colonies were going to start taking matters into their own hands, ignoring treaties, and generally just decide that the Earth could become one gigantic landfill for all they cared. The only thing really stopping them was the fact that, even though Mars and some of Saturn's moons had been successfully terraformed, the resources gathered there had been a fraction of what everyone had been hoping for. And of course there had been no fossil fuels.

The two men walked along a metal gangplank and looked down into the coal reserves. They were, along with everything else, dwindling. Across the way they spied a guard with a rifle. At least those things stayed the same. Throwing dense objects at high velocity didn't use as much energy as some other ways of killing or incapacitating people and body armor was virtually unheard of these days, which made them even more effective.

The guards were a fact of life around the power plant, seeing as how this was where all fossil fuels came these days. The precious commodities were guarded jealously, although it was an interesting fact to note that this facility was one of only about ten worldwide with the capacity to process the materials.

They walked further along the gangplank to a door, scanned their proxy cards, and entered the office area. They immediately began to breathe a little easier. The air out in the plant, and in the land surrounding the plant, wasn't healthy in the traditional sense. There wasn't a lot of particulate matter, as the coal and oil and natural gas were kept sealed up pretty well, but the waste gases were pretty hard on the lungs. Here in the office a fairly robust filtering system was in place to keep the air refreshed. The expertise of these men would be hard to replace if any of them developed serious respiratory issues and had to be reassigned.

"How'd it go?" Chuck asked.

“Fine,” Art told his supervisor. “Sean had to use the torch a little, though.”

Chuck looked alarmed. “You serious? Are you seriously telling me we had to burn propane out on the floor?”

Sean looked at him. “Yeah. It was that or the leak didn’t get fixed.”

“You do realize what those pipes are made of, right? And you do realize that there’s no more like them, right? And you do realize what would have happened if you’d made the slightest mistake, right?” Chuck said, rising from his seat, advancing towards them, and raising his voice a little more with each step and each sentence.

“Yeah,” Sean replied coolly. “But, like I said, it was that or the leak didn’t get fixed.”

Chuck stared into his eyes for a moment and then turned away in mock disgust. The truth was that Chuck knew better than anyone that they were in a no-win situation. Either they did what was necessary to fix the stuff or else it was all going to blow and the fact that there were no replacement parts available meant that it was only a matter of time.

“I thought we were getting the new copper in this week,” Art said.

Chuck shook his head violently. “Nah, that fell through. Colonies needed it more.”

“The Colonies needed copper? How they gettin’ it up there, carrier pigeon?” Sean asked.

“They don’t know yet, they had it transferred to the home base here,” Chuck replied.

Art gaped. He couldn’t believe it was just sitting around idle while they needed it here. Chuck shrugged.

“That’s the way it goes.”

“You’d think they’d allocate a little petroleum to fix this kind of thing,” Sean said, still in disbelief.

“To be frank, I’m not convinced they have enough of it left to even make the amount of pipe we need,” Chuck said. “Stuff’s scarcer than hen’s teeth.”

“What’s a hen?” Art asked idly.

“Nevermind. Something my mom used to say,” Chuck replied. “So what’s the status?”

“It’s grim,” Sean replied, sitting heavily in a nearby chair. It reclined slightly as he sat in it. The chair was old and the seat was covered with a cracked green vinyl. On more than one occasion they’d wished they could reform the vinyl into something more useful, but it was old and mostly just a token effort at containing the stuffing underneath. The back was wooden, equally old, and dark with the stain of human sweat.

“How grim?” Chuck pressed.

“Well, you heard I had to use the torch. If that seam breaks again then there’s no repairing it. Best case scenario is we’ll have to seal it and bypass it. It’s under a ton of pressure and there’s no way to relieve it without more pipe.”

There really wasn’t much left to say. They all looked at each other. Prior to the last war there had been plenty of pipe, copper, PVC, whatever you wanted. But then it all got appropriated by the war effort. It had been better when the government had been the ones to wage war. Once corporations got their hands on it, the whole thing had gone to hell.

The theory had been sound. Corporations liked to save money. They valued efficiency and could find strategic alliances that the government couldn’t always find because politics always got in the way. When you removed national ego and replaced it with the ego of a multinational, suddenly it didn’t matter which country you were from as much as it mattered what the end goal was. So governments worldwide, in one of the only cases of truly unanimous consensus, had stripped themselves of the power to declare war, disbanded their armies, and had sold all the equipment, including nuclear weapons, to a congress of corporate interests. Any company that made the minimum valuation threshold was automatically appointed a seat on the council and had a vote. Most people felt that this was just taking reality and enacting it into law.

What actually happened wasn’t quite so rosy. Corporate espionage turned into a completely different game. Resources were routinely confiscated in the name of national defense and reallocated to wherever the council decided might be good. Some things just went to a warehouse and stayed there because they didn’t really need it, they just didn’t want anyone else to have it. And there was the infighting.

The intent had been for a kind of de facto merger of all the companies on the council, but that didn’t really happen because corporate structure didn’t allow for it. Someone had to be in charge. That was the way it worked. So if anything came before the council, whoever felt the most passionately about it took charge. And if two or more members had a significant stake, then it often turned ugly. And that’s where the wars had come from.

The first time a corporate headquarters building got nuked everybody realized they’d made a big mistake. But it was too late. Governments could write all the laws they wanted, but the corporations had all the guns so there was no way to enforce the laws. The citizenry degenerated to something just short of anarchy in short order before one of the bigger corporations set up a subsidiary to handle local law enforcement. This was a predictably unpopular move, but as soon as the council redirected all the local shipments just outside of town into a fortified warehouse, the citizenry began to come around. It was amazing how they could wage war against one another and yet agree on seemingly little things like this. It turned the horror of war into a whole new ballgame.

After the most recent one, resources were even more scarce than usual. Nevermind the fact that a lot of them had been destroyed, the rest had been repurposed for rebuilding or for the Colonies, who had not escaped unscathed. They weren’t an aggressor, nor were they really another front in the war. They were just a place where battles sometimes happened. These days energy was so scarce that just communicating with them was difficult, let alone shipping them anything, so the council was setting aside things that they thought they might need. Both sides were kind of waiting for the other to come up with some brilliant idea to get all the energy they’d spent during the war back so they could get back



to business as usual. The good news was that a lot of the nuclear fuel had been used up so they couldn't bomb each other as much anymore.

At that moment, the radio crackled to life. All three men stared at it. They kept it on because they were at the power plant and needed to be in contact with people, but it hardly ever came on anymore because nobody had enough power to run a transmitter.

There was a few seconds of static and then the receiver faded into silence and everyone relaxed. A few minutes later, though, it interrupted their conversation again with a few more seconds of static and then faded back away.

"What do you suppose that was?" asked Art.

"Someone wasting power," grumbled Chuck. "We aren't holding this place together with rubber bands and chewing gum so people can waste electricity like that."

They returned to their conversation, which was currently looping around the fact that there were necessary repairs that couldn't be made and why the council didn't think it was worth it to send materials here so they could keep the steam flowing and was about to degenerate into conspiracy theories about the council hoarding power somehow somewhere when, once again, the radio crackled to life.

Instead of static, what they heard was a buzzing tone, high-pitched and irritating, which lasted for about thirty seconds and was then interrupted by a language the men had not heard before. They were able to make out the equivalent of about four sentences before the voice was replaced by the same high-pitched buzzing, and then silence.

"What do you suppose that was?" Art asked again.

"If you ask that one more time, I'm going to put your face in front of the next steam leak," Chuck said. Sean stayed silent. He was thinking about history.

#### **Chapter 4**

"And that is why," Agnes continued, "we must learn to be forgiving of our fellow man. Everyone is doing their best and the idea that people, with a few exceptions, are maliciously manipulating things behind the scenes is an illusion. An illusion we must purge from our minds if we are to reach our full potential."

She looked out at the congregation. It was smaller than it had been the previous week, but still a respectable crowd. The collection plate was being passed and she could hear from where she was the rattle of coinage, but she could not hear the rustle of paper currency. It was interesting to watch the plate go down each aisle as the listeners who were so rapt with her words were suddenly shaken from their reverie by the person next to them, nudging them to take the plate and pass it down the row. It was like a ripple, as opposed to the wave that used to be done in large sports stadiums back when professional sports were still a thing.

Sports had hung on a surprisingly long time and had only recently, after the fifth world war, reached a point of unsustainability. When energy had gone scarce, they had played in the daytime. After all, it didn't require electricity to throw a ball around and sports had gone without public address systems for

quite some time, so going back to that wasn't that big of a deal. What had finally killed them, though, was the fact that people quit coming. Nobody could afford that kind of expense for their leisure time anymore.

Here, at least, people believed they were getting something for their money besides idle entertainment. They believed they were saving their minds. Their souls belonged to the church, and those places of worship were still very well-attended in these times as people looked for any source of help that might be available, but their minds belonged to Agnes, and those like her.

Anthropologist was her official title. The notion had come down that people were spending too much time blaming each other for the current predicament and not enough time finding solutions for it, and so the church had established the post of Anthropologist to explain away the fallibility of humans and to preach the idea that nobody had any answers but God and that we should all forgive each other our ignorance.

Like all good ideas, it lasted a little while but eventually the question got asked "Why does God get to know all the answers and we don't get to know anything? Aren't we modeled in His image?" and the law of unintended consequences spun that out into an atheist movement that proclaimed that nobody knew anything anywhere. And so a schism developed. These days the church barely recognized the existence of the Anthropologists and had refocused on God with a vengeance, effectively preaching that humans didn't matter in the slightest in any case.

"I'd like to thank you all for coming today," Agnes said by way of conclusion. There was a surreptitious movement as people began to gather their belongings. She stepped down from her lectern and watched them go, bid goodbye by the ushers.

"Good sermon, Agnes," said a voice. Agnes turned and saw a tall woman with blonde hair standing on the far end of the room leaning against the wall.

"Thank you, Harriet," Agnes said. "Haven't seen you for a while."

"I've been busy," Harriet replied.

The two of them retired to Agnes's office in the back of the old church building. When the group had split off from the main church, they'd taken a good number of the buildings with them. The population had been reduced enough through war that there was a surplus of space anyway and nobody begrudged them the use of it.

"So what brings you here?" Agnes asked, pouring them both cups of tea and offering Harriet cream and sugar. The tea had been sun brewed and was cold, but it was still polite to offer it.

Harriet took off her long leather coat and draped it over a chair and sat down in a slouching position without saying anything. Agnes sat across an old wooden desk from her, picked up her tea, and waited for a response.

"I don't know where to start," Harriet finally said at length.

“Context is always a good start. We haven’t seen each other in two months. Why don’t you tell me what’s going on in your life before we get to what really brought you here?”

Harriet picked up her own mug of tea and stared into it for a few moments.

“Well, I’m pregnant,” she said, her eyes not leaving the amber liquid in the teacup.

“That’s nice,” Agnes said, taking a sip. “I take it Darryl doesn’t know yet and you’re not sure about this.”

Harriet nodded. “I’m just not sure bringing up a child in a world like this is something I’m prepared to do.”

Agnes looked at her skeptically. “I always thought you’d studied harder than that.”

Harriet looked up abruptly, alarmed. “It’s not that the world is bad,” she said, remembering that she’d been going to Anthropologist meetings for years and that Agnes was bound to take what she’d just said the wrong way. “There’s not even anything wrong with me. It’s just the combination of the two. I’m just not sure it’s a good idea.”

“How long have you known? And why haven’t you told Darryl?”

“I just found out a few days ago. And I was on my way to tell him when...have you seen the news?”

“About the vampire?”

Harriet nodded.

“Yes, I saw it. Tragic. But also, I think, inevitable.”

Harriet glared at her.

“I take it you disagree,” Agnes said calmly. “But humans have always been short-sighted. It’s one of our defining characteristics. This is just the most recent example of it, we didn’t become selfish and ignorant overnight.”

Harriet slumped over again, her shoulders hunched in a way that looked quite unhealthy.

“So you found out you were pregnant, went to tell Darryl, and then got distracted by the newspaper and...” Agnes prompted.

“And I...got really upset,” Harriet said, unable to admit that she’d flown into a blind rage.

“How did he feel about Alin’s passing?” Agnes asked.

“Pretty much the same as you do, except that he acted like he almost agreed with the people who let him die,” she finished with some of her old anger coming back to her.

“And so you walked out on him and came straight here, am I right?”

“Yes,” Harriet replied, knowing what Agnes was about to say next.

Agnes got up and paced around to a window and looked outside. The seasons had gotten all screwed up since the nuclear bombs had fallen. There were only a few pockets that were uninhabitable because of the radioactive fallout, but nuclear winter had been prevalent for a while and things were only just now starting to resemble normalcy. Currently it resembled autumn outside.

“I suppose it’s his,” Agnes said carefully. It wasn’t really a question. More of a statement of fact designed to elicit information.

Harriet’s eyes flared. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing. Just that before you two got married you had...let’s just say you were fairly popular.”

Harriet glared at her. She’d known Agnes for years, even before she became an Anthropologist, and had loved her like a sister. But just as with any family member, there can be moments of purest hatred to counteract the usual unconditional love, and this was one of them. Agnes was unconcerned, still looking out the window, but she could feel the stare boring into the back of her head. It had been a calculated risk and she waited to hear the sounds of the chair being pushed back and Harriet walking out the door. But those sounds never came. There was just the steely silence.

“I’m glad to hear that you still have feelings for him. If you came here, you know what my advice is going to be,” she finally said, turning to face Harriet again.

“Yes,” Harriet said, coldly.

“So why don’t you go do it?”

“Because I’m not sure if I want to forgive him for this!” she cried, the frustration of the last several hours finally breaking through. “Just once I’d like to be able to hold a grudge! Just once I’d like to be angry instead of living in that clinically scientific laboratory that we both live in twenty-four seven! Just once I’d like to be...”

“Right?” asked Agnes. “Just once you’d like to be right, is that it? What’s so important about being right?”

Harriet paused. How could she explain? How could she explain that their work on energy was taking two different directions and that it was driving a wedge between them? Darryl thought of nothing but finding new energy sources. Harriet wanted to try to tap into resources that were already present. He talked about finding the right mixture of organic materials, even going as far as to suggest that sentient life might be part of the solution. She talked about volcanos and solar radiation and drilling into the Earth to try to find new sources of geothermal energy that the cracks in the crust hadn’t eliminated after the wars. It really was the difference between life and death.

“We aren’t seeing eye to eye on certain things these days,” she finally settled on. It was lame and pathetic and she knew it, but she didn’t care.

"I see," said Agnes. "And you think that leaving him is going to solve that? What's your plan? Abort your baby," (Harriet visibly cringed) "or raise it yourself?"

"I don't know, that's why I came here," Harriet said.

"Then I'd say you still have control of your senses," Agnes said. "The only sensible solution here is to forgive him. It sounds trite, I know," Agnes said in response to Harriet's look of disapproval, "but it's what I preach every week and I do it for a reason. He didn't cheat on you, he didn't betray you with malice aforethought, he didn't break his promises. He had a difference of opinion. How is that worth punishing him and yourself?"

Harriet had no answer and let the silence stretch on for an uncomfortable period of time.

"Is that a pregnant pause?" Agnes asked to try to lighten the mood.

Harriet smirked. "Is that supposed to be a joke?"

"Got you grinning, didn't it?"

"Yeah, I guess it did." Harriet sighed and got up. "I can't thank you enough."

"Of course you can," Agnes said, also rising from her seat. "You can darken my door a little more often. I miss having you around, odd as that may sound. So you look like you've made up your mind. What's next?"

"A long talk, I think," Harriet answered, steeling herself.

"Good for you."

Harriet thanked Agnes once again and ventured forth from the old church, her mind filled with thoughts, some of them conflicting, but most completely unrelated to each other. There was an experiment she needed to do, a talk to have with Darryl, a doctor's appointment to schedule, and so many other things. Of course she needed someone in her life to help her with this, if only to have a way of adding extra time to her day by distributing the labor, and Darryl was handy. She chuckled to herself. She had a feeling that the time was coming very soon when she would wish she could distribute a completely different kind of labor.

She walked along the cracked concrete sidewalk, sidestepping the larger bits that had broken off. Concrete wasn't a luxury anyone could afford anymore and repairs were nonexistent. There was a grassy park on her right hand side as she walked and she could see the rusting playground equipment and a sad old clown trying to entertain a bunch of glum-looking children. Fun wasn't what it used to be. A lot of those kids were old enough to have siblings or parents that remembered portable electronic devices and probably lived in envy. Harriet had had one herself once upon a time. It had been a pocket calculator. The wars had taken all that away from everyone.

She watched the clown for a few moments in curiosity. She'd never really understood this part of human nature. The desire to stand in front of people and act like someone or something else than what you were and the desire of other people to stand and watch that kind of thing happen. And yet it had

been going on for hundreds of thousands of years. Ceremonies, play acting, the recognition of achievements and teaching of history through spoken narrative. How was that ever an evolutionary advantage? How did entertainment get to be so ingrained in the human psyche. Did the people who got bored easily by this kind of thing never get a chance to breed?

She watched as the clown juggled some balls for a few moments, finally concluding by dropping them, bending over to pick them up and then tripping over his own oversized shoes. The shoes looked like they were ancient; cracked and fading, the seams coming apart. Probably a family heirloom in a long history of clowning. The children watching clapped in a lazy sort of way, acknowledging the effort without actually being entertained. The clown got up and took a bow, sweeping his floppy hat off of his head, which was attached to his wig, revealing a bald head that had previously looked like it was a tangled thicket of dense hair. That got a small chuckle.

Harriet contemplated applause. When had it started? Why was slapping your hands together considered a polite thing to do? She shivered as a stiff breeze came by blowing dry leaves all around her. Questions that had no answers couldn't hold her interest for long. They were for someone else.

Turning to resume her previous course, Harriet trudged past the clown and on her way back home where she would metaphorically sweep off her own imaginary hat, holding it in hand to tell Darryl that she was wrong to have stopped the conversation and stormed out and that she had been deceiving him, if only for a few days. It shouldn't be a big deal, she told herself, but it sat in her gut and weighed her down all the way back to their house, where she found the porch light left on for her. The sun was setting and she was grateful for the welcoming glow. The door opened as she came up the walk and Darryl stood there with a look of relief on his face. This might go better than she'd hoped.

## **Chapter 5**

The man in the white coat opened the freezer door and took a quick mental inventory of its contents. Roughly twenty boxes, each containing twelve packages of two pints each. He reflected on the wisdom of taking so much in hindsight. So much for immortality, after all. But then again, he had no proof that the creature had bled out or that such a thing was even possible. He had read reports of vampires that had been bled dry and then awoke the next night weakened, but able to give again. The quality suffered, of course, which was why they had tried to regulate the withdrawals, but the fact remained that it was there.

Extracting a packet, he closed the freezer door and made a note on a nearby clipboard, initialing next to the new inventory. This process had been temperamental before, but now that the supply was permanently cut off the future of the project was at stake. So to speak. The man in the white coat did not grin at this thought. And now there were two procedures that had to be carried out with limited resources.

The man in the white coat thawed the blood in a special machine and extracted a small portion into a vial. The machine used a tremendous amount of energy. It was lucky that they controlled the majority of the energy that was left.

He carried his vial filled with the precious cargo down the hall and turned left through a set of double doors, down another short corridor until he reached another door, this one decidedly more secure. He entered a complex code into the keypad and inserted his finger into a small aperture that opened. A moment's pressure indicated that a droplet of blood had been extracted and he withdrew his finger, the

tip of which was shiny with alcohol and a thin protective layer that the machine had put on to help heal the small wound. A moment later, the door opened and he proceeded through to the other side where there sat a table in an otherwise bare room.

On the table sat an acrylic box, its clear sides revealing a rat, restrained but quivering in fear, connected to small plastic tubes. A glass jar, the terminal point of the tubes, sat nearby. The man placed the vial of the vampire's blood on the table. A second man entered the room from a door on the opposite side and approached the table.

"You are advised to cease this experiment immediately. The resources are too precious," stated the newcomer.

"Your advice is duly noted," said the first, ignoring him and turning a lever on the apparatus on the table. Immediately the clear plastic tube filled with the deep red blood of the rat.

"The others will be most upset at this wastefulness."

"Let them be," the first replied. "They do not see as I do."

"No, they do not," said the second. "They are issuing you a formal warning. The process will not work."

The first man paused for a moment. "Warning received. I am attempting to replace the resource. All avenues must be explored."

The second man also paused for a moment, but decided to make no reply and instead turned and walked back out the door he had come in.

The man in the white coat watched as the rat's struggles began to get slower and more feeble. The moment must be exactly right.

Why did they doubt him? When had he let them down? Had his experiments not led them to discoveries that had never before been dreamed of? How had they reached the stars? How had they led society to the enlightened state that they were in currently? Who would have ever guessed that ultimate war was the only path to a lasting peace?

Of course the citizenry did not see this. They rebelled at the controls and the rationing, but these things were necessary. If you allowed people to amass too much of anything then they would only want more of it. This was where conflict came from. If there are no resources, there can be no war and the only way to consume all the resources to prevent future conflicts was to have all the wars all at once. That was why the people left on Earth were told that the colonies were receiving all the raw materials and why the colonies were told that the Earth was receiving them all and why communications between the two groups were kept at a minimum. The truth was that the majority of the raw materials were destroyed.

And how had this brilliant plan been arrived at? He had thought of it. He had given the council the tools to understand through his formula, a formula that gave them wisdom and the ability to see far into the future and told them the path that humanity was on and how to avoid it. That wisdom, and his formula, would be necessary for a long time to come, and that formula was entirely dependent upon the

vampire's blood. It was a key component and could not be made without it and now the supply was extremely limited. More must be made available by any means and at any cost because eventually it would run out. It did not matter if it ran out today or tomorrow or a year from now because losing this resource would be more catastrophic than any of the others that they incinerated on a daily basis.

The rat's movements slowed to a mere twitch, barely detectable. The man looked at the vial of precious blood on the table, then picked it up and extracted a syringe from a pocket. He filled the syringe with the vampire's blood and watched the rat twitch again. It was nearly time. This moment would make history. At last the rat's movements stopped altogether, the eyes closing in fatigue as the last of its precious life's fluid left it and the man plunged the needle into the animal's heart and pushed the plunger. The rat shuddered and opened its eyes once more, baring its teeth and hissing. The man removed the needle and peered curiously at the rodent. The procedure appeared to be a success and he began mentally to prepare his gloating speech to the rest of the members.

But then, as suddenly as it had come back to life, the rat stopped moving again and then crumbled immediately to dust. The man stared in disbelief, running his fingers through the ashes, looking for any evidence for what could have gone wrong or some way that he might recover the blood he had used, but it was useless. The ashes scattered and stuck to his fingers, but there was nothing special about them. He reached into his other pocket and extracted a small dish and scraped some of the dust into it for later analysis, but his own examination of Alin's ashes had revealed nothing. He had little hope that this would be any different.

The others would be upset, there was no doubt. He had not used much of the blood, but in their present situation any use served only to reduce their overall supply. And the formula had not led them down a mental path with any acceptable outcome to this situation. They had seen a multitude of futures, but none showed them the way. Extreme measures were called for, but he had just exhausted one of his possibilities.

Rats were well known for being familiar and favorites of the creatures of the night. He had been certain that that affinity would have been sufficient for a successful experiment. And with a vampire rat available, he could have begun bleeding it and it was possible that its blood would have been sufficient for the formula. And if not, the concept would have been proven and he could have worked his way up the evolutionary chain to humans and could have brought the vampire species back from the dead.

As it was, the experiment was a failure and he was back to square one. He deposited the dish back in his pocket and turned. Someone else would clear this up. He needed to think. He proceeded back through the door, which closed behind him, and paced up the hallway lost in thought. Certainly there had been mistakes made. The mass slaughter of vampires was ill-advised. He should have had Alin turn a few people before the end, but the creature had steadfastly refused. Willful, stubborn creatures, vampires, the man thought. If we could synthesize their blood we would be well rid of them. As it was, however, the man had to admit that there was a serious problem facing them.

Out of sheer habit the man in the white coat found himself outside the holding pens. His wandering mind had not been paying attention to where he was going, but now that he was here he was drawn to the old cells. Nothing lived there now, of course, but he keyed the code into the pad anyway and the door opened into darkness. He stepped inside and proceeded to Alin's old cell. It had been thoroughly cleaned and inspected by various experts who had found nothing at all. Now the room sat empty and cold.



Had the man been truly honest with himself he might have admitted that he missed Alin. Before the end, they had had several interesting conversations. But eventually the vampire had turned quiet and brooding and the conversations had ceased and were never restarted. The man put his hand on the grille, as if hoping that his touch would bring forth visions that would aid him in his time of trouble.

No visions appeared, and the man was not the least bit surprised. He drummed his fingers idly on the shelf and then reached into his pocket again and withdrew a small device which he pressed against his forearm. The small cylinder had two tiny lights on it, both red, and a button at its base. As he pressed the button a hissing noise filled the room, the sound echoing off the bare walls, and the lights on the cylinder both turned to yellow briefly before switching off altogether. The man closed his eyes and sighed for a moment, then reopened them and put the cylinder back in his pocket. He then turned and went back out the door, heading for his dormitory in the facility. There would be interesting dreams tonight. He hoped he could interpret them correctly.

## **Chapter 6**

The pounding on the metal door increased as Claire looked around the room to see what was available. Which turned out to be nothing. She was trapped. True, the door was sturdy and was locked and could withstand whatever they chose to throw at it, and she doubted seriously they'd spend the energy on an acetylene torch to cut through it, but she'd ducked in here thinking it was a storeroom with supplies and potentially even a back door. One of those things turned out to be true.

The storeroom was filled, floor to ceiling around each wall, with old, discarded electronic components that had been saved so that they could be recycled or cannibalized for parts. She dashed over to the shelves and began digging around amongst the items to see if there was anything useful. A blunt instrument, a projectile weapon (although she couldn't imagine there'd be any ammunition for it even if she found such a thing), a portable teleporter (which didn't even exist, but at this point seemed as likely as anything else), just something to help her get out of this.

She hadn't realized that she'd been sneaking into the new colonial headquarters. After the last war had concluded, everyone had naturally assumed they'd move back to the main beachhead in First Sunrise to lick their wounds and get their acts back together, but as it turned out they'd stayed put right where they were. And since it was an undisclosed location, it could be anywhere and this had turned out to be it. All she'd wanted was a few power cells for the outpost a few clicks west, but it turned out those things were pretty valuable to everyone.

The lights flickered and she had a moment of panic. Trapped was one thing, trapped in darkness was another. Surrender was always an option, she supposed, but in darkness she figured it would be more likely that they'd just throttle her and be done with it. No witnesses, no need for justice. Not that there was much chance of justice out here these days anyway. Cut off from Earth, which meant no new supplies, was making everyone very touchy. Nobody knew the situation down there, but everybody knew that rationing was only going to get them so far.

She pushed aside a stack of old circuit boards, feeling the pinpricks of the soldered wires on her bare hands, and found herself staring at a blank metal wall. Nothing useful there.

Abruptly the hammering on the door stopped. She paused. She wasn't stupid enough to think they'd given up, but she wondered what their next move would be. Being under seige wasn't really something she relished, especially since the most she could hope to hold out for would be a day or so.

"Claire?" a voice called.

She paused her search for a moment. Who did she know out there?

"Claire, can you hear me? C'mon out, it'll be ok," the voice said again. She didn't recognize it. She stepped across the room to the door, but stopped a foot from it and hesitated. Her heart was pounding with panic and anxiety. What should she do?

"Claire, we know you're in there," the voice said again. "Really, come on out."

Claire frowned. Surely if it was someone she knew they would have identified themselves by now. So it was a trick. But the question was how did they know her name? She turned back to the stacks of electronic components and began digging through them again. There would be time to solve that mystery later and she wasn't likely to find the answer staring at the door.

But as time wore on, it became increasingly clear that she wasn't going to find any answers among the junk in the room either. She'd been faced repeatedly with blank walls, bare shelves, piles of garbage, and tangles of wire, but nothing that looked like it would help her out of this mess. No extra doors hidden behind the debris, no weapons, no food, and no water. She could totally go for some water right about now. She licked her lips, her mouth dry, and wished she'd never thought about water in the first place because it just made her desire for it all the more acute.

The voice had stopped about a half hour ago and it was quiet on the other side, but she knew they were waiting for her to open the door and stick a toe out to test the waters. Of course at this rate she might be better off making a run for it anyway. Sitting down, she considered her situation.

The colonies weren't doing well. The wars had taken their toll on everyone, including the Earth, but they at least had a planet. The majority of the settlers were on the Moon and a few had made it to Mars. One group had set out for Titan, but that had been before the war. They might not even know about it, but they sure weren't going to get any help from home. The main problem was resources. Having the ultimate "high-ground" advantage had meant that the casualties in terms of human resources and infrastructure had been pretty minimal apart from the infighting amongst people who had taken sides, but the truth was that the colonies were hardly independent. In fact, the entire idea was beginning to fall apart as people began to realize that the colonies were a net loss for the Earth-based corporations because materials kept being sent up and not much was coming back down.

The original idea had been that since the Moon was comprised of very similar elements as the Earth that surely there must be something up here to bring back. A lot of companies had used extreme metaphors implying that by the time they were done strip mining the Moon that Earth wouldn't even have a Moon anymore. They mostly said that to get the goat of the environmentalists, but they still said it.

Fast forward a few years and it became clear that the Moon was mainly comprised of the most common elements already found on Earth. Far from being a source of rare and valuable materials, it turned out

to be mostly the same old dirt and what few rare elements were available took so much time and energy to extract that it wasn't worth it in the extreme conditions you had to work in.

But people are nothing if not stubborn and so the colonies had stayed and had begun to expand on the grounds that surely the NEXT planet and its moons would have something of value, and then the pioneering spirit took hold and everybody was itching to get as far away from home as possible just so they could say they were the first to go.

Claire had been on the last wave of settlers to arrive before the war broke out. She nearly didn't make it at all. The political grumbling had made it difficult to get the necessary corporate funding for the launch because they could all see war coming and everybody was hoarding cash and other resources. It took some fast talking on the part of the mission director to convince the various boards of directors that the mission was solid and that they needed Claire's skills as a civil engineer, along with everyone else on board the shuttle from cooks to janitors to keep the place looking civilized.

The original job she'd taken was to get the plumbing pipework and water reclamation systems working more efficiently. What she'd ended up doing was redesigning the whole thing from the bottom up. There had been water on the Moon, certainly, but not enough and there was a gigantic debate Earthside about what to do about it. One side said that the oceans were vast and, with the polar ice caps melting, there was plenty to spare. The other side pointed out that this was the ultimate non-renewable resource and that any mission to send it to the Moon had better have an ironclad system to make sure it didn't go wandering off into the vacuum of space.

So that had been Claire's mission. Lock down the existing systems so that water could be shipped from Earth to augment the Moon's meager supplies. What she found when she got there was that they were losing fully 0.01% of their water every day, which, on the Moon, was the equivalent of living below sea level behind crumbling dikes during a hurricane and the time and budget she'd been given to work with was the equivalent of sticking your finger in that dike and hoping for the best. It hadn't gone over very well when she'd explained that.

And then the war had started. And it had started with a bang as, in a symbolic gesture, an anonymous member of one of the bigger corporations had set off a nuclear blast in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean which created a tidal wave that swamped the coastlines of the continents on either side. Fingers had been pointed, blame had been assigned, and it looked like it was going to blow over when someone decided that there wasn't enough justice going around and set fire to several college dormitories all over the United States and Europe. With a coordinated attack like that, there was too much blame to go around and the fingers stopped pointing and started resting on the triggers and then it all just devolved into chaos.

Meanwhile the colonies were up in orbit watching in disbelief. Eventually sides were taken and the chaos bridged the gap between the two spheres. Battles had been fought, sabotage had been wreaked, and by the time it was over everybody was hanging on by a thread. Looting was more of a defensive measure than an act of aggression. You weren't doing it for personal gain, you were doing it to make sure you'd survive to see another day.

And that's how she'd gotten where she was right now. Trapped in a room full of worthless electronics with people on the other side who probably didn't care if she lived or died. She glanced half-heartedly

around the room, hoping to find something she'd overlooked, but there was still nothing. She was in a metal cube filled with garbage.

Taking off her shoes, she padded over to the door as quietly as she could and pressed her ear against it. She heard nothing. Surely she couldn't be so lucky that they'd actually given up? If they were still out there, surely they'd be bored by now. Maybe even asleep. She strained her ears, trying to pick up the faintest of whispers, but of course she knew that that was ridiculous. The door was too thick. Anybody could practically be having a party out there and she'd never know about it.

Stepping back from the door, she weighed her options. How serious was this, really? She hadn't stolen anything yet. The war was over. A truce had been declared and everybody was just trying to survive at this point. Surely they wouldn't do anything too bad to her. She paced back and forth, her nerves upsetting her stomach and her dehydration becoming more noticeable. She would have to risk it.

Silently she approached the door and then slipped her shoes back on. The plan was to make a run for it, but to surrender if they were waiting. No point in making them chase her.

She gingerly turned the locking mechanism, which nevertheless made the loudest noise she'd ever heard in her life and she winced for a moment before putting her hand on the door handle and turning it slowly. The door glided open silently on well-oiled hinges and she moved stealthily into the corridor, not able to believe her luck. She moved quickly down the hallway, but when she reached the first intersection a man dressed all in black struck her on the back of her head with a heavy object. She fell to the floor unconscious.

The man surveyed her for a moment. What a pity that everything had come to this. But there just wasn't enough to go around. What was the point of incarceration? And thieving couldn't go unpunished. That just left one option. He grabbed her by one ankle and began dragging her limp body through the hallway, past the door to the room where she had taken refuge, and then turned left to find an airlock. Once inside, he dropped her foot and heard a faint moan as she began to come to. The man ignored her and crossed back into the main part of the building and pushed a large red button. A door slid shut with a hiss just as Claire opened her eyes and began to take stock of her situation. Her head throbbed for a moment, but then the outer airlock door opened and she was sucked out onto the surface of the Moon and immediately, mercifully, blacked out again.

The man shut the outer airlock door again and listened as pressure was rebuilt in the chamber. That was a waste of good air, but probably the least costly option available, he thought. He then turned and made his way back to the room where Claire had hidden.

Once inside, he went to the far left wall and moved aside a stack of components to reveal a peripheral card that looked like all the others except for a strange symbol embossed on the surface. Two acute triangles, side by side, with the points on the shorter side touching. He picked it up and then crossed over to the right hand wall and, with some effort, moved the shelving a few inches. There, behind the support strut that held the shelves upright, was a slot in the wall. He put the card into the slot and watched as a panel opened in the otherwise seamless floor revealing a metal ladder. The man descended the ladder into the darkness below.

## **Chapter 7**

Chuck adjusted the dial on the radio.

“Hurry up!” Art cried, hopping from foot to foot.

“Don’t rush him,” Sean said calmly. It was now the tenth day since the original mysterious transmission and it had repeated itself twice a day ever since. They couldn’t imagine who had that much power to spend, and there was never a reply.

They had moved the radio outside to try to get a better signal. Currently the weather conditions meant that they might as well have stayed indoors. Cloudy, overcast, slightly chilly, and a stiff breeze blowing towards the east. Sean looked in the direction the wind was coming from, his eyes watering slightly in the chill, squinting to try to keep them clear. The terrain was flat and they were standing on an elevated position being on the roof of the steam plant, which gave him a wide view of the surrounding area. He couldn’t put his finger on it but something was making him extremely nervous.

They hadn’t seen anyone else besides themselves in several days. Normally a delivery truck came around to drop off supplies, but they’d gotten word after the last shipment that the council had diverted everything and that the next shipment wouldn’t be until the end of the month, which meant they’d had to ration their food. The solitude was getting to all of them and there had been no radio transmissions apart from the mysterious language that none of them had ever heard before.

“What’s taking so long? It’s never late?” Art said. He had calmed a little at Sean’s admonition, but he was clearly still agitated. Most of their effort had been at Art’s request. Neither Sean nor Chuck really cared much. Sure it was a mystery who was transmitting, but there was no real way to solve it. Art’s insistence that if they listened long enough that something clearer might come through seemed like a long shot, but they’d all decided that taking a few minutes out of each day to listen to it wasn’t going to hurt anything. It was like the shortest, weirdest soap opera that any of them had ever heard of, but they weren’t about to miss an episode.

The only thing they’d been able to discern was that the message changed every time. They had no idea what was being said, but it was different words, implying a completely different message. This meant that it was being sent deliberately and that it wasn’t an automated message like the time and date or something.

“Not sure,” Chuck replied to Art’s question, still fiddling with the dial. “I wonder if we jostled something when we moved it,” he muttered. There was no getting around it. The radio was practically an antique and had been repaired several times, but never by anyone with any expertise and never with the correct parts. Calling it patched together was probably being charitable, and the notion of moving it had been debated extensively. But in the end it was decided that being surrounded by metal and water was probably not a good way to receive a weak signal and so they had carefully disconnected it from the power source, put it on a cart, and wheeled it to the elevator so they could get it as high as possible. Currently it was emitting nothing but static.

Art looked like he was on the edge of panic. Chuck was examining the exterior of the radio. He really didn’t want to have to take it apart unless there was no other choice. The problem was that this was their only real way to communicate with the outside world and if it died then there would be no way for them to get any news or any help. The zombie apocalypse could be going on and they’d never know without the radio.

And then the light on the dial flickered and died. The static coming from the speakers faded to silence as the capacitors drained themselves and all they could hear was the wind.

Art stood still for the first time in the last half hour, a look of despair on his face. Slowly he sank to his knees and then sat cross-legged on the metal roof. All the breath seemed to have left his body. Sean had turned his gaze away from the horizon, where he had been watching in vain for something of interest, and was now looking at Art carefully to see if he might need to be restrained in a moment. Chuck was still looking at the radio trying, and mostly failing, to conceal his fury that the device had gone silent and that he was placing the blame solidly at Art's feet. He knew violence wasn't really going to solve anything, but the idea of clocking Art over the head with the dead husk of the communications device would at least make him feel good for a few moments.

Sean walked over and examined the radio himself. He fiddled the dial and unplugged the device from its power outlet and, on a whim, tried it on another one nearby that he knew was on a different circuit. Immediately the radio roared to life with the sounds of the strange language that they had heard for the past several days. Art sprang to his feet and whipped a notebook from his back pocket, listening intently to the sounds and jotting down rough approximations of what they might be saying phonetically. They had clearly come in on the end of the broadcast, however, as the transmission ended and the radio faded back to silence.

"Get anything?" Chuck asked, suddenly relieved that the problem was not with the radio itself.

"Not really," Art said, looking at what he'd written down. It was just a bunch of nonsense, just like the last several pages. They'd recopied everything in an attempt to make some sense out of it, but it was like there was no sense to be made.

Sean was looking at the plug that he'd taken the radio out of.

"We need to get back downstairs," he finally said. "This outlet has no power whatsoever and looks like it was browning out before it finally lost it altogether."

Art and Chuck looked at him, but said nothing, and then unplugged the radio and wheeled it back inside. There wasn't really anything to be said. An outlet with no power meant a steam leak that had to be fixed and fixed immediately. So they wheeled the radio back indoors, plugged it back in, and went to find the source of the leak.

They had it narrowed down to the 3<sup>rd</sup> circuit, 5<sup>th</sup> ward, second quadrant, just based on the plug, but that was still a big area. The power plant was largely automatic...as long as nothing went wrong, everything was alright, which was good because the thing was about four square miles big. In the good old days, as Chuck called them, the job was actually pretty cushy. There had been a machine to measure steam pressure in the entire facility and could tell you the instant there was a drop in pressure and where it was. You just had to go out there, divert the steam, replace the part, and redivert back to the original path. The entire operation took about an hour.

The machine that measured the pressure had failed two years prior and the council had not approved the repairs to the machine. Nobody knew why. Nobody knew why the council was playing so fast and loose with the nation's energy, but there it was. So for the next five hours, Art, Sean, and Chuck were hand-checking every inch of pipe in the affected area until finally Art found the source of the problem.

"This pipe was just fine last month," Art grumbled, examining the damage.

"Lots of things were in better shape last month," Chuck quipped, poking Art in the gut.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Art asked, hurt.

"Just that we're supposed to be rationing ourselves," Chuck replied. "Forget it. What's this going to take?"

"Luckily this is one of the copper pipes. If this were PVC we'd have a much bigger problem. As it is, we just need a little solder and about fifteen seconds with the torch," Sean said.

"Is there fifteen seconds worth of juice left in the torch?" Chuck asked, extracting it from the repair bag and examining the marks Sean had put on it the last time.

"Probably," was the best Sean could do.

A minute later the repair had been made and pressure was restored, but the acetylene torch was empty and there was no new fuel coming any time soon.

"Place is being held together with chicken wire and hope," grumbled Chuck as they headed back to the dormitory where they slept. It had been a long day. Most of it had been spent with that damn radio and then finding this stupid leak. He needed some sleep.

That night they all slept fitfully. Exhaustion is a funny thing. You want nothing more than to sleep, but you've been up and active so long that your body can't believe it's real and won't shut down.

The next morning, Art woke first. He lay there in an early-morning stupor, made worse by the fact that he had not slept well. He tried closing his eyes, but it didn't seem to have much effect, so he rolled out of bed and shambled to the bathroom where he examined himself in the medicine cabinet mirror. He smacked his lips and rubbed his eyes and massaged his scalp briefly before looking down at the sink to locate his toothbrush.

As he looked down, he caught sight of his gut and Chuck's crack from the day before came back to his memory.

*Probably ought to do something about this, really,* he thought, grabbing two fistfuls and jiggling his spare tire. *Wasn't like this last year. Too much stress.* Releasing his flab, Art decided to shave first and spread shaving cream all over his chin and cheeks. He then reached for the razor and paused to examine it more closely. It was an older razor, not one of the newer ones that had come out before the war. This one had an actual single razor blade held in place with a small screw. The council had rejected their requests for new multi-blade razors, but had been generous enough to send them a whole box of individual razor blades for their use. This one looked a little dull to him.

He carefully unscrewed the blade from its mount, threw it away, and extracted a new one from the box.

The rote task didn't occupy his mind and his thoughts began to drift to the mysterious radio transmission. The notes he had taken were nonsense and useless, he knew that. There had to be another way to find out what they meant besides just jotting down gibberish. He realized he'd need a screwdriver to tighten the screw back properly, so he set the razor handle and the blade down and went out to retrieve one.

As he passed by the table on his way to the workbench, he saw an open newspaper. They didn't get much news around here and this was the first paper they'd seen in a while. It had come with the last shipment of supplies and they'd all read it cover to cover several times, sometimes even reading it to each other. It was a fun game to pretend it was new again and to speculate on what might have happened in the followup story. Out here it was easy to think that you were on another world, just like the colonists, or that the stories were just made up like episodes on television. Nobody had a television anymore. Nobody could afford to turn one on for more than a few minutes at a time.

He glanced at the newspaper, as if he hadn't read it himself ten times in the last week, and saw the headline about the last vampire's passing. That was a shame, in his opinion. There was nothing else on Earth like them and now they were gone. He'd heard some rumors about tests being done on their blood, but he'd never heard the results. Guess it didn't matter now. There wasn't going to be any more vampire blood now.

Retrieving the screwdriver, he headed back to the bathroom. He could hear Sean and Chuck stirring, but there were no sounds indicating they were actually getting up. The razor blade sat on the bathroom counter and he looked at it for a moment before putting the screwdriver down and picking the blade up.

Absently he looked at himself in the mirror again and then back down at his gut. *Better do something about this*, he thought. And then, as if he'd intended to do it all along, he plunged the razor blade into his gut and began to carve away the fatty tissue.

Blood gushed from the growing wound as he quietly, and without fuss, worked the razor around, slicing through the skin easily with the sharp metal. His hands were crimson and dripped the red fluid. He was now about halfway around the circular pattern he was tracing and had not uttered a sound thusfar, although his vision was beginning to fail him as his eyes watered from the pain.

Vampires. The radio transmission. Blood. It was all related. He could feel it. It was inside him, he just had to get it out. He completed the circuit around his belly and dug his fingers under the skin, peeling it away from himself. More blood flowed out of his wounded abdomen and he sank to his knees, but still he pulled at the skin, revealing raw flesh and fat under the thin layer that normally surrounded his body.

Two hours later Sean and Chuck found Art lying in a pool of his own blood, his hands still in a position as if they were trying to dig into his gut. They spent the rest of the day in an emotionally distant place as they cleaned up the human wreckage, scrubbed the bathroom, buried the corpse, and wrote a report that was as detailed as they knew how to make it, considering they had no idea what had happened.

They did not listen to the radio transmission that day.

## Chapter 8



Darryl peered at the image in his hands for several minutes. Then he turned it upside down and looked at it again. Harriet took it from him and turned it back the way he'd had it the first time. He peered at her quizzically, but she smiled and nodded and so he sighed and tried again.

After a few moments he rotated one of his lenses into place to magnify the image and squinted a little.

"You've got to be kidding," he said at last.

"Nope," Harriet said, still grinning.

"They can tell just from that?"

"Yes, Darryl, they've been doing this for a while now."

"So..."

"It's a boy," Harriet said, her smile widening.

Darryl sat down in the lobby of the doctor's office. The hospital was one of the few places left that had unrestricted use of steam-powered electricity and they had just had an ultrasound. She was now twenty weeks along in her pregnancy and they had just found out the sex of the baby.

"A boy..." he said, dazed.

Harriet sat down next to him.

"You can't possibly have thought you'd never be a father," she said. Her smile had turned into a smirk.

"I guess I hadn't really thought about it either way," he admitted. She'd told him weeks ago, but it hadn't really sunk in. He'd been too busy, always on the cusp of some new discovery...or so he'd thought. So far he didn't really have much to show for his work.

"So what do you want to do to celebrate?" she asked.

Darryl barely heard her. A thought was brewing in his mind.

"How do you feel?" he finally asked.

"What? Fine, why?"

"Tired at all?"

"Well, yes," he said, the grin returning to her face. "I'm pregnant, remember?"

"And that takes a lot of energy, right?"

She frowned. "Stop. Stop right now. We're not at work. And we've talked about the potential of humans as energy sources anyway. It doesn't work. It's not efficient and requires the person to be

immobile. Even if it did work, you'd have to use prisoners and it's inhumane and there aren't enough people in prison anyway. There are just too many obstacles. So stop. Right now."

"Sorry," he lied. His mind was now spinning. It was true that they had rejected the idea of humans as energy sources, but pregnancy had not been part of the equation. There were still a ton of obstacles, but it was a new path. One that hopefully wouldn't end in carrots. "I'm going to go talk to your doctor for a moment," he finished, getting up.

He walked up to the reception desk.

"May I speak to Doctor Ryday?" he asked the receptionist.

"Of course," he replied. "One moment."

The receptionist got on the phone for a moment and said a few words that Darryl couldn't make out, then hung it up.

"She'll be here in just a moment," the receptionist said.

"Thank you," Darryl replied.

He turned and looked at Harriet who had a strange look on her face. She knew he was up to something, but couldn't imagine what. He waved at her and she waved back. She made to get up to come over to him, but he waved her to sit back down and smiled. The door behind him opened and he turned to greet the imposing figure of Doctor Samantha Ryday.

"Yes, Mr. Green?" she asked. Her tone indicated that she had other things she would rather be doing. She was dressed in the stereotypical white lab coat, buttoned so that Darryl could not see what she was wearing underneath. Her jet black hair was pulled into a tight bun and she wore glasses frames without lenses. Attached to the frames were an assortment of magnifying lenses, similar to the ones that Darryl himself wore, but much more numerous and powerful.

"I was wondering if you had performed amniocentesis on my wife," he said, coming straight to the point.

"Of course," she replied. "It's standard procedure at this point in the pregnancy. Probably should have done it a couple of weeks ago, to be honest, but better late than never. We should have the results soon."

"I don't suppose I could get a few drops of the amniotic fluid?" he asked.

"What on earth would you want it for? I'm sorry, I'm afraid that's quite out of the question. We didn't take much, we'll use most of it on the tests, and any that remains will be destroyed as a biohazard. I've never heard of such a ludicrous request."

"It's just that this is our first child and, well, I'm a bit of a collector."

"Of what?" Doctor Ryday asked, bewildered.

“Of everything, really, but keepsakes in particular. I prize unusual things that mark an occasion.”

“I see. Well, unfortunately, Mr. Green, that doesn’t really change the circumstances. As I said, we only have enough for the tests and a very small amount left in case the tests need to be re-run. We can’t draw any more without risking your wife’s pregnancy. I’m very sorry, but you’re just going to have to make do with the ultrasound printout.”

“What if the tests don’t need to be re-run?” Darryl asked desperately.

“As I said, the remainder will be destroyed as a biohazard. I really don’t have time for these, frankly, silly requests. I understand your concern and sympathize with your wish to have a record of your first child with a unique keepsake, but in this case what you’re asking for is absolutely impractical in every way imaginable.”

“What’s going on here?” asked Harriet, who had come up behind them.

“Nothing,” Darryl said, turning to face her. “We’re almost done. Just a couple of questions,” he replied.

“Your husband was inquiring about your amniotic fluid. He’s quite the romantic, it seems he wanted a sample of it to commemorate your first child,” Doctor Ryday said.

“Oh, really?” Harriet said, shooting Darryl a look. “Well, I’m sure we’ll create enough memories for three lifetimes,” she continued. “Let’s go, Darryl.”

“Thank you very much for your help, Doctor,” Darryl said as if nothing had happened.

The two of them walked away as Doctor Ryday went back through the door and back to her work in the hospital. When they reached the curb and were well out of earshot Harriet rounded on Darryl.

“My amniotic fluid? Really?” she asked hotly.

“I didn’t think they’d be very likely to give me someone else’s,” he said.

“Well, at least that part is reasonable. I’d ask you what you were thinking, but I have a suspicion I know already.”

“Think about the potential energy in there,” Darryl said, throwing caution to the wind and placing a hand on her belly. He hated the fact that he wasn’t romantic, but he knew where his passions lay. He often wondered how he’d been so lucky as to find a woman like Harriet in the first place.

She put her hands on his hand and closed her eyes. “I know,” she said. “But it’s too soon. The hospital can’t give you any and it’s too soon to get more. Let’s wait a few weeks.”

Darryl removed his hand as if it had been burned. He hadn’t expected this. “You mean you’ll let me...”

“Yes. I knew what I was getting into when I married you. And you’re right, it’s a sound theory and the only way to find out for sure is to test it. I know someone who will help. You just need to be patient.”

He took her hand and kissed it. "I don't deserve you, you know," he said.

"Yes, I know," she replied. Still holding hands, they began the walk back home.

## **Chapter 9**

Space. Vast, inky blackness punctuated by small pinpricks of light that are actually vast, seething balls of plasma. Each individual star, which at this distance are barely visible at all, is actually several times larger than anything the human mind could imagine.

The man watched a viewscreen. The energy to run this equipment had not come cheaply, but in the end it would be worth it. No, that was not quite right. In the end it wouldn't matter at all, which was not quite the same thing, but values were changing. What cost money today would be available for free tomorrow and what was free today might cost you your life ten years from now. It was all cyclical, all relative, and all unimportant in the cosmic sense.

He boosted the magnification and zoomed in on a particular section of space. There it was. There they were. It would be a few more months before they arrived, but nobody knew they were coming except for him. Claire might have found out if she'd been allowed to keep nosing around, but he'd taken care of that.

Touching a control revealed more of them than he'd expected on the enhanced view. They were getting closer now and a better picture was only to be expected. He should have realized that it would take a large crew, but it complicated matters. The bigger your force, the more easily you are detected. The humans were largely helpless now, true, but they had exhibited a remarkable skill for survival. That, of course, did not concern the man or the rest of his kind. The survival of the human species was acceptable to them, if it was possible, but what they could not tolerate was to have their plans thwarted and with their own energy reserves terribly low, they could not afford to take the chance of open conflict, even with a race as technologically primitive as the one that resided on Earth.

Looking again, the man noticed that the ships were not using their thrusters but were instead gliding along the spaceways, riding gravity currents to facilitate their arrival. The energy situation there must be bleak indeed if they were content to travel at that maddeningly slow speed. He had confidence they had done their calculations correctly, so they must be conserving energy in case of something unforeseen. Unless something unforeseen had already happened in the journey.

Glancing at a readout, the man flicked the power switch to the monitors, extinguishing their light. He was already over his energy quota for the day and it would be noticed. Leeching power from the main solar batteries only worked if he stayed below a certain threshold and he had exceeded it. Careless. Sloppy. Getting caught was not an option. He would have to adjust the records.

Getting up, the man crossed the small, cramped, dark room towards a metal ladder, which he ascended with the speed of one who was in tremendous physical condition and had adapted themselves well to the lower gravity of the Moon. Once at the top, he removed the peripheral card from the slot in the wall and the panel concealing his workroom closed seamlessly. He pushed the shelving back against the wall, being careful to hide the slot completely, and then tossed the card itself carelessly on a pile of circuit boards before exiting the room and closing the door behind him.

He wished he could lock it. The entire incident with Claire could have been avoided if he could have just locked the door, but locking a room full of useless garbage would arouse suspicion and so he hadn't even gotten a copy of the key made, which was how she'd been able to barricade herself in there in the first place. So far nobody had missed her, but it was only a matter of time. Her body was still outside on the Moon's surface. The risk of taking out a space suit and retrieving it was too great. Someone would be bound to find her.

Luckily she had a reputation as being a bit of a rabble rouser and reckless to boot. There was always the possibility that it would be marked off as an accident without a formal investigation.

"Hey, Nelson, what's up?" said a voice.

The man looked up. His attention had wandered, which was always dangerous. What he saw did not please him. It was Jeremy, a particularly tenacious member of law enforcement. Jeremy was a stickler for the rules. Being a cop had been his life's calling. Ever since someone told him what a rule was, he'd made it his mission to make sure it was followed. All through his schooling he had been the one reminding people of what they should or should not be doing. He was religious, and followed those rules scrupulously as well, but also respected the laws regarding the proper place and time to proselytize. He was clearly on duty now, as he was wearing his regulation uniform, clean and pressed, so Nelson knew he would not be harassed about his well-publicized non-belief at this exact moment, but it was probably something he could look forward to later.

"Good afternoon, Jeremy," Nelson said.

"How are you today?"

Nelson grumbled inwardly. Jeremy had once been told that he was too abrupt with people and so now he constantly wanted to make "small talk". Why couldn't he just come to the point?

"I am well, but particularly busy," Nelson tried. "How can I help you today?"

"Oh, nothing, really, just a small thing. Been keeping well?"

"Quite well. I really must be going, is there something in particular you needed?" Nelson asked through gritted teeth.

"Well, since you mentioned it, I was going over the energy logs this morning. Looks like there's a fair bit of power flowing through some of the circuits."

"I assure you, I am well within my budget. I may have exceeded it slightly just a few moments ago, but it will be rectified in short order." Nelson cursed his luck. How had he drawn attention to himself? He would have to be more careful.

"Your budget isn't really the problem. It's the location. A lot of it seems to be coming from that recycling depot you asked us to set up. The one with all the scrap electronics."

"I fail to see the problem. If I am within my ration, what difference does it make where I use it?"

“Well, we’re all in a bit of a crunch right now, and we could use all the power we can get. The honchos up in First Sunrise are talking about cutting the ration back. You’re well within your rights to use your ration, I just can’t figure out what you’re using it on in that room. Didn’t you say that all that stuff didn’t work anymore?”

“That is true. It is all being kept for spare parts and raw materials.” Nelson was getting antsy and nervous. Where was this line of questioning going?

“So what’s in there that’s even capable of drawing power? And there’s one other thing, the wiring in that room isn’t really set up to handle that kind of draw.”

Of course it wasn’t, Nelson thought. That’s because there is a separate set of wires below that is designed to handle it. He should have put it on a completely different circuit to cover his tracks, but it was too late now.

“Please come to the point,” Nelson finally said, having put up with the dance long enough.

“My point is that I’ve got my eye on you,” Jeremy said, all hint of friendliness now gone. “At best you’re wasting power. At worst you’ve got something else going on. And I’m going to find out what it is.”

Nelson said nothing.

Jeremy smiled and said “Have a good day,” placing his fingertips at the brim of his hat, and continued down the corridor.

Nelson clenched his fists for a moment, but regained his composure in time to hear Jeremy make the turn at the end of the hall. He began to walk. There was work to do, but returning to the room to do it now was supremely risky. He would have to pick a time and a place. And he must be in a position to receive the radio transmission later in the day. Getting caught now was not an option.

## **Chapter 10**

The man awoke from a vision, drenched in perspiration. He had had a terrifying dream and now needed to figure out what to do about it. Rolling over, he checked the small cylindrical device on his bedstand. The dosage last night had been low, but that was to be expected. He could not fill his own applicator and there was now rationing in place now that the source of the material was gone.

Closing his eyes, the man idly wondered whether diluting the mixture would have the same result. The thought of mixing it with a hallucinogen also crossed his mind, not for the first time, but the risks associated with that course of action were substantial. How desperate would he need to be before he would try it? Getting glimpses of possible futures was probably the most addicting thing he could conceive of, and the ability to do so was drawing to a close. Just the thought gave him shivers of dread.

Throwing his feet over the side of the bed, the man arose and went to perform his morning ablutions. He stared at himself in the mirror, bleary-eyed and in need of more sleep. The formula interrupted the sleep cycle and he would be groggy most of the day, but in most cases it was worth it. If last night’s dreams were anything to go by, it would be more than worth it. The stakes were incredibly high if he had read the vision properly.

What he had seen was fuzzy and indistinct, which was a product of the reduced amount of the formula, and was maddening. How could he be expected to show them the way if he was not being given the tools to do the job properly? But of course, he was not the only one using the formula. He was merely the best at it. But all of them were using it and each of them had developed their own addiction and now that they were all getting reduced doses there would be no clear agreement on the interpretation of the visions. There would be bickering and squabbling and they would waste the formula on trivia and nonsense. He didn't need the visions to see that part of the future.

He splashed water over his face to try to clear his head, but the effect was minimal. Grabbing a towel, he dried himself off as he emerged from the bathroom and headed to the kitchen to make coffee. Perhaps caffeine would help him shake the vision he had seen. The most frightening part of it, he thought, was that there had been only one path. Usually there were multiple branches. That was how the future worked. There was no one future, but limitless possibilities. The formula helped the user to discern the various paths and then it was a matter of determining the probability of each one occurring. Having this advanced knowledge could direct the user's actions to help certain paths become more likely.

This was possible, of course, because the formula was derived from the vampire's blood, which granted the user a limited variation of the vampire's mental abilities. Far from being able to directly read the thoughts of people, which were invariably a mishmash of assorted tangents and emotions, the user's mind would read the prevailing mood and opinion and would then highlight the various possible paths forward. The range was surprisingly wide. In the past, users had been able to nudge events in the desired direction from thousands of miles away. In the case of this vision, the range was surprising indeed.

The man poured his coffee and added sugar and then cream. He watched the milky white substance swirl in the hot brown liquid creating paths of its own, not unlike the paths he usually saw under the influence of the formula. The tendrils curled and twisted in the brownian motion of the heat convection in the cup, a microcosm of his thoughts last night and this morning as he determined what to do.

There was only one thing clear in his mind at the moment, which was that he mustn't despair. The path that was revealed to him was bleak, to be sure, and the fact that there were not others clearly visible made it bleaker still, but he was operating on a low dosage. The system had been broken. Results would not be perfect. He must find a way to dislodge events from the path they were on.

The clock showed that it was now 9:00am. Technically he had no set schedule at his job, but he considered this frightfully tardy. It was now twelve hours since his last dose of the formula and it would be another twelve before he could have more. He twitched slightly at the thought. The formula wasn't supposed to be habit forming, but the fact that he was still coated in a cold sweat even after being out of bed for a half hour indicated otherwise. His clinical mind made a mental note to study the symptoms as they went along. The others would almost certainly be experiencing them as well. Knowing what they were going through would be advantageous for him.

Finishing his coffee, he showered and dressed, donning his white coat last before checking his messages. His energy allotment allowed him to check messages twice per day and this time there was only one. He indulged himself by listening to it again, jotting down information he would need later, and then hung up.

“A very interesting development, indeed,” he said aloud to nobody in particular. His mind raced with possibilities, trying to see the probability in each one and determine why they had not come to him last night in his visions. Perhaps there were other paths, but they could not be seen because the one he had experienced was so powerful? An intriguing possibility.

He grabbed his keys and walked out the door, locking it behind him, and made a mental note to be sure to return Harriet’s call as soon as possible.

## **Chapter 11**

The sun rose and illuminated the solar collectors. It was one of the few parts of the power plant that they never had any trouble with, at least until now. Now they sat there in the full beams of the nearby star and produced exactly zero volts of electricity.

“What do you suppose?” Chuck asked. He was entirely outside of his expertise here. His experience was with piping and steam and management of people. He wouldn’t know a photovoltaic cell if it bit him, which he half expected them to do.

“I’m not sure,” Sean replied, looking at the schematic for the device. He had very little experience with the solar collectors as well. “I wish Art were here,” he continued.

“We both do,” was all Chuck could muster. He’d been hard on Art sometimes, but he’d respected him.

When they had found Art in the bathroom, lying in a pool of congealed blood, razor blade still in his hand, they hadn’t known what to do. The psych tests they’d been given hadn’t indicated anything like this was even possible for someone like Art and the people who had gone over the results with them hadn’t mentioned it. There had been no training, no preparation, and there was nothing in the field handbook that covered the mysterious and grotesque suicide of one of your co-workers.

They’d tried to radio for help, but there had been no response, which was worrying. It made them feel isolated. More alone than usual. They wondered what was going on out there that was keeping their superiors from responding.

To combat the loneliness, and in honor of Art’s memory, they had kept up the vigil on the radio transmissions. They seemed to be coming earlier, but the number of transmissions per day was staying the same. The content was just as baffling as it had ever been. Nonsense syllables, utter gibberish, and none of it comprehensible. Sean had idly wished for a computer to try to crack the cipher, but there was no working computer within a hundred miles, and so he had let the topic drop.

“So what are we going to do?” Chuck asked, for lack of anything better to do.

“Not sure,” Sean repeated. He was comparing the schematic to the actual device and was noticing subtle differences, like they weren’t the same model or something. It worried him. The solar collectors represented only 5% of the total power output of the plant, but 5% was a pretty large amount considering that there wasn’t that much power being generated and that they had discovered another steam leak the day before. They were running out of spare parts and, to make matters worse, a steel girder had popped a rivet and was currently hanging on by a thread. Almost literally, as they had attempted to tie it up with a stout bit of rope. If it lost more rivets then the whole thing would collapse and the rope was probably not enough to keep it up there. They’d put it on to take some of the strain



off, but of course that only transferred the strain to the girder above it. The place was literally falling apart around them.

“What do you mean you’re not sure?” Chuck asked. His tone was aggressive, but Sean knew him well enough to know that he was scared. Chuck took his work seriously and maybe a little too personally. Sean looked up from the schematic.

“I mean these don’t match,” he said, pointing at the drawing and then at the device. He had to get Chuck’s mind back on task. The very last thing he needed was for the only other person left with him to have an incident of his own like Art’s. Being alone out here was not on Sean’s top ten list of things to do. He had a feeling that if that actually happened, he’d be quick to follow.

Chuck looked at where Sean was pointing and then sat down on the roof.

“So we don’t even have the right instructions?” he asked.

“Looks that way. We could have another look in the files, but this was the only thing I saw regarding the solar array. We may have to fake it.”

“You know what? Screw it,” said Chuck, lying back flat on the roof. The surface was covered in white gravel to reflect sunlight back up towards the solar array, which had a few receptors on the underside.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” asked Sean, worriedly.

“I mean we’re out here in the middle of nowhere, we don’t have the materials, we don’t even have the instructions, we’re a man down, nobody is answering our radio calls...screw ‘em! When the power stops flowing, maybe then they’ll send someone to help.”

Sean hesitated. He hated to admit it, but Chuck had a point.

“What about us, though?” he ventured. “If we really do go down to zero power output, that’s going to leave us in an uncomfortable situation.”

“More uncomfortable than where we are now? Seriously?”

“So what are you suggesting?” Sean asked, putting the schematic down and placing a toolbox on top of it to keep it from blowing away in the breeze that was flowing past them. “That we just go back to bed and wait for something to happen?”

“Sure, why not? Are we accomplishing more here? Actually, let’s go turn on the radio. We almost missed the last transmission. They’re coming earlier every day now.”

Sean got up from his kneeling position and nodded his assent. He offered Chuck a hand, who took it and rose to his feet and they both made their way to the steel door that led to the stairs. The stairwell echoed with their footsteps as they made their way down to the lower levels.

The radio had been moved again, this time into a room with a window to allow a compromise between the open air rooftop and the more protected office area. It had also become a kind of de facto shrine to

Art. His tool belt and leather jacket lay on a table beside it, along with the one picture of him they had been able to scrounge from his belongings. They hadn't intended to make it quite like that, but they felt they had to do something and this was the least creepy option. They were both inwardly glad that there were no flowers nearby because they both felt that the other would have been sure to insist on including some.

Sean checked the plug and then flipped the switch to the box. The dial lit up and a whining noise came through as the device warmed up before settling into the soft, reassuring white noise of static. He fiddled with the dial briefly until he got to the frequency that the transmissions had been coming in on, and then they sat back to wait.

Art had insisted they keep a vigil after they had nearly missed on on the fourth day. The first couple of days they had come in at the same time like clockwork, but then they started to, for lack of a better term, drift, until on the fourth day they had turned the radio on and the nonsensical chatter had begun immediately. From that point on, Art had been at the radio a full ten minutes prior to the time that the transmission had begun the previous day. He'd marked it on his calendar.

"I wonder if this is what drove Art around the bend," Chuck mused.

"Who knows? Could have been anything, really. Some days I feel like checking out early myself."

"But not like that," Chuck said, glancing worriedly at Sean.

"No," Sean said simply. "Not like that."

The static continued for a few more moments. Sean checked his watch, which was a wind-up variety of pocket watch. The dial showed that it was 10:48am. The transmission had come in at 10:51am the previous day, so it should be starting soon. He stared at the watch face for a moment, watching the second hand ticking its way around the circular surface, marking mankind's measurements of that mysterious force called 'time' which nobody had yet been able to tame. Clicking the cover closed, he examined the intricate lacework engraved in the metal surface.

The watch had been a gift to Sean from Art's wife, when he'd still had a wife. This was in the good days of the plant before the war when repair supplies were plentiful and energy was still relatively cheap. The idea was that Art was forgetful and so it was Sean's responsibility to make sure Art called home at a certain time every day. The original tour had only been scheduled to last a few months before they got rotated home. But then the war had broken out and one day Art called home and was greeted by an Army officer who told him that his number had been forwarded to the base where counselors were waiting to console those who had lost family members in the war. Art hadn't known that his wife had been killed in an attack and had actually broken down and cried for two days.

In the heat of the war, the three of them had been forgotten. All thought of being rotated home vanished after the first year, and then the phone stopped working and all that was left was the radio. When the repair supplies started dropping off they were instructed not to contact anyone unless it was an emergency, and then after a while it got to the point where the unspoken instruction not to contact anyone under any circumstances was made pretty clear.

He could hear the ticking of the watch, even with the cover closed. The inexorable passage of time. How many books had been written about it? How many more had been lost? It was the great mystery, the marking of time, the inevitable march towards death for every living thing that had ever been, ever was, or ever would be. And virtually every living thing did it in their own way. Periods of dormancy followed by periods of activity that were triggered by exterior conditions, but which could still be defined as a way to mark time.

“What time is it?” asked Chuck.

Sean started, lost in his own thoughts, then snapped the watch open again.

“10:50am,” he replied.

Just as he said it, the transmission started. Chuck held a pen poised over a piece of paper to record the sounds, just as Art had. They both felt they owed it to his memory to try to piece together what could possibly have happened, and this was his last obsession. The fact that he had abandoned something that he’d felt so passionate about made them feel as though he might have actually heard something in there, but the truth was they didn’t know, couldn’t know, would never know, and it was depressing to them.

The nonsense words poured out of the radio, clear and static-free. The tone was deep, but there was a kind of metallic edge to them, and the syllables were clipped and precise. If it hadn’t been for the fact that the words were clearly different, it might have been a recording. And then they heard something they hadn’t heard before. A sound in the background. The voice paused for a moment, said something off microphone, and then another pause, and then it resumed the transmission as if nothing had happened.

And then it was over. The two of them looked at each other.

“It doesn’t matter,” Sean said, switching the radio off, pre-empting Chuck’s question about what the message could have meant. “We listened, we wrote it down. That’s all we can do.”

That night they got out the liquor. There wasn’t much, but the last supply truck had dropped some off and they had had a really fun evening that night, but there had been an accident and the plant had nearly stopped producing steam because of a drunken prank that Chuck had pulled on Sean, and so it had been decided to lock the stuff up and save it for when they got rotated out of this dump. That day had been delayed that they had nearly decided to get into it on a number of occasions, but Art had always said that they should save it. It was like a symbol. As long as the bourbon was there, they could hold out, he’d said. Now that he wasn’t there anymore, the two remaining men had decided to make it symbolic of something else; the death of their hopes and dreams.

“Pour me ‘nother,” said Sean, who was sitting heavily in a chair and refusing to get up. Chuck reached across the table and nearly knocked the bottle over, but even drunken reflexes are enough to save alcohol in danger and he managed to grab it before a drop could be spilled. He unsteadily lifted the glass container and shakily poured another into Sean’s glass and then refilled his own before setting the bottle back down on the table with an audible thump.

“Wasn’ this fuller just a min’ ago?” he asked as he released the bottle.

“Naw,” Sean replied. “Was emptier. You’ve got the world’s first time traveling bottle that fills itself back up after you pour.” Then he broke out into maniacal high pitched laughter, doubling over and nearly falling out of the chair in his inebriated glee.

“Would that it were true,” Chuck said wistfully.

“Oh, iss true,” Sean said sagely. “The bottle’s going the right way, it’s you that’s turned around going backwards.”

Chuck gave this some due consideration. “But how did I get going the wrong way?”

“How should I know?” Sean asked, taking a long pull and choking a little as he swallowed. “Smooth,” he rasped. “Really smooth...” and then his head hit the table.

“You ok?” Chuck asked, just before he passed out as well.

They both lay there for a few moments before Sean’s eyes sleepily opened. His mind swam in the alcohol, doing a kind of mental backstroke, lazily sifting through everything that he’d experienced the last several weeks through a haze of well-lubricated synapses. And then suddenly his eyes snapped open.

He jerked upright, nearly overcompensating and tipping over backwards in his alarm and the legs of the chair briefly came up from the floor and he rocked precariously on the back two before the front ones came back to Earth with a loud clap against the wooden floorboards. Chuck stirred briefly, but then resumed his loud snores, but Sean couldn’t go back to sleep. His mind raced with the possibilities, but he was too unsteady to do anything about it. The fact remained, however, that he knew why the transmissions were coming sooner every day.

## **Chapter 12**

“I left him a message three days ago, I don’t know why he hasn’t returned the call,” Harriet said as patiently as she could.

Darryl paced. He’d done as much as he could without the critical ingredient. His apparatus had been cleaned, removing all traces of the now infamous carrot incident, and rebuilt to new specifications that he felt would make it much more efficient and sturdy. With luck, a failure wouldn’t mean having to start completely over from scratch. He’d done his calculations a dozen times and checked his work as best he could without having any of the actual material on hand to test. An educated guess would have to do, but there was evidence to suggest that it would work and that it would work better than anything he’d dared to hope for up to this point. He just needed that last crucial bit and he couldn’t get his hands on it.

On more than one occasion he’d considered just going out and getting a needle and getting it himself, but then Harriet had shown him what the needle looked like and he’d gotten a little weak in the knees at the very thought. Best to leave that to the professionals, he’d finally decided.

“Seriously,” Harriet said for the tenth time that day, “You’re making me nervous with all that pacing. Which I’m sure will contaminate the sample with all the negative hormones.”

The truth was she wasn't sure of any such thing, but she was desperate to calm him down because he really was making her on edge and she wasn't sure how much more she could stand.

Darryl stopped pacing, but there was still a nervous energy exuding from his body. How much longer would he have to wait?

"How much longer do you think I'll have to wait?" he asked aloud.

"I'll tell you the same thing now that I told you before, I don't know. I left him a message and even called him back afterwards. He is very difficult to reach on the phone. We...you," she corrected herself, "just have to be patient."

"I suck at being patient," he said flatly.

"Tell me about it," she replied. "I honestly don't know how you're going to make it until I get to full term if you can't even wait for a doctor to call back about an unauthorized and probably ill-advised amniocentesis procedure."

"That's different. This is the culmination of my life's work. It's really important!" He regretted his choice of words immediately.

"More important than your unborn son?" she said icily.

"Well, no, of course not," he said lamely, it's just that I had to work a lot harder on this project than I did on..." he trailed off.

"Filters almost kicked in in time," she said, getting up with some difficulty.

"But...but..."

"No buts," she said, rounding on him. "I know you've worked hard on this project, but this is just an idea, and a bit of a crazy one at that. You're setting yourself up for a major disappointment if you keep on like this and I can't stand the way you are now and I really won't be able to stand you if it doesn't work. You've got to keep some reasonable expectations."

"You mean like I did when I asked you out the first time?" he asked.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"I mean I'd worked you up in my head just as much as I have about this," he said, gesturing towards the apparatus. "Maybe even moreso. I was petrified because I couldn't believe someone as beautiful as you would even talk to me and I knew if you turned me down then I'd be insufferable to all my friends."

"That's flattering, but you didn't have any friends at the time. You were, and are, a gigantic nerd."

"I had a couple," he said defensively. "But that doesn't change my core argument. Sometimes you have to believe in something. Nothing ventured, nothing gained."

She sighed. "Ok, true, but still. You've got to calm down."

"Ok, I'll try," he said, sitting down in the chair she'd been occupying.

"Hey, that's my chair," she said.

"You got up," he replied. "Besides, there's still a seat available." He patted his lap.

Harriet rolled her eyes and then sat in his lap and put her arm around his neck.

"I love you," he said, and hugged her tightly.

"I love you, too," she said. "Even if you are a big nerd."

"Whatever," he said. He began to relax. He had it good and he knew it. What he didn't know was how they were going to afford a baby, but he wasn't really worried about it. It was amazing what innovative ideas one could come up with when one's back was against the wall. He was employed, she was employed, and while neither of them were exactly making money hand over fist, they were getting by and with a few adjustments they could fit a baby into the budget. Maybe not easily or entirely comfortably, but they could do it. He breathed a heavy sigh of contentment, and then the phone rang and he nearly jumped through the roof.

"I'll get it," she said soothingly, getting up and padding over to the telephone.

She spoke to the person on the other end for a few moments in a stiff, structured kind of way, using very short words and few actual sentences until she finally said goodbye and came back over.

"We have an appointment tomorrow afternoon," she said, resuming her previous position.

"Oh. Good," Darryl said, tensing up again.

"Just relax," she said, kissing the top of his head and noticing that he hadn't washed his hair that morning. "Come on, let's take a shower," she suggested. Might as well kill two birds with one stone.

### **Chapter 13**

The man in the white coat hung up the phone. He wasn't really looking forward to the appointment tomorrow with Harriet and Darryl, but the implications were too serious. He had to meet with them and determine whether there was a way off the path. But that was for tomorrow.

For tonight, he drew forth a small metallic cylinder that had two shining red lights on it and pressed it to his forearm. There was a small hissing sound and the two lights changed to yellow and then blinked off altogether. He sighed and sat there for a moment before removing the cylinder from his arm and depositing it back into his coat pocket. It would be a few hours before the formula began its work. He inwardly hoped that the meeting tomorrow would be successful, but he was unsure. There was too much, for lack of a better phrase, bad blood. He chuckled slightly to himself at the appropriateness of the turn of phrase.

The inventory sheet in front of him caught his attention. Supplies were dwindling. The others were discussing a different kind of rationing system. There were rumblings that someone might get cut off altogether and that a vote might be coming soon on how to implement it, or perhaps on who would be the first to have his supply confiscated. It could not be him, it was too important. The others, he had gathered, were having the same withdrawal symptoms but were not having the same visions. They believed everything was going according to plan. The man knew differently. He believed that being with Alin in his final moments was giving him a special insight for some reason. The vision was strong. He must be right.

Looking around, he checked his power consumption one more time. Energy vampires were everywhere, little devices that looked like they were turned off but were secretly still drawing power, waiting in standby mode. Newer items no longer had that feature, but those were the ones manufactured after the war ended, and there were precious few of those as there wasn't much energy left to make new things. Most of what he had could theoretically have been turned into an energy vampire, but he guarded against it jealously.

Satisfied that everything was actually turned off, the man removed his white coat and hung it on a wooden hatrack. It looked like an extremely thin ghost hanging there in the dim light he afforded himself. At last he turned out even that meager light and lay down in bed. The sheets were warm and soft and smelled lightly of detergent and sweat, a curious combination. His eyes burned and he wished he had remembered to put the lubricating drops in them before he had gotten into bed, but now that he was here he could not bring himself to get back up and apply them.

The natural sleeping position for the man was on his side in a kind of modified fetal position. It was where he felt most comfortable. He had tried sleeping on his back, on his stomach, and in several positions in between, but sleep did not come easily for him in general and did not come for him at all if the slightest discomfort could be found. The exact moment of sleep was a source of intrigue for the man. He never felt it, never knew when it came. He just woke up the next morning and wondered how it had all happened. He imagined everyone else felt the same.

But it was different for him when he used the formula. Senses were altered and heightened and it was important to drift off before the full effects kicked in or else there would be no sleep at all. It was happening already. He could hear night birds outside hooting and flapping. Or could he?

His mind swirled with the vision. A single path opened itself up to him and down the path he could see the disaster unfolding. A world of darkness and cold and humanity defenseless against an enemy that barely even knew they existed. With no energy reserves, there was no way to make light or heat and so the world would be plunged into a icy existence from which there would be no escape. The path smelled of winter snows, crisp and dry, burning his nostrils as he peered into the unfathomable depths of the darkness.

Turning, unable to bear the sight of the death of the planet Earth, the man saw other paths, but they were paths of the past. He had seen them before, and usually there was no need to tread them. They were but shadows and of no consequence. There was no room in life for regret, and his mourning had been done. What joys he had experienced made him what he was today and there was no need to relive them in specific detail. What could be gained from the past but guidance for the future?

One path to the past glowed briefly, shining in his mind like a beacon. After gazing so long into the darkness of the future, the tiny bit of illumination dazzled him and he squinted and caught a glimpse of a familiar face. Curiosity seized him and he took a tentative step onto the path, trying to see the face more clearly, and came face to face with a nightmare.

This was not the past as he remembered it. Alternate futures were commonplace and well known to anyone who had taken the formula and had experienced the visions, but this was something altogether new and terrifying. He had strayed into an alternate past, a past that had branched from some alternate future but had never come true in this universe.

"Hello, Carl," said the face.

"Hello...Harriet," said the man. He looked down and he was not wearing his usual suit that was his typical costume in the lab and the one he most often found himself in while in the visions. Instead he was wearing a t-shirt, black jeans, and a thin black jacket.

"What are you doing here?" asked Harriet, who was much younger than she should have been. He had not seen her in over fifteen years, since before the war, but her youthful appearance matched his memory perfectly in this alternate past.

In truth he did not know the answer to the question, but his mouth opened and words he had not previously composed came rushing out before he could comprehend them, much less stop them.

"I came to apologize," he said lamely.

"To apologize?" she asked incredulously. "And you think that's sufficient for what you did? You think that coming here and giving me those empty words will be enough to erase it all and absolve you of all sin?"

"Of course not," he said, and again it felt as though he were merely an outside observer with no control over what he said or did. He saw her golden hair flowing in a breeze that he could not feel and his heart ached for her. How he had loved her. But that could not have been. That future had been sealed with his own decisions. And here was his past come back to haunt him again.

"Then why are you here?" she pressed. "Why come down this path and torment me? Why don't you just go away and leave me alone forever?"

The man, Carl, a name he had not gone by for years, a name he had forsaken when he joined the group of researchers who were studying immortality and vampirism and their mental powers and their blood, hesitated. The words that had flowed so easily before would not come at first, but then he felt them building up in his brain, working their way down his spine to emerge from the back of his throat. He opened his mouth and felt as though a scream would venture forth to conquer the world with its ferocity. All the bitterness and anger and resentment towards himself and a world that was unfair on its face, all the emotion that he had so carefully suppressed through the devotion to his work and various chemical assistants, was about to issue forth and he could no more have stopped it than he could have stopped himself those many years ago when he was not himself and committed a wrong that he had never forgiven himself for, even though few now even remembered it.



“I have no excuse,” he began, and it seemed a lame and inadequate beginning to his confession. “I had no reason, I was not myself, and I do not expect you to forgive me, but it is important to me that you know this. If I could take it back, I would. I would undo everything and damn the law of unintended consequences. Our lives can change and take a completely different path on the slightest decision, the vaguest nuance, and there is no way to know what would have happened if I had not done what I did. This vision proves that. You standing before me, looking as you do, speaking as you are, an outcome that must be avoided. But nothing could be worse than the outcome I experienced. The knowledge that I let everyone down, that I let YOU down, gnaws at me every day. I can never forgive myself and every day a little piece of me falls away with the knowledge that both of our lives could have been different and probably have been better if only I had not acted as I did.”

It was insufficient. He could tell by the look on her face. It was a look not of anger, but of pity.

“You don’t understand,” she said, turning away from him. “You didn’t understand then, and you don’t understand now.”

“Then help me...” he began, but he stopped because he knew that it was useless. The shadowy form of the distant alternate past was becoming hazy around the edges. Harriet walked away from him into that haze until, only a few moments later, he lost sight of her completely and the path ceased to glow and he lost it once more in the tangle of alternate pasts that were knotted before him.

He turned and looked again towards the future. A second path had opened, and then a third, and then a fourth, and if he strained his eyes he could just barely make out the usual infinite variety of potential futures that he was used to seeing when under the influence of the vision and the formula, but the primary path still blazed with a furious light that made all the other paths pale in comparison. This was still the way and it was still icy and black and deathlike.

But he now had hope. The existence of other paths implied that all was not completely lost. And it would start with Darryl and Harriet.

He awoke with a start and realized he was still under the influence of the formula. Slumping backwards onto his pillows, he closed his eyes and tried to will himself back to sleep. The dream was not yet completed and interrupting it was very dangerous. He could feel his heart beating much too fast, his breath coming in great gulps as he tried to calm himself. Harriet and Darryl were important, but without him the path, which was beginning to lose just a tiny bit of its influence, would wax full once more and become an absolute certainty. Hubris played no part in it, he convinced himself. His continued existence, his continued sanity, were absolutely essential to the survival of the human race. No. Of every living thing on the entirety of the planet Earth. He rolled over and squeezed his eyes shut and felt his brain burning in his head.

## **Chapter 14**

Nelson clicked off the radio and pondered the meaning of the latest transmission. An unexpected encounter with the deep space colonists was likely to be detrimental to the overall plan. The situation was complicated by the fact that he did not know the final outcome.

If the colonists had seen the incoming ship then they would radio back and the transmission would be received first here on the Moon. It was possible for him to break into the radio receiving station and

intercept the transmission, but the risk was great, especially with Jeremy watching him annoyingly closely these days.

If the ship had found it necessary to destroy the colonist's vessel, then when they failed to check in it would send up red flags. This was not as dire a situation. For one thing, it would take time for the failure to check in to be registered. Then there would be an investigation involving telescopes and then more time would pass. There was no possibility of a rescue ship being sent. There was still risk involved for the overall plan, but it was manageable.

If the colonists had not seen the ship, if it had managed to dodge out of their view in time, then all would be well.

The logical course of action was to do nothing. Nelson drummed his fingers on the desk and watched the computer readout for a moment before reaching over and switching everything off. He had rewired the bunker and it had taken time that he did not have, but he hoped it would throw Jeremy off his tail. How damaging would it be if the colonists radioed ahead about the incoming ship?

The humans were weakened by their wars, which had been part of the plan all along. How long had it taken him to engineer the circumstances that made war inevitable? How many long nights had he spent strategizing? And how much risk was he prepared to accept? Weakened, yes, but not completely helpless, and with enough warning it was well within the realm of possibility that they could muster a sizable defense, one which the incoming ship could repel, but at what cost? It wasn't like their own energy reserves were overflowing at the moment.

It had been simpler before. There were endless stars and endless worlds and his race had merely come along and taken what they needed. But then there had been the accident near the binary star and suddenly there had been a great outcry for increased safety in their mission. That led to big restrictions on the kinds of resources they were prepared to plunder and how they could get them. And then it had been discovered that all this exposure to certain kinds of stellar radiation was causing an incurable disease, which further curtailed their choices.

Whereas before there had been millions of stars, only some of which had planetary solar systems, to choose from, they were now having to target just a few thousand to satisfy their needs, and the list was growing shorter every day. They had gone millennia without encountering other races and species, but now they were having to actively invade populated areas to prevent them from defending themselves. They were mighty, true, but they were not invulnerable, nor were they immortal.

Nelson himself had grown up knowing what his eventual mission would be. Their society was structured that way. Everyone was born to a role based on their genetic code, and his would be that of the spy and saboteur. He had taken to it immediately. The power, the control, the knowledge that his was the most important mission and that if he succeeded then it would mean the eventual success of his entire race. And if he failed... Well, that was a powerful motivator as well. He had failed only once and that had been enough for three lifetimes. Another, more qualified spy had come in to clean up his mess. The expense in time and energy had been recouped from him in ways that he did not care to remember, but the scars he bore prevented him from forgetting.

Ascending from his hidden lair, he carefully re-concealed the entrance and emerged into the hallway. He knew Jeremy was around somewhere, but could not find him. No matter. The end was coming.

Even Jeremy would be hard-pressed to stop him now, unless the unthinkable had happened with the outer colonists. He turned that thought over in his mind. The sensible course of action was to take no action at all, but the notion nagged at him that if he could eliminate this one tiny threat, then there were no more threats to the plan whatsoever. What was the risk?

He pondered this thought all the way back to his quarters, which afforded him a wide viewing window, one of the few in this part of the colony. It had cost him quite a sum, but it was all in Colonial Dollars, which would be worthless in short order. His skills with people had allowed him to amass quite a bit of the local currency and he spent it with abandon as he knew that its time as a viable part of the universal economy was to be short.

The window was a free and easy source of entertainment. From here he could see the Earth from time to time, a blue sphere punctuated with swirls of white and swaths of brown and green. Even the haze of the war had not been able to dull the colors of the planet overmuch and he enjoyed looking at it. It wouldn't be long until the entire area was rendered invisible. Had Nelson been sentimental, he might have taken a picture, but everything was fleeting and temporary and there was no place for certain kinds of memories.

There was, as he sank into a lounge chair in his quarters, a brief moment where he nearly felt sympathy for the humans. And all the other races that his people had eliminated. They, for the most part, had kept to themselves. All had been warlike, for things do not evolve that do not have a desire for conquest and ownership, but they had not yet brought their wars beyond their own territories. Even the civilizations that had ventured beyond their immediate environs had been naïve enough to think they could come in peace. Most had not even bothered to bring weapons with them at all.

And yet there was no room for sympathy. Either his people fulfilled their mission or they would perish. Wasn't survival the ultimate instinct? Wasn't that why he was here? To prevent the humans from surviving by eliminating their ability to defend themselves? He remembered a time when his people had thought they could make peace with the races they were invading.

The first time had been early in their attempts to invade other systems. Many of the details had been lost to antiquity, but the recorded history showed that they had approached the sentient beings of the area with the offer to give them technology and expertise in exchange for their voluntary evacuation of the planet. The response had not been favorable and they had been obliged to eradicate not just that planet, but several smaller moons and asteroids in the area that had been colonized. There could be no chance of revenge later. The cost in energy had been enormous.

Later, another attempt had been made. This time the arrangement was to be more direct and to exhibit a show of force. Rather than offering to help them evacuate and re-establish themselves elsewhere, the terms had been simple: Submit to forced evacuation and slavery or perish. This had been attempted several times, and they had thought it would be a simple enough choice. But the survival instinct had been too great and the first few experiments had ended with the targeted world fighting back. Nelson's people had been forced once again to destroy every living thing on the planet. After the third time, they had begun to take documented evidence to present to new races in the hopes that they would submit. Wasn't survival better than ultimate destruction? And the demands for labor in their mission were never ending. Having servants would speed up the process immensely.

But still they fought, still the needless waste of energy and lives and resources. At last one race submitted. They debated about it for years, but what were years to a species that had adapted itself to interstellar travel, and at last they submitted their formal surrender. At last, there would be no need for the expenditure of energy necessary to destroy a whole planet and they could get on with their work in peace.

Unfortunately, it had not been that simple. What was? It had started subtly with some minor sabotage of the apparatus they were constructing, but that had been quelled with little effort. Then it had expanded to pockets of unrest, which then became open rebellion. They had infiltrated Nelson's people and were using their own weaponry against them in the hopes that it would be enough to overcome them, but they underestimated their resolve. They attempted to make an example of the rebels by capturing a select few and subjecting them to tortures. Some of them were still alive, even today, although their minds were broken long ago. But it had not worked. The rebels changed tactics and made widespread attempts at assassination.

Eventually it had been necessary to weed out every member of the offending slave race and exterminate them. A very few had been left alive in controlled situations. The rest had been killed.

And that had been the last attempt at what most races would have considered mercy. It was judged a futile effort and from that point on the spies, like Nelson, had been sent in to disable their opponent's ability to fight by inciting war, spreading plague, sapping their resources, and preparing the way for the larger fleet. It was so much more efficient. The amount of energy contained in a planet was nothing compared to the real prize, and so they let them expend their own precious resources while the fleet moved inexorably towards the main target. That lifegiving source of ultimate energy, the star at the center of the planetary system. After all, where did all the energy on the planet come from if not from the star?

Energy could not be created, but it could be stored and transformed, and that was what living creatures were particularly good at. Nelson had observed fossil fuels and their equivalents on a thousand worlds and all it was was stored solar energy from the nearby star, incubated by time, and then released millions of years later. It was an inefficient system. Much better to capture all the energy being released by the star in real time. This, of course, had the effect of blocking that energy from reaching the planets, but what was that to them? Their own survival was paramount. And they now had a web of collectors all over the galaxy, each of them storing the energy for their own fleets and beaming the excess across the interstellar distances back to the home planet, whose increasing need for energy was growing exponentially. The hunger would be sated.

He shifted in his seat and his thoughts strayed back to the matter at hand. The chair was constructed of a material that could no longer be made. It was soft and pliable and did not cause perspiration the way the old upholstery that was made of plastic or leather might have and it was no longer available because of the tremendous amount of energy it cost to make it. Comfort had been another casualty of the Earth's wars, but Nelson had been able to acquire this chair at the mere cost of money. What was to be done about the deep colonists?

Closing his eyes, he made a decision just before he drifted off to sleep. The mission was too important to allow even the remote chance of failure. The Earth's sun put out a tremendous amount of energy, but its relatively small size made it comparatively easy to contain. That could not be jeopardized. He

would have to make sure any potential transmission never reached the humans. Jeremy would have to be dealt with.

## Chapter 15

Harriet hung the laundry on the clothesline. It was funny how quickly people had re-adapted to certain tasks. Some people were having a very hard time with the transition into an energyless society, even this long after the war, but even those people who were behind the times, as it were, were able to grasp the concept of the clothesline.

At the moment it was towels and, Harriet observed to herself, towels always took forever to dry. The haze, which seemed thicker than usual today, wasn't helping much as it was blotting out the weak sunlight. There was a breeze, however, and that should help. If only there were something to help Darryl, she thought.

Darryl was pacing again. His nervous energy should have been bottled and then maybe they could have used one of the old fashioned tumble dryers, but unfortunately that technique had never been mastered. Or maybe it was fortunate as Harriet could see an entire industry springing up to make people anxious and afraid if the nervous energy could indeed be harvested.

"You alright, dear?" Harriet called, clothespins in her hand, hanging up a bath towel.

Darryl stopped. "Let me do that," he offered, coming over to help.

"You can help, but I'm not going to just sit around and watch you do this. I'm not completely helpless," she added.

"But the baby..." he began.

"The baby should get used to the idea of doing a day's honest work," Harriet said. "We don't know that he or she will be a scientist like we are or that there will even be science by the time it grows up."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Darryl asked, bending over to get some clothespins of his own.

"Just that people are people and that governments and corporations could go to war again at any moment despite the lack of resources. There's always sticks and stones, and do you really think science is going to survive another war?"

Darryl didn't answer at first, and when he did he pointedly changed the subject.

"You should be getting some rest. Isn't the appointment this afternoon?"

"Yes, it is," she sighed. "But everything is fine."

"No, it isn't," Darryl insisted. "You're really only supposed to do amniocentesis once and you shouldn't do it again unless there's a really good reason."

"There is a really good reason," Harriet said, wringing out a washcloth before pinning it to the line.

"Your work is important."

“More important than the baby?” he asked, putting his hand on her belly. She rolled her eyes at the stereotypically romantic gesture.

“Of course not, but there’s no risk. I spoke to Doctor Ryday and, while I will confess she’s not wild about the idea, she says everything will be fine.”

Darryl hung a towel in silence.

The truth, as only Harriet knew, was that Doctor Ryday had said no such thing. In fact, she had railed at Harriet for a good ten minutes, seemingly without taking a breath, and had said that she was putting the baby’s very life at risk. Harriet had countered with some research she had done on her own, pointing out that if the results of the first test had come back with problems then they darn well would have repeated the test and hang the potential consequences. Doctor Ryday had pointed out that if there had been any troubling results in the first test that repeating it would have been medically necessary and that this was the equivalent of cosmetic surgery, that it was reckless, and that Harriet could find a new doctor if she went through with it.

That night Harriet had come home and consulted a list of local doctors and had made a note of visiting them in the near future to talk to them about taking on a patient in the middle of pregnancy.

“What time is it?” asked Darryl.

Harriet had the only working wristwatch between the two of them and glanced at it. “1:30,” she said.

“No, I mean what time is the appointment,” Darryl clarified.

“Oh. That’s at 4:00,” she said.

“Oh,” said Darryl. She could tell he was nervous and came over behind him and gave him a hug.

“We’re almost done with this. Why don’t we take a few of these clothespins up to the house and put them to a ... different use,” she said.

“While you’re pregnant?” he asked, his voice shocked.

“I’m not likely to get MORE pregnant,” she said into his ear.

After all the years of knowing each other, after all the years of marriage, she still took his breath away. He still had trouble believing she was his wife. He’d grown up his whole life thinking that women were flighty creatures that loved nothing more than romance, and he’d given his share of flowers in his time, but it had all come to nothing. His gifts of flowers were usually met with a look of bewilderment and sometimes followed by a restraining order. He’d been so awkward that he hadn’t known how to approach anyone, and when he had finally worked up the nerve he’d come across as desperate, needy, and generally creepy.

And then he’d met Harriet. It had been anything but a case of love at first sight. She hadn’t conformed to his own personal definition of what a woman should be. She was thin as a rail and wore tough

clothes, like her beloved leather jacket that came down to her knees. Formal wear for her meant wearing a long skirt under the jacket, and she nearly always had a pair of goggles on her head so that she could protect her eyes during the many scientific experiments she ran.

They'd started as acquaintances who merely passed each other in the hallways sometimes, but over a period of a few weeks the time it took to pass each other grew longer and longer until it got to a point where they no longer passed each other, but one of them would turn and walk with the other until they reached their destination and then they would turn around and continue the way they'd been going to begin with. And still there was no spark. Darryl's mind had been so unwilling to think of her as anything other than a scientist that the thought never even occurred to him until he saw her one day talking to another man who was leaning in closely with his hand on the wall over her shoulder.

The very next day he had brought Harriet a single red rose. She'd laughed so hard that he wanted to drop it and run and never look back, but she'd grabbed his wrist before he could make his getaway and suggested that instead of the flower that they could go to the observatory that night. He didn't see a single star because he kept staring at her and wondering what blindness had possessed him until just now that he hadn't noticed her.

And the rest had been history. They'd never looked back, even for a moment, and now they were reasonably respected in their field and about to have their first child and she'd just invited him into their own house to do something that he had honestly believed at several points in his life would never happen at all.

Late that afternoon they were getting dressed for the appointment.

"What did you say this doctor's name was?" asked Darryl.

"He went by Carl when I used to know him, but that was a long time ago and he acted on the phone like he'd changed his name or something."

"Why would he do that?"

"I don't know," she answered, and refused to speculate or discuss the matter further.

When they arrived at the building where the appointment was to take place, Darryl nearly turned around and went back home.

"It's filthy," he said. "There's no way I'm letting anyone do a medical procedure on you here."

"It's fine," Harriet said. "Sure, it looks a little, well, industrial from the outside, but I'm sure inside it's perfectly fine."

The interior did not bear out this claim, however, as there was a fair bit of dust everywhere and it looked like it hadn't been cleaned since the war. The linoleum tile was broken in places, peeling in others, and the walls had odd stains on them. The paint was chipping and it was a color that wasn't in the modern spectrum of interior décor.

"We're going," Darryl said, but Harriet shook him off.

"I went to a lot of trouble to get this appointment, and I did it for you, so we'll at least meet with Carl and go from there. I'm sure the procedure room is better."

Darryl grumbled and grumped and muttered under his breath, but did not make any determined motions towards the door. They had a seat on a moldering old sofa that smelled musty and had fabric so threadbare that Darryl was certain that they were going to fall through straight to the floor, as he suspected that the padding was on the verge of disintegration as well. One broken thread, he thought, and we're going to have a hard time getting our butts out of the holes created by the framework.

Time passed. Darryl drove Harriet crazy by asking the time every five minutes until she finally gave in and gave him her wristwatch, which he then proceeded to check every two minutes until the appointment time came and went. At five minutes after the scheduled time he began to tap his feet. At ten minutes he got up with some difficulty and began to pace. Harriet watched him for a moment, then turned her attention to the book that she had had the foresight to bring with her.

"How can you read? How can you concentrate?" he asked, making another lap around the room, his shoes tapping on the worn tiles and making a small echo off the hard walls.

"It's easy when you're not worried," she replied, not looking up. "You should try it sometime."

Darryl ignored this and checked the wristwatch again. It was now a quarter after the scheduled appointment time.

"If we make twenty minutes late, I'm calling the college lecture rule and we're leaving," he said. Harriet made a grunting noise that was as noncommittal as she could manage.

At 4:19, a door at the end of the hallway opened and a man in a white coat approached them.

"Darryl? Harriet? I'm..." the man paused. "I'm Carl," he finally finished, holding out his hand. Darryl took it with some reluctance and then turned to help Harriet out of the sofa, but she had already risen on her own and was striding towards Carl with her own hand extended.

"Good to see you again, Carl," Harriet said. "It's been a while."

"Yes," Carl said, adding nothing to the conversation. "Let's go back to my office."

The three of them went back through the door that Carl had come through and proceeded down a long hall. The condition of the hallway was not any better than the waiting room had been and Darryl tutted as he glanced around. Faded pictures adorned the walls that looked as though they had come with the frames and betrayed a sensibility that was at least fifty years old. The atmosphere was slightly oppressive and none of them made any attempt at conversation. They passed several doors along the way and, at length, they finally reached one that Carl seemed content to stop at and unlock. They stepped inside and Carl moved to open the curtains and allow the sunlight into the darkened room.

Brown was the best way to describe the interior of Carl's office. The faux wood paneling on the walls was a deep brown, the low-pile carpet was brown with deep blue flecks in it, and the furniture had all been stained a deep brown as well. Carl sat in a brown wooden chair behind a brown wooden desk that



was clean apart from a desk calendar and a single brown picture frame. The frame was turned so that only Carl could see it.

“Now,” said Carl, having seated himself and offered chairs to his guests. “How can I help you today? Harriet, you led me to understand that you need a specific kind of procedure done.”

“That’s right, Carl,” Harriet said. While her manner earlier had been calm and her introduction to Carl had been as friendly as was reasonable to expect, her attitude here in the office had changed. She was now icy and somewhat standoffish. She had also moved her chair several inches closer to Darryl so that he was within easy reach.

“And what kind of procedure would that be? I understand you told me on the phone,” he continued, waving aside the objection he could see forming on Harriet’s face, “but in this situation I think it best to hear it again in person.”

“Amniocentesis,” Harriet said, her voice on edge a little.

“I offer you my congratulations, both of you. Have you not already done this with your regular doctor?”

“Yes.”

“And the results?”

“Normal,” said Darryl, glaring at Carl. The questions were becoming rather personal and Harriet’s sudden mood change was not helping his ability to stay calm. A large portion of his instinct was crying out to him for them to leave immediately, but one treacherous part insisted that they stay. For science.

“Then why would you want to repeat it? The risk to the fetus is small, but not completely absent.”

“Darryl has a theory,” Harriet began, but Darryl cut her off.

“We just want it done again and we want the fluid to take home with us,” he said. The sooner this was done, the better.

Carl raised an eyebrow. “You do not wish me to check the findings of your doctor? You wish me to draw the fluid and then turn it over to you for you to leave with?” He steepled his hands in front of him, his elbows on the desk. “That is a most unusual request. Tell me your theory, Darryl.”

“It’s not really a theory,” Darryl said. “It’s just an experiment I want to conduct.”

“An experiment that puts your baby’s life in some small amount of jeopardy? The results would have to be extraordinary to justify such a procedure, would you not agree?”

Darryl said nothing. Carl got up out of his chair and paced over to the window, looking out at the grounds. The grass looked grey in the haze of the day and there were a few leaves lying on it, dry and brittle.

“Darryl, I am familiar with your work,” Carl said. “And I am prepared to do the procedure for you without your having to explain what you want the fluid for.”

There was a moment of silence.

“That’s it? Just like that?” Darryl asked.

“Yes. Just like that.”

Darryl thought for a moment, then came to a decision.

“Let’s go, Harriet.” For once, Harriet did not argue, but stood up and took a step towards the door. Carl turned to face them.

“You will be back,” he said.

“I don’t think so,” Darryl said. “This whole place is wrong. You’re wrong. There’s something I don’t like and I don’t know what it is, which makes me like it even less, but the last thing I’m going to do is let you stick a needle in my wife’s belly and siphon off some of what my child is living in. I’ll find another way, or maybe I just won’t do it at all. The world can live without this experiment.”

And with that, they walked out the door, leaving Carl standing by the window with a curiously calm expression on his face. He took three steps forward in the small office, closed the door behind them, and then returned to his chair behind his desk. Opening a drawer, he extracted a small recording device and pressed stop. A waste of energy, as he had not gotten the information he wanted. While it was true that he knew of Darryl’s work, he did not know the specific details and had hoped to get some clue.

He glanced up at the brown picture frame and saw his own reflection staring back at him. The frame contained a mirror that he used to keep an eye on himself in public meetings like this to make sure that his disguise was not slipping. He examined himself closely and noticed a small glint of light near the corner of his eye. Of course Harriet would have noticed. Darryl likely had no clue. But Harriet had always been particularly observant and had always been attracted by the eyes.

## **Chapter 16**

Sean stepped back from the diagram that he’d drawn and turned to face Chuck with an expectant look on his face, which fell immediately as he saw that Chuck had his eyes closed.

“Did you hear a word of what I just said?” Sean asked, annoyed.

“Honestly?” Chuck replied. “Not even a little bit. Oh, my head...” he said, pinching the bridge of his nose.

“Will you forget about your hangover for a minute,” Sean said. “This is really important.”

“So is lack of pain,” Chuck said. “Are you sure we can’t spare some aspirin?”

“There’s only one bottle left in the entire plant,” Sean said. “We really ought to save it for something a little more serious than a hangover. Drink some water.”

Chuck groaned. "Don't say the word 'drink' to me ever again. I used to be pretty good at this, but I'm clearly out of practice."

"That's not the only thing you need to practice. Listen!"

Chuck sighed. "Ok, one more time," he said.

Sean patiently explained his theory again. The observable facts were that they were receiving an unknown transmission in a language they could not understand which was coming a minute or two sooner every day. The energy reserves of pretty much everybody were too low to justify a mysterious transmission just for the heck of it, so there must be some purpose and there must be some reason why the time kept changing.

"Yeah, I got that part," Chuck said, although he was clearly struggling to keep up. "So what?"

"So each element taken separately doesn't mean anything, but when you combine them then you can start to figure something out."

"Like what?"

"It's really difficult to talk to you when you're not paying attention," Sean said, exasperated. "It's good there's no crisis going on right now. I'd hate to see us trying to patch something with you in this condition."

"You're the one who suggested getting wasted last night," Chuck countered.

"Whatever," Sean said, looking to defuse the argument before it really got started. "Look, here's what I'm saying. What if someone were out there," he gestured out to the open spaces around the plant, "and throwing a ball at us?"

"Why would they do that?"

"They wouldn't, it's just an illustration. Go with it."

"Ok," Chuck said.

"Alright, so on the first day they're a hundred feet out and they throw the ball at 8 am precisely and let's say they can throw it hard enough that it hits the side of the building here," he pointed to a part of his diagram.

"Ok, so they're a baseball player from back when there was baseball," Chuck said with a wistful look on his face. Chuck had been a huge baseball fan before the war had basically wiped out spectator sports.

"Sure, whatever," Sean said. "And from the time the ball leaves their hands to the time it hits the building, let's say ten seconds pass."

"Alright. So it's now 8 am and ten seconds."

“Right. Now, on the second day they’ve walked closer, so let’s say they’re now eighty feet from the building, and then they throw the ball again at 8 am precisely with the same amount of force they used on the first day.”

“You’re saying the ball will get here faster,” Chuck said, beginning to see the general direction Sean was taking.

“Exactly. Because he’s closer and throwing with the same force, the ball gets here sooner, so let’s say it gets here at 8 am and seven seconds. And on the third day he’s a little closer still and throws the ball at 8 am precisely and it arrives at 8 am and four seconds.”

“So you’re saying that the person sending the transmission is getting closer to us.”

“Yes, that’s it exactly!”

“But the difference is as much as a minute or two and radio waves travel at the speed of light. That’s some serious distance,” Chuck said.

“Yes, it is,” Sean said, “which means that it must be coming from space.”

“Can’t be the colonists,” Chuck pointed out. “They don’t have any energy either, and even if they did that’s still some major league distance to make a difference of a couple of minutes.”

“You’re right, even the deep space colonists wouldn’t be sending this kind of transmission. Which means it’s very likely that we’re getting a signal from another race. An extraterrestrial source!” Sean cried.

“We’re getting an alien radio signal? But why haven’t we heard anything?”

“I’m not entirely sure about that part,” Sean said. “It’s possible that nobody but us is scanning this frequency. It’s possible that the council is hushing it up. It’s possible that since it only comes in at a certain time of day that nobody has their radio on because they’re trying to save power. It’s also possible that they just don’t want us to know.”

“They haven’t exactly been forthcoming with information for us lately,” Chuck admitted.

“But think of the implications,” Sean said excitedly. “An alien civilization! Maybe they’re trying to contact us!”

“Where do you suppose they are now?” Chuck asked nervously.

“What do you mean?” asked Sean.

“Well, let’s say you and I saw a guy, or a bunch of guys more likely, coming towards us here at the plant,” Chuck said.

“Ok,” Sean replied.

“Now getting here isn’t exactly easy. We couldn’t just walk out of here, and believe me I know because I’ve thought about it a few times.”

“Ok,” Sean said, suddenly distracted by the idea that Chuck had considered leaving him here all alone and the only thing stopping him was the fact that he didn’t want to take a long walk.

“So here’s a bunch of guys coming here and we see them coming but we have no reasonable way to communicate with them because they don’t speak our language and they keep flashing us with a mirror but we don’t know their code.”

“Alright,” said Sean, still lost at sea.

“So in that instance there immediately spring to mind two important questions. The first is who are they talking to and the second is what do they want?”

“Well, keeping your analogy, I’d say they want some kind of supplies or energy since that’s what we have here, unless they’re delivering something to us.”

“Delivering something to us is possible, but highly unlikely. We’ve been trying to get the council to do that forever and they’re not listening. Surely they wouldn’t just send some folks out to do that, and even if they did that doesn’t explain what an alien race would be bringing us. And it doesn’t explain who they’re talking to.”

“So you’re saying that an alien race is coming, presumably to invade Earth, and that they’ve got at least one, if not more, operatives in place already scouting us out?”

“Yeah, that’s pretty much what I’m saying.”

Sean considered this for a moment. “So what do we do?”

“I think we have to warn someone,” Chuck said.

“Yeah? Like who? The radio has been dead on the other end for months now. We couldn’t even get someone to come out for Art’s body and to investigate what happened there. You think anybody is going to come out because we’ve got an alien invasion theory?”

“What about your cousin?”

Sean had forgotten about his cousin. It had taken him a while, but he’d managed it. They hadn’t ever really seen eye to eye on anything and there’d been a terrible fight that he’d also been trying to forget and they’d both decided they weren’t going to forgive each other. That had been before he’d been sent off to the power plant. It was just one of the reasons he’d decided to go, in the hopes that he could drive her completely out of his mind. It wasn’t that he’d held her in particularly high esteem to start with, but the fight had been pretty vicious.

“Why would you bring her up?” Sean asked in a low voice.

“Because I happen to know that your parents are dead, you don’t have any siblings, and you were never married. Look, we’ve got to get in touch with someone and I’ve got nobody at all and Art’s gone.”

“Ok, let’s pretend for a minute that I’m willing to even speak to her again. How are you suggesting I do this and what makes you think she’ll talk to me and what makes you think she’ll believe me even if she does talk to me?”

“Does she have a phone?”

“Probably, but who knows how often she keeps it turned on.”

Chuck got up and went out of the room for a moment and into the dormitory where his bed was. Sean could hear the snap of latches as he opened his foot locker and then he returned a moment later with a small satellite telephone.

“Where’d you get that?” Sean asked incredulously.

“Had it all along. No way to charge it, so I’ve been saving it for an emergency. I think this counts.”

“Does it still get service?”

“One way to find out,” Chuck said, pushing the power button. The small electronic device, once so ubiquitous and now so rare and startling to see, began to glow as its tiny computer went through a boot sequence that it hadn’t managed to go through in several years. When it was complete, they both stared at the small indicator that showed whether they had any signal. For several long minutes it was blank and they began to give up hope, and then two tiny bars appeared. Weak, but servicable.

Sean took the phone and screwed up his courage and then dialed a number that he could only barely remember. He and his cousin had been close once and he had called her on a number of occasions to talk about potential girlfriends, school problems, and any of a number of other things. The number had been ingrained into his head and he would probably never forget it entirely, but it did take him a moment to dredge it from his memory. He finished dialing and pressed the send button and heard the electronic ringing on the other end.

Against all odds, he heard a click of someone answering.

“Hello?” said Agnes.

## **Chapter 17**

Agnes hung up the phone. She’d heard enough. Why did he test her so much? It was maddening.

Once she’d gotten over the initial shock of actually getting a phone call, she’d been quite happy about it. She hadn’t heard the thing ring in over a year. Who had the energy budget to call anybody anymore? The sound that the device made was a quaint little tune that had been popular about a decade ago, but nobody had ever thought to change it. She’d listened to it for a moment, basking in the nostalgia before remembering what it meant and then she had to remember how to answer. Luckily the buttons were still clearly labeled.

What she heard on the other end had not been as joyous for her, however.

“Agnes?” the voice had said.

“Yes?” she answered. The signal was staticky and weak and kept coming in and out. She wasn’t sure she would be able to understand the person, whoever it was.

“It’s Sean. Can you hear me?”

Sean? She cast her memory back and finally settled on the face of her cousin. Her cousin who she hadn’t seen or spoken to in over twenty years, who she’d written off, who she’d regarded as dead.

“Yes, I can hear you,” she’d said, not sure what to do. “Mostly, anyway. Your signal is very weak.”

“Look, Agnes, I know we haven’t talked in a while, but this is really important,” Sean said, and she could hear the apology in his voice. The question was, was she ready to forgive him?

No, that wasn’t the question. She was an anthropologist, of course she could forgive him. That’s what she did. That’s what she preached to everyone, that forgiveness was the ultimate path to redemption and that if there was a Heaven, nobody was getting in who held a grudge. She’d forgiven him ages ago, but that didn’t mean she wanted to talk to him. Forgiveness wasn’t the same as being friends again. You could forgive someone and still purge them from your life as a bad influence, and that’s what she had done.

But she also remembered how close they’d been. There had been more than one night when she wished she’d known where her cousin was and missed him dearly, despite the horrible things he did when they’d last known each other.

“Agnes?” Sean asked in response to the silence on the other end. She still didn’t respond, as she didn’t know how. “I think this thing’s gone dead,” she heard Sean say off microphone on the other end.

“No, it hasn’t,” Agnes said, suddenly afraid that he would hang up. “I just don’t know what to say,” she said honestly.

“Neither do I, Agnes, but we can figure that out later. Right now I’ve got to tell you something really important.”

And he had proceeded to tell her about his life for the last twenty years, but mostly what had been going on in the last few months. He had told her that aliens were coming, probably to invade, and that the power plant wasn’t putting out enough energy for him to believe they would be able to defend themselves.

“You’ve got to warn someone,” Sean had finished.

“Like who?”

“I don’t know, someone, anyone. They’re getting closer every day.”

“Where are they now?”

“Not sure, but they’re bound to be close. The signal we’re getting is pretty strong at this point.”

And she hadn’t known what to say. She’d told him that she’d figure something out. He said the phone probably wouldn’t work again because there was no way he would have enough battery power to stand by, but he gave her a radio frequency for the alien transmission and another one for how to contact him at the power plant and they’d hung up.

And that was the whole problem. The entire reason why they hadn’t spoken in so many years was because Sean had been an inherently mean person twenty years ago. They hadn’t really addressed that in their conversation just now, although they probably should have, but there hadn’t been any time. She should have mentioned the argument at least. Or he could have. He’d never actually apologized, he’d just implied it with his tone of voice like a dog coming back to its master with its tail between its legs.

The prank back then hadn’t really been anything to get excited about, at least not in the big picture. He had come up to her and told her that a group of boys at a table in the cafeteria really liked her and that she should go say hello, and so she had. When she got there she hadn’t known what to say, and so had just stood there for a moment looking at the puzzled looks on their faces until they’d finally broken up into laughter. They hadn’t liked her at all. They thought she was a freak.

She’d gone back to Sean, who was laughing hysterically, and yelled at him for being so mean. He’d shrugged it off and asked if she just couldn’t take a joke, but he didn’t understand. She was awkward and nerdy and had funny ideas and laughed too long and didn’t think anyone would ever really love her and for a person like that, this was the worst joke imaginable.

“You’re just mean!” she’d said, trying not to break down into tears.

“I’m not!” he’d replied, clearly stung.

“You are! You say mean things to me and to everyone around you all the time!”

“Those are just jokes! I’m just kidding around!”

“This isn’t kidding, those things actually hurt,” she’d said, losing her battle with her emotions.

“Please, you need to toughen up. If I really wanted to say something mean, I’d tell you how pointless I think everything you believe is. All that anthroapology business, it doesn’t mean anything. You can’t possibly think that any of that is real, can you? Really? All that ceremony and ritual is just a waste of time, left over from tribal superstitions when people believed that you couldn’t really be a man without them and they used them to keep enemies from getting into their encampment. It’s outmoded, outdated, and silly.”

It had been said in anger and frustration, but it had still been said and there was no taking it back. Anthroapology was, at that time, a fledgling faith, but it had spoken to her in a way that no other belief system had and she had thrown herself into it wholeheartedly. She knew that other people thought she was a lunatic for subscribing to it, but she’d always thought that Sean had her back. Now she knew



differently, and she'd never spoken to him again. She'd run away in tears, locked herself in the church, and hadn't come out for two days.

And the worst part was that he didn't come. She expected him to come and apologize right then as soon as his anger cooled down and he started to feel remorse, but he didn't. She waited for him for two full days and he didn't come, and when she finally emerged she didn't bother looking for him. In the time apart, she had come to terms with what he'd said and, according to the principles of her faith, had forgiven him. But she wasn't going to talk to him and she didn't care what he had to say. Not anymore.

And now here he was calling her up, twenty years later, asking her to believe that aliens were coming. She could hear the jeers of the people she might tell now. There were no aliens. He was just pulling the same joke again and this time it was even more cruel because of the distance between them. Tormenting her was worth energy to him and he had thought of her. He hadn't changed a bit.

Or had he? She kept coming back to his tone of voice. It had cost him something besides energy to make that call. He knew how they'd parted.

She sat at her desk at home for about thirty minutes contemplating her next move. She looked around the room and saw all the pictures she'd accumulated and noticed that there were none of Sean. That hadn't been a conscious decision, or at least she didn't remember making it. There were images of everyone else in her immediate family, but none of Sean. She got up and made her way to her attic and found the boxes she'd put into storage up there. Things that people didn't need but that they couldn't bring themselves to part with for fear of needing them again later or for sentimental reasons all ended up in storage.

She opened a box at random and found old kitchen utensils that had belonged to her mother. She remembered thinking that she would use those someday, but when she moved she just ended up buying new things. These were valuable now. Buying new things wasn't as easy as it used to be. She closed the box and tried another, which revealed some old toys from her childhood which no longer held any fascination for her. She was saving them for her own children, but one of her old fears seemed to be coming true and she wasn't sure at this point whether she would even be having any children of her own.

Closing that box was like closing a chapter in her life and she moved on to the next box, which held what she was looking for. Old photographs, unsorted and of various sizes and quality cluttered the cardboard container, massed into a jumble with occasional pockets of organization from the last time she had opened this box up and looked for pictures. She couldn't now remember what she had been seeking, but her need for organization had caused her to group the photographs by approximate year and event the last time. She'd eventually given up because the task was too large, but you could still see the fruits of her labor from long ago.

She picked a stack of pictures up at random and went through them. Family pets, holiday occasions, vacations to places that you really couldn't reach anymore because transportation was so curtailed. Some of them were places nobody even wanted to go anymore because of the radiation from the wars.

There were pictures of sunsets and flowers and unusual cloud formations and cartoon characters brought to life through felt and glue and actors who resided inside them and other things that the children of today would never know in person. None of those things really existed in the form that

these photos showed anymore. These were evidence of mankind's crimes against itself, showing the way things were before greed and avarice and lust for power had taken over and made all these things less important than they should have been.

And at last she found what she was looking for. Pictures of family, and of Sean, and she realized that these were evidence of her own crimes against herself. Things that she should have known for the last twenty years had been destroyed just as thoroughly as the sunset had been destroyed by the haze left behind after the last wars. She shivered a little, from the cold or from emotion she could not tell, but she knew what she had to do.

She closed the box, taking a picture of Sean with her, and descended from the attic back to her office where she placed the photograph on the desk. A frame would come later, when there was time. Quickly, she dressed for the chill afternoon and set out to find support in the place where she knew she was most likely to find it. Every journey starts with a single step and she knew she would need to take a very specific first step if there was to be any hope of having people believe her.

Half an hour later she knocked on Harriet's door.

## **Chapter 18**

Carl, who was not comfortable with resuming that name, but had decided it was easier than fighting it, was disappointed. It had been two full weeks since Harriet and Darryl had visited and they had not returned as he had predicted. Worse, with every day that passed, the alternate paths faded a little more from the visions. If they did not return, he would have to take drastic measures.

Of course, visiting them was problematic. He examined himself in his desktop mirror once again and touched up his disguise. Letting Harriet see through it had been careless. How much had she understood in that moment? Or was she merely uneasy at the unfamiliarity? How much personal risk was going to be necessary to accomplish this goal?

Rising from his desk, Carl put on his white coat, which had been hanging on a small wooden coat rack at his office door and compulsively checked his pockets. He felt a number of objects within them, things that he kept on his person at all times, but most of which he never actually needed, and felt for one in particular. The small metal cylinder came easily to his grasp and he withdrew it to check its contents. Two bright red lights greeted him and he smiled briefly before depositing it back in his pocket. There would be time for that later.

The jitters were getting worse. He knew now that he was addicted to the formula and wondered how the others were doing and what they would all do when it finally, inevitably ran out. He also wondered what they would do when they found out that he had falsified the inventory to disguise the fact that he had removed one of the vials for his own personal use. There was a destiny for that last remaining bit of the vampire's blood and he could not allow them to derail it. The alternate paths in the vision had been particularly strong the night after he had done that.

He had paid special attention to the brightest path last night. Of course it was part of the ritual to observe the most likely outcome and determine whether it was desirable, but with the outcome all but inevitable nobody had really taken note of the fine details. Faced with the carnage, the destruction, and the inky blackness that was the future, there seemed little point in finding out the precise chain of events. It was enough to know that something had to change, and change quickly to find an alternate

path. It was like grasping at a series of ropes as you went headlong over the cliff. It didn't matter which one you happened to catch, as long as you caught something.

But last night he had looked deeper into the path and he had seen them. Ancient. And evil, although they didn't know it. They had a completely different concept of the word. To them it was survival. But wasn't evil a subjective concept anyway? To everyone in their path they were the embodiment of everything that evil could ever hope to be, destroying, enslaving, stealing, and blotting the very light from the universe in a very literal sense. To them these were necessary actions that preserved their species. The contrast was stark and chilling.

Their appearance had been fluid and he had not been able to see them clearly. He hoped that this was because they were still a long way away and that it meant he couldn't get an adequate fix on their thoughts, but he suspected that they were all too close. What he could tell was that they were old and powerful. There was a reptilian edge to their mannerisms and a metallic tang to their minds that were incongruous to him. He had awoken from the vision confused and had spent much time pondering how those two features could reconcile themselves.

Eventually, however, he had decided it did not matter. They were coming and he would have to find a way to stop them and Harriet and Darryl were the key. The question was how to turn that key in the correct direction without revealing his own nature.

Satisfied that he had everything he needed for the day, Carl stepped forth from his office and was confronted by another member of his order.

"Where is it?" the newcomer asked.

"Where is what?" Carl asked. It was a trite answer, as they both knew exactly what they were both talking about, but it was part of the game. The age-old game of cat and mouse that everyone played and nobody knew why. Wouldn't it be easier to just come clean? Wouldn't it be more productive if everyone could stop behaving as if they weren't ultimately on the same side? The endless bickering and complaining could stop and they could all work together towards a common goal.

He shook himself. That was an ideal world that did not exist. Even in the most fanciful alternate future, he had never seen a world where this condition could exist.

"You know very well," said the newcomer. He was taller than Carl, stockier as well, and they were alone in the hallway.

"Enlighten me," Carl said, playing for time that he truly felt that he did not have.

"You have falsified the records. We have hard evidence. You have some of the raw material and we want it back. The supplies are dwindling and you are no better than the rest of us. You do not deserve to have it all for yourself."

The words had come out rapidly, clipped, and betrayed his desperation. The man was clearly feeling the effects of the withdrawal, just as Carl was.

“Assume for a moment that I admit my guilt,” Carl said. “Do you really believe I will reveal my hiding place?”

“Yes,” said the man, flexing his fists.

“Please,” Carl said. “If you intend to injure me, please do so and do not threaten me idly.”

The man raised an eyebrow. “Bravery,” he said. “I would not have expected it.”

Carl frowned and took half a step backwards. How dare he? How dare he question his bravery? He was the only one of the group who had faced the reality that they were all headed towards. Why were the others not having the same visions?

“Tell me what you see,” Carl said in the tone of an ultimatum.

“I see what the others see,” the man said, equally confrontational. I see the usual collection of paths and outcomes and we are all searching for one where we have more of the formula.”

“You do not,” Carl said, unaware of where this new insight might be coming from.

“How can you tell?”

“Because you are not panicking,” Carl said. And as he said it, he knew that he was right because he was panicking himself. That was the only explanation for some of his recent behavior. It was not logical, it was not rational, it was rooted in panic, and he would have to overcome it if he wanted to save himself.

The man tilted his head quizzically. “You think that the impending loss of the formula is not causing us to panic?”

“Not in any appreciable way,” Carl said calmly. That was the key. Calm. He must remain calm and choose the only course of action that would bring success. In his mind’s eye he saw the main path dim slightly and another open up. Was he experiencing the visions in his waking life now as well? That could be dangerous.

The man said nothing at first, clearly puzzled by Carl’s attitude, and Carl took the opportunity to step around him and continue down the hallway. He had intended to go to the observatory and see if there was anything amiss in the stars now that he had some inkling of where the threat was coming from, but now he knew that his destiny lay elsewhere.

“Where do you think you’re going?” the man bellowed at him, his deep voice reverberating along the halls.

“To save us all,” Carl said without turning around. It was trite, but it was true.

He was surprised to find that the man, rather than tackling him, had merely turned on his heel and stalked away. That was the trouble with most of his race. They were cowards at heart. He permitted himself a brief moment of hubris at his own courage before remembering what he now had to do. He nearly quailed at the thought, but remembered his purpose as he walked across the parking lot, filled

with derelict cars that had long since had all their gasoline siphoned out of them, made his way across town, and up the path to Harriet's door.

## Chapter 19

Jeremy came to in a darkened room and tried to remember how he got there. His head swam and he slumped back down after trying briefly to make his way to a sitting position. Blinking, he looked around and saw nothing. The darkness was deep, and although he imagined that he could see small pinpricks of light that his eyes would eventually adjust to, after a few moments he realized that they were merely his brain trying to invent light where there was none.

Straining his hearing, he heard the faint ring of tinnitus, gained from a misspent youth where he had listened to angry music much too loudly over too long a time, but nothing else. He sniffed, but smelled only dry air.

"Hello?" he ventured. His training as a police officer had not really prepared him for this. On the colonies, he was expected to be the law and had always thought that if he had been caught unawares that he would not wake up at all. Being imprisoned, as he clearly was, was wholly unexpected and he wondered what his captors could possibly want.

His greeting received no answer, nor had he expected it to. He closed his eyes, more out of habit than for any other reason, and listened hard again. A hum, a tapping, a gurgle, anything to let him know where in the colony he might potentially be, but there was nothing but that persistent ringing of damaged eardrums. Sitting up, he tried to clear his head and remember where he'd been just prior to waking up here.

He remembered walking down a hallway. The colonies were notorious for hallways, but that's what you got when your entire city had to be enclosed. It was impractical to build a giant dome and enclose everything and build it like a traditional city. It saved materials and energy to build it more like an ant farm. Moreover it saved air. One of the things that was pointed out early in the process of colonizing the Moon was that air wasn't exactly a renewable resource. Nobody could create oxygen or nitrogen or any of the other gases that made up air. They could be trapped or released into other compounds, but there was a finite amount of everything on Earth and so they would not realistically be able to transport enough to give a whole other planet its own atmosphere, nor was it energy efficient to do so anyway due to the weight those seemingly light gases possessed.

So the decision had been made to try to extract those essential elements from the firmament of the Moon or whatever planet they decided to move to next and then to contain those elements and recycle them. The trick was that getting them from the moon rock had been difficult and so they didn't want to have to get any more than absolutely necessary. That precluded a giant dome.

Given all that, remembering that he was walking down a hallway was not particularly helpful because he could have been doing that anytime. Where had he been going?

What he could definitely remember was that he had been thinking about what Nelson was doing. Or, more to the point, he had been thinking about not knowing what Nelson was doing. Clearly he was involved in something shady.

The funny thing about Nelson, Jeremy thought as he finally worked his way into a semi-comfortable sitting position, was that nobody seemed to know where he had come from. Jeremy had asked around, trying to find anybody who really knew him, but couldn't find anybody at all. Everybody knew OF him, he was wealthy and well-connected and so forth, but nobody spent time with him, nobody knew of any relatives he might have, and nobody could remember seeing him on the shuttle up from Earth.

And suddenly he remembered. He'd been on his way to the records room to try to find Nelson's name on the passenger manifest. And then what had happened?

Jeremy tried to get up, and found his footing, but bumped his head on a low ceiling and slumped back to the ground, collapsed in a heap. He rubbed his head and then checked the rest of his body for injuries. There was no blood that he could feel and no broken bones as far as he could tell, and apart from the minor bump he'd just sustained his head didn't hurt. Where were the boundaries of this room? He crawled forward for a bit, feeling around for a wall, but couldn't seem to find one immediately. For a moment he felt a sense of panic as he wasn't sure how he would get back to where he started from, but then he calmed down when he realized it didn't matter. It was a human desire to have a 'home', of course, and to be able to return to it. It was like having an anchor, a sense of belonging, but he was just as lost there as he'd be anywhere else. Best not to worry about it. A wall or a door would be much more valuable.

After crawling for another time, he couldn't tell how long, Jeremy lay down on his back and rested, staring up into the inky blackness and watching his mind conjure images out of nothing.

The records room. He hadn't made it to the records room. He'd run into Janet along the way. He liked Janet, although he wasn't sure how she felt about him. They'd spent a little time together, but she didn't exactly go out of her way to make that happen. The conversation had been idle and uninteresting to him and he was distracted. He remembered essentially brushing her off and felt a vague pang of regret about that. Being on duty was one thing, but he worried that he'd killed his chances.

Getting his breath back, Jeremy rolled back over and resumed his journey, crawling over the oddly smooth ground. There was no sign of dust or dirt or any kind of edge to the tiles or any blemish whatsoever. It was odd and he couldn't figure out where he was. He thought he knew the areas of the colonies pretty well, but this area was wholly unfamiliar to him. Even more curious was the fact that there were still no sounds. The colonies were constantly in motion as people went about the business of running the place without wasting excess energy.

After another long time that he had no idea how long it was, he collapsed again, face down, on the floor to rest. What had happened after he had met Janet? He had made it to the records room, but there was no attendant, which he had thought was odd, and then suddenly one appeared.

"Help you, officer?" the attendant had said.

Jeremy looked at him quizzically. "You're not one of the usual guys."

"Fred's sick. My name is Benjamin."

"Haven't seen you around, Benjamin. It's nice to meet you, although I thought I knew just about everybody."

"I was living over in West Phoenix up until yesterday," said Benjamin.

"That would explain it," Jeremy had replied. "I don't get over there much. Easy to overlook people if you don't see them every day."

"Yessir."

And what had happened then? He'd asked to see the passenger manifests...and then what?

He blinked in the darkness. It was starting to get on his nerves, to be honest. This constant blackness, no light whatsoever, and his mind playing tricks on him. At one point he thought he heard a thumping sound, but it did not repeat itself and he wrote it off as a figment of his imagination. He rose to his hands and knees and set out once again.

The recordkeeper, Benjamin, had brought him the passenger manifests and he had looked through them, but had not been able to find Nelson's name. This in itself was not damning, but it was good, solid evidence. There had been babies born on the colonies, of course, but they were all still toddlers. The oldest was eight years old. Nelson was at least forty. He would add this to the evidence against him along with the wasted energy and the mysterious activities he engaged in at the recycling room. And that had been his next stop.

He remembered stumbling along the way to the recycling room, looking behind himself and people always did to see what he had tripped over, but he had seen nothing. And when he arrived at the recycling room, he had been surprised to see Benjamin.

"How did you get here ahead of me?"

"Shortcut," Benjamin had said. "Here, could you hold this for a moment?"

Jeremy had taken the circuit board that Benjamin had proffered and felt the pinprick of the solder on the backside. And then...

He stopped again and wracked his memory. What had happened then? He couldn't remember. Perhaps a nap would help him think better. He lay down and closed his eyes.

Nelson stood over the body of Jeremy, which lay on the floor of the recycling room, still clutching the circuit board. The chemical on the solder points had not been easy to synthesize, but it would be worth it as it was undetectable, as was the other chemical on the pages of the passenger manifest. Separately they were harmless, but together they sent the victim into a special mental state where they traversed their own minds. The effect was not permanent, but it would baffle the doctors, would not draw undue suspicion from anyone, unlike the dead body of a police officer would have, and would last long enough for him to do what he needed to do in the radio room. He checked his watch and saw that the message from the deep colonists, if they had indeed sent one, would be arriving in about an hour. Turning a dial on the watch, his disguise as Benjamin faded from view. Another waste of energy, but one that he hoped would pay dividends.

Removing the circuit board from Jeremy's hands, Nelson proceeded to drag the inert form of the officer out of the recycling room and down the hall where it would be found, and then doubled back to head to the radio room.

Once he arrived at the base of the tower, Nelson climbed the short ladder and entered the room. This was the one area in the entire colony that could draw as much power as it needed and, as such, it was constantly monitored by about a dozen personnel working in shifts. There were always at least four of them there to ensure that no transmissions were missed and that energy consumption was kept to a minimum. The people were a complicating factor. He did not feel as though he could safely eliminate all of them and any attempts to get them all to leave would certainly attract attention. He would have to improvise something.

"I can't believe he blew me off like that," a woman was saying to her companion next to her. The listener grunted in a noncommittal sort of way, implying that this train of thought had been going on for some time and that they considered it fully explored. "I mean, he's been flirting with me for weeks, I thought he would have been more interested, especially considering what I'm wearing, you know?"

Again, the noncommittal grunt. Nelson stole a look at the speaker and saw that what she was wearing was a very impractical pair of high heels and a skirt short enough that he was surprised she could sit comfortably in it. It looked like the kind of dress that was only suitable for two positions and neither of them were sitting down.

"Well, Janet, you know how men are," said the listener, who was wearing a far more demure ensemble that consisted of a pair of trousers and a button-down shirt. Her hair was pulled back into a tight, well-maintained bun and she wore glasses. Nelson couldn't believe stereotypes like that actually existed.

"What's that supposed to mean?" asked Janet.

"Just that he probably met someone, or something, else and gave up on you," said her friend.

"Eileen, just because Stuart did that doesn't mean..." Janet began, but Eileen cut her off.

"Don't you dare bring Stuart into this. That was two years ago and I'm over it, completely over it, you understand?"

"Sure, sure," Janet said. The two of them lapsed into silence for a moment, each of them studying the readout of their radio gear. The way the radio tower worked, as transmissions came in they were automatically received by the machinery and then transcribed by the computer. The operators could then decide whether a response was even necessary. With the vast distances they were dealing with, each transmission could take several minutes to travel from one place to the other and in most cases an actual conversation was not possible, so messages were sent more like news bulletins rather than anything that actually required a response in most cases.

Nelson saw his opportunity and stepped forward.

"Hello?" he said nervously.



The two women turned. "Who are you?" Janet asked aggressively. Strangers were rare in the radio tower and were generally discouraged.

"New trainee," Nelson mumbled. "Was told to come up here."

"By whom, exactly?" asked Eileen.

"Thompson," Nelson said, inventing a name on the spot.

"Thompson? He didn't say anything to me about a new trainee," said Janet.

Nelson blinked. He had rehearsed this interaction in his head, but it had suddenly taken a frightening new turn. He hadn't imagined he'd actually pick a name of someone she actually knew.

"Me neither, but since when does anybody tell us anything around here?" asked Eileen bitterly.

"True," Janet nodded, but there was still a frown on her face. "What are you training in, exactly? And what's your name?"

"Name's Benjamin," Nelson said. "Thompson just said to come up here. Acted like you'd know what I was supposed to do."

"Typical," Janet said, practically spitting the word. "I'm going to find Thompson and ask him what's the meaning of sending this rube over like this without any warning."

And with that, she got up. Nelson took the liberty of sitting down in her seat and stealing a glance at the viewscreen. If a transmission from the deep colonists were going to come in, all that was necessary was for one of the operators to miss it. He could hack in and delete it from the records later, but nobody could be allowed to read it in real time as it came in. He wasn't sure what he was going to do about Eileen, nor did he know when Janet would be back. The other two people in the room were monitoring power levels, so he wasn't very concerned about them.

"So when did you get brought on?" Eileen asked.

"What?" Nelson asked, startled from his thoughts. "Oh, last week," he said.

"Jumpy much?" she asked. He got the feeling that this passed for a joke with her and she would have smiled if she weren't a completely humorless person.

"Not really," he replied, glancing at the screen again. He had no way of knowing the timing of this transmission or even if it was coming in at all. Why had he come in here? It was too risky. Perhaps he should call it off and take his chances. He looked away.

Just then the screen next to him lit up. His head swiveled back towards it automatically, like it was on a pivot, and he scanned the incoming message. It was worse than he'd feared. Scrolling across the screen was not just a terse message about an incoming fleet of alien ships, but a complete readout, including exact positioning, rate of travel, trajectory, and sketches of the silhouettes. What were the pilots of

those ships doing, letting themselves be examined with that kind of detail? He tapped a key to clear the screen in front of him and then looked at Eileen's screen, but Eileen was looking directly at him.

"What do you think you're doing?" she shrieked. "That was an incoming message from the deep colonists, it's one of the main reasons why we're here, and you just cleared the screen!"

"Didn't it show up on yours, too?" he asked, faking panic.

"Of course not, I'm not monitoring the same frequency as Janet. What good would that do for us both to be monitoring the same frequency at the same time?"

"I didn't think..." Nelson began.

"No, you didn't think," Eileen snapped back. "You didn't think at all."

Just then, Janet came back.

"I just found Thompson," she said. "He said he'd never heard of anyone named Benjamin."

"This guy just cleared your screen," Eileen said.

"Who are you really?" Janet asked in an accusatory tone.

Nelson had finally had enough.

"Someone you shouldn't trifle with," he said quietly, getting up and drawing a knife from his belt. He grabbed Janet roughly by the arm and held the knife point to her ribs.

"You scream, you're dead," he said. "Now we're going to move slowly over to the hatch over there and I'm going to let myself out. You're coming with me until we get a good distance from here and then, if you're good and if you're lucky, I'll let you go."

Janet was rigid with fear and they moved stiffly towards the hatch, but just as they got there Janet stomped on Nelson's foot with her high heels. Unfortunately for her, Nelson was wearing steel-toed boots and so the bellow he emitted was more of rage than of pain. The scream of pain came from her as the torque of the heel sliding off the toe of the boot twisted her ankle and she felt it snap under the pressure. Nelson pushed her from him roughly and she collapsed to the floor, immersed in a world of pain. Raising the hatch, Nelson jumped through before any of the other people in the room could react and began sprinting down the hallway.

If he could make it back to the recycling room, he had a slim chance of escape. Once inside, he doubted they could find the secret to opening the room and there was no way they could break in. He turned a corner, moving at a dead sprint. He had to get there, not just to save his own skin, but to preserve the mission. He had to get into the radio archives and delete that message outright, not just clear the screen.

Skidding around the last corner, he saw his destination in sight. The door was almost within reach when he heard the first alarm, and he grinned because he knew there was no way they would ever catch him

in time. Lightening his pace as he approached the door, he opened it and stepped inside, closing it softly behind him. There was no need, after all, to make a fuss. He rifled through the circuit boards until he found the one he wanted, the one marked with the special sign, and then pulled the shelving away to insert it into the slot in the wall. The panel in the floor slid open silently and he stepped towards it, confident that his escape was nearly complete when the door opened and he froze.

“Hello, Nelson,” said Jeremy, grinning.

Nelson said nothing, but stared at Jeremy. How was it possible?

“Nice try,” Jeremy said, drawing his weapon and pointing it at Nelson. “But once I figured out where I was, getting out was pretty easy. I know my own mind.”

Nelson remained silent and glanced at the opening in the floor, wondering if he could make it and seal the hatch before Jeremy could follow.

“No, I don’t think so,” Jeremy said. “Take three steps away from that hatch. Do it now!”

Nelson remained rooted to the spot, his mind spinning wildly. And at last he made a decision. He went to take the requested step away from the hole, but it was a feint and he ducked and dove towards the hole. The ladder was not meant for a headfirst descent, but he was prepared to take his chances. They could not be allowed to interrogate him on top of everything else. He fell headlong down the narrow shaft, bumping his head, arms, and legs against the sides and the rungs of the ladder. At last he hit bottom, painfully knocking the wind out of him. He started to get up, but then felt the bullet hit him with pinpoint accuracy and then slumped back down to the ground and did not move again.

At the top of the hole, Jeremy stood, his gun smoking slightly, with a grim look on his face.

## **Chapter 20**

The first to arrive had been Agnes, and she was in a right state. Harriet had, of course, been glad to see her, but her elation at the unexpected visit quickly turned to concern as Agnes quietly asked if she could come in and then sat down on the couch and did not speak.

“Can I get you something, Agnes?” Harriet asked, but Agnes did not answer. She was afraid. She was afraid to do what her faith had always told her to do, which was to forgive. She had to forgive her cousin in order to believe what he said, and she had to believe it before she could tell others. It had seemed the obvious thing to do when she had left the church to come here, but now that she was here she was finding it very difficult to follow through.

Darryl came in and saw the two of them together on the sofa.

“Everything ok?” he asked. He didn’t have strong feelings one way or the other about Agnes, but he knew that Harriet had been friends with her for years. The one time he had said anything negative about Agnes, he’d learned to never do it again.

“I’m not sure,” Harriet replied. “She won’t tell me.”

Just then, there was a knocking at the door.

"I'll get it," Darryl said, moving towards the insistent sound.

He peered through the peephole and frowned. "It's Carl," he said.

"Carl?" Harriet said, looking up, clearly alarmed.

"Yeah, Carl," Darryl said, looking grim.

"Tell him to go away, Agnes needs me. I'll talk to him some other time," Harriet said.

Darryl opened the door and stepped through quickly before Carl could say anything.

"What do you want?" Darryl asked.

"You must let me in," Carl said, a hint of desperation in his voice. "They are coming."

"Who's coming?" Darryl asked. "Look, Harriet's busy. We've just had a close personal friend drop in and she needs some help, so you'll need to come back later."

Carl put a hand on Darryl's shoulder and looked him straight in the eye. Shivers ran up and down Darryl's entire body as he gazed into the cold orbs that Carl had trained on him.

"You must let me in," Carl repeated. "They are coming."

Darryl shrugged Carl's hand off his shoulder. "Who's coming?"

"I can't tell you out here. It is imperative that you let me in!" The last word was practically a shout.

"No," said Darryl simply.

Carl sighed. "Darryl, we simply do not have time for this. They are coming, and they could come from any one of two different places. The first option is that my order will track me here and if they do then they will take from me something that I desperately need and which will guide us through dark times to come."

"What's the second option?"

"The second option is the inevitability of dark times to come. The extinction of every living thing on this planet."

"You're lying," said Darryl, turning to go. Carl grabbed him by the arm and spun him around.

"I am not," he said, and as he did so he reached up to his collar and found a seam in what appeared to be his flesh and pulled upwards revealing a different face, one that was dry and cracked and dusty. Darryl took a step back. "They are coming."

Darryl reached behind himself and found the door handle, keeping his eyes fixed on the horrible sight before him. Carl's face was like nothing he had ever seen before. It was almost crumbling right before his eyes, but holding it together was a kind of steel mesh. The handle turned and he stumbled backwards into the room.

"Darryl," Harriet began, "did you get rid of Carl? Because Agnes just told me something...something incredible. And I need you to hear it."

Darryl turned and looked at Agnes. "Is it about something coming to destroy us?"

"Yes," said Agnes, shocked.

"Well, that's good. At least everybody's stories are matching up," he said backing into the room. Carl followed after him, shutting the door behind him.

"Hello," Carl said. "It would appear we have much to talk about."

Harriet jumped to her feet. "Get out, get out right now."

"Harriet, I cannot do that. The fate of everything rests on us. You must allow me to do the procedure."

"I don't know what you are, but I saw you in the clinic and I knew you weren't human. You aren't touching me or my baby!"

"I would not dream of harming you, but you must allow me to do this," Carl continued. With each word, a little more of his face crumbled away. "The formula is doing this to me," he continued. "I am as human as anyone else, but I may not have much time left. I have seen the future, Harriet, and you are a part of what little future may remain. If there is to be anything left along the path from now to then, you must allow me to do the amniocentesis procedure on you, and quickly!"

"Hold it," Darryl interjected, having gotten over his initial shock. "I don't know who you really are, what you really are, or what you're playing at, but you aren't touching my wife. That much is pretty much set in my mind. I've been very uncertain about some things lately. I've lost confidence in myself as an energy researcher, I've let myself get played around by forces I've considered beyond my control, and I've let setbacks get me down, but I am rock solid on the fact that you aren't getting anywhere near her. With that in mind, you are going to explain yourself in clear terms or I'm going to take your crumbling body and kick you out of my house."

Carl took a pleading look to his face, the mesh holding it together stretching and molding itself to fit his features, but digging into his flesh all the same. "There is no time," he said, "but if you insist then I will do my best to sum up and hope that we are not digging our own graves."

Carl sat down in a chair across from the sofa, uninvited, and hung his head briefly. Darryl sat next to Harriet and put his arms around her. Agnes stared at Carl with wide eyes as if he represented everything she had ever feared in her entire life.

And the story began. It began with the vampires, ancient creatures, and the mystery of their origins. Nobody had ever managed to successfully spontaneously create a vampire. They were well known, of

course, for being able to make more of their kind, but in a classic philosophical exercise, nobody could determine which had come first, the vampire or the victim. Their powers were legendary, their resilience unmatched, and the world considered them evil when in fact they were merely doing what they needed to do to survive. But survival was something humans did quite well themselves.

Humans had long ago mastered the art of evolution through technology. Our biological forms adapted too slowly to rapidly changing conditions, and so we made up for it with machinery, knowledge, and manipulation of the physical world, whereas the vampires seemed to live entirely in the mental and spiritual worlds. How much could we have learned from them if only we had been able to find a mutual peace? But since when did humans place learning above control?

And so humans had taken their technology and had mastered the vampire and had taken what they could find of value from them and the vampire, so long accustomed to being in control, had begun to wither away in the face of their adversary. Loss of control was more effective against them than any of their classic weaknesses; religious imagery, garlic, stakes through the heart, or even the ultimate weapon against vampires, the sun itself.

And at the center of it all was their blood, the blood of humans primarily, which, after passing through the vampire and being exposed to the mental and spiritual worlds, attained properties that had never been seen before and could not now be found in any other substance. Attempts to synthesize it had been unsuccessful. And so when Alin, the last vampire, succumbed to the loss of control and disintegrated, the last known source of their blood was gone forever.

Carl told them of the formula and its ability to allow people to see the many branches of possible futures, how the mental powers of the vampire could temporarily be transferred to living humans. And he told them of the cost associated with those powers, the rotting of the flesh, the deterioration of the soul, and of the addiction that kept you taking it even in the face of these costs.

As his story progressed, he told them of what he had seen in the brightest path, of the desolation and destruction and darkness that awaited the Earth if nothing could be done. And he told them that they were coming.

At this, Agnes let out a gasp.

“That’s what Sean told me!” she exclaimed. Carl nodded as she told him of the mysterious radio transmissions and what Sean and Chuck had theorized about their origins.

“He is entirely correct,” Carl said. “They are not entirely unlike the vampire, you know. They merely seek to survive, which in itself is not something to be condemned, but they do it at the cost of those around them. They are unfeeling, uncaring, one might even say selfish.”

“But what are they?”

“What does it matter? They are coming and we know their intentions. Knowing their biological nature is something I may be able to find out, but it will be useless if we do not have the means of defending ourselves and for that we will need energy. And that is where you come in, Darryl, and you, too, Harriet. Your fabulous inventions both mechanical and biological. We will create energy and use it to fight them.”

There was silence for a few moments, and then Harriet rose and left the room. When she returned she was dressed for going out.

“If we’re going to do this, let’s get moving. And if I think you’re endangering the baby for even a minute, even by accident, I’ll...” she paused, “I’ll kill you and every member of your order and damn the consequences.” Carl’s eyes flashed for a moment, but he said nothing and merely nodded.

“Wait a minute,” Darryl began, but Harriet silenced him with a wave.

“I’ve made up my mind,” she said. “I’d been considering having it done anyway so you could continue your experiments. I talked with Doctor Ryday and she said it’s risky, but then so is walking down the street. It’ll be ok.” She leaned down to where he sat on the soft and kissed him.

“I’m coming with you,” he said. She nodded her assent.

“I’d like to come, too,” Agnes said, getting up.

“Then let us all go,” said Carl.

After a buildup like that, it was a bit anticlimactic for them all to have to walk, but nobody had any gasoline and so they had no other choice. They set out for the clinic and, when they arrived, they found their way to a procedure room. Darryl was gratified to see that it looked quite a bit cleaner and more well maintained than the rest of the building. Once they were all inside, Carl locked the door.

“What’s that for?” asked Darryl.

“The other members of my order do not agree with my interpretation of the visions. It is merely a precaution.”

Harriet laid down on the table and Carl performed the procedure. Darryl had not been present when Doctor Ryday had done it and was surprised at how quickly and fluidly the entire process was. Harriet showed no sign of obvious distress apart from the perfectly understandable nervousness. When it was over, Carl held a small vial of a semitranslucent fluid.

“The liquid of life,” he said, holding it close to his eyes and examining it minutely. “If there is energy in anything at all in this world, it is here.”

“How much?” Darryl replied. “Enough for what, exactly? If the experiment is a success, will we need to start rounding up every pregnant woman in the world to collect the stuff?”

“I honestly do not know. But let us find out.”

“How much time do we have, exactly?”

“This I do not know, either. We must conduct the experiment and hope for the best.”

## **Chapter 21**

“So what do you think?” Chuck asked as Sean hung up the phone.

“No idea,” Sean said, still staring at the handset. He pushed the button that turned the power off. The battery had nearly died during the call, but there was still a little juice left. Best to save it for a last-ditch effort if it came to that.

“There’s a leak in subsection sixteen,” Chuck said quietly. He’d known Sean for a long time, and quiet introspection didn’t suit him. He didn’t know what would happen if he interrupted his thoughts.

“Best get out there, then,” said Sean. “Unusual place for a leak. That’s one of the best built, most well-maintained parts of the plant. Bad omen.”

“You believe in omens?”

“At this point, I don’t know what I believe, but if the sturdiest part of the plant is starting to crumble, that’s bad news in the real world.”

Chuck couldn’t argue with that. They gathered their tools and headed out for subsection sixteen.

The hissing of steam greeted their ears as they entered the small enclosed area. This was a sensitive part of the entire apparatus and was one of the final junctions before the energy they were generating was sent out into the world. They had often wondered what would happen if the flow of energy ever stopped. Would it be enough to get some much-needed attention out here? Possibly. But they suspected that it would not be the kind of attention they would want and besides, at this point most of the power was going to essential services only. They had decided eventually that losing power at a hospital or something similar was not worth getting some attention out here in the middle of nowhere, especially when that attention was likely to take the form of prison.

There was also a strange clanging noise.

“You suppose a flap’s come undone?” Chuck asked.

“Hope that’s all it is,” Sean replied. “That’s a pretty easy fix compared to what could be happening down here.”

The white noise of the steam obscured most other sounds except for the high frequency clanging they could still hear. Their own footsteps were muffled and it seemed as if they would drown in the humidity, but in amongst the clanging they thought they could also hear another sound. Unable to make it out, it nevertheless sounded familiar to them both somehow. They turned a corner, triangulating on the source of the two sounds. Sean pulled a heavy wrench out of the toolbag and wielded it like a club.

“What’s that for?” Chuck asked.

“Not sure,” Sean replied. “Just in case.”

“Just in case of what?” Chuck replied, and his voice was slightly higher pitched from nervousness. After a moment’s thought, he, too, drew a wrench from his own toolbag, holding it in what he hoped was a



brave and threatening manner. The clanging was growing louder as they approached the area where they thought it was coming from, and the other, familiar sound was growing in clarity. It now sounded like muttering of some kind.

“Hungry...so hungry...numb...”

Sean, who was in the lead, turned and looked at Chuck, who shrugged his shoulders to indicate that he had no more idea of what was going on than Sean did. The sounds were clearly coming from very nearby, possibly around the very next corner, but the steam in the room was making it difficult to pinpoint exact locations or distances. They stopped at a junction and hesitated, listening to the sounds.

For a moment there was a wet sucking sound that managed to be heard over the incessant hissing of the steam, and then the muttering recommenced.

“Must have more...” and then there was a great clang and the hissing grew louder.

*On three*, Sean mouthed quietly to Chuck. Chuck nodded and Sean held up three fingers, dropped one, then a second, and when the third finger vanished they moved quickly out from behind the corner.

In the haze and mist of the leaking steam they saw a shadowy form, hulking and slouching and slavering over the steam output vent, holding its great mouth open in front, trying to capture as much of the outgoing energy as it possibly could, greedily putting its mouth on the vent for a time and sucking the vapor out.

“Who are you?” Sean asked bravely. The figure spun and stared at them with eyes that shone, piercing through the fog in the room. It stared for a moment, wordlessly, then returned its attention to the vent. Sean and Chuck took two steps forward.

“I said who are you? You’re trespassing on utility property,” Sean said. He raised the wrench a little higher to try to intimidate the figure.

“Not trespassing,” the figure muttered, still hunched over the vent.

“I don’t know how you figure that,” Sean said. “You are stealing from the power plant. Now step away from the vent and explain yourself.”

The figure did not move for a moment apart from its efforts to capture all the steam leaking from the vent, but then turned with a frighteningly sudden movement, fixing its luminous gaze on the two men, and then strode quickly over to them. They recoiled at this unexpected onslaught, but the figure stopped just as it reached them.

“They don’t recognize...don’t understand...” the figure muttered. And again, especially now that it was so close, the voice was familiar.

“...Art?” Chuck said.

The figure recoiled slightly at the name, but righted itself and made no comment. Its eyes glowed brightly in the mist and the two men had to squint to keep themselves from being blinded.

“Art, what happened? We buried you!” Sean said.

“Hungry...need energy...” Art muttered, and then turned and sloped back over to the vent to consume more steam.

“Art, we can’t let you do that,” Sean said, stepping towards him and putting a hand on his shoulder. He removed it quickly. He had expected Art’s body to be warm, but what he felt instead was the unyielding cold of metal. Art turned and glared at Sean for a moment, but then returned his attention to the vent.

“Chuck, get over here, we can’t let him do this. We’re losing power fast.”

Chuck hesitated for a moment and then came over to assist, but the creature that answered to Art’s name threw them aside with surprising strength.

“Hang on, I’ve got an idea,” Chuck said, scurrying off down a side area. A few moments later he returned with a length of sturdy chain. Together they encircled the distracted creature, which paid them no notice at all, until they had the chain wrapped securely around it and then they pulled.

The creature resisted for a moment, grabbing onto some nearby pipes, but it quickly lost its balance, being somewhat top heavy, and fell to the floor with a clang.

“No!” it rasped. “So hungry...must have more...no...” it continued, its eyes blazing with a blinding light, but Sean and Chuck paid no heed to its cries and dragged it away from the vent, its metal hide scraping across the concrete floor with a horrible sound. They affixed the chain to a sturdy support with a length of scrap rebar inserted through the links and then sprinted to the vent to repair the damage.

“Look at this, it’s like he bit through it,” Sean lamented. “It’s all shredded. How are we going to fix this?”

Behind them they could hear the struggles of the mechanical monster that resembled Art so closely. In the backs of their minds, they struggled with this knowledge and wondered how it could have come to pass, but they maintained the majority of their concentration on the task at hand: restoring full power to the output vents.

“Can we reroute?”

“We can, but the other systems can’t take the pressure for long.”

“What if we do that and then cut off the shredded bits and repair what’s left?”

“What are we going to cut it off with? There’s no fuel left for the torch and a hacksaw would take forever.”

“What if we fit a bigger pipe over it?”

“What bigger pipe?”

They stared at the escaping energy for several minutes and then Chuck glanced back at the monster still struggling on the floor trying to break the chains. An idea occurred to him and he rushed to the creature's side.

He watched it for a moment. It was strong, but uncoordinated. If it could get its act together, it could break the chains easily, but it clumsily grasped at them and couldn't seem to get a grip. Meanwhile, it rolled back and forth ineffectually, struggling like a turtle stuck on its back.

"Art!" he said.

The creature stopped struggling and looked at Chuck with its glowing eyes.

"Chuck," it said, and the metallic throat created a kind of desperate rasp. "Need steam," it muttered.

"We know, but we need it, too, Art. You know where that vent goes and if they lose power then all the people who are depending on it could die."

"Hurts..." the Art-creature said.

"I know," Chuck said, although his mind was still struggling with the entire concept of Art being alive in this metal body, let alone the idea that it could hurt. "We can get you power from someplace else, but first we need your help."

"Hurry up over there," Sean shouted.

"Help?" Art said.

"Yeah, you tore up the vent pretty good. We need you to cut off the shredded part so we can fix it. And then we can reroute the pipes so that everybody gets all the power they need, but first we've got to fix this damage. If I help you up, will you do that for me?"

Art began to struggle against the chains again and mutter "hurts, need power," and other pitiful phrases for a few moments, but then gave up and went limp against his bonds.

"Art?" Chuck prompted.

"Yes," Art rasped.

Chuck removed the piece of rebar and helped Art to his feet. The figure shambled over to the vent, which was no longer leaking steam. Sean had rerouted the power through another conduit, but he could see the pressure reading and knew it wouldn't hold for more than a few minutes. Art considered the metal piping carefully with his glowing eyes and then reached a metallic hand up and gripped it solidly. He then took his other hand and sheared off the fragmented pieces, leaving behind a reasonably smooth surface. Sean quickly replaced the hose that carried the steam and sealed it with a crimp. Art released the pipe and Sean rerouted the power again so that the pressure was off the alternate pipe.

“Need steam,” Art rasped, and his voice resembled nothing as much as metal being dragged across metal. With the steam no longer escaping, the room was much quieter and the sound of his voice was chilling and grated on the nerves.

Chuck grabbed a spare bit of hose and plugged it into the alternate pipe and then routed a small amount of steam through it. He gave the hose to Art who plugged it into an aperture in the area where his neck would be. Art sagged to the floor and sat in a hunched, uncomfortable position.

“Thanks, Art,” Sean said. “You ok?”

Art glanced at him with his blinding eyes and said “Do I look ok?”

“Well, no,” Sean confessed. “But you look better now than you did ten minutes ago.”

“I suppose so,” Art said. Now that he had a steady supply of steam feeding him, he was much more coherent.

“Actually, you look better than you have in months,” Chuck said. “I mean what with actually moving around and being alive and all. What happened?”

Art considered the question for several moments.

“I do not remember cutting my flesh,” he said at length, “but when my consciousness awoke I knew that my body was useless. You had rightfully put me in the ground at that point. I do not fully understand what caused it, but somehow the radio transmission awoke something within me. Perhaps it was my obsession, perhaps it was my need to know, perhaps it was a mystical word that they spoke and I repeated in my attempts to understand it, but whatever it was my spirit would not die. And a spirit without a body is an unbearable experience, and so I began to draw from what was around me.”

Sean and Chuck listened, although they found it difficult. The voice grated and was unpleasant.

“As I said, I was in the ground, and so I began to draw from the minerals and metals around me. It took me a long while to accrete enough material, but slowly I began to leach it from the soil around me until at last I was able to move again. I extracted myself from the Earth, but I quickly found that I needed energy. That was when I came here.”

“So you’ve only been back for a few hours?”

“That is correct,” Art said. “And I fear that the steam you are feeding me will not be enough for long. It is addicting and I will require more.”

“You know there isn’t any more, Art,” Sean said carefully. “You know this place is hanging on by a thread and is falling apart. If we give you any more then we risk not having any for the outside world.”

“I know, but the addiction is strong. You saw me a moment ago. When the craving takes me, I will be uncontrollable and I will consume all the power available here and then go in search of more.”

“You’re an energy vampire,” Chuck breathed.

"It would seem so," said Art.

## **Chapter 22**

Jeremy descended the ladder and examined the inert body of Nelson. After removing the rather elaborate disguise, it was obvious that he hadn't been human, but despite the alien physiology, Jeremy was satisfied that his adversary was dead. An alien presence. Jeremy had suspected that alien life existed for some time. It was, after all, pretty much a statistical certainty in an infinite universe that life would have to exist in more places than just on Earth, but there had never been any concrete evidence of it until just now.

And as he watched, the body began to decompose much faster than it had any right to do. Jeremy attempted to find a container to trap some of the biological material, but there was nothing nearby and eventually it all crumbled to dust.

Cursing his loss of the evidence he needed, he turned his attention to the banks of computers, currently switched off. He would investigate these later. No doubt there would be security, and possibly even alien technology that would require time to decipher, but one thing he could do immediately was get access to the radio records to see what Nelson had been so desperate to hide. He mounted the ladder and emerged into the recycling room once again.

Sprinting down the hallway, he made his way to the radio tower and found it chaotic. Medical staff were tending to Janet's ankle and technicians were already poring through the data banks to find the missing transmission.

"Did you find it yet?" Jeremy asked.

"Yes, it's just here," replied Eileen.

They stared together at the computer readout and tried to grasp the enormity of what they were seeing. Based on the transmission time, the positioning, and the relative velocity of the incoming spacecraft they were able to make a rough guess as to the arrival time.

"They should be visible with telescopes now," Eileen said. "They should be visible with the naked eye in a few hours. They will be within range of our short range transport rockets by this time tomorrow."

"That's impossible," Jeremy said. "That's impossibly fast."

"It isn't impossible," Eileen replied. "But it is very, very fast."

"We don't have the capability of defending against something like that up here. We have to get on the radio and contact Earth."

"We're trying, but they don't seem to be responding for some reason," Eileen said.

"It's the damn council, they're actively trying to cut us off. Which frequencies are you trying?"

"The official ones we're supposed to use to contact Earth."

“Try some others. Try them all. We’ve got to get in contact with someone down there.”

Eileen turned back to the transmitter and tapped the screen a few times. Options appeared and she made her selections, then switched her microphone on.

“This is Moon Base Colony calling anyone on Earth. We are now transmitting on several frequencies simultaneously. Official channels are unresponsive. If you can hear me, please respond and identify yourselves. Again, this is Moon Base Colony calling anyone on Earth,” she said, and her voice was calm, as if she had rehearsed this a thousand times.

She stopped transmitting and the two of them waited in the silence for a few moments. After a reasonable length of time, Eileen repeated her message and again they waited. More moments passed and then, just as she was about to try again, a burst of static came on briefly, followed by silence.

“What do you suppose that means?” Jeremy asked, but he was interrupted by another burst of static and then a voice.

“We hear you Moon Base Colony. This is Power Station Alpha Gamma Tau, located in Nebraska.”

“Power Station, this is Moon Base Colony, radio operator Eileen speaking, we have a situation here and need you to relay a message to central ops, over.”

There was a pause before the radio resumed receiving again, and then the voice on the other end said, “That’s a problem, Moon Base, because central ops has been unresponsive to us for several months now. We have a situation here as well...a couple of them actually, and we were hoping you could help us.”

Eileen and Jeremy looked at each other, each trying to decide how to respond. Jeremy leaned over and took the microphone.

“Power Station, this is Officer Jeremy Blather speaking. Describe your situation and we’ll do what we can on our end.”

“Moon Base, this is Chief Charles Monit. We have two situations, which I will describe in order of seriousness. First, we have a...a massive power leak here that we currently have contained, but which we believe will become much more serious very soon. We do not have the materials necessary to provide a permanent solution.”

In the background of his transmission, Jeremy could here a rasping sound that almost resembled words, but he couldn’t make them out.

“Second,” Chuck went on, “we have been receiving strange transmissions for the last few weeks in another language. We have reason to believe that an alien fleet may be approaching our sector. Do you have any intelligence in that regard?”

Jeremy nearly dropped the microphone, but managed to keep hold of it.

“Power Station, we can confirm the approach of alien vessels,” Jeremy said after a moment’s consideration. What was the point of keeping a secret of something they already knew? “We have reasonably good positioning data and an ETA of roughly one to two days.”

More silence from the radio and then Chuck came back on.

“Do you believe them to be hostile?”

“We have intercepted and eliminated a spy and saboteur here at Moon Base. Based on his actions, we believe them to be potentially hostile.”

“What resources do you have to repel the attack?”

“A few short range transport rockets and some small explosives. Most of our weaponry was either used or decommissioned after the war to provide raw materials for basic survival up here. We’ve got no nukes. What help can you provide? We could sure use some energy up here.”

“We have the capability to beam you power, but as I mentioned we are currently containing a potentially serious power leak and we are also supplying power to essential services in the western United States.”

Jeremy considered the situation. Apart from general power needs, extra energy wasn’t really going to improve their ability to defend themselves. What they needed was supplies and weapons from Earth, and those would have to come quickly. Nelson had done his job well, he reflected grimly. He wondered how much influence he had had behind the scenes of the last war. Perhaps both of the last wars. Earth could not be more vulnerable now. Even if he could mobilize the entire military force of the planet, could they get here in time? Would there be enough of them left to repel the invasion? And what did they want?

“Power Station,” he finally said, breaking the lengthy silence, “I’m not sure what help we can give you. Continue providing power to essential services and keep us apprised of your situation. We will monitor this frequency and continue trying to raise central ops. Moon Base out.”

Jeremy placed the microphone on the desk and looked at Eileen. “What do you think?” he asked.

Eileen looked back at him. Her eyes were steely and her look was severe. “I think we’d better start telling people because we’re going to need as many ideas as we can get on this one.”

## **Chapter 23**

Darryl stooped over his apparatus. He had gone over it a dozen times, but he was still nervous about this. Harriet was resting on a chair nearby behind a desk. Carl looked on with an impassive manner. Agnes sat near Harriet, trying to make sense of it all.

“Everything ok, dear?” Harriet asked.

“I think so,” Darryl said. In his mind he was absolutely certain, but he wasn’t ready to commit to it verbally yet. The idea that all his research was coming to this, that it might actually work, was thrilling to him and he couldn’t wait to be able to pronounce it ready to test and start the process. On the other

hand, the implications were chilling to him. If this worked, he would be forced to start lining up pregnant women to take their amniotic fluid and there was no time to work out an organized way to do it. They needed energy to defend themselves against an invading force. In an ideal world there would be compensation for this kind of thing and then the people using the power could be charged for it, just like it had always been with any natural resource.

In this situation, though, there wouldn't be time to put any of those systems together. The council would probably just pass a law or something and women would be lined up to have their fluids removed. He feared the atrocities that might be committed and wondered if he really wanted the experiment to succeed. Would survival of the species be worth subjugating it? And what if people just decided to stop getting pregnant to avoid the inhumanity that he could see coming? Would there be forced implantation of cloned fetuses?

Darryl glanced at Carl, who claimed he could see the future. There was no way for him to share the visions he said he was having. Darryl wondered if he was telling them everything, what futures he really saw, and whether this experiment was really a part of it. He also wondered if there might be another way.

"How goes it?" Carl asked. Darryl couldn't help but feel like he was an enforcer more than an enabler. Carl had done the procedure flawlessly and there had been no indication that the baby was harmed, but now that it had been done he just stood around and, frankly, looked menacing with that wire mesh over his crumbling face. The white lab coat reinforced all the old stereotypes about mad scientists and Darryl was glad he didn't own one. He rotated a magnifying lens into position so that he could examine a pipe fitting more closely.

"It's fine, just a few more checks. Gotta make sure it's flawless, we don't get another chance at this," he muttered.

Carl nodded, but said nothing. He paced over to the window and looked out and up at the hazy sky as if he could see the alien fleet approaching through the cloud cover.

"Anything you want to tell us?" Darryl asked. He glanced at Harriet and noticed that she had fallen asleep. The procedure had taken something out of her. He hoped it was nothing serious.

"We are on the right path," Carl said, not looking away from the window. "The primary path is slightly dimmer and alternate futures are popping up more numerously."

"But we're still on the path to extinction," Agnes said. It wasn't a question, but a statement of fact that Carl was expected to either confirm or deny.

"Most likely," he replied cryptically.

Darryl sighed and returned to his examination of the apparatus. Everything appeared to be ready and so he started the initial process. In twenty minutes it would be ready to add Harriet's amniotic fluid.

"So what's the plan if this works?" Darryl asked.

"What do you mean?" asked Carl.



"I mean, let's say I produce a significant quantity of energy. Who do we tell? How do we make more? What preparations should we be making, mentally, right now so that we make sure this gets done right?"

"We will need a power plant to process the energy correctly," Carl said. "I have one in mind in China that will suit our needs perfectly."

"China?" said Agnes, startled. "Why China?"

"I have associates there. There will not be time for lengthy explanations, we will need whoever helps us to trust us completely and take our instructions without hesitation. Do you know of another power plant where those conditions exist?"

"Actually, I do," Agnes said. She then told Carl what Harriet and Darryl already knew, which was that her cousin was working at a power plant and that he had talked to them about the potential alien invasion. There hadn't been time to discuss that part of it much since they'd started talking about this experiment. Her head was still spinning, but this was something she could focus on.

"Fine," said Carl. "It's closer and will be suitable, I think." Darryl was taken aback slightly. He had fully expected Carl to have some sinister reason for preferring the China site, but he seemed perfectly content to go to the closer plant. Suddenly, Carl's knees sagged and he clutched the window sill for balance. Agnes rushed to help him, but he waved her off and stood upright again.

"A waking vision," he said, bits of skin flaking off of his ravaged face. "They are rare."

"What did you see?" Darryl asked, glancing at the apparatus. A few more minutes remained.

"It was indistinct, but I believe the decision to go to the closer power plant triggered it."

Here we go, thought Darryl. Some mysterious 'vision' crops up and suddenly there's going to be a compelling reason to go all the way to China. They still have a bigger population than any country on Earth, even after the wars. Maybe he's going to be going after the amniotic fluid there.

"So you think we're making a mistake?" Agnes asked.

"No, I think we have stumbled upon exactly the correct decision," Carl said. Again, Darryl was taken aback by his answer. "How is the procedure coming?"

"Couple of more minutes," Darryl said. He didn't trust Carl. Maybe it was left over animosity from the fact that Harriet knew him and didn't trust him either, but so far he was saying all the right things.

"What do you have to contain the energy?" Carl asked.

"Battery array," Darryl said.

Carl looked at it. "It will not be enough capacity to contain the energy produced, but it will serve our purpose."

“What is our purpose, exactly?” Darryl said. “You’ve never answered my question about what the next step is even if this is successful.”

“This is a proof of concept,” Carl said. “I have another plan. We need enough energy to make it to the power plant, which will require a vehicle. I have a vehicle which we can modify to run off of your batteries, but we will need the power plant before we can do more.”

Darryl wanted to argue, but a sound behind him made him turn. A fitting was loose, but the experiment was at a critical juncture. If he stopped to repair it then they might have to start over. If he added the ingredient now, the fitting might last long enough to finish the experiment. And time was short. He grabbed the vial and tipped it into the receptacle and watched it dribble through the path towards the reaction chamber. As the liquid approached, he pulled his goggles down over his eyes.

And then the apparatus exploded.

Shards of glass and melted plastic flew out in all directions, propelled by the force of the explosion. Darryl instinctively recoiled, but still felt the burns hit his face. He fell face down and could tell from his wet breath that he was bleeding. The desk was pushed back several feet and Harriet woke with a start to see Agnes and Carl lying on the ground with the breath knocked out of them. She sprang to her feet and ran to Darryl.

“Darryl?” she cried. “Darryl, talk to me!”

“Glad I had the goggles on,” he mumbled. Harriet hugged him tightly and broke into tears.

Carl recovered his breath and came over to examine Darryl.

“Burns are not too bad. There will be a small amount of scarring, but most of this is superficial. You were lucky,” he said.

“Yeah, I totally feel lucky,” Darryl said. “Guess we got energy, though.”

“Yes,” Carl said, grinning and causing some additional flakes of his face to fall off through the metal mesh that was holding him together.

Painfully, Darryl got up and made his way to the desk. They got some first aid supplies and cleaned him up as best they could, including removing a few glass shards from his cheeks with tweezers, and then he went to check on the apparatus.

“Completely destroyed,” he moaned. “Where are we going to get the stuff to make another one?”

“There is no time anyway,” Carl said. “Check the batteries.”

Darryl moved to look at the receptacles and checked the charge on them.

“They’re totally full. We charged them up and still had enough energy left over to make that explosion. It was a total success!”

“Excellent. And now we must go to the power plant.”

“How’s that going to help? We don’t have the stuff anymore. No more amniotic fluid, no more apparatus. The experiment was a success, but now we’re basically screwed,” Darryl cursed.

“You must listen, you must try to understand,” Carl said. “Things are happening. I saw things in the vision that I cannot explain, but all the answers lie at the power plant. All we need is our knowledge, the batteries to get us there, and haste! This was the proof we needed that the process works. Now I will provide us with something beyond the amniotic fluid.”

And he would not explain himself further. They disconnected the batteries from the charred wreckage of the apparatus and made their way as quickly as they could to a vehicle that Carl had hidden behind the clinic. It took him an hour, a very anxious hour, but he finally made the modifications necessary to connect the batteries to the vehicle and they piled in.”

“This is a pretty old car,” Darryl said.

“Yes,” Carl replied. “It was one of the early hybrid vehicles from the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. It was intended to run on electricity and gasoline, but there is no more gasoline, of course. I have made it run entirely on the batteries.”

They started out. The ride was rough.

“This thing going to hold together?” Agnes asked.

“Any way to get it to stop shaking so much?” Harriet asked. “I feel like I’m going to be carsick, unless this thing induces labor first.”

“Don’t say that,” Darryl said. “It’s way too early.”

“Don’t I know it?”

“There is no time to make additional modifications to the vehicle,” Carl said. “If you feel as though you cannot continue with it in its current condition, then we can stop and let you out.”

“No way!” said both Agnes and Harriet together.

The trip to the power plant took seven hours. They made two stops along the way to answer calls of nature, but there was no food or water available. At last they saw the towering spires of the plant heave into sight on the horizon.

## **Chapter 24**

Chuck and Sean sat watching Art. They had moved the radio down to the substation so they could keep an eye on him and monitor the radio for any traffic. They marveled at their luck that Chuck had gone upstairs at just the right time to get it that the Moon Base had tried to contact them.

Art sat, apparently peacefully, with the steam pipe in his neck absorbing the energy. He had not said anything in quite some time.

“What do you think?” Sean asked.

“About what?” Chuck couldn’t believe the absurdity of the situation or of that question. There was so much going on that he didn’t even know where to start.

“About Art coming back,” Sean said.

“I honestly haven’t thought about it much at all,” Chuck said. “Which I realize sounds strange, but when you’ve got as much on your mind as I do, I hope I can be forgiven for putting something on the backburner.”

Sean grinned. “Yeah, you’re forgiven.”

“How long do you think we’ve got until he starts moving again?”

Art twitched a little.

“Not long, I’m afraid.”

“You think the Moon Base is going to come up with something?”

“I’m honestly not sure what they could possibly come up with.”

Just then, the radio crackled to life.

“This is Moon Base to Power Plant,” said Jeremy.

“Power Plant here,” answered Chuck.

“Power Plant, we have the alien fleet in sight. They are passing directly above us.”

A chill ran through Sean and Chuck as they realized that Art was suddenly the least of their problems. Art began to stir. They had taken the precaution of chaining him back down, but everyone knew that he could break the chains if he mustered enough coordination to do so. His eyes had faded to a dull glow.

“Are they attacking?” Chuck asked.

“Negative, Power Plant, they are not. We’re not sure why that is, to be honest. We’ve been going through the spy’s records, but they’re all encrypted and in an alien language so we haven’t been able to get anything from them at all, really.”

Before Chuck could reply, a second voice came on the radio.

“Sean?”

It was Agnes's voice. Sean took the microphone from Chuck.

"Agnes?" he said. "Moon Base, stand by, we are receiving a second transmission on this channel."

"Moon Base standing by," Jeremy replied.

"Sean, we're coming to you at the power plant. We estimate we're about an hour out."

Sean looked at Chuck. "Why do you suppose they're coming here?" he asked.

"I don't know, but I don't think it's a good idea. Art could go nuts any minute now."

"Sean, do you copy? We're almost there."

"Agnes, this is Sean, I copy, but I don't think it's a good idea. We've got a pretty significant power leak situation here. Were you able to notify anybody that we need help?"

"No, Sean, but we've got something that might solve your power leak problem. Tell us how to get to your exact location."

Sean sighed. He wasn't thrilled about this, but decided that since it was almost over anyway he might as well be with family. Either Art was going to go crazy or the aliens were going to destroy everything, but either way the end result was going to be the same. He radioed her the instructions for how to get to the plant and what to do once they got there.

Chuck took the microphone back from Sean.

"Moon Base, what's the progress report on the alien fleet?"

"They have passed us by, repeat, they have passed us by."

"What do you suppose that means?" Chuck asked, bewildered. Why would they pass by? They clearly knew the planet was inhabited if they'd sent a spy like Jeremy had said they had. What were they going to do, invade Mercury? Then it dawned on him.

"Moon Base, what is their current trajectory?"

"They're heading straight for the sun," and Jeremy's tone of voice made it clear that he'd just realized what was going on as well. Up on the moon, he sent people to the telescopes to get a better view of the situation.

Art began to stir more, the chains that held him clanking against one another and against the concrete floor. A metallic rasping moan escaped from him and he began to struggle, trying to get to his feet.

"Here we go," Sean said.

"Hungry...so hungry..." Art said, clearly delirious. He pulled the steam hose from his neck and it gushed vapor into the room, creating a haze that made it difficult to see.

“Why would he do that?” shouted Chuck over the sudden hissing noise that was permeating the room.

“If you were starving to death, would you hold onto something that was feeding you crumbs or would you go looking for something meatier?”

Art began to pull at his chains with more energy. He finally succeeded in getting a grip on one and snapped it.

“We’ve got to get him out of here,” Chuck said.

“How?” Sean asked.

“What’s the most energetic thing we have we can use as bait?”

“The torch, but it’s almost out of fuel. Not enough left for anything, really.”

“We don’t need to light it, we can just wave it under his nose.”

Chuck sprinted upstairs where they had left the acetylene torch. By the time he made it back down, Art was pulling spiritedly at the other chains and had nearly broken them all. He was lurching greedily towards the main steam vent again.

“Art! Look here!” Chuck shouted. What was left of Art’s mind turned and looked at him and saw the canister of fuel in his hand. Abandoning his lurch towards the steam vent, he snapped the last chain easily and began moving quickly towards Chuck. The monster moved much faster than he had expected, and Chuck nearly tripped over himself trying to move out of the way. He was cornered now, with Art moving towards him quickly.

“Sean! Think fast!” Chuck yelled, lobbing the canister over Art’s head towards Sean, who caught it and waved it around like a matador with a red cape. Art turned and moved towards Sean who, after making sure Art was definitely following him, sprinted up the stairs. He could hear the clanging of Art’s footsteps as he made his way up the metal steps and hoped that they would be able to withstand the weight of Art’s metal body. He carried the canister like a football and listened to see if Art was catching up.

At last he made it to the outside, on one of the lower towers of the plant. He spun and saw Art emerge from the stairwell and start coming towards him. A few moments later, Chuck came out of the stairs as well. Sean was cornered. Chuck waved his hands, indicating that he was open for a pass, but Sean had another idea. He waved the canister at Art to make sure he had his attention. Art held his arms out and charged towards the canister, which Sean then heaved over the side of the tower down to the ground below. Art hurled himself after it and a few moments later, Sean and Chuck heard a massive clatter as the metal body hit the ground.

Then they looked up and saw a cloud of dust coming over the horizon. Agnes and her friends were arriving.

## Chapter 25

“What was that?” Darryl asked as they watched a massive object plunge from one of the lower towers as they approached the plant.

“I do not know,” Carl said, accelerating, “but time is short. We cannot worry about that now. We must get to the power plant at all costs.”

Darryl watched the shape hit the ground, where it remained motionless for a time. And then...

“I think it’s moving!” he cried, straining his eyes to get a better look through the haze of dust and clouds.

“It doesn’t matter,” Carl said calmly. “Nothing can deter us from our goal at this point. We must succeed or else all will fail.”

Darryl didn’t share this opinion. He had just seen a massive object fall from a great height and was absolutely certain now that it was moving and he felt that that was something serious to be considered in addition to the mission they were currently on.

As the car arrived on the scene, the massive bulk was rising. It had a small canister in its hand, which it bit through with metal teeth, exposing the contents, which turned out to be a very tiny amount of acetylene fuel. The creature tipped the precious few drops into a hole in the side of its neck and then roared with metallic fury when it discovered that that was all there was.

A door opened in the side of the power plant and two men raced out, heading straight for the monstrosity.

“Art! Art! We’re sorry! Come on, man, see reason!” one of them yelled.

“Sean!” Agnes cried, jumping out from the car.

“Agnes!” Sean said, turning to face her. “Get back!”

She stopped where she was, but did not retreat. Art rose up to his full height and let forth a screeching cry that caused all of them to clap their hands over their ears.

“What is that thing?” Darryl yelled.

“Friend of ours,” Chuck said lamely, keeping his eyes firmly fixed on Art as he flailed around. There was no obvious energy source nearby for him to make for, but it was only a matter of time before he gained enough awareness to turn his attention to the power plant and they had nothing left to distract him.

Carl calmly got out of the car, but said nothing.

“Moon Base,” Harriet said into the radio. “Moon Base! We know you’re on this frequency, answer me!”

“Power Plant, this is Moon Base, go ahead,” the radio said.

“Tell them to expect a massive beam of power in a few moments,” Carl said.

“What?” Harriet said, distracted from the microphone for a moment.

“And ask them to give us the exact position of the alien fleet,” he continued.

Art was flailing around, stomping the ground, in an uncontrollable rage.

“Moon Base, what is the exact position of the alien fleet at this time?” Harriet asked.

“Power Plant, the alien fleet has taken up position in a wide orbit around the sun. They are deploying solar collectors.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” asked Darryl, who was still in the car with Harriet.

“We believe they are not intending to invade Earth after all,” Jeremy went on. “They are intending to set up solar collectors around the sun.”

“Well that’s not so bad,” said Harriet.

“Let me clarify,” Jeremy went on. “They are deploying solar collectors around the entirety of the sun. They are preparing to block all sunlight from reaching any of the planets in the solar system.”

“How long’s that going to take?” Darryl asked.

“Based on their current rate of progress, I would estimate two hours,” Jeremy said. “They are moving with remarkable speed and efficiency.”

“Probably been preparing for it for weeks, it’s just a matter of getting it into position at this point. In vacuum it doesn’t matter if you’ve got a bunch of wide solar collectors deployed, you can just fly in and put them up and rivet them together,” Darryl said bitterly.

Carl was walking slowly up to where Art was still raging, flinging metal limbs around himself, trying to get enough control to triangulate on an energy source. Sean and Chuck were circling him, trying to find some way to get his attention and calm him down or at least start herding him away from the plant. If Art managed to get back into the substation where the main output vent was, there would be no repairing it this time. Calmly, Carl reached into his white coat pocket and withdrew a small metal cylinder with two glowing red lights.

With unnatural speed, Carl lunged forward and deposited the metal cylinder into the small aperture in the side of Art’s neck. Art shuddered and then collapsed.

“What did you do to him?” cried Chuck.

“Nothing permanent,” Carl replied with maddening calm. “Harriet,” he called, “do you have those coordinates yet?”

“Yes,” she called back.



“Please come over here. We are going to need them in a moment.” The still form of Art began to stir again with a clanking and a clatter of metal on metal.

“Watch out, he’s getting up,” Sean said.

“No, he is experiencing the visions,” Carl said. He put his hand into his coat pocket once again and withdrew a small glass vial filled with a deep red liquid.

“What’s that?” asked Darryl.

“This is the secret ingredient. We needed to know that the process worked and we needed to charge the batteries. That was the only reason for having your wife’s amniotic fluid. This is the culmination of everything and nothing must happen to this vial for what is inside cannot be replaced.”

“What is it?” Darryl repeated.

“Vampire blood,” Carl said. “The last remaining vial of vampire blood in the entire world.”

“So what are we doing with it?” Darryl asked.

“There is no time to explain how my order gained control of it. What must happen is this. When Harriet gives us the current position of the alien fleet, we will position the body of that creature in that direction and then we will pour the vial in. I suspect strongly that the creature’s metabolic processes are identical to the process you just demonstrated for us a few hours ago in your lab. The energy potential of the vampire blood far exceeds that of amniotic fluid and the energy created will be enormous.”

“So you’re suggesting that you’re going to just shoot them out of the sky?” Darryl asked, incredulous.

“Yes,” Carl said. “But first we must make some modifications to these two men’s colleague.”

“What kind of modifications?” Sean asked.

“A single destructive beam would be a complete waste of the vampire’s blood. We must use that energy in another way.”

“I don’t understand,” Chuck said.

“I do not expect you to,” Carl said. “Just do as I say and I will explain later. I need you to trust me.”

Everyone looked at Carl and took in what he had just said. A man who held the last remaining vial of vampire blood, who had just incapacitated a rampaging energy vampire, whose face was currently being held onto his body by a fine wire mesh, wanted them to trust him. They all wondered when the madness would stop.

The modifications were made to Carl’s specifications. A cable was run from his body to the power plant, which was, Carl said, the only thing that was going to be capable of absorbing and distributing the excess power that was about to be generated. Carl then affixed another device, again drawn from that seemingly bottomless pocket in his coat, to Art’s chest. Art remained mostly motionless throughout this

process, twitching only slightly as they proceeded. An hour later, Carl pronounced the procedure complete, and not a moment too soon, as Art's eyes opened and he peered around blearily.

"Art," Carl said. "How do you feel?"

"Hungry," Art said.

Carl nodded. "In a moment, you will never feel hungry again."

Art looked at himself and saw the cable running off to the power plant and the device on his chest. His eyes widened.

"You understand," Carl said. "You saw the visions. Tell me, which path is brightest now?"

"The one that leads to your own damnation," Art said, and there was horror in his metallic voice.

Carl smirked. "That is only to be expected."

Art began to move, his joints grinding against one another with a sickening sound, reaching for the cables and clawing at the device. "No...no...not like this," he muttered. "Would rather die..."

"But you cannot die," Carl said, advancing on him.

"Wait, what's he talking about?" Chuck asked.

"He is delirious," Carl said, getting closer.

"No...would rather die...no..." Art continued, but he could not reach the cables and the device on his chest was affixed too firmly. He scrabbled at it ineffectually.

"I think you should wait," Sean began, but Carl cut him off with a rage that they had not expected from him with his calm demeanor.

"Wait? You think we should wait? How long would you wait? Would you wait until the sun is blotted out? Would you wait until there is no more heat or light left in the world? Once they get the solar panels in place the Earth will have exactly eight minutes left until it is plunged into an impenetrable darkness from which it will never emerge. There is no more energy left on this planet or on its colonies, there is no artificial heat. The planet will cool, beginning on the surface, and then extending down through the mantle until at last even the molten core will solidify and then your precious Earth will be a lifeless husk, a solid ball of iron and carbon and silicon, hurtling through space, affected by the gravity of a star it can no longer see and the Schague will have claimed another and you will all be dead!"

The last sentence felt penultimate, as if Carl had intended to go on but had run out of words, had run out of anger, and had run out of time. He spun and poured the contents of the vial into Art's neck and punched the coordinates of the alien fleet into the device on his chest.

At once Art emitted a screech of pain as the energy rushed through him. His eye glowed with a blinding intensity and a beam of pure energy shot from them into space. The blast lasted for several minutes

and Art screamed the entire time, a sound of metal scraping against metal that put everyone's teeth on edge and caused them to cover their ears, but it was not enough. The sound bored into their skulls and into their minds and the light of the blast seared through their eyelids and left afterimages even long after it finally faded away.

Following the intense burst of energy, Art's form began to flicker and then became translucent, and lay there immobile. All that was left was a hazy image that resembled the metallic form that Art had taken following his body's death.

Slowly, everyone got up and began to look around.

"Moon Base calling Power Plant, come in Power Plant," the radio whined.

Harriet, who was closest, staggered to the car and picked up the microphone.

"Go ahead, Moon Base," she said weakly.

"What the hell happened down there?" Jeremy asked. "The aliens were getting ready to set the solar collectors in place and then all of a sudden this blast of light comes up and annihilates the whole fleet and all the solar collectors!"

"Moon Base, stand by, we're still assessing our situation," Harriet said.

She looked at Art and saw his semitransparent form sit motionless. Sean and Chuck were slowly getting up and moving towards their former friend, putting their hands out to touch him, and having them pass right through as if he were made of thin air. Meanwhile, the cables that had been connected to him pulsed with energy that was being transferred to the power plant.

"What did you do, Carl?" Darryl asked. "What did you do?" He grabbed Carl by the lapels and saw a few more flakes of skin fall to the ground. Carl laughed.

"It worked...it worked..." his laughter rang all throughout the area, echoing off the sides of the power plant.

"What worked?" Darryl asked, shaking him.

"Infinite energy. Truly infinite energy," Carl said gleefully.

Darryl hit him in the jaw and Carl collapsed. When he looked back up at Darryl he was still grinning and Darryl was rubbing his knuckles from where he had hit the wire mesh on Carl's face.

"Explain," Darryl said simply.

Getting up and dusting himself off, Carl explained. The vampire blood had indeed been rich in energy, but it would not have been enough to destroy the alien fleet. It would require more, and the only way to get it was to create energy from nothing.

This, of course, violates a fundamental law of the universe, but what if that law could be bent? What if, instead of creating energy from nothing, it was merely borrowed. With enough energy, anything was possible, and so the vast amount created by the vampire blood was used to create a wormhole in space that facilitated time travel. The device on Art's chest navigated him through time, borrowing small amounts of energy from each time that he visited and transferring it back to his body here, which created more energy, which allowed the process to continue infinitely.

"So where is he now?" asked Chuck.

"His body is right here, physically. But he is currently wearing a kind of chronological camouflage. Nobody can tell when he is," Carl said.

"That's what he meant when he said he'd rather die!" Sean shouted. "Who would want to live like that?"

"If he did not live like that, we all would have died! Why is this so difficult for you all to comprehend?" Carl countered.

"There was another way!" Chuck said.

"There wasn't!" Carl said.

"Wait a minute," Darryl said. He'd been thinking. "The aliens were after energy, and you had a way to create infinite energy all along. Wouldn't there be enough to share? Why did you have to kill the whole fleet? And won't more come when they realize we killed that group?"

"No more will come," Carl said, and his grin widened again. "The blast did not just wipe out the fleet that was here to steal your sun. I had Art here blast every known member of the Schague race. They are extinct in this universe and in all others. And I thank him for his service."

"How do you know what they were called?" Agnes asked, horrified.

"Because they enslaved my people fifteen thousand years ago. They thought they had killed us all as we resisted them, but I am the last of my people. And I am dying. But I have exacted my revenge. The human race will benefit and in time I will be revered. If any of my people remain, they will regard me as a god and humans will live forever now that they have the energy to do so. I have abolished war, there is no need to fight over something that is now so abundant. I have enabled you to explore the entire universe, as you now have the capacity to rend both time and space, bending it to your will and going forth to explore and satisfy your own curiosities. No longer will you have to scratch and scabble and want."

Agnes looked aghast.

"I sense you do not share my vision," Carl said, shaking his head sadly. "It matters not. I have given you all a great gift, and I have accepted my payment in the form of the eradication of my people's oppressors."

“But with time travel...” Agnes began, “you have no idea who you just destroyed. Or what you have created. It could all be a loop.”

“It could,” Carl said, turning away from them. “But I care not.”

And with that he walked away from them. They never saw him again, and there was no more vampire blood to see the future with. Humanity had all the power it could ever hope for, and no guidance with which to use it.

What would the future hold?

The end.

Author's notes:

When I began NaNo this year, I only had a vague germ of an idea. I'd been struggling with it for a few weeks, trying to decide what I wanted to write about this year, trying to carve out time to do the necessary prep work prior to beginning. Unfortunately none of that actually happened and I ended up diving in with only that germ of an idea, which was that vampires (the current monster du jour, along with zombies) were now extinct and that somehow that was bad for us.

Two challenges immediately presented themselves: 1) Why was it bad? 2) How could I solve the 'bad' without bringing the vampires back? It seemed logical...if lack of vampires was bad, then the solution to the conflict was to get vampires back. But it also seemed like a cop-out, so I decided early on that they weren't coming back. That stayed true right up until I had the idea to have a different kind of vampire, and it still felt a little like a cop-out, but I thought it was clever enough to leave in.

As noted above, I finished this on 11/25/2011. I am writing the author's notes on 12/3/2011. I wanted to give myself time to think about what I'd written before commenting on it because, and I can't emphasize this enough, I hated writing this novel. I hated it from the beginning, I hated writing it, I hated my characters, and I especially hated my ending which was the ultimate cop-out. Hello, I just changed the world, ok, gotta go! Horrible. And when I tell people, they tell me to write a sequel, but I hated writing the first one, why would I want another one?

The original premise was a post-apocalyptic/steampunk setting, which is to say a modification of the traditional steampunk universe to say that we got here by modifying our energy source. The problem is that I haven't read a lot of steampunk and had no idea how to describe that kind of setting. So the steampunk parts weren't steampunky enough and the science fiction parts (the moon base, alien invasion, etc) weren't sciency enough and the post-apocalyptic parts were basically nodded at in acknowledgement but we never struck up a real conversation.

And so now I'm left with the same problem I had last year, which is that I've identified that I need to do more advance prep work and I need to start learning how to do revisions. Because as much as I hated this novel from start to finish, there's some damn interesting ideas here if I do say so myself. A little nuance here, a little more character development there, and some real thought into what energy rationing would actually entail (including the economics involved) and I think I'd have something kind of neat here. Oh, and a timeline for the wars. That would be nice, too.

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