

The war they wanted

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Earth, 2045.

The Great Religious War has just ended. Seventeen years of brutal fighting have cost more than ninety percent of the Earth's population their lives.

The survivors created city-states beyond each other's reach.

With much of the technology destroyed, farming has once again become the primary means of producing food.

Most religions found their place on the European, Asian, and African continents. The atheists and agnostics made their home in the Americas.

Because of the vast distances between these remaining groups, the war slowly faded—without any formal declaration of peace.

Chapter 1

Harry Biggins, late thirties, sat on his porch chewing a strip of beef jerky. His brown hair was dishevelled beneath a bushy moustache, and his faded black pants met a burgundy long-sleeved shirt that had seen better years.

Behind him stands a worn but liveable house. The essentials are there to make it a home, though it could use a solid coat of paint on the outside.

With the wheat fields around him glowing bright yellow, he nods thoughtfully, “Two more days, then I can harvest it.”

When he finishes the strip of jerky, he rises from his chair and walks toward an equally weathered electric car, its brand markings long since faded. The only hint of its past is the faint trace of what used to be bright red paint, now dull and beaten by years of weather.

He gets in and drops a shopping list on the passenger seat. For a moment the wind dies completely, the air unnervingly still. A shadow sweeps across the car, then sunlight floods back in as if nothing happened.

Harry looks through the windshield and up at the sky. It’s as bright as before. He shrugs, starts the car, and the dashboard display flickers to life. Pulling the lever into drive, he rolls off his farm toward the main highway.

Though few people still use cars, habit makes him glance left and right before turning onto the road and heading for the distant city on the horizon. From here the skyscrapers still rise proudly, their decay hidden by distance. As he nears the outskirts, the

damage becomes clear—windows long gone, corners shattered, chunks missing from their sides.

As he reaches the city limits, Harry's car stalls and rolls to a silent stop without warning. Another shadow flickers across the windshield.

He opens the door, about to step out, when bullets tear past him.

Falling back into the car, he yanks open the glovebox and pulls out a small revolver. Aiming it toward the open door, he hears chattering outside, but no voices.

Growing impatient, he lifts his head slightly between the seats, hoping to catch a glimpse of whoever's firing. "The war is over! Why are you attacking me?"

There's no answer—only rustling from a small barn about twenty meters behind the car, its doors half open.

Keeping low, he shifts his feet beneath him, then launches himself out of the vehicle toward the roadside ditch. More bullets tear past, shattering the car's rear and side windows. Glancing back, he realizes whoever's shooting hasn't noticed he's gone.

Crawling forward, he finds a hole in the barn wall and peers through it. Inside, a figure crouches with a rifle. Against the glare of daylight, only its forward lean and oddly shaped face are visible.

Harry steadies his aim through the hole, fires once, and the figure drops instantly, the weapon clattering to the floor.

He stays down for a while, listening. No movement. Slowly, he rises, circles the barn, and peers through the window. The body lies motionless in a dark pool of blood.

“What on Earth is this?” he mutters, “a failed experiment?”

Climbing through the window, he studies the creature. It’s roughly human in height, covered in coarse grey fur, with the head of an oversized rat. A grey jumpsuit clings to its body, leaving only the head and hands exposed.

He leans against the wall and exhales. “We face man-sized rats now? And I thought crows were a problem on the fields.”

He pushes himself off the wall and looks around the barn. Aside from a few cracked ceramic jugs, the only thing of use is the rifle the creature was carrying.

Kneeling beside the body, he searches the jumpsuit pockets and pulls out several items — a folded piece of parchment covered in strange, unreadable text, a card the size of a credit chip marked with the same alien script, and something that looks suspiciously like a USB stick.

He pockets them all, slings the rifle over his shoulder, and glances down at the body. “Either we’ve had some sort of nuclear disaster, or we’ve got a badly aged experiment. Neither sounds very promising — we’re still recovering as it is.”

Harry sets out to look around the barn and notices a strange pattern in the grass about fifty meters from the road.

As he approaches, the blades part to reveal the outline of a ship — its hull lined with mirrored panels that make it nearly invisible from a distance.

Up close, the shape becomes clear: an arrowhead design with a narrow gangway near the back, flanked by two mounted engines. Rifle in hand, he steps cautiously aboard and begins a slow sweep through the interior. His technique is clumsy — something he picked up from old television shows years ago —

but it serves as decent practice. The vessel is silent and empty. Examining the consoles, he finds the same strange scribbled language as on the scrap of parchment and the card, still unreadable to his eyes.

At the front of the ship, two oddly shaped seats catch his attention. They're clearly not made for human anatomy, though if turned around, they might just work.

He also notices a symbol of an electric spark, with a circle around it, the light is turned on. He pushes the light and it goes off, but seemingly does nothing else.

Harry shrugs, wondering about it for a moment, then goes on with his search of the vessel.

In one of the ship's cabinets, Harry finds what he assumes are rations. They reek of chemicals. A few jugs filled with some kind of liquid give off an even sharper stench — alcohol, mixed with something toxic.

After a few minutes aboard, he walks back down the gangway and into the grass. Looking back once more, he throws both jugs into the ship. The glass shatters, spilling the contents across the floor.

As the liquid trickles down the gangway, he strikes a flame and sets it alight. Fire races up the slope, chasing the spill back inside. Within seconds, the interior is burning.

He steps back toward the barn, watching the ship's hull begin to glow, flames licking along its mirrored surface.

A few smaller explosions inside make him flinch and widen his eyes. He ducks behind the barn, then moments later, a massive blast tears through the air. When the shock fades, only smoke and scattered debris remain.

Harry exhales, half relief, half disbelief. “Well... not sure what it was exactly, but it won’t be used against us now.”

Harry heads back to the car. With its shattered windows and bullet holes, it looks even worse than before, but he climbs in and checks the display.

Oddly enough, the systems still respond. The battery under the floorboards and the wheel-mounted motors are intact. Whatever caused the stall seems gone. He figures the ship must have sent out an electromagnetic pulse.

He resumes his drive into town. The closer he gets to the city center, the more of those same mirrored vessels he sees streaking across the sky.

Turning a corner, he slams the brakes. Ahead, a firefight rages — the same grey-furred creatures are exchanging fire with a group of humans.

Grabbing the assault rifle, he steps out of the car. Several humans go down under the barrage, and without a second thought, Harry raises the weapon and fires. The nearest creature collapses.

Another human drops one of the attackers. Harry takes aim again, firing steadily, each shot finding its mark.

Within two minutes, the last of the creatures falls. Above, the alien vessels vanish in a blur of motion.

Across the street, six humans rise from behind a wall of rubble and start toward him. Harry approaches cautiously, rifle still at the ready.

An older man with gray hair and tired eyes steps forward. “Ben Stiles. Thanks for the assist — they almost had us.”

Harry lowers the rifle and shakes his hand. “Harry Biggins. Why

were they attacking you here?”

Ben turns to his group. “Get the wounded inside. Zara will take care of them.”

The others hurry off to help the fallen, and Ben faces Harry again. “We’ve got a shelter nearby — over two hundred people. These things want us gone.”

Harry glances at the bodies of the creatures, then back at Ben. Over his shoulder, he sees the wounded being carried away. “We can talk inside. Let’s help your people first.”

Ben nods and jerks a thumb down the street. “Go on. I’ll keep watch for more of them. They’ll be back — and in greater numbers.”

Harry points to two nearby buildings. “Post lookouts there and there. If they come back, you’ll have a crossfire ready.” He moves to a fallen man and kneels beside him.

Ben looks at the buildings Harry mentioned and nods, “Clever!” After a quick look, Harry sees the man has a chest wound on his right side. It doesn’t look fatal, but he’s no medic. “Can you walk? Let’s get you to the shelter.”

The man nods weakly and grunts in pain as he pushes himself up. Harry slips an arm under his shoulder to support him. “Tell me where it is. I only just got here.”

The man tilts his head toward a low, factory-like building nearby. “There.” Together they move slowly in that direction.

As they approach, several armed men rush out of the building. Harry calls out, “Find Ben near the intersection! He’ll have work for you.”

The men hesitate. “And who are you?”

“Not the enemy,” Harry says with a brief smile. “But I want the same thing you do — survival. Ben’s waiting there.”

They glance between Harry and their wounded companion, then nod and sprint toward the intersection.

Harry guided the wounded man into the building. “Name’s Harry. What’s yours?”

The man winced as he walked. “Jake Harrow. Thanks, man. Thought we were done for back there. If you hadn’t shown up...”

Harry tapped his arm lightly. “Just relax. I was here, and I stepped in. Now, let’s find your medic — what was her name again?”

Jake nodded toward a woman kneeling beside a man on a stretcher. Her hand rested on his chest as she spoke softly, words Harry couldn’t make out. The man gave a faint smile, then went still. The woman bowed her head for a moment of silence. Harry looked around, spotted an empty stretcher, and helped Jake over to it. As he eased him down, the woman was already beside them.

“Jake, you’re hurt.” She pushed Harry gently aside, and he stepped out of her way without protest.

Jake glanced at him while she cut open his shirt. “Thanks, Harry.”

Harry nodded once, offered a faint smile, and turned toward the door.

Outside, Harry surveyed the square and the intersection. Ben was already directing men toward the buildings Harry had pointed out earlier. He muttered to himself, “Well, this day turned out different than I figured this morning.”

“And what was the original plan?” said a voice behind him.

Harry turned and saw the same woman — light brown hair, tired

brown eyes. Her face carried both care and fatigue.

He smiled faintly. “A quick run for beef jerky and vegetables, then back to my wheat farm to wait for the harvest. Three more days, that was the plan.”

She nodded with a faint smile. “Simple enough. I’m Zara Sunwise. I run this place — used to be a homeless shelter, now a hospital.”

“Harry Biggins,” he replied. “Used to be a service engineer, now a farmer. Or at least I thought so.”

Zara tilted her head toward the building. “Thanks for saving Jake — and the rest of us.”

Harry nodded once. “You’re welcome. But if Ben’s right, you’re not safe yet. They’ll be back.”

Zara’s gaze drifted to the ground. “Convenient, isn’t it? They show up right after our own war ends. Kick us while we’re down. It’s too simple to be coincidence.”

Harry looked at her for a moment, then up at the sky — a blue field with the occasional cloud breaking the pattern, “You think it was planned?”

She shrugged slightly. “I don’t know. I’m just saying it feels too convenient.”

Harry lowered his gaze from the sky and looked at Zara. “And what are they? I killed one earlier today — a giant rat of some kind. The ones back there, same thing, just different fur colours.”

Zara lifted her shoulders. “I don’t know. They started showing up this week, rushing out of those dagger-shaped planes.”

Harry nodded. “Then we’ll need to figure that out — how many there are, and who made them.”

Zara blinked at him. “Made them?”

Harry frowned. "They look like failed experiments to me. So we need to find out where they came from."

Zara let out a short laugh. "Maybe they are an experiment — but a natural one." She paused. "They're aliens, Harry. Invaders."

Harry stared at her as if she'd told a bad joke. "Aliens? Like in the movies? But they use human assault rifles — if they're aliens, wouldn't they have their own weapons?"

Zara's smile dropped. "I wish it were a movie, Harry. As for the weapons... I wish I knew."

He nodded slowly, half-accepting, half-sceptical. "Then we need to know where they're from — so we can send the bodies back. As long as they're using our weapons, the learning curve won't be steep — we're already experts with our own guns."

Zara gave a faint laugh. "That's funny. But you're right. We'll need to know, so we can stop them."

Harry shook his head. "We haven't had a space program since before the last war. We've got no way off this planet."

Zara nodded sadly. "I know. But we'll have to find a way to fight back. With the population this low, we can't survive another long war."

Harry sighed. "That's true. Add it to the list — find a way off this rock."

A shadow darted overhead, and Harry veered off instinctively, shouting back to Zara, "Get troops out here! They're back!"

Zara froze for a heartbeat, then sprinted inside. Seconds later, a dozen soldiers poured from the shelter.

Harry ran past Ben toward a building across the street. "Get ready! They're coming again!"

Ben ducked into the structure on his left, taking position by the

door. The men inside readied their weapons. Outside, the soldiers from the shelter scattered behind broken walls and debris.

Moments later, several arrowhead-shaped vessels descended onto the intersection — silent, not even a whisper from their engines or the wind. From each one, a dozen grey-furred creatures spilled out in practiced formation. Five ships in total. Sixty armed invaders.

The humans held their fire. The creatures hadn't seen them yet, but when they reached the square and found their fallen comrades, they hesitated.

Before Ben broke the silence, he gritted his teeth in anxiety, then with a loud voice, yelled, "Now!" He fired first, and the others followed.

Gunfire erupted from both sides of the street, from above, and from the rear where Harry and Ben fired. The creatures fell quickly under the crossfire.

Ben spotted their radio operator and took him out first, cutting off any chance of reinforcements.

As the last shots faded and the humans began to cheer, another vessel slammed down on the intersection — right beside Ben. Harry dashed from cover, sprinting toward the ship. As the ramp lowered and the creatures emerged, he fired his rifle, then swung it like a club when he closed in. The sudden, reckless assault caught them completely off guard. They fell fast.

Clearing the hold, Harry kicked open the cockpit door. Two creatures turned toward him in shock. He drew his revolver and fired twice. Both collapsed instantly.

Ben, recovering from the chaos, stepped into the ship. Bodies lay strewn across the deck. "Good lord, Harry... that was

something.”

Harry turned, still breathing hard. “Zara said we needed intelligence. Maybe you can pull something from this ship.”

Ben nodded, then noticed a dark patch spreading on Harry’s side. “The problem with a burgundy shirt — no one sees when you’re bleeding. Can you make it to Zara?”

Harry glanced down. A bullet hole in his shirt, blood soaking into his faded pants. “Guess that thing did get me.” He staggered, then collapsed to the floor.

Ben cursed under his breath, kneeling beside him. “Come on, buddy. We’ll patch you up.”

When Harry woke, he found himself on a stretcher with Zara standing over him.

The moment she noticed he was conscious, her tone was sharp. “We don’t have that many medical supplies, Mister Biggins. Try not to be so reckless next time.”

Ben stood behind her and tapped her shoulder. She glanced back at him, nodded once, then returned her gaze to Harry. “But you did bring us intelligence — and plenty of it. For that, we thank you.”

Harry touched the bandaged wound at his side and winced. “I didn’t plan on getting shot. I figured the element of surprise would be enough.”

Ben smiled and rested a hand on his shoulder. “I heard you’re a farmer. That was some serious cowboy work out there. But you scared the living daylights out of me when you collapsed.”

Harry reached into his pocket and pulled out the note, access card, and USB stick. “Next time, I’ll walk here first — then collapse? Maybe you can use these. I took them off the first one

I killed down the road.”

Ben’s eyes widened as he accepted the items. “This is exactly what we needed. The card activates the ship. When you shot those two in the cockpit, theirs were destroyed.”

Zara pointed at the card. “Have Jane check if this one’s still intact.”

Harry glanced between them. “How did the others get destroyed?”

Ben nodded. “They knew you were coming and knew they were losing the ship. They overloaded theirs.”

Harry nodded in return. “Right. And the one I killed probably didn’t realize he was losing, so he had no reason to destroy his.”

Zara looked back at him. “Exactly. That’s what we’re hoping for. You may have just saved our efforts — three times in a row.”

Harry grinned, looking between them both. “You’re welcome.”

Ben’s expression turned grim. “We’ve been holding this position for nearly a week, and today we killed more of them than in all the days before combined. If this were a human operation, command would level the whole area. We should consider evacuation.”

Zara let out a deep sigh, lowering her head. “Yes... I was afraid you’d say that sooner or later.”

Ben turned to a few nearby men. “Get the trucks out of the garage. We need to move the wounded and the disabled. And find a trailer — we’re taking that alien ship with us.”

Harry tried to sit up, but Zara pressed a hand to his shoulder. “Don’t even think about it. Your wounds aren’t healed yet. We barely stopped the bleeding.”

Ben looked over. “She’s right. We can’t waste bandages on stubborn people. You’re leaving with the wounded.”

Harry stopped struggling and exhaled. “Fair enough. How long before I can walk again?”

Zara met his gaze. “Just walk? Maybe two days. Anything heavier — weeks, if you want the stitches to hold.”

Harry looked slightly disappointed but kept his eyes on Zara and Ben. “And how will I assist the efforts? I’m not going to stay down and let others save me.”

Ben laughed. “You saved us initially — they were beating us. You suggested a tactic that saved us before the next attack, and then you handed us a huge intelligence package.”

Zara added, “True. You’ve done more in two hours than we managed in a week of fighting. Now you’re wounded, and although our medical supplies aren’t endless, that cost is minimal compared with what you gave us.”

Harry nodded slowly and lay back down. “Alright. I’ll rest and heal. But if you need help and I can do anything, tell me.”

The distant rumbling of heavy engines broke the silence a few minutes later, and trucks began filling the square outside the shelter.

A few minutes later, trucks filled the square outside the shelter and the most seriously wounded were loaded.

Harry stayed outside, insisting on being loaded last so he could see how the convoy worked. As the final truck was filled, they put him in the last one, the trailer carrying the alien ship hitched behind it.

With his feet toward the rear, he sat in a half-seated position, his rifle beside him; Ben made sure to hand him a few extra magazines.

On the other side of the truck lay Jake, positioned the same way.

Harry smiled at him. “Jake Harrow — good to see you’re still with us.”

Jake returned the smile with a nod. “Yeah. Seems my wound isn’t bad enough. I’ve got guard duty back here.”

Harry nodded. “There’ll be trouble for sure. A convoy this size can’t move unnoticed, especially with the enemy holding air superiority.”

Jake looked at Harry, then at his rifle. “I hope we get away clean. The chest wound still hurts quite a bit.”

Harry nodded. “With the noise these trucks make, we’ll draw some attention. Just be ready — keep my side as your field of fire, I’ll cover yours. We should be able to keep them off our backs.”

Jake grinned. “Right — and try not to hit the truck or the ship.”

Harry grabbed his rifle and aimed it at the space between the truck and the trailer. “Remember, the trouble starts when they swarm the sky. For whatever reason, they drop their troops in.”

Jake nodded, his expression serious, then followed Harry’s lead, keeping his rifle trained on the truck’s flank at Harry’s side as the convoy rumbled into motion.

The trucks were moving through the city for the better part of an hour when Jake spotted a shadow overhead. “I think they’re here.”

Harry gripped his rifle and looked up just as a craft descended and landed. A dozen of the creatures poured out before it lifted off again. “Something’s off — it landed too far from us.”

Two more ships followed, dropping more troops. The aliens charged toward a building across the street. “They’re going for that building, not us,” Harry said.

Jake tried to lift himself to see, but the pain in his chest forced him back down.

Harry raised his weapon, wanting to help the defenders, but the truck turned a corner, cutting off his line of sight. Gunfire echoed behind them, distant but steady.

“It’s not fair,” Harry muttered as he slams his fist into the side of the truck wall. “I hope they can hold them off.”

Jake nodded quietly, watching him. “We can’t help everyone, Harry — not like this.”

Harry lay back on the stretcher, defeated. “I know. But they’ll pay for this.”

Jake grinned and nodded. “That they will, pal. That they will.”

Harry stared up for a moment, then looked at Jake. Jake blinked. “What?”

Harry shook his head. “Those pilots had a clear line of sight to us, but they never turned their troops toward us. When I charged the shuttle, nothing happened — they didn’t attack.”

Jake’s eyes widened. “But you got shot.”

Harry raised a hand. “I don’t think it was deliberate. I reckon the one who hit me blinked and involuntarily squeezed the trigger.”

Jake frowned. “What are you getting at?”

A small smile crept across Harry’s face. “We’ll need to test it. I think they don’t handle moving targets very well.”

Jake looked puzzled. “And how do we test that? Run at them and punch them in the nose?”

Harry laughed, then winced as he clutched his wound. “Cute idea — tried that. Maybe move laterally. See how they react.”

Jake nodded, slowly warming to the idea. “Alright — we’ll talk to Ben when we get to where we’re going.”

Harry shook his head. “We should leave the city. In open terrain

we'll be far more manoeuvrable.”

Jake's eyes lit up and he laughed. “We're about as manoeuvrable as a pair of rocks. So for the moment, hiding's the best we can do.”

Harry nodded, laughing the same way. “Hiding it is, until we can kick their backsides again.”

An hour later, without any further incident, the convoy came to a stop.

Ben walked to the back of the truck and found Jake aiming his rifle over Ben's head. “You can lower that, Jake. Thanks for the vigilance — you too, Harry.”

He heard the thud of Harry's rifle hitting the floor.

Harry spoke up. “No problem, but I think one of my stitches came loose.”

Ben chuckled. “We'll patch you up again.”

Jake looked at him. “Harry says we passed another building being attacked. Why didn't we stop to help?”

Ben shook his head as he climbed into the truck, still smiling.

“There was nothing there except two small radios. We planted them — wanted the enemy to go for that instead of us.”

Harry narrowed his eyes. “I almost opened fire on them. You should've told us — we were the rear guard.”

Ben nodded, grin never faltering. “You're right. Didn't think of it. Sorry.”

Harry chuckled and held up his hand, blood seeping from the reopened wound. “Well, no harm done — to us or the aliens. Guess we need a medic.”

Ben stuck his head out the back of the truck and shouted, “Medic!”

Within seconds, Zara came up to the rear and looked at Harry's seeping wound. "Didn't I tell you to take it easy?"

Harry laughed. "Then don't put me in the rear guard."

Zara's eyes narrowed. "I didn't put you there." She turned to Ben.

Ben met her gaze and straightened up, his voice cold and clipped. "Convoy security is my responsibility, and these two were the best choice for the job. I needed able bodies in the centre and quick thinkers in the back. You don't like it? Too bad, Zara — tactics are my domain, and I made the call."

Then he looks into her eyes for a few seconds, his tone softened. "Sorry, Zara. But it was necessary. Please, patch Harry up."

Zara's eyes dropped to the floor, then to Harry, "Sorry, Harry. I guess my anger needs to face someone else." Then she looks at Ben coldly, "And we will talk about this."

Then she turns back to Harry, "Rolls on your good side, I will patch up that stitch."

Harry rolls on his side, his lips pinched closed from the discomfort, "Does this make us bloodbrothers, Zara? You poking inside me for the second time in a day?" then grins. Zara glared at him for a second, and with less caution clamped a staple in his flesh.

Harry grunted and let out a short laugh. "Remind me not to anger my healer in the future."

Zara turned away, but Harry caught a glimpse of her smile just before she stepped off the truck.

As she left the three men behind, Ben chuckled. "Harry, you're something else. I've never seen her this riled up over anyone. Either she truly hates you, or she absolutely adores you."

Harry grinned, pressing a hand to the still-stinging stitch. "I hope

it's hate. If that was kindness, we're in trouble — that really hurt."

Zara's voice rang out from around the truck. "I heard that! Serves you right — you're far too reckless."

Ben and Jake laughed, and Ben climbed down to help the others off the truck.

With everyone offloaded and the trucks camouflaged under nets that mimicked broken walls and rocks, the humans moved into an abandoned apartment building, setting up on the ground floor.

Ben sent several men across the street to occupy other buildings, and others to the windows on the first floor above them. The soldiers hurried to their posts, forming a defensive perimeter. They returned to the trucks several times to haul more ammunition crates inside.

Harry and Jake were placed in a back room, well away from any windows. It was deliberate — to keep Harry from throwing himself into another fight before he'd healed.

Zara entered the hall where the more troublesome wounded were kept — men like Harry who couldn't sit still — and began refitting their bandages.

When she reached him, he smirked. "Be gentle with me?" She shot him a glare. "Just as soon as you're gentle with the rest of us. Your behaviour has cost lives. We can't afford that — not with so few of us left."

She cut his old bandages loose, the scissors cold against his skin, making him flinch.

"Oh, come on. Those people didn't die because of me, and you know it. It's war — people die."

She cleaned the wound, the alcohol biting deep. “No, but your recklessness endangers us all.”

Harry pushed her hands away. “That’s enough, lady. If you’re angry, aim it at the aliens. We’re fighting the same war here.”

Zara froze, taken aback. She opened her mouth to reply, but Harry raised a hand.

“Go help someone else. With the way you treat me, I’d rather be tortured by them — at least it’d sting less.”

For a moment she just stood there, the air between them heavy. Then she sighed and looked away. “I’m sorry, Harry. You’re right. You don’t deserve that. You’ve saved us more than once, brought us the alien ship — and all I’ve done is stay angry.”

Harry nodded and let out a slow sigh, but that infuriating smile crept back onto his face. “It’s fine. You’re just as frustrated as any other medic. But if you’re that angry, vent it at the aliens — they deserve it more. Now then, do you think I can safely present you with my wound?”

Zara chuckled, the tension easing from her shoulders. “I’ll try not to treat it like a piece of artillery.”

Harry grinned at her comment and turned slightly so she could reach the wound. Zara resumed her work, noticeably gentler this time.

“This is much more pleasant,” Harry said.

Zara smiled for the first time since they’d met. “If you don’t like it, I can always go back to how I was before.”

Harry’s eyes widened. “Oh, no thanks, ma’am. If that’s how you treat allies, I’m glad we’re not enemies.”

Zara paused and looked up at him. “Harry, it’s not that I didn’t like you — that’s irrelevant. You were reckless. If you’d been more careful, you might not have been wounded.”

Harry met her eyes, unflinching. “I doubt that. My charge caught them off guard — if I hadn’t, they’d have had time to react.” He paused, thinking aloud. “I had an idea back in the truck. I think these aliens can’t handle lateral movement — they can’t track quick side-to-side motion.”

Zara nodded, unfazed. “Oh, we know that.”

Harry frowned. “You know? Then why are we still defending from fixed positions?”

Zara tied off the last of the bandage. “Stitches look good. And that? That’s Ben’s department — tactics. I was told in no uncertain terms.”

Harry laughed, then winced as the movement pulled at his side. “Yeah, he was a bit stern there. But you had it coming — you weren’t exactly friendly back there.”

Zara smiled, though it didn’t quite reach her eyes. “Yeah, I get it already.”

Harry chuckled softly. “Oh, relax — I think you need a coffee.”

Zara nodded, this time the smile reaching her eyes. “Oh, that I do. You have no idea. But we’re out, and the supermarkets have been plundered dry. We checked.”

Harry looked up at her, a twinkle in his eyes. “This is a different part of town. Maybe, when I’m more mobile, I can find us some coffee. Just imagine the morale boost it’ll bring.” He gestured grandly, as if describing Mount Everest.

Zara let out a weary laugh. “You’re incorrigible, Harry. Fine — see what you can do, once I give you the green light to go outside.”

Harry kept grinning. “Two days, right?”

Zara’s eyes widened. “Don’t you dare! If you—” She stopped as Harry burst into frantic laughter, clutching his side.