Everfree

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Extract

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Nothing in the sky with nothing. No moon, no stars. Just a canopy of black swallowing the light. Lucky break for the fox. Tough break for the hounds.

Scentless, this fox. Normally, there's a subdermal transmitter. You implant it – it lasts for about a month, then dissolves harmlessly in the bloodstream. A month is a decent observation period to make sure there's no dementia. That's procedure.

Procedure hadn't been followed.

The crisp October wind swept against me as I cut in and out of Quincy and Prescott. Deserted streets. No thermals. A serious fuckup, this, a potential disaster.

Voices crackled in my ear. Slow Bridge reporting equal success.

'History of heart problems,' I said. 'Well documented. Now he's running. He's scared. We have to find him before he drops.'

'Maybe we should back off?' said Bridge.

'Yeah, let him calm down on his own?' said Slow.

'Not in his right mind, wandering off, a threat to

himself and others? No thanks,' I said. 'And that's on you, Slow, because you botched the protocols. You spooked him. You took your eyes off him. If he gets hurt, it's on you.'

'Okay, I get it,' she said. 'Yell at me later.'

We made the rounds. Silence on the channel until Bridge called out: 'He's here – he's past the Fogg!' And then: 'He's doubling back!'

But she lost him, and called his name fruitlessly until I caught up.

'He's quick for an old Popsicle,' she apologized, panting hard, hair in her eyes. 'Army trained, right?'

'Marine.'

'Took me to school. Vanished. It's like he owns the campus.'

'He went here,' I reminded her.

She sighed. 'Why can't he be a Yalie?'

We stood under the Statue of Three Lies, a slumping, seated figure with the inscription: John Harvard, Founder, 1638. Wrong person, wrong founder, wrong year. But it was Harvard University, nevertheless, where I'd dreamt of going to medical school back when I was young and naïve about the world. Tourists used to touch the statue's foot for luck. That's what Bridge was doing now.

I pulled up a schematic and tried to ignore Slow's voice on the channel. Something about how it shouldn't matter how trained or skilled he is because

he's just a human being, a classic, while we three stood a cut above on the evolutionary tree.

'Sloane, we've lost home-turf advantage,' Bridge said. 'He's the farmer.' I'd once told them that the best soldiers in the world are tactically disadvantaged if they don't know the terrain they're fighting in and any farmer who knows the ins and outs of his farm could outwit or get the drop on those soldiers if they weren't careful. Good to know they'd been paying attention.

'So think like he's thinking. You know the area. You're being chased. Where's the best place to lose someone?'

'Down?'

'Down.'

Into the tunnels went my hounds. Harvard was built atop a vast network of infrastructure – a labyrinthine underworld of steam lines, boilers, electrical relays and such – and as the school ran out of room to expand above ground, it continued to build below. An excellent place to hide.

A flurry of comm chatter as they found him. They tried to calm him but he ran, so I had them herd him up to where I was waiting, syringe in hand. He was a bear of a man, white-haired, square-jawed, with a face that inspired confidence. But sallow now, haunted, confused. He'd spent decades in cold storage, revived only now that we'd found a cure for the microbes that nearly put an end to the entire human race. We'd cut

the disease out of him, but the last stages of it had left their mark. I could see it in his eyes. Was I an enemy soldier to him? What combat flashback was he reliving? It was as if we'd turned the flood back, but the water damage remained.

He wanted past me and I wouldn't move, so he lunged and I caught his punch with my ribs. Clinched him long enough. He let out a cry like a wounded animal, staggered off a little ways, and fell. He lay on the grass, sprawled out, staring wild-eyed up at us, clutching his arm where I'd pricked him. I nodded as the sedative took hold, trying to look as reassuring as I could. Sobbing, he curled into a tight fetal ball. In my pocket I found my stethoscope, and I put it on to listen to his heart.

'Relax, Mr President,' I told him. 'It's going to be okay.'

I didn't know the man. Didn't vote for him. Didn't particularly care for him, but then I didn't much care for his opponent, either. In fairness, I don't have a very high opinion of most politicians. I agree with the man who said, 'Politics is the art of looking for trouble, finding it everywhere, diagnosing it incorrectly, and applying the wrong remedies.' That would be Marx.

Groucho, not Karl.

Left to my own devices, I'd never have thawed the

POTUS out. Hell, I'd never have thawed out anyone. I was born to be a doctor (*designed* to be one, really), but I never took the Hippocratic oath. Even if I had, the few thousand cryopreserved humans secreted throughout the world weren't my patients. Not in my book. No, they'd cooled their heels for forty years; they could stay frosty for a little longer.

It hadn't been my call. I'd been outvoted, four to one. Just because we had the ability to bring people out didn't mean that we should. My argument. But, ethically speaking, it wasn't right to leave them frozen. So my friends said. And though I'd been tempted to pick up and go – old habits die hard – I stayed to help.

One friend in particular: Naomi d'Oliveira, better known as Pandora. She was, I'd come to realize, the best of us. Because she didn't want to be. Vashti, Isaac and Champagne had won my friendship, but they were hypocrites with enormous egos. And the same could be said for me. But Pandora had a quiet strength, and she was undeterred. Not untouched by the grief of the world – not dead inside, as I'd been for so many years – but simply unwilling to let it stop her. Indomitable. She'd believed in me long after anyone ever should have. She gave up her sight for me. More than a friend, Pandora, much more than that now.

While my security team and I escorted the POTUS to New Cambridge Hospital for tests and observation, she was trying to restore life. No mean

feat. It's very easy to annihilate someone you're trying to revive.

You have to get the metabolism going again, but carefully. You'd better protect the brain with everything you've got, because normal circulation can really fuck it up. Free radicals and metabolites can do major cerebral damage during 'reboot,' so you can't be too quick, but you can't be slow, either, because you're up against the process of cellular decay. The dreaded 'I,' *ischemia,* the fast track to the brain withering, because it isn't getting the oxygen and other nutrients it needs. It's a balancing act to flush out the cryoprotectant and then flood the body with molecular scissors – Vashti's special blend – the ones that can cleave Black Ep from the genome like chaff from wheat. That 'turns back the flood,' but there's still all the 'water damage' to repair, all the myriad degeneration the plague did during its stay. More often than not, some of the patient's major organs are shot, which means accelerated therapeutic cloning is required. If the new organs play nice in the old body, it's time to shock the heart and fire up the brain, and cross your fingers the ultrastructural damage isn't too bad.

To see Pandora work, you'd never know she was blind. Malachi helped guide her – our old pal, Mal, an artificial intelligence who could serve as her eyes via cameras in the lab, and even as a force beyond her eyes via biodegradable microcameras injected into

the patient's capillaries. But Mal could only do so much. As a computer program, he lacked intuition – and that was where Pandora excelled.

'She goes against the odds and wins,' he told me. 'Not always, but enough to make me wonder what she understands that I don't.'

'Power of the subconscious,' I shrugged.

On that night, everything was going wrong. Touch and go. It had been a risky attempt to begin with, this patient suffering from a degree of cellular necrosis just at the borderline of what we feel comfortable trying to save.

ICBA, Mal predicted. Irreversible cessation of brain activity. Vashti joined the operation and reluctantly agreed with Mal. But Pandora wouldn't hear of it.

'He's a fighter,' she said. 'He wants to live.'

In the end they saved him. She came home, pale and exhausted. I took her to bed, rubbed the tension from her shoulders and told her she couldn't keep working these hours. I said she was risking her health. She kissed my cheek and told me not to worry. She knew her limits.

I doubted it.

But we could talk about it later, I supposed, in one of the rare windows of time when neither of us had anything immediate to do. I'd watched those windows shrink over the past year. Sometimes I felt like I was in a lightless room.

Okay, so you can bring a person back to life. But you can't just thaw and run. The thawed have questions. It's a confusing time for them. Even the ones without dementia. First of all, they don't know how long they've slept. Most are prepared for a year or two. Tell them it's been over forty, and their worldview curdles. It's a big hit to take. It helps to put it in context.

For Rip Van Winkle was old and gray,
And twenty summers had passed away—
Yes, twenty winters of snow and frost
Had he in his mountain slumber lost.

So it's the double plus Rip Van Winkle coma, or 2RVW+, which sounds like the far side of forever. Fortunately, there are mitigating factors. For one thing, cryopreservation puts a bullet in the natural aging process – the thawed are no older nor grayer than they were at the moment they were frozen. Vanity mitigates. For another, the time they lost – all the summers and winters I spent and they didn't – well, they didn't really miss anything. Just all the struggles my friends and I went through – but who were we, right? Everyone they knew – friends, enemies, rivals, politicians, newsmakers and trendsetters – well, they were either dead or in cryonic stasis like them. Envy mitigates.

Hey, you haven't lost your looks, and you really haven't lost any time, so you can save your mourning

for the dead. Which, in fairness, they did. The thawed had lost more than any generation before them, more than any generation in human history. It's awful hard to mitigate a dead family. And that was always one of the first questions they'd ask. *What about my loved ones? What happened to them?*

To which you have to be absolutely direct, because anything else is cruel.

Other questions include: *Where am I?*

New Cambridge Hospital.

New Cambridge?

That's what we call Cambridge now. Cambridge, Massachusetts. Do you remember being frozen? You're just a mile from where that procedure took place.

Am I going to live?

Yes. You are no longer infected. Our medical staff is monitoring your condition closely and will work to repair any lasting damage the plague may have caused.

What's it like out there?

It's a new day. Black Ep was the biggest threat humankind has ever faced, but we've beaten it at last.

How many survivors?

No human beings survived the plague. It emptied the world, claiming every last man, woman and child.

Then how are we still here?

Posthumans.

Like on the news?

Right. Genetically engineered offspring with

redundant organs and enhanced immune systems. Designed by the biotech company Gedaechtnis in the darkest days of the plague. Posthumans, PH. You're looking at one now.

So you saved us?

Not me personally, but yes. It took decades to find a cure. That was the first step, 'Response.' This is the next step, 'Recovery.' New Cambridge has the largest collection of cryopreserved individuals anywhere in the world. We are conducting triage here, disaster relief. Those who can be revived will be revived. Our goal is the continued eradication of Black Ep and the resuscitation and treatment of infected peoples. To that end, we have established an ad hoc government, as was proposed by the Emergency Plague Powers Act back in 42 BR.

What's 42 BR?

The year you were frozen. Forty-two years 'Before Recovery.' I'm afraid the old calendars have changed.

What's going to happen to me?

That's the magic question. Once they ask you that, you know they're starting to look forward instead of back. So you reassure them that their options are wide open so long as they don't do anything criminal or crazy. As soon as they're given a clean bill of health, they're free to go anywhere in the world they want. Not much civilization beyond our fence, admittedly, but that's what pioneers are for. Godspeed. That said,

here you give them the Invitation, encouraging them to stick around and help rebuild the promise of the future.

This is Year One of the New World and you're smack dab in the center of it: New Cambridge, Victory City. Here beats the heart of the Recovery, and it's beating strong. You have a golden opportunity to live in the latest, greatest city on planet Earth. Be a part of it. Pitch in. Why struggle for food and shelter when we have gourmet dining and luxury apartments? All you have to do is contribute. We have many jobs available. We have farming, construction, renovation, acquisition, counseling and service positions, and if you lack training it will be provided free of charge. You've lost family and friends – we have counselors here who can help you through your pain. You're not alone. We've thawed out over a thousand people – you'll make friends here. You can renew yourself. And here you give them the Doctrine. You pass on a philosophy, something solid for them to push against. This world is collective. This is it right now and we're all in it together. Let's find a new way of living where we all look out for each other. The future is big and bright and full of opportunity – let's explore it together.

That's what a Greeter does. It's an important job because you're the first person they get to talk to, and what you do sets the tone for the rest of their stay. I'd tried it for the first three weeks of the Recovery, but

didn't have the temperament for it. Just not my bag. The last straw came when, after I explained the situation to this one guy, he kept asking me if it was a joke. *Are you kidding me? Is this a practical joke?* Nine times he asked me. I said yes. God, yes. I sat back and told him that he was dead, I was the motherfucking devil, this was Hell, and welcome to it.

'Same as any other business. Build your brand with the right team around you, a strong team, empowering them. Then it's a question of understanding the market, taking initiative, outthinking your competition and leveraging your strengths. Same deal. I'd never trade it, but it isn't, you know, magical. When you're a kid and you grow up in the family business you think maybe it might be, but no. It isn't Willy Wonka.'

Mars had a first name, but I've forgotten it. He was a twitchy, chatty sort, friendly enough, but damaged in the way that so many of them were – overwhelmed by the feelings that crop up from a brush with oblivion and determined not to drown in them. Just another absurd, privileged, self-deluded, guilt-ridden human being, thrilled to be alive.

'And it's more than just chocolate. Many people don't realize that. We've got vending management systems, information technology, not to mention coffee, pet foods, Uncle Ben's Rice. We're diversified.'

The royal *we*. Bad habit with the CEOs. *We* have this and *we* have that. Right. Who's *we*? Black Ep had annihilated billions. Mars was alone in the world. A couple thousand tycoons had been lucky enough to finagle cryonic suspension, but their management teams had not. To say nothing of their labor forces. You can own anything you like on paper, but who's going to run the factories? Who's going to sell the merchandise? Let alone buy it?

Capitalist existentialism – 'How do I prove my wealth and status now that the world's been destroyed?' – had given rise to a collector culture. With so many abandoned possessions available for the taking, many thawed would establish a pecking order based on who had the most cars, jewelry, gadgets, olive forks and so on. With the economy in shambles, they competed to see who had the rarest of the rare, who had a complete set, etc. Useless pastime as far as I was concerned, but I pointed out the flea market as we passed it by.

Mars wanted to know if we'd thawed anyone from Hershey or Nestlé. Scoping the competition. One of the first questions he asked.

'I don't know how anyone's supposed to come back from a disaster like this,' he said, as if surfing my thoughts. 'But we sure as hell have to try.'

'Sure as hell,' I agreed. 'Assuming you're talking about civilization in general and not just your candy empire.'

He arched an eyebrow. 'The one doesn't preclude the other?'

I interrupted my tour of our little utopia to look at him, eye to eye, because I wanted him to understand. 'It just might,' I said. 'Do you want some free advice?'

'As long as it's free.'

'Mr Mars, the past is gone. You can't return to the status quo. You can't chase a fantasy. When you do, you waste everyone's valuable time, and worse than that you disrespect the sacrifices we've all had to make. Maybe someday you'll have a chance at reclaiming everything you've lost, but right now it's adapt or die. So embrace the Doctrine.'

He was listening. I watched the wheels turn.

'In the meantime,' I told him, 'if I find any unemployed Oompa Loompas wandering about, I'll be sure to let you know.'

'Is that your role in this?'

'To look for Oompa Loompas?'

'To push the Doctrine?'

Overhead, geese winged their way south. Follow the leader. I tracked the V with my eyes.

'No. You can do what you want. It's your life. Live in the past. Live stupidly. I won't push. I won't interfere at all unless you cause trouble. But trust me, you'll be a lot happier if you live in the now. Hence the Doctrine, hence the advice.'

Mars didn't seem like he'd be trouble and he wasn't

obsessed with *what's the best part of town* and *what's in fashion,* so I answered all his questions and made a point of introducing him to all the good apples I could find. Good apples make a huge difference. Wake up with so little left and you might be desperate to bond – so we tried to get the newly thawed to bond with our supporters, the ones who believed in what we were trying to do.

Handshakes, business cards, link numbers – all the rituals and buzzwords, all the trappings of corporate culture. They found it comforting, and I couldn't argue with it, though I couldn't relate to it, either. One dog sniffs another – *Who's the alpha, you or me?*

I'm not big on hierarchies. Don't like groups. Don't play well with others. But I can't isolate myself anymore. Not when I have responsibilities and – like the old poem goes – promises to keep.

Because Mars was new, he served as a lightning rod for the regulars. As the ultra-rich tended to socialize only within their circle, many already knew him from before the plague. Those who hadn't wanted to greet him and take his measure, which meant I could trot him out in front of me and duck most of the questions about the President. Word had traveled, but rumor had traveled farther.

'He's fine,' I assured them. 'Resting comfortably. Prognosis is good; I'm sure he'll be up and running the free world again before you know it.'

Everything's lovely. Everything's better than perfect. Shut up. Trust me, this is the best of all possible worlds.

'You make people nervous,' said Mars, once I'd moved us on.

'Do I?'

'Well, there's something unsettling about the lot of you. The different genes – the whole 'not quite human' thing. But there's something about you specifically, if you don't mind my saying. The bright orange hair, maybe.'

'Never trust a redhead.'

'I've heard that before,' he said. 'The mark of Cain. Also Judas, I remember. My family's Christian, but I broke from the faith a long time ago.'

Cain, Judas and the Egyptian murder god, Set. Thank you, exotic gene for red hair, MC1R. Not terribly long ago, they burned redheads as witches. In Egypt they buried them alive. I'd been buried alive once. Didn't care for it. Had yet to be burned.

Mars had picked up on something, but it had less to do with hair color and more with a growing feeling among the thawed that I was not their greatest friend, that I did not love them unconditionally, and that any who wanted to gum up the wheels of progress might not like what I'd do in return.

I'd made myself the one PH who wouldn't budge. No, I'd done more than that. I had been keeping a very close watch on the bad apples, and while my day job

consisted largely of solving their disputes with kindness and understanding, I'd been moonlighting as a hammer. As a trip wire. As a poison pill.

Someone who'd even think of threatening the people I cared about, or the fragile peace they'd achieved – well, that poor misguided prick had to understand that the cost would far outweigh the benefits. He had to know it, so I made sure he knew it. By putting fear in his heart. Because no one else would. Because it had to be done.

Another reason why I'd embarked on my campaign of intimidation: it made me visible. I'd come to the conclusion: *If I find the troublemakers and make myself the flashpoint for their anger, this will insulate my friends.* And so it had, but only to a degree.

'White Crane Spreads Wings,' Mars said. He'd taken sight of a line of men and women making slow, steady movements on the lawn of the Harvard Square Hotel, each maneuver flowing smoothly into the next.

'You do tai chi?'

'It's how I relax.'

'Beginner or expert?'

He shrugged. 'I put in eight years.'

'Can you fight?'

'Fight? Never tried. To me, it's just for relieving stress. When I got sick, it was practically the only thing that helped me. I'm good on the forms, but still can't meditate for shit.'