

The White Wolf at Outpost Aleph

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“Go! Go! GO!”

We’re running for our lives through the jungles of planet Zoria. At least four Stiggans were chasing us: agile feline creatures at least twice a person’s weight. I’m at the back of my squad, following them as they dodged orb-like plants and tall trees.

“Emmett, watch out!” someone shouts through the squad radio.

Another Stiggan bursts out of the shrubs and charges towards Emmett. He aims his phaser rifle and blows off its head. The headless corpse stumbles, but only for a moment. Then it gives chase.

“Keep moving!”

Fabian pushes him and they run. They’re still ahead of me.

The Stiggans behind us are catching up. Their snarling gets dangerously loud behind me. I turn around with my rifle.

Bang!

Bang!

Some of them fall. I aim at their legs and fire, leaving them limping after us at a slower pace. Then I turn back to my squad, now barely visible through the trees. I give chase.

I hear Gaven’s screams on the radio.

“Leave him! Leave him!” someone else yells.

I see him as I run past: a beast had pinned him down and was biting off his face. There’s no saving him, so I run faster.

“Decro, you okay?”

“Yeah,” I huff.

“Keep up. There’s a bunker ahead.”

I’m close to catching up with the squad. There’s a sharp pain in my back as a Stiggan slashes at my back, tearing through my combat suit and slicing through my skin.

“Argh!”

I fall to the ground. It stings.

Bang!

Bang!

Someone's firing at the Stiggan attacking me, and it falls back. Still lying on the ground, I pull out my rifle and fire.

"Don't stop. Go!" I yelled into the radio.

I'm as good as dead, or so I thought. I fire at the Stiggan, expecting more to pounce on me. But no more came. The main pack must've gone after my squad.

Lucky me.

I unload shot after shot until the Stiggan is reduced to a heap of fur and metal. Then I scramble to my feet and run. My back is burning from the wound, but I need to keep moving. The ground slopes uphill. Then there's light. I keep running until I'm out of the jungle. The bunker is up ahead, but I don't see my squad.

I'm almost at the bunker, and I sincerely hope that my squad is already there.

There are loud snarls behind me. I turn and see my squad leaving the jungle, with the pack of Stiggans in pursuit.

"Get to the bunker!"

I run for the building: a one-storey bunker made of stone walls and a steel door. Strong enough to keep out the infected creatures. I dash through the door and I hear it slam shut behind me.

"Huh?"

I turn around and try to turn the door handle.

It's jammed.

"Decro! Open the door!"

"I'm trying!"

The wheel-like handle refused to budge. How did it lock shut?

Mason reaches the door first. He bangs on the circular window in the door. I can't see his face through his visor, but he sounds terrified.

"Let us in!"

"Come on, Decro! What are you doing?" Fabien screams.

"It's not budging!"

"Are you listening?"

"Open the goddamn door!"

"Fuck, they're almost here!"

The door handle is a watery mess as I fight through my tears.

“I can’t. I can’t. It’s not moving. I can’t—”

I hear the snarls.

I hear their screams.

I peek through the window and I see them pinned to the ground. Their eyes look at me with fear and betrayal. Metal tendrils burst out of the Stiggans’ mouths: the signature writhing snakes that the infected creatures all have. The tendrils stab my squad members, infecting them with nanites.

They’re screaming my name.

I duck down and let go of the door handle. I can’t bear to watch. Their voices scream in my head, long after their mouths have stopped. The Stiggans are gone, but I know their corpses are still there. I sit with my back to the door. My mind is hazy.

I have to... I don’t... It’s all so... What is happening?

I can’t move. It’s like my body is stuck in a stupor. Daylight turns into dusk.

Then I hear them get up. My squad members, now converted creatures too.

“Decro...” Emmett groans. It’s his voice, but it sounds... wrong.

“Why didn’t you didn’t let us in?” another one groans.

“How could you betray us?”

I clutch my head in my hands. “I’m sorry. I couldn’t—”

“Look at us.”

“Face us. Or are you too afraid to face your mistakes?”

I get up shakily and look through the window. Their visors are smashed and I see their demented faces.

“Make things right. Open the door and join us.”

The door handle starts turning.

I back off.

Someone grabs my shoulder. I turn around.

“Gaven?”

His face has been torn apart by bite marks, revealing metal beneath. His eyes glow red in the dark.

“G-get away from me!”

Gaven grabs me and I fall to the ground. He pins me down with his hand on my chest. There's a piercing pain. Coldness spreading through my veins.

"Decro."

"Join us, Decro."

I'm... going to turn too.

"Decro. Decro. Decro."

I hear a scream. It's in my voice. But my body is no longer mine to control. Static fills my mind. And then—

"Decro!"

I jolt awake to find Maple shaking me. We're in the soldiers' bunk. I'm safe.

"Another nightmare?"

I take a deep breath. My heart is racing. My hands are shaking. I manage a nod.

"Want to talk about it?"

"I... I dreamt of them again."

"Your section mates?"

I can see the red wolf stifle an eye roll. I can hear his lips almost asking "Again?".

He let me recount my dream. The tears come back.

"Hey, it's alright. It was just a dream."

"But I feel guilty."

"What happened was not your fault. You did your best."

"But maybe things would've turned out differently if I tried harder to protect them. Maybe I could've ___"

"Look, you couldn't have done anything. We're just patrol soldiers on a planetary outpost. The last thing we're prepared for is a full-on onslaught from invading aliens."

There he goes again. I know. I know. I know! Everything makes sense logically. We were attacked. I'm helpless. The end. But that's not what I *feel*. I feel like this should not have happened. I feel like things could've turned out differently. I feel like it's all my fault. But Maple wouldn't understand.

"Decro?" He interrupts my train of thoughts.

"Yeah?"

“Just one more week, alright? A rescue ship will come to pick us up. We’ll be out of this living nightmare. We can go home.”

“But... what if we don’t survive? We’ve tried to contact the other stations. Everyone is either dead or converted, except for us—”

“We’ve survived this long somehow. One more week should be no problem.”

“Our rations are running out, though. It won’t last the week.”

“That just means we need one last supply run, and then we can hole up in this outpost until rescue comes.”

He gets up and heads for the door.

“You’re going now?”

“Yeah. Might as well get it done and over with.”

I can’t let him go alone. It’s going to happen again. I know it. I can feel it.

“Let me come with—”

“No!” he shouts.

I draw back, shocked.

“I mean, it’s okay.” He lowers his volume. “I got this. Besides, it’ll be easier to remain undetected if it’s just me.”

“But I can—”

“Stay here. I’ll need you here to take care of things at the outpost. And if any survivors radio in, or the rescue ship somehow makes it here earlier, at least you’ll be here to receive comms. Got it?”

I nod. A million and one scenarios play through my head. Maple falling off a steep cliff while he’s outside. Maple getting attacked by a converted Norvid. Maple coming back and infecting me, because I couldn’t tell he had already been infected.

It’s all going to go wrong.

Very wrong.

We’re fucked. We’re fucked. We’re fucked.

“You got this, alright? Just one more week, and then we’ll be home.”

I’m not convinced, but there’s nothing I can do.

It takes a while for Maple to go through his morning routine and gear up. I make sure he’s out the airlock before I sigh. Talking to him always leaves me feeling drained and empty inside. Shaking the feeling off, I go to the generator room. We’ve been running low on power, so we’ve only been

directing power to the sections of the outpost that we're using. I use the switchboard to turn off power to the bunks and redirect it to the control room.

Then I head up to the control room, where I can now watch everything that goes on inside and outside the base. The lighting strips are off, so the only sources of light are the screens. Over twenty screens let me switch between hundreds of cameras around the base. I set them to cycle through the cameras every few seconds.

The mess hall. The bunks. The training halls. The airlock. The northern exterior wall of the outpost. The southern slopes near the outpost entrance.

I like being here, but I don't tell Maple. I can imagine him calling me paranoid. That it's the trauma that's affecting me. So when I see him coming back from his trips outside, I go back to the generator room and route the power back. Then I go to the recreation room and pretend to read a book. He never suspects a thing.

It feels like an obsession, scanning through the screens and watching everything.

But it makes me feel in control.

It makes me feel safe.

I had brought my blanket with me, so I hold it close and keep warm. The heater isn't turned on. I had considered routing power to it, but that was too much of a luxury with our limited fuel. In the darkness, the light of the surveillance screens feels warm and comforting.

I jerk awake; something had woken me up. For a second, I panic. If Maple finds out I've been doing this... I check the airlock logs. He's not back yet. It's only been an hour and a half.

Then I hear a screech.

I use the keyboard and flick through the cameras. The generator room. Nothing. The recreation room. Nothing. The hangar. Nothing. The outside.

Wait.

I see a Tork: an eagle-like beast with 2 pairs of wings. Why does everything on Zoria have to be so big? This one is twice my height, even without taking into account its full wingspan. Two more join it, circling the outpost.

I'm shaking.

It's fine, I tell myself. It's fine.

I'm safe here.

But not Maple, though.

It's fine. The Torks will be gone by the time he comes back. Everything will be fine.

Then in my head, I see Maple come back with Torks swooping down on him. Lifting him into the air. Dropping him. Then they peck at him. Infect him. Then he turns into another organic-robot thing.

I need to get rid of the Torks. Maple only has the basic combat suit and pistol. Here at the base, I have access to the outpost's entire arsenal. I can't sit here until it's too late. I have to do something.

I get up and go to the generator room. After redirecting power to the armoury, I head there. The armoury is extensive, with combat suits and weapons of all kinds. But there's no time to look around. I go straight to the heavy armour. There's a row of ten GX-2001s: heavy-armour combat suits that could withstand high-calibre ammunition.

Hours of training drills kick in and my body moves on pure muscle memory. I grab an M-size interface suit from the hanger, strip off my clothes, then put the suit on. It's made of a black heavy spandex material, hugging my body like skin tight compressions. Black metal contact points are seamlessly integrated into the suit, allowing the interface suit to synchronise my movements with my armour.

I then press a button beside the nearest canine mech suit. The featureless visor lifts and the armour chest plates open to either side. I lift my legs and step backwards into the suit, carefully guiding my tail into the tail sleeve. Then I slide my arms into the holes on either side until my fingers are in the suit's armour gloves.

Once I'm in, I clench both my fists. The armour plates close in around me and I can feel their interlocking mechanisms click shut. The inner lining of the suit expands, pressing against my body for a form-fitting grip. It feels like hard foam squeezing against my figure.

The visor comes over my face, sealing me inside the suit. The hum of the outside world is silenced, and I feel the suit stir. As I move my body, the suit moves with me. For something so heavy, it's amazing how effortless my movements are. If anything, it feels like my body is weightless as I get off the armour stand and walk around.

Okay. Next step. I head to the weapons rack. There's an energy cannon that's so impractically heavy, it's only usable with the mech suit. It feels like I'm picking up a feather as I grab the handles on its front and back. Good. It's fully charged. Just in case, I bring a phaser pistol and attach it to the waist mount.

I head to the airlock. As the inner doors close behind me, I hit the emergency release catch that skips the depressurising process and opens the outer doors. There's a huge pulse of suction as air gushes out through the door opening, and I stumble out into the open. The Torks turn their head to face me.

I flick the safety on the cannon and hold the charge trigger. There's a high-pitched hum as its capacitor charges up with power. Then I aim the cannon at the closest Tork and I pull the blast trigger.

BNZZT!

A beam of cyan energy blasts through it, tearing through steel and feathers as if it were paper and cloth. The two halves of the corpse crash to the ground in clouds of dust.

Another Tork swoops down, but there's no time to charge a second shot. I barely dodge it and I feel its talons scratch my armour. Thankfully, the heavy suit helps me keep my balance. I charge up another shot and aim at it.

BNZZT!

It swoops to the side, dodging my beam. Without warning, a Tork grabs me from the back and lifts me into the air.

“Oh fuck!”

I see the outpost grow smaller below me. My suit doesn't offer protection from a 20-storey fall, so I'm fucked if it drops me. I strap the cannon to my waist hook to free up my hands. Then I grab the Tork's leg and climb. It screeches. I grab one of its flapping wings.

It's not a stupid idea if it works.

I yank. The suit amplifies my strength, and I tear off the wing in a burst of sparks and hydraulic fluid. The Tork screeches again, flapping its remaining 3 wings to stay airborne. But with its weight and mine, it's a hopeless battle.

My heart lurches as gravity squeezes us in her death-grip. I have mere seconds to throw myself up on the Tork's back and brace myself. We smash into the ground, and I'm cushioned by the mechanical flesh of the fallen bird.

Amongst the wreckage of tarnished metal and orange plumage, I look up and spy three more Torks circling overhead, so I pull out my cannon.

BNZZT! BNZZT!

My next shots bring down two more Torks. I aim for the last one, but it gives a final squawk before fleeing for its life.

And like that, the battle is over.

I get to my feet and stomp out of the wreckage. I head back to the outpost, but my movements are slow and heavy.

Hmm.

I check the internal visor display to see if the suit is somehow low on battery. No, it still has 3 days left of power on it. I examine my suit to see if anything was damaged during the fight. There are some scratches on the front, but the armour plates are still intact. Behind me, I see a trail of black liquid, and I see four tendrils piercing my armour.

My gut tightens.

I yank the tendrils out, and I see bloody wounds through the holes.

Fuck.

It hit me. The full weight of it just hit me. I collapse to my knees.

The fight. I must've been too occupied to feel them injecting me with nanites. Or maybe they pierced me during the fall, and I thought the pain was just the impact.

Either way, I'm fucked.

I feel a change in my body. The nanites are doing something. Converting flesh into lifeless metal. Turning me into another soulless robot.

I'm not making it home.

My arm is twitching, moving without my control. This is happening too fast. Conversion normally takes a couple of hours, but I don't think I have that luxury now. The tendrils must've pumped me full of nanites. Tragic. I don't even have time to make peace with the end. Won't even get to say goodbye to Maple.

Maple.

My converted body will try to infect him when he comes back.

I can't let this happen. I grab the pistol from my waist and aim it below my chin. But I'm just a second too late. My body is no longer mine. Stuck in my kneeling post with a gun below my chin, I'm frozen in time.

It's eating away at my insides, I can feel it. I expect to feel my body be converted from flesh to steel, but instead it just feels like I'm being hollowed out. I feel the outside air on my skin. I feel the energy of a power cell. I feel the strength of mechanical muscles.

Then I realise what's happening. The nanites are integrating me into my suit of armour. Stripping away my flesh, leaving my soul bound to my metal shell.

If I had more time, I'd curse the nanites. Curse the culprits who spread this infection. Cowards. Turning our own people against ourselves. Invading a planet without having to even show up. Gutless. Spineless. Pathetic. But there's no time. My mind is turning too. It's like television static filling out my vision, my thoughts.

It's cold. I'm cold.

I feel like a dying star, emitting my last rays of light before I fade out into the vastness of space.

Everything goes black.

I'm still here. I shouldn't be, but I am.

I'm just a passenger in my own body. Or at least, a passenger in this combat suit. My flesh has long been converted, integrated into digital circuits. And now I get a front-row seat to my body's coerced actions.

I see myself do things that I don't want to do. I yell and scream in the void of my mind, but nothing obeys. I watch as I drag the Tork corpses behind the outpost. I watch as I swap the cannon for a rifle. I watch as I stand guard in front of the inner airlock doors.

I watch as I hold my position and wait.

Time passes. Minutes? Hours? Days? I have no clue.

Then I hear the siren of the airlock and the doors open.

I see Maple, shocked.

“Decro? What are you—”

Then I feel pure terror as I hear my own voice.

“Hands up in the air.”

~ End ~