

Dirge

The sound of rapid banging worms its way into my subconscious despite my deep slumber. I shoot up with a quick gasp, throwing the thin blanket I had been given to the floor. The heavy metal door to my room shakes on its hinges. My eyes dart around in a daze before I get off the bed and slowly approach the door. The shaking stops, and after a few seconds a loud, deep voice cuts through the thick material.

“David!! You alive in there?!”

I exhale in relief and open the door. Lieutenant Arbors and Captain Harvey file into the room without delay. The latter clasps his hands around my upper arms and greets me with a slight shake. Harvey’s hands feel like iron vices around my biceps, and his shaking is enough to make me lightheaded. The soldier’s friendly eyes and bright white smile cut through my half-conscious mind. His chiseled face and broad body packed into a tight tank top would have terrified me if I didn’t know him to be a gentle five-foot-seven stack of muscle.

“Wakey wakey, Davey! What’s up my man? You look like you’ve seen a flesh hound,” Harvey inquires, remaining at the same volume as when he was on the other side of the door.

“Uh...thanks for reminding me of that experience,” I respond, still in a daze from the two mens’ sudden visit. “I was just sleeping. What are you guys doing here so late? You scared the piss out of me.”

“It’s only midnight,” Arbors counters. “But I take it you’re trying to catch on on some Zs. Sorry. We’re creatures of the night.” He wanders deeper into the room, inspecting the small space. Eventually, he falls backwards onto my bed, keeping his fancy officer’s uniform on, and takes off his hat to run his hands through the sparse ring of grey hairs on his head.

“Getting comfy, old man?” I say to Arbors jokingly. “Maybe you’d like to live here instead.”

Arbors' baggy eyes remain planted on the low hanging ceiling. "I might take you up on that offer. How are you liking it here at Sector G?"

My gaze pans around my new home. Thankfully each sector of the Zeta Line is large enough to be a small city, so the U.S. Army gifted me my own room in the upper floors of the sprawling military complex upon my arrival. The room doesn't quite feel like a home though. The six sides are made of a sterile white concrete, only broken up by an air conditioning vent and several fire sprinklers. The only furnishings in the room are a simple metal desk, a dresser for my clothing, and a fairly uncomfortable bed. Well it's more like a glorified cot, but I had slept on worse in the past few weeks alone. On the dresser are the few belongings I packed before my escape from Seattle; a stack of the lists I had spent my teenage years writing, a wooden puzzle my mom had given me for my thirteenth birthday, and a framed photo of my father and me on top of the Space Needle when I was five. His gentle eyes met mine across the room from behind his round glasses and long hair.

"It's... safe," I respond after a little thought. "Seriously why are you guys here?"

Harvey pats me on the back. "Warner wants to see you immediately. He has something he wants you to look at. Get dressed and we'll explain everything on the way."

I look down to see that I am still wearing only the white T-shirt and boxers I fell asleep in. "Give me a little privacy."

With a barely suppressed chuckle, the Lieutenant and the Captain shuffle out of the room. I reach under my bed and pull out a heavy trunk. Inside is a forest green camo uniform. It was given to me at the behest of General Warner. It's best if Raschter's men think I'm a U.S. soldier, at least when viewed from afar on the battlefield. If I could be easily identified as THE David Glifford, I'd get a bullet in the forehead before I could be of any use to the U.S. army.

Once I am fully dressed, I meet Arbors and Harvey outside. We walk together to the elevator and descend to the lower levels of Sector G. Out the exterior windows of the shaft, the countless lights of the facility's buildings and moving vehicles grow closer as we approach the ground. The imposing wall on the western side of the Zeta Line extends well past the horizon, barely illuminated by the dim moonlight. After a few short moments, we exit the elevator and take our seats on a small utility vehicle, with Arbors at the wheel. He drives Harvey and me deeper into the sector, towards an area I am unfamiliar with.

"Okay," I say without hesitation. "Where are you guys dragging me to?"

"It's your lucky day," responds Harvey. "You're finally going to see the Kennel."

"Good to see Warner finally trusts me enough to let me pay it a visit."

"That place gives me a serious case of the willies," interjects Arbors.

"Oh Warner still doesn't trust you in the slightest," Harvey continues. "But there is no way this thing is being moved, so he doesn't really have a choice."

"Next question. What is the thing? It better be important to require me to be awake."

"It is," Harvey reassures. "An elite flesh ripper has been shipped in from Sector I. It was captured during the Battle of Denver last month. Didn't stop us from losing the city, but it's still an amazing and rare feat."

"An elite flesh ripper?" I ponder aloud. "I've never seen one of those in Seattle. I thought all flesh rippers were equally deadly and terrifying."

"I wouldn't have expected you to. Raschter doesn't use them to police his colonies. They're usually sent to the battlefield to control large groups of flesh rippers. So you should be happy to have never seen them."

Arbors grunts in agreement. "It's us who got the short end of the stick there."

“Anyway,” Harvey continues. “Warner wants you to pull your voodoo shtick to turn it over to our side. This could help us out a lot in this war.”

I yawn and stretch my arms dramatically. “Alright. Let me at him. I’ll make this quick.”

Arbors eventually stops at a large rectangular building, which is isolated from the bulk of the facility. As we exit the vehicle, I hear the faint sounds of snarling and thrashing within the thin metal walls. Arbors stands back from the tall sliding door on the front face of the Kennel, staring at the structure with worry.

Harvey approaches him from behind and pats the aging soldier on the back. “Come on, Mitchell. You’ve seen this place before. Buck up.”

I follow Harvey as he grasps the handles of the door and slides it open with a strained heave. As the opening grew in size, a blinding pale blue light floods my senses, forcing me to shield them with my arm. After my eyes adjust, I get my first look at the infamous Kennel. Florescent lights hung from the high ceiling, illuminating the entire building with a harsh unnatural glow. The main room is populated with rows upon rows of glass containers. They remind me of overgrown fish tanks without any water or decorative treasure chests. Inside each of them are a group of horrifying creatures; the sector’s entire collection of flesh rippers.

Every one of the humanoid creatures is in the middle of its usual rowdy routine as I follow Harvey into the building, roaring in defiance and smacking their clawed hands against the walls of their cages. However, after a few seconds, the creatures turn their heads towards me and slowly stand upright, their erratic actions stopped in their tracks. Just as I’ve seen many times before, the flesh rippers have become docile with my presence.

Lieutenant Arbors scratches his neck while sweeping the room with his wide eyes. “You know, I thought it might be less scary in here when you turned them into trained puppies. But I was wrong. It’s way creepier now.”

“The elite flesh ripper is being kept in the back,” explains Harvey. “I’ll lead the way.”

The three of us pass through one of the aisles, giving me a good look at the flesh rippers once again in my life. The creatures act like 9 foot marble pillars, the only movement they show being their rapid breathing and the slow turn of their head towards my direction as I pass each one. Flesh rippers have very lanky body types, grey skin pulled taut against their slim torsos and spindly arms. Their eyes are just as unnerving as always, large, black, and bulbous, with a small red iris swimming erratically in the center. Their mouths, hanging open and populated with long teeth similar to those of an angler fish, let loose a quiet wheeze with every breath. Metal armor and tubing, used to protect from bullets on the battlefield and help circulate blood and nutrients throughout the mutant abominations respectively, was fused to their hairless grey skin by Raschter’s engineers. The freakishly long claws on the beasts’ hands and feet twitch occasionally, possibly itching to help their owner live up to its namesake.

We reach a door at the back of the facility and Harvey holds it open for Arbors and I to enter. Inside is a smaller room with a wide window built into the wall opposite the entrance. The room is dark, with most of the light streaming in from a much brighter room at the other side of the window. Standing in front of the window, hands clasped behind his back and silhouetted by the harsh glow, is a large man in the uniform of a high ranking military officer.

I approach General Warner, who doesn’t acknowledge my presence, choosing to keep his eyes focussed directly in front of him. Harvey and Arbors stay by the entrance, keeping their distance from their intimidating boss. As I get closer to Warner, the subject of his gaze emerges from behind his body. In the room on the other side of the window is the elite flesh ripper, contained in a metal frame that was built into the floor and ceiling. Its forearms and calves are trapped in massive conical capsules, while its torso is suspended freely in the center. The creature thrashes about with a relentless fervor even greater than what I’ve seen in other flesh rippers. It

roars at an earth shaking volume, staring directly at Warner. While flesh rippers are normally emotionless, I think I see a hint of rage in the beast's eyes.

"So uh... this is the elite flesh ripper," I nervously comment to Warner. "It's pretty scary."

"You think?" he responds curtly.

I look up at Warner's grizzled face. As usual, his large goatee is bushy and unkempt, and his stern eyes convey murderous intent 24/7. Definitely the scariest man I've ever met, but he's avoided killing me so far, so I've learned to accept his distrust of my character due to my knack for controlling flesh rippers.

"I guess I'll be trying to convert it now?" I confirm with the general.

"I suppose so. If we bring it to our side, it can lead the other flesh rippers in battle instead of you, seeing as you don't really know what you're doing. However, elite flesh rippers are extremely intelligent. It might act like the flesh hounds, and not be influenced by your ability. So there's a good chance you'll be killed as soon as you enter that room."

"What else is new. Just let me in there and I'll do my best."

With an approving grunt, Warner presses a button on a console in front of him and a heavy door next to the window swings open. With a deep exhale, I enter the room. As soon as I'm inside, Warner pressed the button again and the door swings shut.

I walk up to the elite flesh ripper, making sure to keep my distance from its chomping teeth. Curiously, the beast does not become docile when I approach it, instead shifting its murderous gaze to me and continuing its tirade. I finally have my first good look at this new beast. Maybe it's just my fear getting the better of me, but this creature appears slightly larger and more muscular than its basic counterparts. And I'll be damned if its claws aren't a little longer too. It has more armor around its body, specifically on the sides of its bald head and

around its shoulders and chest. The metal is adorned with orange stripes, possibly to identify the beast on the battlefield.

The flesh ripper's thrashing would not cease. We were in no position to negotiate anything. I turn to Warner, who continued to watch with stoic intent, and nodded my head. After a slight pause, he presses yet another button, causing the conical restraints to hiss and turn, slowly releasing their grip on the beast's limbs. The elite flesh ripper begins to fall downward, but before it can even hit the floor, it lunges towards me. As a gasp escapes my mouth, the beast zooms past me and begins darting around the room. It latches onto walls with its claws, desperately searching for an escape, while screeching in the distinctive voice of a flesh ripper. I stand shock still as I keep the creature in my line of sight.

Eventually the elite flesh ripper finds its way back to me and begins sniffing me while circling my body menacingly. It flexes its claws and lets out a few snarls, but doesn't make any moves to attack.

"Feeling better now?" I ask the monster. "Let's talk. Man to flesh eating mutant."

The flesh ripper cocks its head slightly. After a few more seconds of studying me, it stops in front of me, still maintaining a threatening stance.

"Look I know you're probably confused. Hell I'm confused to. I have no idea why I have this effect on your kind. But I want to make peace with you. And I want you to help us."

The creature says nothing.

"Your boss — Marcus Raschter. He's taken over the entire west coast, and I can tell you from experience that he had no idea what he's doing. I want you to help us fight his soldiers so we can save the people trapped in his colonies, like my mom."

The creature says nothing.

I notice a collection of orange letters and numbers on the beast's upper arm. "DIRG3? Heh. That's funny. Looks exactly like the word "Dirge". Hey do you mind if I call you that? Seems appropriately dark."

The creature lets out a single grunt.

"Ah that got a response. You like it, huh? Listen, Dirge. From what I've been told, you're a leader yourself. We can be partners. You and I, leading your siblings in battle."

I reach out my hand and slowly reach towards one of Dirge's forearms. When the flesh ripper doesn't react, I grab hold of its pale skin. It's leathery and cold to the touch. Just by its feel I can tell that the skin is tough enough to defend against blunt force and sharp objects. Dirge simply looks down at me with interest.

"Looks like we have a deal. Just do me one favor. Could you place your hands and feet back in the restraints?"

Dirge growls and backs away, tearing its arm from my grasp.

"Okay, okay," I say defensively, holding my hands up. "Too far. I get it. But this arrangement only works if you be good. No more violent outbursts. And you can't harm anyone on this base. Are we clear?"

The creature doesn't respond.

Satisfied, I back away to the door, keeping my eye on the creature as its gaze remains fixated on me. A soft beep indicates that Warner had opened the door. I pass through it, meeting the general, as well as Arbors and Harvey next to the window. We all keep eye contact with Dirge as it remains right where I left it.

"You couldn't get it back in the restraints?" complains Warner with a snarl.

"You want to give it a shot instead?"