

Triage Camp Whiskey-Tango-Foxtrot

By Tim Macauley

"Mankind is poised midway between the gods and the beasts."

—Plotinus

"I remember nan's pumpkin pie....the year the Oilers last won the cup....the scent of juniper trees. I remember Joey Huget pitching a no-hitter....I do!" A slight look of admiration washed over his face. "And fresh citrus oranges....and girls. I remember when girls dressed in something—anything—other than coveralls. I remember what life was like before the rift tore asunder the sky," he pointed meekly up, "before the fire fell."

He nodded shallowly to no one in particular, as if reassuring himself that his memories were true, and then slipped back into unconsciousness, the conversation having exhausted the frail old man. He slept in an upright bucket seat that had long ago been separated from a Honda Civic, swaddled in a wool blanket where only the slim breadth of his face was exposed.

Six other members encircled their precious elder. Rook leaned forward and tucked the fabric gently around Ananias' fragile frame. He had no hair left of any sort; no eyebrows, no eyelashes, no errant ear hairs run amok. His skin had a permanent rhubarb hue, and every inch of him looked as though he'd suffered third-degree burns long ago, as if his entire surface was made of continental plates that had shifted, collided and then shifted again. Conversations were always stilted and laborious, for both the speaker and the audience. But they listened. Ananias was full of knowledge, and he was one of their last lifelines to what was now known as the Epoch of A.D.

A small gale shifted the tarpaulin above them and the rainwater found a new course to follow, drizzling down a crack above Machiavelli. Startled and agitated, the marine paced in a circle around the fire pit, running his hand over his shaved head. "Look at him, he's like a...a...living smore," he whispered, gesturing toward the bucket seat. Rook reached out and clocked him hard in the ear. "What the hell?!"

"Mind that motor mouth of yours," Rook chastised. "You'll show nothing but respect for this gentleman." Machiavelli rubbed his ear, retreating to the far side of the shelter. "All I'm saying is, I ain't ever seen anyone with such an affliction," he replied with an indignant look.

They'd run into this problem repeatedly. New clones were constantly being brought online, and while they could recall the past memories that their donor had at the time their genetic data was collected, they had absolutely no knowledge or understanding of the countless events that had transpired since. The complexity of this problem was substantial, as most clones were from the 2116 A.D. batch, and already it was 55 A.R. Machiavelli himself had only been birthed three days ago, so it was completely reasonable for him to not understand the intricacies of Ananias and their entire resistance movement.

Nyugen, Garcia, Sage and Bastille were also beneath the tarp. "I'll cover this one, boss," Bastille said. Rook grew impatient dealing with new recruits time and time again. The Resistance was lacking in every type of resource. When these clones were originally designed, there was a proper procedure put in

place for their birthing. There were proper steps to help them acclimate. There were supposed to be licensed therapists and counselors on hand to help them through their first days alive. But the Resistance had nothing at all along that line of resources. He didn't even have the hardware to record a training video for each new birth. It got old saying the same thing to the same face that you explained only a week ago. Life expectancy for each new clone was a meager ten days.

"You've heard us mention the Dry Sea in passing, but it's time you had a better understanding of it. It is responsible for how Ananias became so grievously afflicted." He paused for a moment, glancing at the old man sleeping.

"We received some intel this morning about the location of a nomadic sect that always camps along the sea's perimeter. Don't ask me why anyone would want to live there, but we'll be moving at sunrise tomorrow to find them. We're seeking updated reports of any recent raids by marauders, and Rook had the foresight to suggest we slip some GPS transponders amongst the sect's followers. As long as they choose to live on the cusp of the event horizon, we may as well get accurate coordinates of where the Dry Sea's boundary is.

"You'll need to prepare yourself, psychologically, for the first time you lay eyes on it. It is a sea unlike any other, made not of water but of earth, borne by air that blazes as a furnace, twisting and gyring, like a sandstorm that fills the entire sky, and—"

"And a sense that it is not a natural phenomenon," Nyugen interjected. "...that it is not simply an indefatigable, unforgiving storm. Its movement cannot be forecasted. It defeats our very best pattern recognition protocols. It seems to always select civilian-populated regions, as if making a deliberate, conscious decision over where to shamble its awesome destructive might. This sense that it can discern between different paths, conveys a sense of intelligence and with that, of evil incarnate....a palpable, seething presence that metastasizes over all within its reach..."

"Visually, it looks like an enormous sandstorm, one that stretches across the horizon and towers thousands of feet high, blotting out the sun at midday. The Arabs had a word for it, a '*haboob*'. Look here." Bastille handed a tattered photograph to the new recruit.

"It can be mesmerizing. That photo doesn't do it justice. It's unlike any sandstorm you've seen before, I'll wager. Note how black it is, that deep void. Not just dark, but the blackest of blacks. There is this undeniable sensation that the phenomenon is a dynamic system, that's it's alive in some non-cellular way. One moment, it exudes a sense of being languid and satiated, and then the next..."

He kicked the largest log in the fire pit. A cloud of cinder sparks whooshed upward, and the glowing coals within flared brightly for a moment before the fire's intensity faded to its previous state.

"This endless void can suddenly surge with a wide palette of colors, and it's like....it's like staring into a nursery of stars, the cradle of creation. Bursts of burnt orange and tyrian purple light up the dark, and the sallow glow of electrical fingers scabble throughout, like synapses discharging in the brain. It's as if Zeus was somewhere inside, his hands twisted in a cat's cradle made of lightning in lieu of knitting yarn."

"It is...the crucible of the gods..." Ananias suddenly blurted out, his eyes still heavy from sleep. "Steel yourself, for its allure is....intoxicating." His eyes held Machiavelli's for a moment, before his head drooped forward to rest against his chest again. Sage made a melancholy face.

"We do not pretend to know its nature, but it is a predator that pervades every organism that it touches. *Everything*," Bastille continued. "It throbs, like an organ itself, pulsating with life. Sometimes it advances as slow as a glacier, other times it's as fast as a dust devil. Never turn your back on this undertow. And do not let it glamour you. There are moments when a sheen ripples across its surface, where it has a striking resemblance to a halocline—that boundary where fresh water collides with a salt water ocean. And for just a moment, you can convince yourself that the gods have taken an arc torch and traced your heart's desire there deep in the recesses of that veil, beckoning you into its midst...."

Bastille stared wistfully at the horizon. Garcia, who had been fidgeting with a transistor radio on top of a nearby crate, cleared his throat loudly.

"You must forgive Bastille if he romanticizes it a bit much." Rook gave a reproachful look. "We have all felt the siren's call when the Dry Sea is near. It remains a phenomenon that we cannot explain, but you must be vigilant in your resistance to its seduction. Don't be misled by the lustre of whatever vision it shows you. The Dry Sea is more like a smoke-curdling cauldron that parts and lets you stare straight into the maw of Hell. Many have ventured in, but only two are known to have survived. That gentleman right there is one of them. He and seven others went in, dragging a tethered power sled. Two days later, their belaying crew outside spooled the tether back in, and all they found was Ananias, the tether slack tied tightly about his waist. He returned a broken man, an incoherent vegetable for weeks. But that man right there had a *fierce* will to live."

"Who is the second man to have survived?" Machiavelli asked softly.

"Woman, actually. We've been hearing rumors for weeks that a female leader from a religious sect has undertaken what they call the *Viagem dos Mortos*, the journey of death. She's known as the Apostle, and her sect is the Fellowship of the Amalgam. This is the group we're intending to visit tomorrow. They follow the ebb and flow of the Dry Sea's threshold, living along its event horizon. We've heard multiple accounts of their followers voluntarily walking into the billowing, churning void.... You'd think their congregation size would soon dwindle, but their membership continues to surge. At any rate, from the independent testimony we've heard, there is probably some truth that their Apostle has spent time in the Dry Sea. They said she was delirious as well upon exiting, but she doesn't bear the painful outward manifestations that Ananias does."

The little transistor radio suddenly sprang to life with a nostalgic, dreamy pop song. "*Into this house we're born, into this world we're thrown*", a man's voice droned, a relic from some forgotten century. "Oh yeah, I'm da man," Garcia said. "Nobody touch this dial."

"Hopefully the sect tomorrow can give us more information about the autopsy we did last week," Nyugen said, glancing anxiously at the others. "That corpse wasn't like the infected that we've previously studied. It's clear they've evolved."

"No...they've changed," Ananias interjected with his raspy voice. "Evolved suggests some element of progression, but the infected aren't—" A fit of coughing racked his frame. "The infected aren't an improved version of humanity. They lack something that is core to humanity...empathy...they lack empathy." And then, just as promptly, he succumbed once again to fatigue.

"I don't think devolved is a word, but it should be. They've degraded." Sage said, while rummaging through a med-kit in preparation for another birth. They had the inanimate clone—what they referred to crassly as the 'cherry'—reclined on a faded, outdoor pool chair.

"Dr. Hildegaard suggested that the neocortex and the limbic system in their brains have been striped away, and they're left with just the reptilian-complex and the neural chassis. Consider the evidence. They are consumed by hierarchical structures, territoriality, ritual..." He taped an IV tube to the cherry's forearm. "and aggressive behavior."

"Loads of aggressive behavior." Garcia piped in.

"The amygdala is deeply involved in aggression. Hildegaard's theory held that the Dry Sea seems to retard the normal distribution of several neurochemicals that keep our aggression in check. The infected are essentially regressing to our reptilian past. If the infected have a vulnerability, it may lie somewhere therein." He activated the charge paddles in case of an emergency and then nodded at Nyugen.

The radio squawked on: *"The world on you depends, our life will never end, gotta love your man."*

"It's like Darwin said, only the strongest survive, amigo." Garcia said, feeding a new belt of ammo into his chain gun.

"No *señor*, he said not the strongest, but the one most responsive to change." Sage paused a moment. "It seems to me that they have changed. We'd best do some changin' as well."

"The trick is...can we adapt without...forsaking...what makes us—us, you know?" Rook sat on his haunches, absently sticking the mud with a large twig. "What do we have that they don't? Empathy. They have turned one of our most noblest of traits into a handicap. They have leveraged it against us time and time again. They knew we couldn't leave Candace back at Oslo Point...they dangled her wounded body as bait knowing we couldn't leave a man behind. They rocked us again with that soul-wrenching massacre at the Jeunet plantation. They find our behavior as predictable. Somehow we need to think of how to leverage—how to exploit their certainty of our predictable ways."

The singer on the radio crooned a chorus over and over again, and the sound of raindrops in the recording meshed eerily with the actual rain that fell all around. *"Riders on the storm, riders on the storm."*

Nyugen checked the hanging saline pouch again, and then said, "Ok, I think we're ready to bring this guy online." Bastille and Machiavelli held the clone's arms down on each side.

“What a hell of a place to be birthed.” Bastille said. “This guy already has debris on his face from that last mortar attack and he hasn’t even clicked on. *Mãe de Deus.*” He spat on his fingertips and wiped a streak of dirt from the clone’s closed eyes. “What?” He looked around self-consciously. “That’s empathy, right?”

Rook chuckled. “If that is, maybe it’s overrated. All right, let’s see if you gave sight to what once was blind.” He nodded at Nyugen, who pushed the plunger on the syringe.

“God, it never gets old doing this in the field, with no sanitation or proper tech.” He shook his head.

“No, it never does.”

Clone #41280-JX3’s eyes burst open with a panicked look. The soldiers on both sides of him held him firmly, while Nyugen gave the speech he’d given hundreds of times before. It started like this: “Good morning Mr. Rook, we are delighted to have you with us. You’ve won the deployment lottery!”

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