

LURKERS

by

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“If we don’t run into any trouble, we’ll make it there before dark.” Tony tried to sound reassuring, but standing in the ruins of a burnt-out city didn’t lend credibility to any thought of safety.

“I know we’ll make it.” Zelpha tried to sound as brave as felt she was not. It wasn’t all that long ago when the worst concern had been gaining too much weight from her love of chocolate. Now it was going a few miles without getting lynched. Or worse.

Zelpha followed Tony’s lead. Every step wishing she was back at the basement where she now lived. It was dark, it was dank, and it smelled worse than any locker room she had ever endured in high school, but at least there she felt marginally safer. Her right hand slipped into her pocket and touched the pistol she carried. Nothing frightened her more about what the world had turned into than the fact that she was now ‘packing’.

With her other hand she touched the pouch at her side. Inside was a true miracle. A Personal Digital Assistant that still worked. When the Lurkers had friend Earth technology, it seemed that everything had been destroyed, but here and there were bits still working. And no one had any clue as to why.

“Damn it!” Tony cursed, as he stopped suddenly. In front of him was the ruins of a overpass, now nothing spanned the chasm over a once vital freeway.

“We’re going to have to go around,” Tony said glumly. Tony looked up at the sun, it was more than half way to the horizon. “We’re going to have to cut through center-city.”

Zelpha almost screamed no right there. The center of the city was the worst of it. before she had found Tony and the others she had watched too many bonfires. Heard too many screams. She knew what would happen to her if anyone there caught themselves a geek.

“We can’t go back now.” Tony had read her emotions as well as if he could read minds. “It will be dark before we got home, and that is too important to risk.” He pointed to the pouch with the PDA.

“I didn’t say anything,” Zelpha protested.

“No, you didn’t. But it occurred to me too.” Tony pointed off towards the crumbling and burnt-out buildings of downtown. “Let’s get going.”

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Tony’s head exploded into a blossom of blood, bone, and fragments of grey matter. The report of the gunshot was fractionally behind the impact of the round, like a movie just out of synch. Zelpha ducked low and sprinted for the cover of the ruin buildings nearby. She had turned and started her sprint even before Tony’s corpse had fallen to its knees. Grief and loss would have to wait; survival had seized total control.

Asphalt exploded into tiny geysers behind Zelpha as she darted for safety. Jerking chaotically left and right she hoped to soil the sniper’s aim,

Zelpha charged out of the street. Exerting her adrenaline-charged muscles, she heaved herself through a doorway and out of the line of fire.

She was not safe; and she knew it. Rolling hard to her right, Zelpha crawled and scrambled to get further into the destroyed building. Slowing only to take the time to pull out her pistol. Hardly of any use in a sniper match, still it was better than nothing. The snipers, Zelpha could tell that there was more than one firing, knew that plaster and ply board were no shield for rifle rounds, began shooting through the thin walls of the building in hopes of getting another kill. Paint and plaster exploded into the room. The air cracked with the passage of the high velocity rounds. It would take the blindest luck for the snipers to get a kill this way, but Zelpha was not about to trust to luck. There was no survival in that strategy. She kept to the floor, her tough denim taking the punishment of the debris-strewn floor, and worked her way to the back of the building.

Keeping her head close to the floor, Zelpha slowly peeked around the destroyed door jam. A narrow alley extended to the left and right from this exit. Damn, alleys were the worst kind of death traps. Still, there was no sign that her ambushers had cut off this escape. Maybe she and Tony had simply stumbled onto looters. Maybe that hadn't been targeted, because if they had, then the attackers would stop at nearly nothing to hunt her down and kill her.

Time for another dash, the rifle fire behind her had already fallen silent. Not a good sign. They were certainly moving in; she had to be elsewhere, now. Gathering her strength with a deep breath, Zelpha dashed out of the doorway

and down the alleyway. There was little room to weave back and forth in the alley, if there was a shooter covering it, she was dead. Her side was stitched with pain, the spot between her shoulder blades itched with anticipation of an arriving bullet, and the end of the alley seemed so far away.

“Here’s the Geek bitch!” A big man appeared ahead of her at the opening of the alley. Dirty, clothes in rags, he was wild in appearance with long hair and a tangled matted beard. Not that his looks mattered, all that really mattered was the old hunting rifle he held in both hands.

Faster than she could think of it, Zelpha’s hand was up and firing her pistol at the brute. Rounds flew haphazardly from her gun. Bullets impacted in the street, the walls, and some even shot into the sky, but one found its mark, smashing through her target’s sternum with a shower of blood.

Zelpha leaped over his thrashing form, not slowing her run in the least. She hated leaving the rifle behind, but she despised slowing down and making herself a target even more. Zelpha darted across the intersection and into more cover. There was more at stake tonight than just her life, a lot more. That’s what Tony would have said.

Moving quickly through the labyrinth of alleys gained Zelpha distance and a little time. She needed a place to hide. To wait for them to go away so she could turn around her head for the safety of home. She turned and dashed into an old multistory brick building.

Advancing at a trot, she searched until she found the stairwell heading up. Trusting that they had not rotted completely through, she ran up the stairs

as quickly, while trying to remain as stealthy as possible. The stairs ended before the fourth landing, forcing her to choose the third floor as her refuge.

A corner room seemed to be her best bet for the moment. She could cover the stairwell, and still have another door to dash out of if they overran her position.

Working slowly, because her hands were shaking with fear, she removed the magazine from her pistol and loaded in a fresh one. Just a few years ago she was gathering petitions to ban guns, now she used them without thinking. And without regrets.

Her left hand slipped into her bag and caressed the PDA, the working PDA. There weren't too many of those still about. She gripped it tight, a tiny silver memory of better times. Back when she used to code for a living, when cell phones and pagers hid in her purse instead of guns and ammunition. Tears started streaming from her eyes. Biting her lip to keep her sobs silent, she let go of the PDA and wiped the tears away with her left hand. The pistol, ready in her right. It had been Tony's idea to set the meeting for daylight hours. Even armed, he argued, it was too dangerous to travel at night. Not in numbers less than a dozen, and there wasn't a dozen in their little group. Of course that's why it was so important to join with a larger, better-equipped team.

Still, anyone trying to use tech, no matter how big their gang, had to be careful. Too many of her coworkers had been shot, stabbed, burned, and just plain torn apart by angry mobs after the collapse. Torn apart, that's what she was risking to meet up with James and his band.

Again, her left hand returned to the PDA, she had the signals, hopefully, James would be able to turn them into communication. She had long since given up any hope that the electromagnetic pulse and the collapse that followed it had been some sort of accident. When the Lurkers cleared orbital space of *everything*, it was evident they meant to knock mankind down. Then came the announcement; blockade. The Lurkers weren't going to allow mankind off-planet, ever again. There had to be some way to talk to the aliens, to reason with them. People hadn't even been further than the Moon. There had to be some way to make the Lurkers see that humans weren't the threat that the aliens thought they were. Zelpha had to believe that, or the wretched shamble that the Earth had turned into was all it was ever going to be.

Of that would mean getting the PDA to James. Not running home, but doing what she and Tony came out here to do. But she couldn't do it by herself! She would get caught, and then...she couldn't let herself think about what would happen after they caught her. They knew she was geek. There would be no talking, or even bribing her way out of it.

She could always stay here. Stay hidden. She had a little water, after a day or so she could head back and get help. There would be other chances to get the PDA to James.

She was lying to herself, and a part of her mind refused to let her get away with it. James had exposed himself and his group setting with this meeting. Once it was clear that no one had made it through, he would abandon his hidey-hole and go to ground. It could be weeks, if ever, before they made

contact with James again. And James not only had a working radio, he also had a working computer!

Zelpha hated it, but she knew she was rapidly taking away all her options. She had to get moving. It was now or never, and it was up to her.

Outside, as darkness slipped over the shattered city, Zelpha could hear the men hunting her. Clutching her pistol tightly, Zelpha froze, not even breathing, as they searched the streets below. After moments that passed like hours, the voices moved further away. Zelpha dropped her face to her knees and let the shakes have their way, for a little while.

Okay, time to get moving again. Somewhere nearby was James and his people, if she could find them she would be safe. More important, the PDA would be safe. Except for the hardware that she had heard James had gotten working, this PDA might be the most powerful computer on the coast. Hell, she might be the only programmer left alive in the city now that Tony was dead. Zelpha laughed softly at herself as she stood and moved cautiously towards the stairwell landing. She should have chosen a less dangerous career, like soldier.

Going down the steps, she considered her resources. One pistol with two magazines of rounds that made a total of twenty-six shots. It sounded like a lot more than it was. Zelpha also had a knife, but she knew she was worse with a blade than she was with her pistol.

It was dark outside, the kind of dark that she had never known before the Lurkers' electromagnetic pulse. A child of the modern industrialized cities she had never been aware of just how much of the night mankind banished. No

streetlights illuminating with harsh circles, no traffic, no house lights, nothing but a sliver of moonlight, veiled by low fast moving clouds. And of course the Lurkers' ship. No one really knew if it was a ship, but that's what everyone assumed. It looked like a a cross between a refinery and a Christmas tree. Scarily it was as large as her fist as it crossed the sky from north to south. Zelpha didn't know how big it had to be to appear like that from orbit, only that it was huge.

Zelpha slipped out of the building, remaining flush against the wall. She moved with great care staying the in comforting shelter of the deep, dark shadows, straining to see obstacles in her path.

The chase and escape had turned Zelpha around, but she knew the streets here. Getting back on track to find James wouldn't be the hard part, doing it safely would be.

As much as she wanted the safety, she also lusted after the tech that James had gotten working. She missed her world terribly. Even a lit light bulb would seem like a miracle to her. She wanted her computers back, fresh food, hell even television would be a blessing.

The shell of a burnt out *Gateway* computer store greeted Zelpha on her left. Good, the theater where James was holed up should only be seven or eight blocks away at most. It used to be this wonderful underground playhouse, both in the pieces it produced and its location from a converted basement warehouse.

“Gotcha!” A hand slammed into her neck, fingers crushing her throat. “I’ve got the geek bitch here!” Footfalls in the dark announced reinforcements hurrying over.

Zelpha tried to swing her pistol up into the man’s chest, but he batted her hand away with an easy blow. He grabbed her pistol hand and used it to twist her around until he was pulling her back tight against his chest, her arm bent back, threatening to break.

“Not this time.” His breath was foul in her nose. A savage wrench of her wrist sent pain shooting up her arm, and the pistol dropped from Zelpha’s grasp.

“P-p-please...” Tears, as real as her pleading was not, crawled down her cheek. Zelpha brought up her foot and smashed it down, heel first, trying to break her attacker’s instep. Either he hadn’t bought her pleading, or he was just faster than she was. It didn’t matter which, his foot was already sweeping under her legs as she tried her assault. He took out her supporting leg easily, crashing the both of them to the pavement, his weight smashing the breath out of her.

“Nice try.” He licked her ear, his tongue as raspy as his voice. “I’ve got a few tricks to show you myself.”

“Don’t play with her, Clarence!” Two men closed in around them. Zelpha felt a curious detachment growing over her. “Stand her back up.”

Zelpha found herself pulled upright, but now each arm had the luxury of being held by its own captor. The leader of the three was a small man, shorter

than Zelpha's five-foot-five. That didn't make him seem any less dangerous, somehow it made him seem more so.

"You going to tell us where your pals are?" The head man asked directly. Zelpha ignored him. She found she wasn't really afraid to die, just horribly disappointed that they were going to get the PDA and smash it.

"You know you're going to die. But, I can make it quick, or you can burn." That wasn't hyperbole, she had seen friends burn alive.

"Tell me where they are, and you'll get a bullet in brain. Try to play hero and Clarence will get what he wants." The little man moved in closer, his face only inches from hers. Zelpha looked past him, not wanting to see his feral smile. Far away the moon dipped towards the top building across the street. A silhouette move across the face of the moon, a man bent over in a low crouch. The detachment fled from Zelpha like a deer from a mountain lion. Time! She had to buy more time!

"It's not our fault!" Zelpha screamed, hopefully, loud enough so any friends out in the dark would know she was conscious and able to fight. "We didn't know they were lurking on the 'net!"

A fist smashed into her solar plexus, exploding the wind out of her.

"That's not what I asked!" Zelpha fought to keep from throwing up as the man ranted. "We know the filth you geeks flooded our world with. Perversions, fags, and child-porn, you infected the world with your sickness, until they showed us the way. Now we're going to finish the cleansing they started."

“They weren’t sent to clean anything.” Zelpha spit out a bit of bile that had crawled up into her mouth. “The Lurkers are just aliens.” The leader lashed out with his foot, kicking Zelpha viciously in her stomach. Zelpha bent over double, vomit flowing freely from her.

“I ain’t got time for games. Either tell us now, or get ready to scream.”

The leaders head, in a grotesque flashback to events earlier in the day, exploded as a rifle round crashed through it. Confusion reigned for the next several moments. It was all Zelpha would need.

The man on her right side let go of her arm and tried to pull his own gun, but another rifle round cut him down before he had it fully drawn from his make shift holster.

Already bent over from her retching, Zelpha snatched the knife out of her boot with her now free right hand, and in a single, fluid, motion drove it up through the chin of the remaining thug. He gurgled softly as the blade slid into his brain, then sighed and fell to the pavement. Zelpha seized a dropped pistol, and turned to face the sound of onrushing footsteps.

“Hold your fire.” Came a voice from the darkness. “Are you Zelpha?”

“Yeah, James?” Zelpha felt her knees starting to shake.

“He’s back at the theater, I’m Daryl. Don’t shoot, I’m coming out to you.” A young man walked, carefully, out from the deep shadows of the building. He was a tall black man whose skin hung loose, like someone who once weighed a great deal more and had suddenly been starved. As Daryl got closer Zelpha felt as if her knees would give out entirely, but she managed to stay on her feet.

“Tony’s dead.” Her voice was flat, dead, even to herself.

“We know. We found his body, when we didn’t find yours we decided you must have gone to ground and hid.” Daryl reached out and took her by her left arm, leaving her pistol hand free, and started to lead her back out of the street.

“I’ve got the PDA.” Daryl just nodded at the news. “With assholes like that,” Zelpha jerked her head back toward the dead men in the street. “It’s easy to understand why the Lurkers have blockaded us.”

“It’s not that simple, Zelpha. It never is.” Three more people were waiting in the shadows, a woman and two men. “They listened, spied on us, even chatted with us secretly for years. The Lurkers had to know just how *diverse* mankind was.” The small group wound its way through alleys and dark streets as Daryl spoke. “I think the Lurkers even had some web-pages of their own. No, they had to know we weren’t all like that. The blockade they did for their own reasons. But maybe, someday, we can talk them out of it.”

Daryl fell silent as footsteps came running up from the east.

“I see you got her out of there.” A girl’s voice said.

“Come on, Paula.” A girl, she looked no more than thirteen or fourteen, trotted up and joined them. In her hands was a well-maintained rifle, snapped down over her face, giving her a decidedly alien contenance, a pair of night-vision goggles. It truly amazed Zelpha, to see such lovely high-tech in working condition.

“You’re fast with that knife.” Respect vibrated in Paula’s voice.

“You’re not bad either.” Zelpha nodded towards the rifle.

“We can chitchat back at base.” Daryl reminded them. “After James has that PDA.” Not waiting for agreement Daryl lead the ragged group off into the darkness.