

**Captain's log, April 25, 2326. The Huron has reached the fringes of allied space, in response to a distress call from one of our outlying ships, the Harrier. The distress signal reported an attack by hostile life forms encountered on a planet being scouted for mining potential. Subsequent attempts to hail them have proved fruitless. Their ship appears to be dead in the water, and an away team is prepared to board to provide aid to the wounded and engage any hostiles still present.**

Captain Corwin turned off the recording before making her way to the shuttle bay. She wasn't on the rescue team; it was the protocol for the captain not to lead any dangerous away missions. Still, her second in command, Garrick Foxwell, was more than adept to command in her stead. He would take a small strike force to survey the status of the ship as well as supervised medical personnel to treat the wounded. If needed, a larger second wave of security personnel would be sent over to support them after the initial assessment and perimeter establishment.

Initial scans showed that the Harrier was undamaged externally. Yet the power systems were running on backups, and there was no response to further hails. Clearly, something had happened abroad, be it some force from the planet or a hostile takeover from another ship. Foxwell was determined to find out.

"Bring as many of them home as you can, Fox," The captain said as she entered the bay to see off her first officer's crew before they boarded the shuttle.

"Aie Aie, captain," Foxwell said, double-checking the power settings on his weapon before loading it into the bay with the others. He was an excellent shot and took pride in assessing the proper working order of his equipment himself before each and every mission, hostile or no. It was always the quirk he was tormented for most by his subordinates, but on more than one occasion, his diligence had likely saved his own life as well as dozens of others. Corwin had come to trust his judgment in combat situations and his years of experience were invaluable when things got dicey.

"Alright, Jann, take us out," Foxwell ordered as the bay cleared, and their shuttle blew out into space. The entire team looked out into the void at their sister vessel against the background of an M-class planet. Malik and Basset, their two medical personnel, went over their medkits meticulously as per Foxwell's expectations. Garret, Tyrrell, Mika, Wynn, and Bancroft all reviewed the internal schematics of the ship as they'd done a thousand times before, making sure that every access point in every room or corridor could be recalled from memory in the heat of combat. Foxwell couldn't help but feel a sense of pride for his crew for their diligence.

The outer door was activated remotely, and the team entered the shuttle bay, turning on their emergency beacons to compensate for the low lights of the ship's backup power. Jann took a look at the readout display from the shuttle bay's console, reporting that life support was functioning through the ship. Foxwell breathed a sigh of relief at that. It would make their job easier not to require environmental suits.

A quick scan of the ship's interior reported no life signs, human or otherwise. Yet Foxwell told them not to give up hope. It was just as likely that internal scans would show up negative if key systems were damaged. Their personal equipment could only detect things within a limited range. They needed to search the ship deck by deck to confirm the presence of survivors or hostiles.

"It's like a fucking Mary Celeste in here," Jann said as she entered the command to open the shuttle bay door into the corridors.

"The what?" Bassik asked, confused by the analogy.

"Some ship that lost its crew at sea? Showed up with no crew but all its operations in working order. Like they'd all just gotten up from whatever they were doing, eating, whatever, and all jumped overboard," Jann said as the console beeped and the door opened.

"Keep your focus on the objective," Foxwell said sternly, as they entered the ship's interior. He didn't really mind the idle chit-chat, but it was his job to be a hardass on his crew, after all. From personal experience, that's what got them out alive.

"The fuck is that smell, commander?!" Tyrrell said, waving his hand over his face as they went out into the corridor. The stench was one of rot and decay and seemed to be coming from a strange organic substance oozing from the far wall.

Basset walked over and scanned the substance for a few moments. "Complex proteins, acids, and something else. Human DNA?" She said, confusion in her voice.

Both Malik and Foxwell confirmed her findings. The human DNA seemed to somehow be integrated into the substance, though they were unsure how such a thing was possible. Whatever had produced it, it seemed as though it had been human at one time, or at least in part.

"Some sort of viral infection by-product? Can't make heads or tails of it commander," Malik said, defeated.

“Alright. If the ship is clear we can have a better look at it later. Stick together for now till we figure things out. Let's get the bridge. We'll get our answers there,” Foxwell said as Bancroft and Wynn took point.

They headed down the familiar standard corridor to the lift that would get them to the bridge. This ship was nearly identical to their own in design, making it far easier to navigate. Though, in the dimly lit corridor, it truly looked like they were inside a completely different structure.

Nothing unusual seemed to appear on their sensors. It was as though the entire ship had been abandoned. Yet a simple scan revealed that none of the shuttles or escape pods had been deployed. What was going on? No life readings from nostrils, no malfunction, no biological contamination were present to explain what had happened. Were all hands killed as they killed the intruders in turn? Then where were the signs of a struggle?

The attack began so suddenly that no one had time to react. A massive claw came down through the metal of the ceiling and impaled Wynn through her cranium, causing her to fall to the floor, dead in an instant. Bancroft hardly had time to raise his weapon to fire at the shapeless object before she was killed. He shot wildly into the air, unaware of the second claw that ended his own life with the same deadly precision.

“Get down!” Foxwell said as his remaining security officers fired at the holes in the ducts, eliciting hisses of pain that likely indicated direct hits. Yet their enemy remained invisible. Their scans had picked up nothing. No trace of the attackers, no indication of what they were, or even how many of them were present.

Foxwell led the medical personnel into a nearby lounge before joining his remaining officers in laying down cover fire. Recalling the location from memory, he was certain there shouldn't have been any other entrances to the room, so his non-combatant charges would be safe for the time being.

“They're in the fucking walls!” Garrett yelled as she fired her weapon at the ceiling, the energy rounds penetrating the hull above them. Yet, all they saw were the scattering of something through the grates, too fast to be made out as more than a blur. There was no way to tell how many of them there were!

“Duck!” Mika yelled as one of the creatures tore through the ceiling and reached a deadly claw to kill another of their number. Garret was thankfully able to get down in time to avoid being decapitated from the deadly blow.

The sight of a thick carapace and serrated jaws scrambling to get purchase through the hole it had made was a clear target. Foxwell hit the thing dead on and it screamed in pain. Yet, the blast that would have decapitated a human left it more bruised than anything. None of them got a good look at the thing as it crawled away with lightning speed.

The sounds of skittering stopped for a moment, giving the team a second to breathe as their attackers had seemingly backed off for the moment. Yet, a scream resonating from the longue sent the already panicked soldiers into hyperdrive as they burst into the room where their medical staff had been hiding. As they feared, the wall had been torn apart from the inside, indicating an unexpected attack. Only one of their crewmates was left, Bassik shivering in the corner in abject terror unbecoming the normally calm and collected officer.

“It...it took Malik!” Bassik said, unable to keep her composure. She had participated in complex surgeries, dealt with battlefield wounds from fallen soldiers, and faced the same training as did they all. Yet at the sight of an alien being capable of rending her limb from limb, bursting out of the wall to steal away her colleague in mere seconds...she nearly collapsed, unable to cope with the reality of the situation.

“Alright, Jann? Keep Bassik safe at all costs. We may have more wounded en route. Mika, contact the ship. We're going to need more reinforcements. Maybe a whole fucking exterminator squad. Garrett and Tyrell, with me. Secure this parameter. We aren't leaving this spot until help gets here,” Foxwell said, trying to keep his own nerve. It would be over if their commander lost it, after all.

After about twenty minutes, Mika swore and slammed the transmitter into the floor. “Fucking thing was damaged in the crossfire. We're stuck here until the ship realizes how fucked we are and sends over a crew. They could be walking into a slaughter just like we were,” he said, a hint of despair in his voice.

Foxwell sized up the situation for a few moments. Their only choice was to get to the bridge and alert the captain, even if it meant risking their own lives in the process. Their only other recourse was to return to the shuttle, but by now, they were halfway between both points, with no idea what dangers lay on either path.

“Alright, we move out in five minutes. Our goal is to get to the bridge and secure it. If there's any way to detect those things, how many there are, or their attack patterns, we'll find it there from the captain and crew logs,” he finished, trying to restore confidence in his officers. All they really knew was that they were dealing with ambush predators. Yet not predators, not really.

They had left the bodies of their victims on the deck, bleeding and dead. But why had they taken Malik?

He and Mika took point, with Jann and Bassik in the center while Tyrell and Garrett took up the rear. They walked out into the corridor, seeing no signs of their intruders, save for the remains of their former crewmates. Still, they did their best to ignore them as they made their way for the lift, cautious for any sound of the alien beings. Their ears were all they had in this situation, though unreliable through the fear of what they had encountered.

Mika opened the lift, swearing from the realization that power could not be rerouted, and they would indeed have to climb the six decks to get to the bridge. There were any number of access hatches where they could be ambushed and killed or taken. With that in mind, they moved quickly, crawling up the ladder several floors to reach their goal.

Five minutes of climbing left no signs of the invaders. Mika laughed, a piercing sound to relieve the tension. "Looks like those fuckers are-" he started before the screeching sound of metal broke the silence of the climb.

Mika barely had time to scream before a massive claw impaled him through the eye and killed him instantly. Foxwell, already on a hair-trigger, fired a few shots at the creature, which were enough to make it retreat through the hole it had made.

Yet he was not in time to save the rest of his team. A scream caught his ear as Jann's body was pulled through a tear in the wall they hadn't heard in the commotion. She was quickly tugged into the cacophony of skittering creatures, her screams indicating that she was being taken alive, as perhaps Malik had been.

"Get out now! Get to the shuttle bay!" Foxwell yelled as his crew fired on the invaders and tried to escape down the elevator shaft. He had no chance to join them without going through several sets of sharp jaws and claws, which was clearly not an option. Instead, he scrambled up, doing his best to get to the bridge. It took all of his efforts to get the door open quickly enough as the clicking sounds of a thousand sharp claws came bearing down on his heels.

Foxwell somehow managed to get the door closed, but he was sure it wouldn't hold, not with how powerful those things seemed to be. They would have to be to tear through metal like it was cardboard. He reset his weapon to its lowest setting, trying to weld the door shut to buy himself a little time. Foxwell was certain he wasn't getting back that way. But that didn't matter if he got to the bridge and got his message out.

With the primary systems all offline, and it was nearly impossible to get the doors to the bridge. With no other option, Foxwell placed a charge on the door and got out of range, covering his ears as the explosion burst the metal structure open. It was sure to attract his pursuers, though it seemed they were already aware of the presence of his team on the ship through some other means.

Pausing for sounds of any hostiles, he made his way into the bridge, shining his weapon into the wide room. To his horror, it fell over a massive creature, who stood looking down at him, frozen from the interruption. The thing was about seven feet tall, yet its tail easily added double that. Foxwell's first impression was that it appeared to be a cross between a centipede or a mantis. Yet it was far larger than anything similar on earth. Its entire length was divided into sections, each sporting a pair of multi-jointed limbs that could rotate at angles all over the circumference of its respective segment. The ends of each were tipped with three-toed claws that explained how it could cling so easily to the ship's interior. These limbs ran all the way down two-thirds of its body, with the final section of the abdomen muscled and ended with a bladed-tipped tail.

The two limbs on the first segment after the neck were massive serrated claws, looking like the razors of a mantis. He'd seen them tear into the metal of the hull and into the flesh of his crew. One blade was blown off, much smaller than the other though it seemed to be regenerating somewhat. It was similar to where he had hit the creature in the shaft, yet it seemed that his precision was pointless if the creatures could simply regenerate.

Where its face should be was a pair of massive mandibles that lead to a small opening of smaller mouthparts. It had two thin, waving antenna and several sets of segmented eyes on its head. But situated just below its forehead was a pair of piercing blue eyes with white irises that looked as though they'd be in place on a human face. They regarded him with an intensity that sent shivers down his spine.

Perhaps most disturbing of all was the fragment of uniform it had around its chest. It bore the colors and even the emblem of his crew. It seemed impossible to have gotten there by accident. It looked almost as though the creature had grown underneath it.

Foxwell only had a small window with which to act. Even at point-blank range, he knew he couldn't get a killing blow before he was himself impaled. Yet there was another option. Taking quick aim, he fired his weapon at the console behind the thing, which exploded in a shower of sparks and flames. The creature tried to move out of the way, but its skin caught on fire almost immediately, and it rolled around, trying to put out the blaze. Flames actually seemed to be hurting the thing!

Foxwell trained his weapon on the injured creature, hitting it repeatedly in its trunk, its head, and those haunted eyes until at last, it stopped moving, collapsing onto the damaged console with a final hiss. Foxwell stood over the carcass for a few moments with his weapon leveled, wanting to make sure it was dead.

Assuming he was safe for the moment, he then pulled out his com, hoping that his team had been as lucky as he had. To his relief, through the static, he heard Garrett's voice replying to his com.

"Sir?" She asked, seemingly relieved to know he was alive.

"Foxwell to Garrett. Fuckers can be killed. Not by direct shot though, at least not before they get to us. Try fire. These things don't like it hot," he finished, finally breathing a sigh of relief. "Are you all OK?" He asked, needing to know where they stood.

"So far. We're in the science lab. Finally found a way to track them. They don't give off heat, which makes them hard to follow, but that means they run cooler than the ship as well. We can track the spaces they leave as they move. The good news is that none of them are near us," Garrett said, seeming to hesitate for a moment.

"Then what's the bad news?" Foxwell asked.

There was a lengthy pause, followed by a gasp. "There seem to be a bunch outside the bridge, and more are on the move towards your location, sir. You have about two minutes before you're overrun. Get out of there if you can!"

With that short window, Foxwell wouldn't have enough time to get his message out to his ship. Yet he wasn't about to let an opportunity go to waste. The intense heat from a few well-placed charges could do them in if he was lucky and their cohort was any indication. He hoped, at least. Foxwell had only minutes to arm them, using his thousands of hours of muscle memory to get him through the task. He set them for 30 seconds and dove into the captain's ready room, hoping to get to the private lift, the only possible escape left. He hoped the aliens would try and break through the main lift doors, entering his deadly trap.

Thankfully, even in the dark, nimble fingers were able to remove the bottom panel to squeeze into the shaft. Foxwell was barely able to enter the lift when a series of explosions wracked the ship, making it rock under his feet. Off-balance, he fell down the narrow shaft,

trying his best to find a handhold to slow his fall. Thankfully, it wasn't a far drop. He cried out as he landed hard on his ankle. The pain was intense, but he hadn't broken it, at least.

Safe for the moment, he moved on to more important matters. "Foxwell to Garrett. I'm en route. Status?" He asked over the portable coms.

The sound of retching could be heard over the static. "Oh God, commander. We...we found Malik and Jann. You...you need to see this," she said before throwing up. It wasn't like Garrett to lose her composure in a combat situation. That deeply worried him, enough that he made his way to the science lab as quickly as possible. At least he wouldn't be ambushed, assuming his trap had killed most of the bugs that were en route to him.

Entering the lab, Foxwell tried to remain convinced that his surviving crew was still in there, though they hadn't answered their coms in the last few minutes. Taking a quick look around the lab, his eyes settled on the light of several beacons set up in the adjoining room from where his team likely set up their operations.

The sight that lay before him was more horrific than anything Foxwell could have prepared for. Both Malik and Jann were present, in some kind of cocoon attached to the wall. Their eyes were wide open, clearly awake, and aware of the whole ordeal. But it was obvious they could no longer speak. The thick mouthparts and familiar mandibles sticking out of their faces prevented that.

Both of his former crewmates were wrapped in some kind of slimy, sticky fluid. Their skin bulged and writhed underneath, as though alien flesh was pushing against their frail, human skin. He could even see the beginnings of extra limbs pulsating out along the edges of the trunk-like carapace that had formed out of their torsos. It was as though they were changing, becoming the same fucking aliens that had invaded this ship!

Foxwell nearly vomited from the realization. He couldn't imagine the horror of being awake through such a change. Their eyes were looking around the room in silent terror, every bit as aware as the human eyes that the first creature sported that he had killed on the bridge.

"How the hell is this happening?!" Foxwell yelled, not bothering to keep his composure. This was insane! Not only did these creatures kill other life forms, but it seemed they transformed them into more of their kind!

"I-I have no idea, commander. There's...there's nothing like this on any known systems!" Bassik said, tears running down her face.



Foxwell took a moment to compose himself. “Alright. See if you can slow the changes. We can’t get them out of here safely with the rest of those fuckers still running around. Maybe if we get them to the med-bay fast enough, we can try to save them,” he said, trying to keep the doubt out of his voice. Yet Foxwell knew it was unlikely. Anything that could change a human being on the cellular level like this couldn’t be reversed with the medical technology they had at their disposal. Still, he had to keep up hope and motivation. It was his duty as the mission leader, after all.

Bassik did her best to ensure they were stable, but nothing in her kit seemed to have any effect on their changed physiology. Her scans seemed to indicate some level of bodily activity as both looked out at her in horror. But it was getting difficult to take the readings as their body temperature decreased, most likely to a similar state as the invaders.

The reality of their situation crossed over each of them in turn as they sat in silence. There was no way to know how their crew had been infected, no way to know what it was doing to them mentally. Were they all infected now, just waiting to be taken away and changed into more of those creatures? The thoughts went unspoken between the surviving crew.

“There’s another problem, Commander,” Garret said, bringing up the scans of the ship on the internal monitors. There were no moving empty shapes, yet a massive stationary one seemed to exist in engineering. The size of the mass seemed to indicate they were dealing with at least half a crew compliment worth of the things. Thankfully, they remained put for the moment, though it was impossible to say for how long.

“We have to get out of here before the rest of them wake up. There’s no one left to save. And the others are going to walk into a slaughter if we don’t do something about it,” Garrett said. Tyrell nodded in agreement.

Bassik looked up from the cocoons with dismay in her eyes. “I can’t do anything for them here. We can try to help them back on the ship. Or…” She let the last thought hang.

“How many explosives are left?” Foxwell asked, revealing his open empty bag. Even between Tyrell and Garrett, there were not enough to deal with the number of creatures that swarmed the engine room. They had to get out of here and have the Huron fire to destroy the ship. Assuming they could make it out safely with their injured crewmates in tow.

“Take a look at this!” Garrett said, walking over to a series of five rounded lumps on the floor, lined up against the wall. The structures seemed to have gone unnoticed before now, list in

the sight of their changing crewmen as they all were. They had the same mucus-like composition that covered the bodies of their two crew members. They almost resembled the eggs of some sort of insect. Two of them appeared to have burst open, while the other three were intact, something moving just under the surface.

Foxwell wanted to caution her, but suddenly all three things started squirming as though reactive to her presence. The eggs rapidly opened up and the tiny creatures within scurried out, running in zig-zag patterns almost too fast to see with the naked eye. The aliens scurried in the dark on many jointed legs, making it impossible for anyone to get a shot off.

As though homing in on her body heat, one of the creatures crawled up Garret's legs in under a second. Garrett screamed as the larva on her body crawled into her open mouth, and she gagged, falling to the floor. In moments both Bassik and Tyrrell were assaulted by the two remaining things. All traces of the alien beings disappeared into their hosts within seconds.

All three of his remaining team members were convulsing on the floor now, writhing as though in pain. Foxwell had field medic training but was unsure what he needed to do to stabilize them. Their eyes bulged, gasping as though for air, yet there seemed to be nothing obstructing their lungs.

Foxwell placed his fingers on Garrett's neck to check her pulse when a strange cool texture greeted his fingers. He looked down to see a gelatinous substance rapidly oozing from his crewmate. Slime pooled from his officer's skin in torrents as they became stuck to the surface of the floor. All three writhed and screamed, but it was to no avail. Soon, even that response stopped as they became as immobile as their other unfortunate teammates, cocooned to the floor by their own secretions.

The creatures inside them seemed to bulge under the skin as they seemed to find their place within the infected host. There was no doubt in Foxwell's mind what was happening. Just like many insects on earth, these organisms needed a host to gestate in. But to change its host into a copy of itself rather than use it as a source of food? That was beyond anything in Terran entomology books.

In vain, Foxwell pulled at the ooze, but the sheer quantity made it nearly impossible to remove. There was nothing Foxwell could do at this point. His team was trapped and changing into the same creatures that had taken over the ship. He could try and get away to save himself. But there was no way to know if he would be infected himself before reaching his goal.

With little other recourse, Foxwell made his way to the engine room, all the explosive devices on his person armed with a twenty-minute countdown. Even if he didn't get to the engine room, they would still do some damage, taking out any attacker that tried to stop him. Ideally, he would make his way to the shuttle and get back home before they went off. But that wasn't the priority. With no way to contact his ship, he couldn't let his crew come to his aid only to be lambs to the slaughter.

To his surprise, his short journey was mercifully free of obstacles as he finally braced himself at the entrance to the engine room. All of the remaining creatures on the ship were likely inside. They would surely attack him upon entry. But he needed to get the charges as close to the fuel source as possible, or risk survivors.

Within the last few hours, he'd encountered more horrors than in most of his career combined. Yet he was not prepared for the sight that greeted him within the engine room. He knew that the blank space from his scans meant a large number of aliens in the engine room, and that was certainly the case. But he was not expecting one massive creature being surrounded by dozens of the smaller hunters, for that's what they seemed to be.

The thing in the engine room was almost twenty feet tall. It resembled very much the creatures that attended it. Yet its massive segmented limbs could not move. Its two front pincers folded in on themselves like a form of armor. Its head was a single trunk, able to rotate entirely on its axis, and was much larger in proportion to its body. Yet its eyes were blind, and its antenna did not move. Its entire body seemed to be covered with impenetrable armor, sturdier than that of the others. And where the deadly-looking tail sat on its lessors, a massive pulsating abdomen worked up and down.

It was being attended by about twenty of the aliens, all wearing scraps of uniforms from the crew of this ship. To his horror, two of them seemed a little more human than the rest, their arms not fully claws, their heads still human, and their tails not yet fully formed. Yet still, they were skittering around on multi-segmented limbs, acting as much as the other fully-formed creatures. Had Jann and Malik changed so quickly, to burst from their cocoons and race to the engine room ahead of him to join their new fellows?

The abdomen of the behemoth was massive, pulsating, and steadily spewing out several eggs that were taken away by her attendants. They exactly matched those that had infected the rest of his crew. Several had already been placed around the engineering room, while others were taken away, likely to be placed all over the ship as they had been in the science lab.

Foxwell braced himself mentally and physically. An explosion set off this close to critical systems would most likely blow up the ship. But he was the only one left alive and human. It didn't matter if he died so long as he took every one of these fuckers down with him. It was the least he could do for his fellow officers who lost their lives and their humanity today.

Yet he didn't even make it near the core. As soon as he stepped inside, every creature began converging toward him at lightning speed. He hardly got his hand over the grip of his weapon before he was swarmed and captured. As he suspected, he was not killed outright. Multiple mandibles locked around his body and kept him frozen in place as he was hauled upwards. It was obvious they were taking him to the upper platform. He could see the wet, glistening, slimy eggs up there, filled with a larval alien that would change him into one of the creature's hoard. He shuddered at the notion that was almost impossible to fathom. Foxwell would rather die than be turned.

Foxwell would die soon enough from the explosion caused by the charges set all over his belt. But if they took him too far from the main behemoth to infect him, then his death would be in vain and the hive would remain intact. He had to come up with a way to be sure. Thankfully, they did not have the intellect to disarm him, as retrained as his arm was regardless. Yet, he knew his weapon would not pierce the hide of such a thing. What could...?

Foxwell stared around, assessing the situation with a focus that only a battle-hardened man could muster. He could shoot at the tank surrounding the superheated fluid in the core, but it wouldn't be enough to blow up the ship, not being close enough to any other vital systems. But if what he recalled on the bridge held true, then it was his only recourse.

A single shot punctured the tank as the grip of the creature's mandibles tightened, and he was unable to move the arm any longer. But that was all he needed. A hiss of gases erupted from the tank as the fluid seeped out, enough to rend human flesh from its bones. And evidently, the flesh of the unfortunate matriarch. Its immobile head was just in range of where he had fired. The thing screamed in agony, though not from its own mouth. The pain it felt was echoed from all the other creatures around it as the life was taken from its gargantuan bulk.

Foxwell fell onto the floor, free of the claws and just now realizing what he had done. He had killed their queen if such a term applied to the creature's organization. She writhed on the floor in her death throes, her abdomen clenching as though wanting to expel one more egg. To Foxwell's surprise, one more slimy translucent mass did, in fact, eject from her massive abdomen. It was larger than the ones he had seen thus far as rolled over towards his prone form.

This was his chance. Foxwell was close enough to lob his charges at the writhing mass of aliens. He didn't have many, but he didn't have time to set them all around the room before the creatures abandoned their queen and went after him. The resulting explosion was more than likely to cascade into the ship's engine and take him along for the ride as well. But Foxwell had accepted his fate.

In their frenzy to rescue their queen, the other entities were unaware of the imminent danger surrounding them. Foxwell felt a pang of guilt from that. Most likely, every one of these things had been a fellow officer only a short time ago. They had lost all semblance of their humanity and were forced to serve an alien overlord with no regard for their own safety. Of all the dangers associated with space travel, this had to be the worst way to go.

Foxwell took careful aim, not wanting to miss the shot before the creatures turned their attention to transforming him once more. The pain from his wounds made concentration difficult. But that was no matter. He wouldn't be in pain much longer once the charges went off.

A single blast from his weapon was all it took. The creature's screams responded through his ears even above the force of the explosion. Though he was spared the brunt of the flames, the force of the blast sent him rocketing into the deck below. His fading mind was braced for the world shattered explosions to radiate over him, to engulf him in a sea of flames and take him into the beyond. But it didn't. The pain in his body intensified from the force of the contact with the floor. He saw stars, felt the world around him screaming in anguish. After an agonizing eternity, he was finally granted a reprieve in unconsciousness.

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A scream of alien agony awoke him with a start. Foxwell looked up to see twenty armed officers, all wearing environmental suits. He was lifted up as the dying cries of the creatures still resonated through every fiber of his being. The entire room stank of flame and death, but it was a very real smell nonetheless. Through some miracle, he had been spared from the fate he had hopefully granted the queen and her progeny.

He tried to look around, to witness the display of carnage that had been wrought by his own hand. Had he failed to kill some? Were more of his friends and comrades being caught and changed into those alien monstrosities? His blurred mind could only focus on one shiny, alien object near his feet, an oval that had been opened from the inside. Yet, soon, he passed out, the fatigue of the ordeal finally overtaking him into blissful unconsciousness.

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The next several days all blurred into one another as the horror of the experience washed over his fragile psyche. He stayed in decontamination for several days to ensure his safety and that of the crew. The creatures were reported to have mutagenic properties in their DNA, and it was of vital importance that it not spread to anyone else in the ship.

After some time, the outer chamber door opened, and the captain stepped through, touching the intercom so she could speak to her first officer. "Welcome home," Captain Corwin said, a heavy note in her tone. She was happy to see her first officer back, but...the loss of life was nearly more than she could bear. All the officers on the Harrier, as well as some of the best members of her own crew, were lost aboard the ship.

Foxwell regarded her with a mournful expression, regret in his face. "I...I tried everything I could. There weren't any survivors from the Harrier. Everyone was either killed or converted into one of those...things. I'm sorry I didn't bring your crew home with me," he said, leaving it there. It was not the time to blame himself. He'd have the coming days to cope with survivor's guilt.

Corwin wanted to comfort him. To tell him that she was thankful he survived, at least. It would have been too much, losing everyone to those things. But she was a captain, and there were rules to follow. Foxwell needed to file a situation report to detail exactly what happened. There would be no hearing, most likely. It had been an impossible situation by all accounts. Still, the protocol needed to be observed before they could take a much-needed drink together.

In the end, he was deemed clean and free and discharged to quarters with no other duties than to file his mission report and seek out the services of the ship's counselor. Corwin told him again how glad she was to have him home, and that was all that mattered for now. She had her own report to file. Harder were the letters to send to the families of those who had been lost in the line of duty.

Door to his quarters finally closing, Foxwell smiled, feeling his belly move and his abdomen pulsate under his uniform. His new species had defensive mechanisms that went far beyond what could be detected by human science. His latent infection had been ready to change him more slowly until it was safe. He was not infected to become a warrior, but rather a queen to replace the dying one in her last action.

Though his mind had already been altered, Foxwell still retained awareness of who he was. Yet, more than anything, he desired to change the creatures on this ship into his new brood. They would not lose themselves to the aliens, as he did not. Rather, their priorities would simply

be directed towards serving their new queen and spreading her progeny. His developing anatomy would lay eggs, offspring that would infect others with his larva and mutate them into more drones to create his hive. His abdomen twitched at the thought. It would not be much longer before his first eggs were ready to be birthed...