

Ichneumon

by

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(based on COTY)

(With apologies to Starship Trooper)

The last thing Jack remembered was the light, the terrible, stabbing, insistent light that blurred everything in his vision. There had been smoke in it, and fire, and the terrible, terrible legs and claws of the Bugs; but most of all there had been the light, and that was all he could remember for sure. Everything else was tainted. Impossible to recall.

Then the men had come, the soldiers. . . Mobile Infantry, they'd said. He'd never been so glad to see soldiers in his life. A civilian on Terra most of his life, Jack had never really had much to do with the military. They were there if you wanted to join up. They ran things. They worked. That was all he knew for sure about them. They'd been there when he'd signed up for the colony mission; the Navy had escorted their ship to their new homeworld, on the edge of the Skinnies' space. They'd been there for a long time, long enough to be part of the colony landscape. He hadn't thought about them.

Not until the Skinnies gave way to the Bugs. Not until they'd died, screaming, guns blazing. And then there had been the light.

Now Jack huddled in a green-walled room in a chair that some engineer, somewhere, had tried to design for both support and softness. It hadn't worked. The cushion was thin, as thin as what little natural padding Jack had left after his captivity. There were beams of something running through it- places where the foam had been isolated into cells, maybe - he didn't know. All he knew was that he could feel the hard grey polymer from which the chair had been spun through the attempt at comfort, and that only made it worse.

The door to the green room swung open. "Mr. Watson?"

Jack stood up, legs trembling uncontrollably. The hallway outside was incredibly bright.

"The Lieutenant wants to see you now."

Jack made the entire walk down the white-tile hallway with his eyes shut. It wasn't hard. There were two MI men there, suits and all, one on either side of him. If you couldn't walk a straight course down a straight hallway between two clanging suits of armor, you couldn't walk a straight course at all. They stopped once, and there was a hiss; they stepped forward, and Jack followed them. The other side of the hiss was darker - still lit, but at least dark enough that through

closed eyelids he could tell the difference. He stayed where he was, hands cradled over his stomach, and did not open his eyes.

"Yes, sir," said one of the suit voices at last. There was a hiss again. Jack bit his bottom lip.

"And you," said a different man's voice. More human, that one. No machine filtering, no speaker-static; warm, calm, low-pitched. Human. It must have been the Lieutenant. "Take the records up to the Intel officer, then come back here."

"Of course, sir." Another hiss, another spill of light; then quiet, and only the sound of human breathing.

It didn't last long. "Mr. Watson? Is something wrong?" came the human voice. "You don't look so good."

Jack pressed his lips together tightly, feeling the shivering spread up from his legs. He shook his head rapidly; there had been a dark place after the light, he remembered that, he remembered-

"I think you'd better sit down. There's a chair just behind you."

"Th- thank you, s- si-" He couldn't shape the words.

"Unless you're a soldier, you don't have to call me sir." Real warmth in that voice, and a hint of an accent Jack couldn't quite place. Terran, though. "Lieutenant Preston" will do just fine."

Still not trusting his lips, Jack nodded. One hand fumbled behind him until he found the chair; this one was wider, better built, designed to be built in small numbers. He dropped into it gratefully and let out a very long breath. "Better?" asked the voice. Jack nodded again.

"Good," said the voice. "I'm afraid I have to ask you a few questions. Prisoners are a real rarity."

Carefully, very carefully, Jack cracked open one eye. The room didn't spin, or shake, or sprout huge impossible claws to reach for his head-

"The squad medic tells me he didn't have time to do more than patch up your surface injuries," said the other man's voice. "If you're having trouble keeping upright, say so and I'll send you upstairs."

"N- no. I- I'll be fine, Lieutenant. . ." By an act of sheer will Jack got both his eyes all the way open.

The man who had been speaking wore the uniform of the Terran military, but it wasn't an MI suit. Jack didn't recognize the insignia on his collar - some kind of

line and loop, like a child's drawing of a spoon - but the rest of the russet-haired man's markings were clear enough. A set of gold pips, a first lieutenant's bars, enough duty pins to cover an entire hand of space- this was an experienced officer, whatever he was. His light blue eyes were fixed on Jack, and his face bore an expression of concern.

Not quite able to hold the lieutenant's gaze, Jack turned and shot a glance around the room. It could have been a room in a military base, or it could have been ship-borne; he didn't know, couldn't tell. It didn't matter. The walls were brown, a fair approximation of wood panelling; the floor, black, shot through here and there with grey or brownish streaks. There were bookshelves along one of the room's narrow walls, opposite the door. There was a desk, a chair, a data station - a painting, very small, of some snowy tree-covered God-forsaken landscape-

"Mr. Watson?" asked the Lieutenant quietly. "Are you sure you're all right?"

"Yes." There, that came out all right. "I'm sorry, s- Lieutenant."

Preston nodded. "All right." He glanced down at the sheet of flimsy translucent plastic in his hand. "It says here that you were one of four surviving colonists removed from a Bug hive, out of-

"A hundred and fifty," Jack whispered. "There were a hundred and fifty humans touched down on this planet."

"Hmm. . . yes." The lieutenant's blue eyes flicked up to him for a moment, then back to the flimsy. "The men were only able to account for ninety casualties. There's still a few squads looking for the rest, but we haven't got much hope on that front."

Jack closed his eyes again, as a wave of nausea swept over him. He pressed the heel of his hand against his stomach; after a moment, it passed. "How. . . bad was it?" he managed, taking a few deep breaths to steady himself.

"For the colonists? Pretty bad." Jack opened his eyes. Preston's features had gone grim, his eyes cold. "A couple of them had to be identified by DNA sampling, since all we found of them were-" He hesitated. "Parts."

Jack shuddered.

"A few of the finds are still up in the air, of course - an arm or a jawbone isn't official proof of - Mr. Watson, there's a trash bin next to your chair."

"Thank you," Jack managed before lunging.

The lieutenant watched him steadily, eventually getting up and crossing to the door. Jack heard the hiss again, but didn't dare lift his head. Some moments

later, the uniformed man was at his side with a cup and a thin bit of cloth that might've been a napkin. "Whenever you're done," he said quietly, and sat back down.

Jack nodded unhappily, grabbing the cloth and wiping at his mouth. When he'd finished rinsing his mouth out (spitting into the trash bin a bit unwillingly - then again, it was already contaminated), he sat back in the chair. "I . . . think that's it," he said. Risking a glance down at the bin, he ventured, "I don't think there's anything left to come up."

The lieutenant made a small noise that might have been the beginnings of a laugh. Jack wasn't sure. "All right, then," said the other man. "Here's how it stands. Ninety of your fellow colonists are dead, fifty-six are unaccounted for, and four survived. Your three companions are currently in coma states, or close to it. What happened?"

Jack's hands clutched involuntarily at the arms of the chair. "I don't- I can't-"

"Try and remember, Mr. Watson. Whatever you can will help."

Jack shuddered, shaking his head rapidly. "No! No, I don't want- please, don't make me-"

"Mister Watson." There was a sudden edge in Lieutenant Preston's voice, a steely sound that hadn't been there before. "Your fellow colonists are dead at the claws of the Pseudo-Arachnids- colonists whose new world was specifically chosen for its lack of interest to the Bugs. Out of a hundred and fifty, four of you are still alive. You're the only one who can talk. You might not want to do so, but you haven't got a choice." He stood up, leaning across the desk and holding Jack's unwilling gaze. "Tell me what you remember."

Jack froze. There was no looking away from those eyes. The thought simply drained out of him. "I-"

"Tell me."

"They came," whispered Jack, mesmerized. "I was in the communications building - the alarms were going off all over, the soldiers were running to the perimeter defenses-"

The lieutenant sat back down, nodding to him to continue.

"I couldn't get the comms array to work - it was jammed, they were broadcasting, first on the Skinny frequencies and then the Terran ones. The - the proximity detectors, they were pinging like crazy. Then they went dead. Like they'd been cut."

"Go on."

Jack shook his head slowly. "The ground started shaking, and I slipped. I hit my head on the way down." One hand crept up to the line of soreness that still ran across the back of his skull. "I couldn't see much after that. There was fire."

"We found incendiary evidence, yes."

Jack swallowed. "I didn't see more than that," he whispered. "I tried to get up, and the room just - it exploded, it was light all over-"

"Did you see anything else?"

"There was a Bug." He didn't dare close his eyes now; he'd see it again. "The first one through the ceiling - and then there was light." His arms folded themselves across his chest, cringing, huddling. "So much light. . ."

"And that's it?" asked Preston quietly. "That's all you remember?"

Claws, probes, needles, nightmares- none of it made any sense, none of it was real, he'd hit his head- "Yes."

"Lies," growled a guttural voice. "Remembers. No want say."

Jack's head shot straight up. "What was that?"

Preston was smiling. It didn't reach his eyes. "My partner, Mr. Watson," he said softly. One forefinger tapped at the loop-and-line on his collar. "Didn't recognize this?"

The trembling was back, worse than before. Jack couldn't even manage to shake his head.

"K-9 Corps, Mr. Watson." From under the desk a grey shape emerged, slinking out and around to sit at Jack's right hand. "This is King. He's a Caleb."

The beast was huge, the biggest dog - neodog - Jack had ever seen. Sitting on its haunches, it barely had to lift its muzzle to look Jack in the eye. Its gaze was as unnerving as its partner's - or worse. At least Preston didn't have that ancient golden colour to his eyes, the colour that marked nature's predators.

Jack found he was trying to scramble away from the Caleb, but the chair was in the way. The neodog's ears splayed sideways as Preston noted, "He's one of the first to be able to handle the Bugs in the field, and I'd rank him above any man, any day of the week. He's also very, very good at sensing things. . . things that doctors miss."

"Get him away from me!" Jack blurted.

Preston shook his head. "He won't hurt you. He won't do a thing to you- isn't that right, King?"

"Carries thing," rumbled the beast. "Smells . . ."

"Like bug?" asked Preston quietly.

The Caleb nodded, that head's steady up-and-down motion somehow more frightening than anything Jack had yet considered.

"I'm not carrying anything, Lieutenant! I swear! I don't- these aren't even my clothes!" Frantically, Jack plucked at his shirt. "These are what, scrubs? Your soldiers gave them to me!"

"Not," the Caleb said. "In-"

Jack couldn't, for the life of him, make out the rest of what the beast said; he turned to the Lieutenant, eyes wide, pleading.

Preston frowned over his steepled fingers, looking at the neodog. "You're sure about this, King? That's a pretty big thing to miss."

"Inside." King jerked his muzzle towards Jack's middle. "Through old scar."

"And the medic only patched him up on the surface," said the Lieutenant thoughtfully, leaning back. "Because we didn't have a deep scanner."

The Caleb was still looking at Jack. "Knows," said the beast. "Not want-"

Again the beast's speech was too garbled for Jack to make out. "Lieutenant, you - you can't honestly tell me this thing is- you don't believe it, do you? I'm not in league with them! I swear, I'm not! I'd cut my own throat first!"

Lieutenant Preston lifted his eyes from the neo and gave Jack Watson a long, cool glare. "First of all," he said, "my partner is not a thing. He's a genetically engineered symbiote. Might be derived from dog stock, but he's the single most intelligent example of his kind, and is as important to the Terran military as I am. Second, I do believe him. In fact, I trust him implicitly. King has never once led me wrong- ever."

Jack whimpered.

"And as for the last part. . ." Preston put down the flimsy. "It was never a question of whether you were in league with them or not, Jack. Any more than a plague victim is in league with his fleas."

"I- what?"

"You've been infected, Jack. Injected with an egg by one of the Bug queens. Up until now we'd only been certain of a few castes. Warriors, workers, queens, brains- the basics. Intel's been getting some interesting information lately, though. They've managed to tease some information out of a captured Bug ship. Seems they've decided to take a gamble, try and get themselves behind enemy lines. . . Are you familiar with the word "ichneumon", Mr. Watson?"

"I . . . thought that was a kind of. . . I thought it had fur?"

Preston shook his head. "Right word, wrong animal. You're thinking of what some Terran cultures called a mongoose. I'm talking about a thing called an ichneumon wasp. The females of their kind lay their eggs on the bodies of other insects - caterpillars, usually. The caterpillar generally doesn't notice, because the wasp lays her eggs in the least vital parts. It takes a while for the egg to hatch. When it does, it starts developing inside the caterpillar."

Jack's hand drifted to his stomach again. He could feel the muscles kinking, but he didn't have anything left to throw up.

"The wasp larva develops inside the caterpillar, and lets it go on living as long as it's convenient. It devours the caterpillar from the inside out - saving the vital organs for last." The Caleb chuffed quietly as Preston went on. "That's when the grown wasp finally comes out."

"Oh my God. . ."

Preston smiled, faintly; a pitying look this time, more than anything else. "I'm sending you and your fellow survivors for advanced medical treatment immediately. We don't know how quickly the Ichneumon caste develops. If the doctors are skilled enough, you might survive."

"If?" cried Jack. "I'm a dead man! I'm nothing but a walking Bug incubator!"

"No," said a voice, and it belonged to the Caleb. "Small smell. Small thing."

Jack stared at the neodog, disbelieving.

Its tail wagged briefly. "You no dead yet."

First Lieutenant William Franklin Preston watched the MI men escort Jack Watson out. Poor devil, he thought. "Wouldn't want to be in his shoes right now," he said aloud.

King padded back over to his partner's side. "He'll live," said the massive Caleb.

Preston smiled. Unlike the infected civilian, he'd long ago learned to understand

the speech of neodogs; his mind's ear filled in the missing b's and m's and f's and v's. "I don't know, King. He looked pretty poorly to me."

The neo snorted. "Just woke up. Only old Bug glop in stomach. You no look good either."

That drew a laugh. "I suppose you're right." He reached over to scratch his partner behind the ears; King gave a pleased little growl. "If Jack Watson lives, that's one more civilian we've saved. . . and if the thing in his gut lives, that's entire worlds of people more."

King barked once, his kind's equivalent of a huzzah. "Well done, old boy," said Preston. "Well done."

Finis

(Authors notes - This is Sgt Preston in the future - in Robert Heinlein's 'Starship Troopers, please don't shoot me!)