

**The Variant Effect
MADHOUSE 3
BURN
G. Wells Taylor**

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Acknowledgments:

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PART ONE: CARNAGE

CHAPTER 1

DAY THREE - 9:50 a.m.

June 21

He groaned and then struggled into a sitting position, propped up with his aching shoulders against the cold concrete wall. It took him a moment to orient himself in the near dark, grunting as pain stabbed up through both hips. Amber light ebbing from emergency lamps and a slowly dimming flashlight at his side only cast the corners into deeper darkness.

He knew he had company over in the shadows by the door, but he wouldn't risk looking up and meeting the gaze of the terrifying creatures that lurked there. He had no wish to test whatever force was keeping their violent urges in check.

So he tried to keep his mind on other things.

The floor was damp, and the sound of dripping water echoed. Obviously, this part of the subterranean complex had sprung a leak. That could be attributed to aging plumbing and crumbling concrete combined with neglect. And the Bezo Metro Headquarters' location had eventually proven to be a poor choice.

They had built too close to the bay. The water table became a swampy sponge north of the complex in the spring, and in especially wet years it backed up around the BMHQ.

Empty assurances from trusted officials and a legacy of lax 1950s building standards had allowed the construction of the complex despite some public opposition to the dangerous research activities that would take place there.

Global Warming had only made matters worse.

Had the "Hole" not been shut down for "security" reasons, evolving safety standards and environmental awareness would have forced its closure anyway.

For all the good that would have done anyone. By the time many of those issues were politicized, Bezo had already developed Varion and packaged it to sell to families.

It had seemed like such a good idea at the time.

The drug's potential for overdose after long-term use and resulting side effects were only realized when it had become a popular medication. It was later proven that the active Varion molecule evaded human kidneys and other filter organs as easily as it passed through municipal water treatment systems.

The overdoses came because Varion could accumulate in the human body, and directly enter the water cycle and food chain where it could be re-ingested and further concentrated, contributing to the growing toxicity.

Nothing ventured, nothing gained.

Ovid Mironov grunted, pulling at his bonds. His wrists were wrapped with thick duct tape, and the ill-fitting hazmat suit made it impossible to get any leverage for tearing the bindings.

He didn't flatter himself thinking he could snap them outright, Bezo testosterone supplements or not. At ninety-two, he no longer had the upper body strength for such heroic measures; however, he *was* persistent, and if he could find a rough ridge of concrete or wood he could wear away at the tape until it broke.

For whatever good that would do him.

His problems ran far beyond simple kidnapping and confinement.

Mironov had no idea who was responsible for his capture or why he had been taken. True, Brass had initiated the chain of events, but the recent developments did not bear the big man's signature.

It lacked finesse.

The madman who had arranged for his *second* kidnapping wore goggles and a filter mask that completely obscured his identity. And his accomplices' variously scarred and featureless faces would not bear appraisal.

Appraisal? The living horrors could not be borne at all.

So, for the time being—certainly, to distract himself from the terrifying aspects of his situation—Mironov had applied his anxieties to the task of studying the man. Anything to help assuage his fears and combat his weariness.

I'm no spring chicken.

Some of the drugs he'd been given before transport into Metro still remained in his system, and the adrenaline that had kept him alert in Lancaster's lab and that had surged again during his abduction to the lower levels had all but drained away.

To resist shock—*was that what it was*—and to stay sharp, he focused his mind on the mystery of this unknown figure.

The lighting was poor and inconsistent in the basement halls and grew worse the deeper they had traveled underground. The stranger carried a small flashlight and the overhead fluorescents flickered and strobed, either broken or malfunctioning. The dim emergency lamps positioned over exits and in corners gave off little more than a glow.

So Mironov had managed to get his best look at the man back in Lancaster's lab.

His abductor's head was covered by a close-fitting cotton surgical cap, so there was no telling if he had hair. The dark goggles and filter mask left some of the face exposed on the upper cheeks and bridge of the nose where the skin was a mottled scarlet in color and had the appearance of deformation or *disease*.

Mironov's fingers twitched into hooks and his skin prickled at the thought of illness. He knew that disease killed men his age, and *that* knowledge had fueled his persistent phobia about germs. Nothing hand-sanitizers couldn't manage.

Oh, and gargling with antiseptic mouthwash. Be careful with that. His doctor had warned him about overdoing *it*—and about the consumption of Bezo multivitamins and other dietary supplements.

Too much of a good thing.

His first observations of the stranger offered little information, so Mironov had focused on the man's body and gait.

He had a crooked back, and his head and shoulders bore a pronounced lean to the right. He appeared to be cradling that arm. The limb was somewhat twisted, and the gloved right hand moved and trembled spastically.

And he had limped with his left leg.

The surgical garb the man wore was baggy and narrow; bones showed through wherever it made contact with his thin body.

Mironov had judged the stranger to be "old" based on his physique and movements. He was certainly more than middle-aged and there was no way he was young.

And where has he brought me?

After being forced into a hazmat suit and removed from his cell in Lancaster's lab, Mironov had been shepherded by a pair of large, apparently "trained" or "controlled" dermatophagics from a group of similar creatures that accompanied the stranger.

These two had alternately supported and carried Mironov as they made their way deeper underground with the strange man moving cautiously ahead with *skin eater* guards of his own.

Not skin eaters—"Biters" as the squads called them. But these were different.

They wore thick leather vests and knee-length trousers or shorts and responded quickly to the orders that came muffled by their leader's mask. These Biters were barefaced, barefooted and barehanded; and the skin and flesh that remained on their exposed features and extremities was a lattice of old scars and stitches.

Mironov supposed it must have left them insensitive for they had been none-too-gentle as they manhandled him, at times delivering great surges of bruising force.

Their rigid fingers and hands had pressed like talons.

These creatures acted as guardians also, that had been apparent, for a large pack of blood-soaked and savage Biters had followed close behind them. This second terrifying group personified the beasts that had rampaged back in the day. Their skin had recently been ripped away in strips and sheets to expose glistening, red reams of pulsing muscle.

Their lidless eyes had roiled with madness, and their splintered teeth snapped and clattered as they violently interacted with each other.

Blood dripped and splashed from them with every movement.

Mironov had no doubt that they were made desperate by his proximity. The hood of his shining protective gear was transparent, and he imagined he made an irresistible focus for their ritual obsessions.

Few of them had more than rags for clothing as they'd joined the march first singly and in pairs hissing and straggling out of the shadows, until the stranger led them to the lowest basement levels near the bulkhead that sealed the Hole.

At that place he had pulled a small, cylindrical device from his pocket, and slipped its mouthpiece past his mask to play flute-like notes upon it. The sound was not unpleasant, but its effect was monstrous, drawing even more Biters out of the darkness.

There were at least thirty in this ragged and gory group held in check by still more trained Biter-guards that had continued to control the others with hisses, clicks and punitive violence.

Mironov had imagined such a task would have been impossible for the shepherding Biters that arrived with them had the hunting pack not been so terribly injured. All were torn by bullets and teeth, and were slick with blood. A good number of them had appeared to be dying, and would have fallen if not for the potent Varion molecule that boiled in their systems.

The worst damaged of these creatures had been driven to desperation when they first saw Mironov through his clear vinyl hood, and they soon agitated the entire pack to the point that all the Biter-guards and their strange masked master were required to keep them from attacking and performing ritual outright.

When order had been restored, their master made his guards remove a heavy steel panel that hid access to the elevator shaft.

The stranger had then bound Mironov's hands and instructed a pair of the Biter-guards to carry him down to the bunker's lowest level and into the small room that he now occupied. A flashlight had been left waiting for him against the wall illuminated by the dim amber glow of an emergency lamp.

Mironov had lit the device and huddled close to it ever since.

The Biter-guards had made no effort to communicate with him. Instead, they exchanged glances and voiced worried *clicks* near the door—obviously agitated and nervous listening to echoes in the dark.

Mironov had said nothing and spent the time dreaming of ways to escape.

Then gunfire had resounded, so distant at first that he thought he'd imagined hearing it through his vinyl hood. And then more gunfire roared—coming closer.

A war. It sounded like a war.

The gunshots returned again and again, until they thundered to a terrifying storm of explosions that had left Mironov and his guards trembling.

The Biters grew agitated and crowded at the open door to peer out.

And now Mironov could hear it, too. Action, the sounds of many feet upon the move.

They're coming.

The stranger appeared in the doorway moments later, his clothing drenched with blood.

Behind him his Biter-guards blocked the door to keep the rest of the pack at bay. Those hideous creatures hissed and groaned mournfully in the hall outside the room while the stranger and four other guards carried three more of their kind in and set them on the floor across from Mironov. These were terribly injured and streaming blood.

The main pack continued to hiss and click and bellow outside the door. In the semi-darkness, the emergency light reflected off the growing pool of crimson at their feet.

The stranger retrieved a lantern, archaic-looking medical equipment and stainless steel tools from a closet. He used these on one and then the next of his injured Biter-guards—his *soldiers*—but the first and second died quickly, and left him hovering desperately over the third.

The stranger's voice came muffled through his filter mask as he spoke to one of his Biter-guards. She was assisting him, holding tools and the lantern, while another restrained the dying creature.

"SSSKIN!" came the cry from the door, a cry that was joined and amplified by a chorus of hissing calls for ritual.

And Mironov glanced over to see the bloody faces and anxious eyes of the Biter pack as they leered through the portal, snapping at and jostling the Biter-guards who hissed and shoved them back.

All of the creatures were injured and agitated. Their eyes were gleaming with terror. Occasional *thuds* spoke of shared blows. Ripping noises and shrieking suggested skin fights.

But the Biter-guards kept them back. Smarter and stronger, they cautioned and warned their ignorant brethren in their simple language of shredded words, hisses, and clicks.

A moan brought Mironov around to see the stranger drooping over the third dead Biter. The man shuddered as if he were weeping.

The Biter-guards with him turned to glare at Mironov, their lidless eyes and mangled expressions hinted at utter hatred and a desire for bloody vengeance.

“His name was Darren,” the stranger said finally, rising to lean crookedly against the wall. The man’s voice was rough-edged with age, but strong, so his words easily negated the muffling effect of his filter mask. “I knew him for five years. Never friends—but we became *close* to friends. We respected each other. He was one of the first to join my cause—the cause.”

The stranger’s dark-tinted goggles leveled with Mironov’s gaze and the eyes behind them were mere shadows.

“Or should I say *your* cause—for we were all *your* victims.” The stranger set a comforting hand on the Biter-guard who had acted as his nurse.

“And I have led Darren to this end for vengeance—with your help ... *We* have killed him—you and *I*.” The stranger’s shoulders rounded, and he seemed to collapse in upon himself—until something hardened within—and he straightened again to say, “As *we* have now killed so many others. But *their* deaths will have meaning yet.”

He looked toward the wild Biters that leapt and struggled in the hallway. “*They’ve* also been wounded fighting *your* army in *my* war.”

The stranger froze, and his angled shoulders quivered. “And the poor devils have yet to perform ritual ...”

He reached into a hip pocket and drew out the curious instrument that he again raised to his covered face.

With one hand he shifted his mask aside to expose a scarred chin.

He pressed the device to his twisted lips and blew. The Biters in the hall went quiet as the whistle trilled in the shadowed room. Several notes fell in a complicated sequence, to be answered by the sudden return of rustling, hissing, and fighting in the hall past the open door.

The stranger moved his filter mask back into place.

Soon the sounds of hissing breath and cries for “skin” were accompanied by the noise of violent struggle and anguished cries.

Biter-guards pushed out into the hall, shoving the bloody pack aside to draw another two Biter-guards within.

They bore a large, blue package between them—something wrapped in a long thick tarp that they threw upon the floor.

Where it moved and shuddered.

In moments, a woman wearing a ragged, vinyl coverall struggled free of the binding sheet. Her head was uncovered and patches of hair were missing. Her face was lined with trails of blood.

“What is this?” she gasped where she knelt gaping at the hellish corpses and their master’s disguise. “Who are you?”

“Another victim of this nightmare,” the stranger said, gesturing at Mironov. “*His* nightmare.”

“I’m co-Captain Cutter from Variant Squad Nine—I’m—we’re here to help,” the woman pleaded from her knees, eyes going round and white as she watched the Biter pack in the hall clambering and pushing against those who blocked the entrance.

She looked at Mironov and asked, “What’s going on?”

Mironov turned to search his captor’s covered face and sigh, “I’m sorry.”

“Apologize to *them!*” the stranger roared, gesturing at the Biter pack. “And yet there are few words that they would understand thanks to *you*—few words save *ritual*.” The man’s goggles flashed in his lantern’s low light.

“No,” Mironov begged.

“And *SKIN!*” the stranger shouted, before exposing his mouth and blowing the whistle again.

The Biter-guard who had acted as nurse joined another to grab co-Captain Cutter and lift her screaming.

Hissing, they carried her to the doorway where skinned and ragged arms and hands reached through straining; as hisses of “*SKIN! SKIN! SKIN!*” increased the clamoring Biter pack’s fury.

A light blazed up in their flashing eyes as the Biter-guards tore the vinyl tunic off the screaming woman and offered her bare shoulders to the waiting, clutching hands.

“*SKIN!*” the Biter-guards echoed, snarling, moving out into the hall as the noise of tearing vinyl gave way to the sickening sound of skin peeling away from flesh.

As their master’s tenuous grasp upon them gave way.

As the desire for ritual overcame them.

More vinyl popped and clothing tore under clawing fingers. The woman begged and screamed, and then came the much more insidious and sickening sound of skin being ripped off and chewed by gnashing teeth and fleshless jaws.

The woman wailed longer than Mironov could believe.

He kept his head down and eyes away from the two Biter-guards that had remained behind and stood to either side of their master staring, struggling against their desire for skin.

Or were they judging Mironov’s inability or reluctance to help the woman?

Listening to her keen, Mironov wondered if he would suffer for as long and as loudly when his time came. But that was unthinkable!

The difference between himself and the woman whose hoarse begging had turned to garbled cries and insatiable hissing was that Mironov had at least one card left in his hand.

He had no idea why he’d been kidnapped and forced to witness this horror—but he was still in the game.

Mironov held a card that would surely trump any that his wretched captor might have to play.

For deep beneath them all a clock was ticking. It had been ticking since he’d first told Brass of its presence and had continued winding down ever since.

Tick. Tock.

The trick was to play the card before it played itself.

CHAPTER 2

10:00 a.m.

“Forget it,” Beachboy rasped, raising his voice on the suit-com-link, trying to drown out the memory of murder that still echoed faintly. “We don’t know where Cutter went, and I doubt we’d survive a rescue mission right now.”

It had taken Brass, Beachboy, Aggie, and the other veterans’ threats to hold the squad back when she had started screaming.

Now the squad crowded the open elevator doors, their faces showing pain and shame for listening to the torture, but letting the cries go unanswered.

Cutter’s sudden death had come muffled and discordant—from a great distance past many obstacles. The screams had echoed up the elevator shaft, through vents and along the bunker hallways.

It would have been impossible to pick the right direction to charge. The squad would have had to split up to answer the cry, and everyone knew that would cost them dearly. More lives would be lost.

So, Beachboy had ordered them to attention; he had told them to listen and learn.

Everyone got the message. Don’t let this happen to you. Cutter’s voice had screamed out over a jumbled chorus of Biters clicking, hissing, and screaming for their share of her skin.

Marisol had been first to put a name to the victim, while Cutter got the full ritual.

The audio experience left everyone damaged, but full of fury.

Beachboy hoped that emotion would impel them forward, that it would make them vicious enough to survive.

As the mysterious whistling had trailed off, and the battle of the elevator shaft was coming to a halt, Hornie, drunk on battle lust, had charged after the retreating Biters on Bunker Level One.

That’s how Kwak had reported it when Aggie and Beachboy rejoined the squad.

Co-Captain Cutter had gone after Hornie, either to bring him back or provide some cover.

Beachboy had cursed them both then, struggling with his own desire for blood, to go after them in turn—to join the mad dash for violence. To take part...

But then he had taken a good look at his squad in the hood-lamp light.

They were a mess: most of the bag-suits were damaged or torn; all of his people were blood-spattered and looking worse for wear.

And then both Hummer and Cat had reported feeling dizzy, and others mentioned headaches. Aggie’s quick look at their breathable gauges had explained it all.

Two hours had passed since 9-Squad had entered the basement. The bigger people—Hummer and Cat, Borland and Brass—would have burned through their air during the descent and fight.

The others of average height and weight like Beachboy, were looking at a five- to ten-minute span before they’d come up empty, and the leaner baggies like Mudroom, Birdie, and Amigo could probably choke another ten or twenty minutes out of their primary tanks.

Those revelations took reckless missions like running after Cutter and Hornie completely off the table—or delayed them, at least.

The first thing the big boys had to do after the fight was switch out their empty breathable tanks for backups.

That had given them an hour of air about a half hour ago.

The squad hurried to search their suits for tears and patch them up.

Events were moving too fast.

By the time they were ready to go after Cutter, she had already started screaming.

All they could do was hope that Hornie had not suffered the same fate.

“Roll call,” Beachboy snarled, setting his fists on his hips. “Answer loud and clear for Birdie to make a record of it. We’re still working here.”

After roll call, the squad did another quick check of each others’ bag-suits for leaks, counted ammo and supplies.

Killjoy had helped repair the damage to Aggie’s bag-suit and hood with heavy transparent vinyl tape.

Marisol Romero watched from where she still rode Hummer’s back. She’d wanted to get down and look for any sign of Hyde in the elevator shaft, but Beachboy had asked her to hold her position until they took stock of the situation. They might have to move fast if the Biter pack returned.

“How are you feeling?” Marisol asked Aggie, as the fighter taped over several tears at the seam where her hood snapped to her tunic. Killjoy was checking her broad back for holes.

“Besides the stink down here?” Aggie shook her head. “Fine.” Her fingers pressed against a length of tape that stretched along her collarbone. “Coming up the shaft, it smells like rotten meat.” She realized her faux pas and looked away when Marisol winced.

Captain Hyde.

“I hope that’s *all* you were breathing,” Marisol sighed, a dark look in her eye as she glanced over at the open elevator doors. “Keep me appraised. If you *feel* anything unusual ...”

“I know—Varion,” Agnes Dambe said, smiling grimly. “I’m solid, so far, and didn’t Kwak say the yellow ‘fog’ biodegraded?”

“We can only hope that the earlier attack on the Lazarus labs ended when the suspension carrying the Varion dispersed,” Marisol said. “We must still be cautious about contact transmission.”

“Squad can stay locked down as long as possible,” Aggie reminded her. The baggies would be getting claustrophobic in their protective gear. Action, sweat, and condensation only increased the pressure. A little longer, and they’d be screaming to get out.

If they even had a choice. The breathable was running low and filters were only a temporary solution.

There was still an elephant in the room that was delaying Beachboy ordering the squad to move out.

The grim task of looking for survivors when there was little chance anyone could have survived the fall down the elevator shaft.

Mudroom and the corporal had started while the others were switching out their breathable tanks. The transport driver switched on her external suit speakers and called out for Hazard, desperation in her voice. The corporal had stood beside her staring down into the darkness, anxious for some sign of Hyde—and gauging his chances.

Beachboy had silenced the pair immediately, ordering them away from the door to assist with bag-suit repair. There was still a Biter pack out there somewhere.

Ritual would only keep them calm for a short period of time. Cutter was only one person, and the Hole appeared to be infested with Biters.

Mudroom's loud calls would agitate them, and renew their need for skin.

Beachboy had only managed a glance down into the shadows at that time. Dr. Kwak had said it was a hundred and fifty feet or more to the bottom of the shaft where the car would have been abandoned when the lift mechanisms were detached.

The squad had to confront the fact that there was no need for a search and recovery mission. Confront it and move forward, but abandoning hope was bad for morale.

"I can't see anything down there," Hummer said reluctantly, moving over and dropping to a knee while keeping a tight grip on the doorframe. He hung his head out over the sill between the elevator doors. The intercom went silent, and then: "Wait! I think—there's a flicker, a hood-lamp, maybe. No—it went out."

From her position on Hummer's back, Marisol Romero peered down over his shoulder and into the darkness with her single eye. The dismal expression behind her face-shield said it all.

"A light?" she breathed, her words muffled by vinyl. She toggled the private link to Beachboy's intercom. "Captain, doesn't that mean there is hope?"

"Damn it," Beachboy muttered, accepting the link. He was leaning against the opposite side of the doorframe and staring into the depths. "A hundred feet would kill anything ..."

"We should go down there," Marisol said. "There could be survivors."

Beachboy glared at Wizard.

"I can't raise anyone," the bagged-tech said dismally, joining the private chat. She crouched between them with her portable com-link station in the doorway, sweeping the dark for any broadcast signals. "There's nothing."

"We could use the breathable," Beachboy said, opening up the com-link discussion to the squad. He wasn't trying to be a dick, just practical. No one knew how long it would take to get out once they found Kwak's escape tunnel, and the bigger baggies consumed a lot of air.

"And ammo," Aggie added, her voice cold, as she easily made the leap. The Variant veteran had also been considering what *they'd* been discussing in the private exchange.

"Should we scavenge it?" This came from co-Captain Bitch.

"No," Beachboy said. "We'd use more breathable than we'd recover. But it's a fallback position if our mission changes."

"It'd be suicide to try, damn it!" Borland growled. "A hundred feet—then *bang* on whatever junk's at the bottom. They would have smashed like eggs!"

"Joe, shut up!" Marisol scolded, shifting her prosthetic arm and bracing against Hummer's shoulders to turn and stare at the fat man. She'd already toggled radio-silence for a two-minute cry after first realizing Hyde had gone down the chute.

Her professionalism had rebooted when Hummer worriedly asked if she was okay after feeling the vibration of her suppressed sobs.

Marisol knew the drill. Women didn't have to be stronger than men, but they couldn't appear weaker.

Borland scowled at the gap between the elevator doors. He knew there was no chance.

He remembered watching Hyde and his attackers drop into the dark.

Borland had briefly contemplated the death of his old partner after stepping off the ladder and onto the bunker's first floor but had failed to conjure much of a response.

So much for the sensitivity training. It didn't seem right that Hyde would fall to his death and doom, with so little to mark his passing. And for him to go so quietly.

Just another body in the pile. If you can believe that. Borland grunted. *Was that the problem?* Had his dislike for Hyde and their toxic dynamic grown so strong and become such an overpowering part of his life that he'd never believe that the crippled veteran was actually dead? A part of him had always thought they'd kill each other like two dinosaurs ripping themselves into extinction.

So what did he need? Fossils, genetic evidence, and a marching band? No. If Hyde was dead, then karma had picked an anti-climactic way for him to go.

"The hell with him," Borland muttered into his face-shield, keenly wanting to lubricate the curse with a drink. "Hyde hated life anyway!"

A few angry voices sputtered over the suit-com-link. Borland toggled the sound lower.

"Best thing we can do for them," he muttered, in a conciliatory tone. "Head straight out of here before our air runs out and we have to breathe Varion."

The fat man deftly avoided thinking about his role in Hyde's hatred of life, and turned away from the elevator shaft. The bagged-boys and -girls gathered in a half-circle around Beachboy and the others at the opening.

A couple of them were facing outward with weapons raised, guarding against attack. Hyde was better off dead like his daughter.

The daughter that Borland remembered killing.

Birdie reported, somewhat needlessly, that 9-Squad had taken a big hit.

Hazard had turned Biter before he fell, taking Digger, Rocky, and Churchill with him; on the bunker first floor Biters had shoveled Bandit and Dingo into Hyde and the group of them fell. Co-Captain Cutter was killed in ritual, and Hornie was still missing.

That left the survivors: Dr. Kwak, Brass, Dr. Lancaster, and his patient Oliver; Marisol Romero and Borland.

The main fighting group was down to Captain Beachboy, co-Captain Bitch, Agnes Dambe, bagged-tech Wizard, T-1 driver Mudroom, and the med-techs Snowman and Killjoy.

That left the heavy lifting for the baggies: Squad Recorder Birdie, Mountie, Cat, Irene, Amigo, Hummer, Wolf, and the Corporal.

Hornie returned along the main hall while the squad was forming up to march, and Wizard was finishing her scans of the com-link and suit intercoms. She couldn't raise anyone below ground or above it.

Hornie hadn't seen hide nor hair of Cutter, but had heard the attack.

"Was that her?" he said, coldly. "Couldn't tell which way it was coming from—wasn't on this level anyway."

The squad glared at him.

"How'd she get separated?" Hornie asked, sheepishly, registering their ire.

"Next time you go on one of your solo charges don't come back!" Beachboy said. "We have to stick together. We're low on ammo and people."

"What's got into your britches?" Hornie scowled. "I'm just doing my job!"

"Cutter went after *you*, stupid," Borland said.

"She came after me?" Hornie's tanned face drooped behind the layers of protective vinyl. "Ah, Jesus, I didn't ..." He slumped against the wall. "I didn't know she was there."

"It's done. It's finished," Beachboy said, flushing, remembering his own behavior dictating another's fate. "We can hate each other later."

"Are you sure she's dead?" Hornie stepped forward.

"I hope so," Beachboy breathed harshly, turning away. He didn't want to meet her in battle. "Leave it. Time to go."

"What do you mean, *go*?" Hornie said.

"We complete the mission," Beachboy said. "Get back to the surface and call the cavalry."

Hornie's expression darkened, as he sauntered over to gaze down into the elevator shaft.

"Look for guns, ammo, and supplies," Aggie said over the suit-com-link, as she approached the Biter bodies that had fallen along the bunker hallway. Kwak had already identified a couple of Lazarus team members among the dead, and Brass pointed out one of his security people. "Some of those skin eaters were L-Squad, and wearing partial gear. We can use breathable, 'sealed' food packs, nutrient bars, and water, too."

"What for Aggie?" Borland grumbled. "The war's over."

"We're not out of danger yet," she snarled, running her eyes over the fat man.

"Retreat is a winning tactic for wise leaders," Brass interrupted coming near. He'd been quiet since Cutter's death, but suddenly seemed to have found his footing.

"Yeah, you won't hear *me* complain either." Borland nodded his reluctant agreement. "We find Kwak's escape tunnel, and get the hell out of here."

"Yes." Brass' baritone deepened. He held his injured arm like it was a baby. "We'll get help for every survivor down here once we're out."

Beachboy had followed the intercom chatter, and now regarded the big black man's restless eyes.

The young captain's gaze shifted to Aggie. He could tell that Cutter's terrible end had struck the Variant veteran hard. She'd want vengeance for that, and for the losses on the squad.

"Brass is right," Agnes Dambe observed with a shrug.

“We’ll stick to the plan,” Beachboy said, watching “fury” battle with “fear” in 9-Squad’s eyes as they gathered around. “If we’re lucky, we can offer a little payback on the way out.”

He turned to the tall, slim scientist.

“Dr. Kwak,” Beachboy said. *He* had also been very quiet since Cutter’s death. “You said there was a tunnel.”

“Yes,” Kwak answered. “Stairs in the northwest corner of the complex will take us two floors down. The tunnel is in the opposite corner on the southwest.”

“All right, squad,” Beachboy started, glancing at Aggie who nodded approvingly. “Let’s move out.”

CHAPTER 3

10:15 a.m.

“Borland!” Hyde blurted, lurching awake, gagging on the name. Somewhere a rumbling sound echoed trailing off, like the tread of many boots.

But darkness pressed in on him, deadening his senses. Darkness flavored with the stench of ... rotten meat? He coughed at another breath of it. His guts twisted as he retched.

But the muscular reflex abated when he thought it through—when he realized...
He could *smell!*

So his suit, his skin-shell suit that aside from offering chameleon-like camouflage, also protected him from the environment—was no longer protecting him from the environment!

And if he could smell, then he could breathe, and he'd breathe in this dungeon environment, and *wasn't the air down here poisoned with Varion?*

He held his breath and tried to raise his hands to assess the damage, to see if there was some way to close up his protective hood, but he couldn't move them. His arms were being held tight to his sides.

What? He struggled to free them, and immediately regretted the action as sharp waves of pain flowed up from his ribcage.

He coughed and dragged in a tortured breath as more spasms wracked his body.
My ribs. *Broken.*

But what is this? What is holding me?

And he wondered if he was a captive. If the Biters had transported him to their lair for later skinning. It had happened to others back in the day.

Ah, sorry about your luck! Impossibly, a searing laugh slipped out, left his body shuddering at the realization—the absurdity.

Somebody beat you to it...

“Control yourself,” he hissed in the darkness, fearful that such twisted levity might be a harbinger for madness.

That it might bring on a fatal break with reality.

Focus on the mystery at hand! If not Biters then remember the whistle that came before the fight—that was something new—am I a captive?

Hyde remembered the few “tame” Biters that had held back at the edges of the action. They'd been partially clothed—really *clothed* in protective vests and leggings, not just draped in the rags of their former lives. And they'd acted with a purpose more canny than the mad desire that raved in the main Biter packs' every eye.

Those other Biters had shared an overpowering desire for ritual—to peel and eat skin.

But the whistling? The mysterious “fluting” sound had been heard in relation to the first attacks in the basement and Hyde had heard it himself before the bunker attack.

Were the tame Biters responding to that signal? They'd behaved similarly to Alpha males, and such creatures followed primitive instincts that might utilize two-pronged attacks like the squad had experienced, with a force coming from above and below.

And they had communicated with the main pack using clicks and verbal iterations of their one desire, skin! But the whistling? The notes had been played exactly, clearly made by some kind of instrument.

And it seemed to have come from some distance.

Had someone else ordered the attacks, then? Was there a Stalker-Biter in the ranks? Had an unholy alliance been formed?

But how could that be? And what drove the tame Biters if not ritual? Alpha males traditionally led only as long as they could lead the pack to skin. And they were always being challenged for leadership.

Stop this! You have more pressing concerns.

Even if he could accept the existence of some force controlling the Biter pack or that an individual was holding their leash—such thinking and any conclusions he derived would take him nowhere until he determined where the Biters had brought him.

Hyde drew in a half breath of fetid air and let it out slowly, but the gentle action was answered by waves of burning pain.

It feels like I've been suspended in the air on a hook.

Because the scar tissue covering his back had only patchy remnants of original, functional skin, Hyde could only *feel* a diffuse but constant pressure there, punctuated by various irregular shapes made by contact with rigid elements.

And with those came a painful pressure that was driving up through the base of his spine. A pressure that burst into flame when he shifted his weight.

His gasp set his ribs alight again.

The pain.

He swung his right leg out and back where it thudded against stone or concrete.

Fresh fire ran up his spine, and he hissed through gritted teeth. His ribs throbbed anew.

Hyde wasn't lying on the floor, that was clear. His orientation and sense of up and down in the dark left no doubt. The heels of his boots were pressing against a hard surface.

The elevator shaft perhaps? It had to be. He cast a look down into the black.

That stench again. Rot. Infection! The dank air below him was rising—lifted by putrefaction, and bringing the stink, bacteria and contagion with it.

Then, he whispered, "I fell with the Biters—I'm still in the shaft!"

He glanced upward to his left, and made out a very distant and dim rectangle flashing in and out of existence with the bunker's inconsistent lighting.

It was the open elevator door—very far up there—at least fifty feet ... He looked to his right to see another glimmering rectangle where the escaping light was cast on the opposite wall.

His eyes had been drawn to the flicker from damaged overheads.

Borland had watched him fall.

An attempt to twist his head, tilting it back to confirm, brought a groan from him. The pain shot through his damaged nerves like wildfire.

Anxiety grew in him like panic.

Wait! Stop! Calm! Control!

Hyde hung there panting, catching his breath as the pain faded, gathering his thoughts until he remembered his hood-lamps. But then he swore. He could not lift his hands to toggle the controls on the tunic's chest plate.

But you didn't turn them off!

The hood-lamps were on when he fell! The lights had been mounted on an aluminum ring that arched over his hood, but the hood was badly damaged. It was possible a connection had been loosened or interrupted upon impact. And it was clear to Hyde that his injuries and current position had involved a tremendous blow.

It could have knocked something loose! Or jolted his skin-shell suit's control computer into "safe" mode.

Hyde started turning his head rapidly, side to side—biting down on the pain it caused him—pulling forward and feeling the tug of wires that ran from his form-fitted *contact* cap to the suit's electronics.

There were clicking sounds as his forehead and cheeks bumped against broken Kevlar, plastic, and vinyl. The remnants of his hood and face-shield.

Then he froze, stomach fluttering, certain that he'd felt his entire body moving—subtly shifting, slipping...

What the...

Hyde's hood-lamps flashed as power trickled from the damaged suit. Two bulbs flickered to life, but gave barely more than a smoldering orange glow. The ring-mount had torn free of the mangled hood and hung around his neck.

A circular thread of LED control lights inside the skin-shell suit collar shimmered weakly, and showed the clear, jagged edges of his fractured face-shield. Much of his head was exposed to the environment. His suit would give *little* protection.

Actually, he corrected himself. *None*. No protection from the toxic atmosphere.

First things first.

He glanced down but could not see much farther than his boots. On closer inspection, Hyde saw that his suit had been savaged by the Biters and ripped in many places. There were great tears in the vinyl that was laid open to show protective pads, display plates, and electronics.

He noticed that his chest bulged oddly, and he wondered if that was the cause of his pain. Had something skewered him through the back or shoulders? Then glancing down to the left, he saw a large right hand sticking out of a tear in the suit under his breast.

An arm ran across his chest—had been driven in under the protective material as he was mauled.

Hyde followed the arm up and to his right where the shoulder pad and display surfaces had been completely torn away.

A dead man's face glared open eyed at him, two inches away from his own.

Hyde cried out and tried to pull away, but froze as he felt dizzying motion. He gasped as he slipped in the dead man's grip.

Calmly now! Or you'll fall. His position was precarious.

He drew a slow, painful breath and turned again to see that the left cheek of the angled face rested against his shoulder like a lover's. The dubious effect was magnified by the strong arms that had been thrust through Hyde's broken suit and wrapped tightly around him.

One hand had punctured the material in front of Hyde's left arm with the fingers poking out through holes made between a joint in the armored display plates at his waist.

And the right arm encircling him had passed through the massive opening on Hyde's right shoulder and crossed his chest. It had tangled in the suit's harness and wiring, and was held in place against the skinned veteran's damaged ribs.

The fingers on the hands had been skinned to the muscle and bone and looked more like claws.

Hyde inspected the creature's gargoyle-like face. Its mouth gaped wide. Strands of com-wire and shredded vinyl from Hyde's skin-shell suit were entwined in its broken teeth. Its expression was a mixture of frustration and desire—perhaps heartbreak.

The eyes were rolled back and the tongue protruded through this mouthful of tangled wire and plastic. It was impossible to say, but it may have suffocated during its uncontrollable gorging.

This underlined an ugly truth about dermatophages and their ritual. Hyde—like other victims—had been skinned alive to feed this emptiness and cover the overwhelming fear that was amplified by Varion. But the nervous action could be performed on other things than skin.

Ritual did not require it to give relief when the behavior and the semblance of skin-eating alone could reduce stress.

Often Biters found dead on site or during autopsies were discovered to have choked themselves on shower curtains, garbage bags, and bed sheets in an attempt to satisfy their insatiable need.

Hyde realized he was tensing his muscles, partly against the pain, but also from the knowledge that his position was grim.

Relax. He willed himself to calm. If the corpse's grotesque grip loosened, he'd need his wits about him.

And he'd never survive if he was beset by cramps.

Hyde cautiously turned his head left and right.

The dead man is one of the Biters that attacked me.

He was black, and remnants of his clothing suggested he also had been wearing protective gear.

One of L-Squad's, likely: the first group sent in to protect the Lazarus team that had been judged too small to do the job alone, and that precipitated the drafting of 9-Squad.

Fine. He was a baggie, too.

Hyde saw that as they had tumbled together, they'd come close to the wall. A series of support girders or guide rails stood out some eight inches from the concrete.

The Biter's legs had jammed into the narrow space where a pair of girders crossed. His downward motion had been arrested with a violent stop that left him dead and wedged firmly in place.

From the feeling of Hyde's own spine, he judged that it must have absorbed a lot of the shock, and kept him from being knocked out of the Biter's arms.

Hyde was dangling over a great, dark drop.

His dim hood-lamps barely lit the walls around him, so he could not see what lay below. He only knew that the first floor of the bunker from which he'd fallen was a long way overhead.

Whatever Hyde did, he would have to respect his precarious position and the dead man's hold upon him.

Hyde's headset had been knocked down around his neck with his hood-lamps, but he could hear nothing from it. No voices. Not even static.

He considered shouting for help, but abandoned the notion. Until he knew help was near, he wouldn't risk drawing more Biters—or the Kill Squad reinforcements, for that matter.

He had no idea how long he had been unconscious, but it was long enough for the squad—if they were still alive—to be some distance away. And he could hear no ambient sounds.

All he remembered was the battle, and then the Biters rushing toward him. Then it had been dreams or delirium. Dark dreams full of violence and the screams of pain peopled with Biters and Borland.

He had to hope that the squad had survived and had either retreated, gone into hiding, or found their way out.

In the meantime, he'd have to rescue himself.

Whatever he did, he had to be careful. A wrong move and he'd slip out of the Biter's arms, and fall the indeterminate distance to the bottom of the shaft.

That would finish the job.

Hyde could simply wait. He could dig into his well of patience and hope that someone came looking for him.

And he'd have to do it without moving a muscle.

As long as it didn't take too many days.

But that required Hyde believing that the good guys might win this one, and he had been around Varion and Borland too long to ever believe that.

He'd have to help himself.

There was a sudden soft scraping sound above him, and he gingerly turned his head to look up.

It seemed he was not far from the maintenance ladder that the squad had used to climb down earlier. It followed a shallow channel in the wall on his left, and stood out at right angles to the surface he was being held against.

Not far, but it might as well have been a hundred miles, considering his predicament. However, it was close enough for him to easily see the person climbing down the rungs.

It was a young woman, taking the ladder head first, without showing any hesitation or lack in dexterity or strength.

She was wearing torn pajama bottoms and a T-shirt. Her clothing, like her wiry limbs was blotted and stained with grease and dirt.

The young woman stopped some six feet over him, and turned to look across the fifteen feet that separated her from where Hyde hung in the dead Biter's arms.

Alexandra Sims regarded his position and smiled.

CHAPTER 4

10:25 a.m.

“What are the chances that Kill Squad is following us?” Irene’s clear voice came over the suit-com-link. A relative newcomer to the group, she’d found her footing in the last few months under the Metro Ziploc.

“You mean, reinforcements?” Mudroom asked. Both bagged-girls were in a rearguard position with the corporal, who seemed to be adapting to life away from the Horton.

Irene had an M-19 slung over her back. She’d been given the weapon to use judiciously.

Brass, Lancaster and his mysterious patient Oliver moved in front of them. The sick man scurried with his arms bent and gloved hands dangling before him like a squirrel’s.

“Just keep your eyes and ears open,” Beachboy interrupted before the chatter spread to the rest of the squad.

We are between a rock and a hard place. Saying it does not help.

He led the group with Aggie. Like the baggies behind them, they kept their hood-lamps and shotguns moving, scanning high ground ledges and exposed ductwork for *Jumpers* and searching low in the corners and doorways for *Jacks*.

There were plenty of bloody footprints to evidence Biter activity on the bunker’s first level. This increased the farther away from the elevator that they got with older tracks crisscrossed and overlaid by the recent passing of survivors from the pack that had attacked them.

The squad was on high alert. If those Biters were still on Level One, then they’d have holed up somewhere to let their anxieties build before they came in search of skin.

Kill Squad be damned. We’re in Biter-country!

The Kill Squad’s existence and likely pursuit had been a sore point that had only diminished while 9-Squad was fighting the Biters.

Skin eaters took priority. The place was full of them and the Kill Squad would have to come from behind.

Earlier, while overseeing the ammo count, injury and suit repair, Beachboy and Aggie had considered climbing up to the basement level to seal the bulkhead that covered the Hole, and do the same for the elevator doors before they left.

Half the Biter pack had retreated to that floor, and any survivors would be able to return and attack—and the Kill Squad was up there too.

By the least paranoid reckoning, it seemed likely that the unknown soldiers would have received reinforcements and deployed them by now. And the recent sounds and signs of battle would have put them hot on 9-Squad’s trail.

Of course, the Kill Squad would be cautious after their initial losses.

Beachboy had decided they could better use their time heading directly for Kwak’s escape tunnel.

And they didn’t have the breathable to spare anyway.

To prove that point, Hummer reported empty air tanks a short while later. Beachboy told him to switch over to air filters, but Marisol spoke up, insisting he take her replacement.

“There is little left of me that still requires oxygen to operate,” she said, indicating her prosthetic legs with her fake arm. “My primary tanks are almost half full and you’re consuming much more oxygen carrying me.” Her large eyes widened, and tears gleamed. “I insist you take my spare.”

“If that’s an order, then it would be an honor,” Hummer relented, grinning sheepishly as co-Captain Bitch pulled Marisol’s spare out of its carrying pouch and hooked it up to Hummer’s bag-suit.

Beachboy had ordered the march north along the westernmost hallway which put them behind the retreating Biter pack. The Variant veterans had agreed that the injured and terrified attackers would have run until they collapsed or found a place to hide. Common sense suggested that corridors branching off to the east made for better escape options and the blood tracks seemed to confirm it.

Coming down the main hall might have put the squad in the panicking Biters’ path. Especially if any had followed Hornie back after his charge.

As they moved cautiously along the hallway some took the opportunity to comment on the shelter’s gothic design. Words like “cold” and “prison” punctuated the nervous suit-com-link banter.

Such talk was fine for relieving stress. The problem was keeping it positive.

The hall was twelve feet across with facing doors every twenty feet or so.

“Brick and concrete ... exposed girders,” Borland observed, walking beside Hornie halfway along the squad that moved three abreast, keeping bagged-boys and -girls on the outer edges. Dr. Kwak and Hummer with Marisol perched on his back moved just ahead of the fat man. “What kind of dump is this?”

“A dump you should feel well at home in considering your age,” Kwak teased, and several baggies laughed over the intercom: “Previous to the plastic that now permeates every molecule of western culture, builders *then* used materials that exchanged architectural overindulgence with function and an abiding sense of permanence.” He cleared his throat before continuing.

“Instead of serving one’s own ego in the hope of ‘cementing’ a place in the future, building designers often linked the present with the past—and hinted at the ages to come. They didn’t just install pre-designed and manufactured components. They made the parts by hand from materials brought to the site. Buildings ‘grew’ from the talent of craftsmen.”

“*Quack’s* a tour guide now!” Borland grated. “Too bad Hyde isn’t here. You could bore each other to death on a private com-link.”

Beachboy sighed, thinking, *well, that lasted about two minutes.*

“My father was a carpenter,” Kwak said, moving the conversation past Borland’s ham-fisted observations. The old scientist understood how chatter could impact morale. “I inherited his love of craft and style.”

Borland pointed at a heavy steel door set in a brick arch. “Looks like it was designed by Igor.” He laughed somewhat giddily. “Designs by Igor. Yeah. *Igor Decor!* I could see *that.*”

“It’s pronounced, *Eye-gor!*” a female voice joked, and the squad shared a tense laugh over the intercom.

Beachboy grunted approvingly. The squad was resilient. *We'll mourn our friends when we're somewhere safe.*

"Besides, it's all academic, Captain Borland. The ornamental elements were installed over reinforced concrete walls," Kwak lamented. "You have to consider the function of this place. It was built to survive nuclear blasts—and other disasters."

"Yeah, yeah," Borland said nervously, the previous light-hearted moment casting the next dark arch into deeper shadow.

They'd discovered that the doors were latched, and a few were locked, but there was no time for a thorough investigation. Most opened on partially furnished living spaces and bunk rooms but the squad couldn't help imagining what else might be hiding behind the closed doors they passed.

"The bunker was designed to give the impression of great strength and permanence," Kwak continued. "For the physical *and* psychological comfort of those who would be living within its walls. They needed hope *and* home."

"So, that defeats your argument," Borland pushed back, suddenly growing excited. He would enjoy putting the scientist in his place. "In the end, your *craft* is just a fake nailed over an ugly pile of concrete."

The suit-com-link was quiet a few seconds.

"It could also be argued that the disguise required even more of the craftsmen's cunning," Kwak said wryly. "It certainly fooled *you*."

Borland grunted, and started chewing over a response.

Beachboy was sure it would be something reckless, damaging, or stupid.

But then the fat man noticed a sign bolted to the wall beside another door.

"Get Panicky and Get Hurt," Borland drawled.

"It was about maintaining calm," Marisol interjected. She'd grown introspective since leaving the vicinity of Hyde's fatal fall. "These signs *and* the building were designed for survival."

Borland had already seen another sign, and read it out loud: "Improve Health, Raise Morale, Increase Comfort." He made a growling sound. "Just a bunch of brainwashing."

Cameras had been installed in the walls over some doors and at the junctures where eastbound corridors on the right linked to the hallway they traveled. The video technology was well over twenty years old, bulky, and the worthy brunt of a joke.

So far, none of the devices appeared to be operational and Wizard had soon pronounced them dead.

"Not even sure they'd work if they had power," she said. "Museum pieces—but never say never."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Beachboy asked, and the suit-com-link went quiet again as the squad listened.

"I can't be the only one to notice," Wizard said, pausing to point up at the bank of fluorescent lights that glowed and flickered randomly overhead. "Don't know why these lights are on, since the place is supposed to be abandoned."

"Well, it wasn't *really* abandoned," Beachboy said, giving Brass a sidelong glance. "Was it?"

Brass just hugged his injured arm.

"Yeah," Wizard said. "But they don't seem to be working properly."

“Ah,” Kwak breathed over the intercom, but didn’t elaborate.

“They aren’t working anywhere in BMHQ,” Beachboy said, starting forward.

“What’s your point?”

“The Hole is not BMHQ *or* its basement,” Wizard said. “The Hole should be on a separate system. If it ever really was a bomb shelter.”

Brass nodded silently and slowly.

“The electronics down here should be self-contained,” Wizard observed. “Weird they’d have the same bug that’s been following us all the way along.”

“Interesting point, Wizard,” Kwak added quietly. “Perhaps someone is overplaying his hand.”

“Whatever game’s being played,” Beachboy grumbled. “I’m sick of it.”

Every hood-lamp followed Beachboy and Aggie who had suddenly moved toward a doorway to stand ready on either side of it. Wolf took a position before the closed portal with one of the purloined M-19s up and ready for use.

“What is it?” Borland asked, approaching Brass who stood well back from the operation with Dr. Lancaster, Oliver and some baggies.

“Sign on it says ‘supplies,’” Brass explained.

Beachboy tried the latch, pushed the door open and then stood back as Wolf moved in.

“Boxes of canned and vacuum-packed food,” the baggie’s taut voice crackled over the intercom. “Preserves. Cooking supplies.” Wolf’s actions were echoed by the flicker of hood-lamps on the doorframe and the floor.

“Any bullets?” Beachboy asked as he and Aggie followed him in.

“Look for iodine pills,” Kwak requested over the buzzing interference that had returned to plague the suit-com-link. “Some will be stored in the complex to treat radiation poisoning.”

“What do we need that for?” Borland asked.

“There were machines down here that used sealed radioactive sources,” Kwak said. “They may have leaked over time.”

“How long you plan on staying,” Borland challenged, frowning.

“Why would *they* need iodine pills?” co-Captain Bitch asked. “Wouldn’t they be safe down here?”

“Cold War bomb shelter designers knew that anyone surviving a nuclear or biological war would be required to stay underground for an indeterminate amount of time,” Kwak said, gesturing vaguely at their surroundings. “But they couldn’t stay down forever.”

“Depending on the kind of radiation,” Wizard muttered over the suit-com-link.

“Yes. You could expect years of waiting depending on the type of radiation and the concentrations of it,” Kwak continued. “There would be pockets where lethal levels of toxic fallout would have collected, or where unexploded ordinance had been damaged and their radioactive sources exposed to the environment.”

“How the hell would they know when it was safe?” Bitch asked.

“They would have portable Geiger counters and there would be monitors connected to the surface to sample air and water,” Kwak said, watching as Beachboy and Wolf carried boxes out of the supply room and set them by the door. “Perhaps other survivors

could share information via radio, but you'd have to make an educated guess at some point."

"And you'd never be sure!" Bitch said, sharply. "What a stupid way to fight a war."

"There would always be a danger of exposure," Kwak said. "But someone would survive somewhere. And even survival underground beats extinction."

Marisol made a sad sound that came over the suit-com-link like a cross between a gasp and a groan.

"Atomic and chemical warfare," she said unhappily. "And all before Varion, when the madness behind such ideas was completely *natural*."

"Survival mechanisms gone wild," Kwak observed, pausing to play his hood-lamps over another sign. This one read: *Calm. Cool. Collected*. "We were never meant to have that much power at such an early stage in our evolution. We don't think far enough ahead. How do you win a war if the land is rendered uninhabitable for thousands of years?"

"They'd have to pack a lot of whisky," Borland joked, hand reflexively rising to his tunic's breast pocket and the flask it held. He needed a drink, and he was growing desperate. He'd already almost emptied his water supply and would have to rely on the "bland" results of his bag-suit's moisture recycling system.

Which really wouldn't solve *his* problem. He needed a drink. A shot. A belt.

Something with teeth.

A part of him was looking forward to ditching his bag-suit when he was completely out of breathable and his air filters had clogged. Take that choice away, and he could get a drink.

Borland was pretty sure he could lift and lower his hood and face-shield quickly enough to take a couple pulls on his flask. Varion would have to be floating in the air right in front of his face for him to breathe it in. And he'd hold his breath anyway. *What were the chances?* He'd wait until the squad stopped again. Hell, there'd be others that could use a blast.

Hornie had to be getting the thirst by now—especially after what he did to Cutter—and he had that oversized flask.

"Insanity," Brass said, shooting Borland a knowing look.

But the fat man didn't get it. Instead, he thought the Bezo liaison was jabbing at him, like Borland was a cave man who could understand the animal madness of nuclear war.

He did get it, though.

War of any kind *was* insane, and if you couldn't win it, then go all in and ruin the victory for the winner. Poison it all if you had to, and get him from the grave. There was a nasty sort of justice there, but it was war.

Why treat your conqueror with any respect?

"It's a madhouse," Borland grunted, and several voices on the intercom agreed. "Only an idiot would climb into a hole like this ... nukes or not."

Several baggies laughed out loud at that, and Beachboy offered a stern word to quiet them.

"Keep sharp kids," he said, before gesturing at the boxes they'd brought out of the storage room. "These were open when we found them and a few tins of canned soup are

missing. Other boxes inside are completely empty. So that was either curious Biters, someone else is down here with us, or it happened before the Hole was closed.”

“Damn it,” Hornie said.

“Damn straight,” Beachboy agreed. “Everyone keep your eyes peeled. Looks like there’s more than just skin eaters on the prow!”

Then he pointed his shotgun at a sign on the wall that read: *Don’t lose your head. Use it.*

The squad had nothing to add to that.

“The stairs are just up here,” Kwak said with some urgency, pointing as they started forward.

Beachboy called a halt by a door on the outer wall with a sign over it that read: “Stairs.” The corridor turned east away from it at a right angle.

Bloody bare footprints followed that hall, but also indicated that the pack had exited and entered the stairwell. Scarlet tracks carried past the door and frame that were also blotted by contact with crimson-stained bodies.

“Okay, Wolf, Birdie ...” Both baggies stepped forward holding their M-19s at the ready. “You guard this door until we’re all in, and stay up here until we’re clear on the next level down. Then catch up, and wait on that level until we’re on the third.” He tapped the barrel of Birdie’s gun. “Be careful with these.”

“Why use them at all?” Birdie wondered aloud. She preferred her shotgun and pistol, and had started sharing the M-19 with co-Captain Bitch who felt the weapon went well with her recent promotion.

“You’ll keep them pointed into the open hallway and *up* the stairs,” Beachboy explained. “Away from *me*.”

“And I’ll have another one on the point going down,” Aggie said, hefting her M-19, before gesturing at Mountie and Irene who carried the other commandeered assault rifles. “You hold yours back, unless we’re overwhelmed.”

“Remember, everybody stay cool,” Beachboy added, as he slowly pushed the door open.

Aggie entered the stairwell cautiously, M-19 stroking the dark

“All clear!” she whispered, from the narrow landing.

Beachboy led the baggies after her. The stairs were dimly lit by emergency lamps in the ceiling but grew darker as they descended.

There were bloody footprints, wet and dry, covering the stairs, as if an army of Biters had passed. And the inner surface of the door and wall around it was coated.

The squad members went first with the technically *civilian* noncombatants Brass, Kwak, Lancaster, and Oliver following. Hummer would carry Marisol after them, and Hornie and Borland would guard the rear with Wolf and Birdie.

Aggie took the lead, snuffling on the stale air in her suit. She had run out of breathable and was recycling her bag-suit air through filters. She was thirsty, too, but rationing water.

Her head had started aching as they approached the stairs. Dehydration caused that.

So did beating your boyfriend to death. She’d taken a few hard hits to the skull from Gordon.

There's no time for that!

She cleared her thoughts, focusing on the stairs. Dust floated in the hood-lamp light and had collected in the corners, and on the railings, but it had been disturbed many times over.

Naked bleeding feet, torn and stripped of skin, had sprinted up and down. The Biters would have had a tough time negotiating the smooth surface with so much blood.

There was wet blood, and there was old, dried blood.

Signs of boots and shoes also.

"They've been using this as a passage for some time," Beachboy said over the crackling intercom.

"Then someone must have held the doors for them," Aggie said, and Beachboy muttered his agreement.

Biters were clever, but the Variant Effect usually stripped its victims of higher intelligence. When in full ritual, they often had trouble with doorknobs and latches.

The squad continued gliding down the stairs, that switched back ten feet twice until they got to the second level.

"Okay, Birdie and Wolf," Beachboy said. "Come down!"

Aggie silently descended the next switchback in the stairs, and turned.

"Wait!" she breathed, coming to a halt. "Someone. *People*."

"Jesus Christ," Beachboy said, looking past her.

Aggie could see the door to Level Three at the bottom of the last span of stairs.

Unfortunately, there were at least ten people lying on the lower steps and on the narrow floor between.

Most were naked and had been stripped of skin on the torso, back, and arms. They were bloody and raw.

Some of them were alive. Tortured chests rose and fell. Limbs quivered and shuddered.

"Oh for God's sake!" Marisol cried from the back. "How can this happen?"

"They're bleeding out," Aggie said, moving quietly forward and down, until she was a stair or two above them. "It's just a matter of time."

"Well, we don't have it," Beachboy said. "We gotta go through."

"Aggie, you heard the man!" Borland snarled. "Let's go!"

"That's enough!" Beachboy hissed. "Aggie do you ..."

Agnes Dambe glanced up, and at that instant, she felt fingers wrap around her ankle.

She turned, with weapon raised. At that range the M-19 would chop a body to pieces. The head would explode.

A ravaged face looked up into her hood-lamp light. Aggie recognized the eyes, the shredded features and pieces of uniform.

The creature hissed and champed its broken teeth, attempting to rise.

"Cutter!" Aggie screamed.

End of this eBook Sample.

The story continues in

The Variant Effect:

MADHOUSE 3

BURN

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G. WELLS TAYLOR was born in Oakville, Ontario, Canada in 1962, but spent most of his early life north of there in Owen Sound where he went on to study Design Arts at a local college. He later traveled to North Bay, Ontario to complete Canadore College's Journalism program before receiving a degree in English from Nipissing University. Taylor worked as a freelance writer for small market newspapers and later wrote, designed and edited for several Canadian niche magazines.

He joined the digital publishing revolution early with an eBook version of his first novel *When Graveyards Yawn* that has been available online since 2000. Taylor published and edited the *Wildclown Chronicle* e-zine from 2001-2003 that showcased his novels, book trailer animations and illustrations, short story writing and book reviews alongside titles from other up-and-coming horror, fantasy and science fiction writers.

Still based in Canada, Taylor continues with his publishing plans that include additions to the *Wildclown Mysteries* and sequels to the popular *Variant Effect* series.