

NIERSEL CHRONICLES

LAST HOPE

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In Memory of my Father:

*Measure a man's success neither by the abundance of his possessions,
nor by the extent of his worldly accomplishments,
but by the spirit of his deeds.*

*For not with swords loud clashing,
Nor roll of stirring drums;
With deeds of love and mercy
The heavenly kingdom comes.
~ Lead On, O King Eternal, Shurtleff/Smart*

NIERGEL

(Welsh: 'Nirgel,' pr. Near--g-el – Mysterious Secret)

*“Search with eyes enlightened,
heart unshackled and mind unrestrained,
these tomes to comprehend”*

~ Cronicis Nirgel

RESCUE

The determined visitor is knocking and ringing repeatedly... declaring the urgency of his message by his repeated pounding.

Jeff awakes from a deep sleep and finally lifts his head to squint at his bedside clock, registering the time in disbelief: 2:54 AM. He mumbles a few unkind remarks about the absurdity of the hour as he stirs himself from the bed. His aggravation grows as he stumbles down the bedroom hallway while the audacious visitor continues to ring and pound his door.

Finally making his way across the darkened living room, he switches on a lamp and peers suspiciously through the peephole. The unwelcome visitor is a short man. His slick raincoat and wide-brimmed hat appear drenched from the rain as a flash of lightning illuminates his shoulders.

Jeff cautiously pulls the door open a crack and speaks coldly to the stranger through the small gap. The extent of his annoyance is evident in his voice.

“Can I help you?”

In the dim light, he can see that the mysterious stranger is an older man. But he appears youthfully energetic for his age. He is well dressed in a black raincoat and matching custom-made fedora; the gap at the coat's collar reveals a silk necktie, and Jeff detects the tailored cuffs of expensive dress trousers over a pair of shiny black shoes. There is an unmistakable Scottish brogue when he speaks:

“Am I speakin’ with Jeffrey Thomas Sutherland?”

Jeff swallows in surprise at the question – almost no one knows him by that name; his real parents have been dead for years. Everyone calls him Jeff Samuels, using the surname of his adoptive father.

Jeff looks at the stranger with a cold stare.

“Who are you?”

A distinctive burr in the stranger's deep voice rolls his 'r's when he speaks, which somehow adds to his credibility as he apologizes.

“Pardon me. My name is Ernest Billingsly. Pleased to make yer acquaintance, Sir.” He tips his hat, letting a stream of water run off the brim. “Might I come in? It's frightfully damp out this ev'n.”

Jeff studies the old man's face for a moment, finally deciding that he doesn't look particularly dangerous, then pulls the door open and steps aside.

“Much obliged.” The odd visitor says as he removes his hat and shakes the water off of it onto the doorstep before stepping inside. “Sincerest apologies for the inhospitable hour o' my call. I've come straight from Loch Harnan, Scotland, with a bit of terribly urgent news fer you, I'm afraid.”

On hearing this, Jeff straightens incredulously... “News? Me? There must be some mistake,” he objects, “... I'm sorry, I'm still half asleep; where did you say you've just come from?”

“No mistake, I assure you, Mr. Sutherland... or perhaps it would be better for me to address you as Mr. Samuels — I know a great deal about ye.”

The odd stranger looks around at the impressive living room of Jeff's neat suburban ranch. It reflects Jeff's comfortable living working as the tenured Chairman of Genetic Research at a prestigious Boston university. A career accomplishment that is made all the more

impressive by the fact that Jeff has only just celebrated his twenty-eighth birthday.

“It’s a lovely home you have,” he politely complements.

As he is saying that, he unfastens the top breast button of his wet coat and reaches inside, causing Jeff to step backward suspiciously with his hand raised in a blocking gesture. His visitor pulls out a small thumb drive and holds it up, presenting it to him.

“May we use your Computer?”

“What? ...wait, how’d you know I have a...?”

“Just a likely assumption,” the man says, turning toward Jeff’s hallway. Unguided, he negotiates the small hall as if he’s done it a dozen times, then enters the last doorway on the left — Jeff’s darkened study — and flips on the desk lamp. Jeff nudges himself several times to ensure he isn’t dreaming as he follows closely behind the odd old man. Fumbling with the wires, the stranger quickly disconnects the computer from its network connection, then switches it on and waits for it to boot.

“I’m sorry... did you say your name was Billingsly? Who are you exactly? How do you know so much about me?”

“Ernest Billingsly, Esquire, at your service, Sir.” He holds out a damp hand, and Jeff shakes it reluctantly. “I was your Uncle’s *chargé d’affaires*.”

“Uncle? I don’t have an uncle... did you say ...*was*?”

Billingsly pauses thoughtfully and glances down at his shoes for a brief moment before clearing his throat to ease its tightness. “I must regretfully inform you that your uncle passed away this evening.” His voice is strained, and Jeff notices a small tear being quickly wiped from the corner of his eye. “Please forgive my sentimentality; he was a very dear friend.”

Jeff stands silently for a moment as he acknowledges the old man’s apparent anguish; a sympathetic response escapes his lips, “...I’m sorry.”

The PC’s startup theme soon interrupts them. “Ah! Here it is,” Billingsly says, willing himself past the somber exchange. He turns toward the computer and locates a port, then inserts his mysterious

delivery and steps backward with a wave, inviting Jeff to step up to the screen.

“That’s not gonna work; it has hardware encryption — it needs a password...”

However, before Jeff can finish his objection, a tiny dot appears and quickly grows to fill the screen. The image is of a sophisticated-looking man who appears to be of great age. He is clean-shaven and nicely dressed, seated behind a large desk. He seems surprisingly spry as he speaks, with a gleam in his eye and a crack of wit in his voice that belies his advanced age.

“Jeffrey,” he begins, leaning forward. “I am going to tell you the truth about your family history, which has been kept from you until now for reasons that shall become clear very shortly. I have intended to deliver this message to you in person; however, if you are seeing this, it can only mean that I have died. In that case, listen very carefully; time is of the essence!

“You, my dear lad, are now the only living member of the Hastleworth family,” he pauses... “heir to the entire Hastleworth estate. Since we have never had the pleasure of meeting, let me introduce myself; I am Barrymore Eldridge Hastleworth, the current Duke of Hastleworth.

Your father was my father’s son, my half-brother; that makes me your uncle, of course. Your grandmother, Lydia, was in our family’s employ. Father was many years her senior but confided to me often that Lydia had been his greatest love, a love that was cut short in a manner remarkable and tragic.

“My father’s ex-wife was a terribly jealous woman, I’m afraid.” He pauses again as if in deep thought, then determinedly refocuses his attention on the camera and continues. “To explain

the events of Lydia's demise would require far too much time, and time is now of the essence!" He speaks with absolute authority and urgency in his voice.

"Lydia wisely hid your father's existence, making arrangements for him to be cared for by her sister, Maria, in New Mexico. You knew Maria as your grandmother and her husband, Thomas Sutherland as your grandfather – your father never knew that they were not his real parents. By the time his whereabouts were learned, he was already a grown man, about your age, with a wife and son of his own... yourself, then eight years old."

Jeff feels a stabbing in his stomach at these words – he was orphaned at age eight.

"As you may have already pieced together, within weeks of this knowledge, your father and mother met a tragic end themselves. Luckily, as it were, your existence was unknown. Your father's best friend, Chet Samuels, took you in and eventually adopted you as his own."

He leans forward further as if taking Jeff into his confidence. "I have sent this message to you to warn you so that you may escape your parents' and grandparents' sad fates. The forces that destroyed them have now learned of your existence; it's a short matter of time before they locate you... indeed, they may have already succeeded. You must exercise extreme care, my boy!

"Ernest Billingsly is my closest and most trusted friend. I imposed upon him to deliver this message at his considerable risk only because I could trust no one else with certainty. You must travel with him immediately to the only place where you will be safe, the one place where they can never hope to reach

you – our own estate here in Loch Harnan. You must leave at once under cover of darkness!

“Take nothing with you except your single most prized possession; you will have need of nothing here in Loch Harnan. Leave no instructions and tell no one of your departure... your very life depends upon it, my boy.”

With that remark, a look of grave concern furrows his brow. He looks downward and clasps his hands, covering one with the other. “I so longed to meet you...” he pauses thoughtfully, then continues... “many other answers await you here. Go swiftly... and may God protect you.”

THE INSTANT the message is finished, Billingsly retrieves the thumb drive and hands it to Jeff. A mechanical buzzing can be heard from the PC’s hard drive as it obliterates its contents, wiping out every trace of Jeff’s personal information.

Jeff stands in stunned silence, holding the small memory stick in his hand. He is suddenly feeling altogether frightened, confused, and astonished. Yet, at the same time, he is saddened by the realization that this unknown relative – his only relative – has been introduced and then taken away in the same brief moment.

“Hurry, lad!” Billingsly’s voice breaks the silence as he throws Jeff’s leather coat into his arms. “Grab what you will, and let us be off!” The urgency in his voice shocks Jeff to his senses as the old man makes his way to the window and looks through the shade nervously.

A thought suddenly jolts Jeff – he instinctively knows what to take. It is without a doubt his dearest possession. Pulling his coat over his pajamas, he runs to a small curio cabinet in the corner of the study and reaches inside to grab a shiny gold pocket watch... it had been given to him by his parents on his 8th birthday. Even though he’d never been able to get it to work -- or even open, for that matter -- it

held great sentimental value to him. He runs his fingers over the smooth surface of its golden case in admiration before shoving it into his coat pocket.

He looks down at his bare feet, noticing that Billingsly is already on his way out the study doorway. “..Wait! Let me just...” without finishing the sentence. He ducks into his bedroom to grab a pair of sneakers. He hops on one foot, trying to pull them on as he rushes to keep up. Billingsly turns into the kitchen...

“The front door is back this way,” Jeff tries to correct him.

“Yes, yes, I know it is, lad... but our transport is this way... hurry along, we haven’t much time.” As he says this, he glances over his shoulder at the front door as if expecting something unpleasant to arrive at any instant.

Billingsly bursts through the back door and sets off running at a surprising pace for a man of his age. Jeff sprints after him into the rainy darkness, his half-on sneakers slipping in the slick grass and mud. With an amazing navigational ability, Billingsly leads them in the dark across several of the neighboring yards before making it out onto the next block, then stops abruptly at the curbside. Jeff is struggling to catch his breath but notices that his mysterious guide doesn’t appear in the least bit fatigued. He is calmly waiting beside the curb as if expecting a bus to pull alongside them at any moment.

JUST THEN, a light shines at his feet, and Jeff can barely believe his eyes. It’s dark, admittedly, but he could swear that the vehicle opening its door right in front of them is utterly invisible!



NARROW ESCAPE

“**I**nside! Hurry!” Billingsly waves with both hands for Jeff to climb in and then rushes in behind him. He scrambles forward into what looks more like a pilot’s cockpit than a driver’s seat; the door slowly lowers itself and latches with a mechanical swish.

“Fasten yer seatbelts; this is likely t’ be a bit of a bumpy ride.”

The lights inside dim, and Jeff can see through thick windows that they are already moving. Far from being bumpy, it is so smooth that he has to struggle to detect any movement at all. That’s when he realizes that they are not only accelerating but also rising!

As they pass the height of the nearby rooftops, a terrific explosion suddenly shatters the night’s calm; glancing to his right, Jeff realizes that it is his own house! Pieces of wood and debris are raining down on a broad area of the neighborhood as flames shoot high into the sky from the splintered remains of his home.

“HANG ON!” Billingsly shouts as he leans on a large throttle in the center console, rocketing them forward at incredible speed. Jeff’s head

sinks backward into his seat as he feels his cheeks being pulled toward his ears. From the corner of his eye, he can see the city's lights shrink into the distance below them as they streak into the night sky. Within seconds a radar map on Billingsly's dashboard begins to flash red.

"I was afraid o' that... here we go..." Billingsly says as he rolls the ship into an evasive spin. Jeff watches the fiery tail of a small rocket whiz past the window. "If we can just get high enough, perhaps we'll be outta range..."

"Out of range of what!? What's happening... is someone shooting at us!?" Jeff struggles to move his head enough to see behind them. It looks like two more rockets are rising toward them. Billingsly skillfully rolls and dodges, firing a decoy flare at just the right moment to draw off their heat-seeking noses. They explode in the air nearby with violent force.

The airborne explosions draw the attention of townspeople below, making them aware of the airborne drama as well as the one on the ground. Jeff can make out the lights of police cars and fire engines racing across town below them. Within a few minutes, the radar scope flashes again, this time showing a set of larger objects approaching from in front of them – they are closing fast.

"Oh dear, I had hoped t' be avoidin' this..." Billingsly says, rubbing his forehead with one hand. On the radar console, Jeff can make out the ATC labels for each of the approaching objects, which read: "USAF F18," followed by call letters. "Those are F-18 Hornets!" Jeff exclaims, "...th-that's the Air Force!"

"I presume they don't take kindly to havin' missiles explodin' over their neighborhoods – can't say that I ruddy blame them..." Billingsly concedes. He rolls the craft to the left and levels out, hitting a switch for afterburners that catapult them forward even faster – they are supersonic! A sonic boom shakes the city below as Jeff watches the lights of the Massachusetts coastline speed past; they are passing out into the blackness of the open ocean.

The air force jets on radar split formation, one is chasing them, and the other is heading for a point behind them. Soon, they can see why; another object is entering their radar map with no heads-up ID.

. . .

JEFF LOOKS around at the compartment he is sitting in. In front of him is a narrow console running the width of the seating compartment, with a few lighted controls in the center for what appears to be a rather sophisticated entertainment center. Beside them is a single button labeled “Sensor Array.” He looks up at Billingsly, who is busy scanning a myriad of heads-up display projections that cover his windshield. The older man mutters in deep concentration as the ship rolls from side to side, evading weapons fire from the mysterious craft chasing them.

Feeling that he had better not distract the old man at the moment, Jeff decides to test the intriguing button for himself. He presses it, then sharply draws his hand back as a series of blinking lights immediately spring to life across the entire console. Suddenly, a translucent screen rises from behind the console and wraps in front of him in a 180-degree arc. The screen flashes to life with a marvelous array of images. It takes him a moment to realize that he is seeing a night-vision view of their surroundings; it wraps a complete 360-degree picture across the screen from one end to the other. It seems to be zoomed-in on a scene far away – yet the clarity is extraordinary.

At the extreme right side of the screen, he can make out the nosecone and wings of the first Air force jet. Instinctively reaching out with his hand, he touches the image. As soon as he does, a circle with crosshairs surrounds the jet on his screen, and the scene enlarges to fill the entire screen, zooming in so close he can make out the pilot’s helmet inside the cockpit. The light of a full moon covers the jet’s wings and shines in its translucent cockpit dome. The lights reflected from the F18’s gages are visible in the pilot’s visor.

The jet’s instant enlargement and clarity cause Jeff to fall back into his seat in surprise. He turns his head around, expecting to see the jet right on their tail but quickly realizes that it has only been magnified somehow by this marvelous gadget.

He studies his surroundings again – what kind of ship is this? Except for the double shoulder belts and the console in front of him,

the cabin looks more like the inside of a typical limousine than an aircraft. Scanning across the top and bottom of the large screen in front of him, he sees a wealth of tactical information: airspeed, altitude, heading, bearing, levels for fuel & oxygen, cabin pressure & interior atmosphere.... the list goes on. A horizon gauge at the center of the top row is rocking back and forth with Billingsly's maneuvers. Jeff registers that to be a clue that the top bar of information is for their own ship. The information at the bottom, he reasons to himself, must be for the jet that is chasing them.

Jeff's gaze is suddenly drawn back to the F18 as it takes a dramatic evasive maneuver, rolling onto one side and cutting away to the south. A fiery-tailed air-to-air missile fills the airspace where the jet had been a moment earlier. Jeff touches the screen again in an area of empty sky, hoping to make it zoom outward for a wider view. It works; he can see the much smaller image of the jet's underside as it banks sideways and then continues to roll into a heading away from them, apparently directly toward whatever has fired on it. The jet's tail engines blaze brightly in the night sky.

Looking back again at the console, he notices several more lighted buttons and lightly places his finger on one marked TAR, and a box appears in the center of the screen with the description "Tactical Air to Air Radar Display." He taps the on-screen box, causing a radar display to appear similar to the one on Billingsly's dashboard.

He can clearly see the moving shapes of the two F18 fighters and the third mysterious aircraft. The unknown craft darts from side to side with unbelievable dexterity, at once avoiding the fighters' pursuit and continuing to fire toward Billingsly's ship.

"How many missiles does that thing have?" Jeff mutters to himself.

"I was beginnin' t' wonder that selfsame thing," Billingsly responds candidly.

He banks hard to the left just as another rocket shoots past them. Billingsly studies a map on his windshield display where blips mark their GPS location. Under his breath, Jeff hears him whisper, "Almost there... just another few minutes..." There is a sense of anxious

expectancy in his voice as if he is bracing himself for an especially difficult maneuver.

Jeff studies his own screen again, suddenly wondering about the enemy pursuing them. He tracks the mysterious craft's radar symbol – it darts around on the large screen like an irritating fly avoiding capture, appearing one moment on the extreme right-hand side of Jeff's screen and the next moment at the left as it swings back and forth behind them. Jeff paces its movements and finally manages to hit it with one finger – the screen locks onto his target and zooms in.

The enlarged image that fills the screen sends a chill down his back. The craft is ominously sophisticated; its backward-swept wings are transparent – perceptible due to the continuous emission of weapons fire from their tips. Its body has a mirror-like surface that is almost invisible – rather than reflecting the light of the full moon; it seems to show through the solid structure in a ghostly blur.

The most unnerving thing that catches his eye, however, is the cockpit itself – he can make out three figures through the large cockpit dome, two in front and one behind them, all seem to be reacting with mechanical precision to the images that he can see being projected on their helmet visors.

Assuming that the one sitting in the back is probably controlling the weapons, Jeff zeroes in on that one's helmet, hoping that the screen will allow an even closer focus. He is right; the image zooms in on his faceplate. On the crewman's helmet visor, Jeff can see a mirror image of the enemy's cockpit display. Jeff can make out the symbol of their own ship as targeting crosshairs chase it across the screen, as well as the locations of the F18s in pursuit.

Jeff attempts to look past the visor to see if he can make out a face, but there is nothing to be seen; it is as though the visor is completely opaque – or the helmet is empty! He strains his eyes harder – “Must be a trick of the night vision equipment,” he quips, trying to zoom in further. The image enlarges again, filling a large section of his screen with the visor display – but inside is only blackness.

Jeff has a sudden queasy feeling as he peers into the helmet's vacant darkness, unable to drag his eyes away as an overwhelming

sensation engulfs him that he is being drawn into its empty black expanse. He is gripped by an unnerving sense that his mysterious enemy is staring invisibly back at him.

While staring at the screen dumbfounded, Jeff suddenly notices something flashing in the enemy's reflected cockpit display. Forcing himself to focus on it, he realizes that it is the symbol of their own ship — it has turned glowing red beneath the crosshairs fixed directly over it.

AN ALARM SOUNDS in his own console, breaking the mesmerizing spell he'd been under — a large red message in the center of his screen flashes a warning: WEAPONS LOCK!

Billingsly glances backward at the enlarged display on Jeff's screen; "Oh dear... I'm afraid I should've been payin' closer attention... It's quite unwise to look'em in the eyes."

"In the eyes?! What eyes?! I couldn't see a face, let alone... wait a minute, what did you mean, look them ...unwise...?"

"No time t' be explainin' now," Billingsly interrupts; he rolls the ship roughly to the right, then into a careening nosedive. Jeff feels himself being pulled off his seat by the change in direction, pressed hard against his shoulder harness and lap belt.

Seizing the steering wheel in a tightened grip with one hand, Billingsly manages to hit a button on his center console with the other that shuts down the zoomed image on Jeff's screen, reverting it to its original panoramic view. Jeff can see the locked missile gaining on them — it's following them downward, growing larger by the second.

Billingsly pulls hard on the wheel, jerking the ship to the left to level off, then reignites the afterburners. Jeff is thrown back into his seat again as they are blasted forward. He can barely move his head as he watches the deadly missile follow their every move.

"It's s-still g-gaining o-on u-u-us!" he manages to say through his gritted teeth.

"Th-th-that's the t-trouble with these b-buggers," Billingsly labors in reply, "solid r-rocket b-boosters — c-can't out-r-run 'em..." He

throws them into another sideways dive, making Jeff feel like he is being pulled from his seat by a huge angry beast. His seatbelts dig into his shoulders and stomach as the ship spins around in a wild death roll.

IN THE BRIGHT MOONLIGHT, Jeff becomes aware that they are approaching the ocean's surface at an alarming rate, nose-first! If he could only move his head, he would also see that the missile is now close enough to view with the naked eye and closing fast. The ship is spinning in a rapid downward corkscrew motion as it speeds headlong toward the ocean.

Jeff can't breathe; he hangs paralyzed in fear as he watches both approaching killers race closer... the missile screaming toward them from above and the ocean from beneath. He hopes with all his might that Billingsly has a plan for pulling them out of this before it's too late!



Niergel Chronicles

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