

## The Andromeda Strain

The book I read was Michael Crichton's *Andromeda Strain*. It is a science fiction story about an outbreak of a deadly airborne virus. The virus came from an experimental satellite named Scoop VII. The satellite landed in a small town in northwestern Arizona named Piedmont. There were only 2 survivors out of forty-eight, an old person and an infant. There are four main characters who study the virus. They are Jeremy Stone, Peter Levitt, Charles Burton, and Mark Hall.

It all starts out when a team of five prominent biophysicists give the United States government an urgent warning: sterilization procedures for returning space probes maybe inadequate to guarantee uncontaminated re-entry to the atmosphere. Their recommendation contained two parts. The first was to implement a program which collected microorganisms from the upper atmosphere. The project was named Scoop and was a series of seven satellites, the seventh bringing back *Andromeda* which caused the suspension of the program. The second part was to build a major research and containment facility where a microorganism could be isolated. They named the facility *Wildfire*.

The outbreak starts when two people are sent out to search for Scoop VII. When the two men sent neared Piedmont they noticed vultures circling the town, watching, waiting. At their last check point there was only a scream and static as the virus took two more lives.

Hours later a military helicopter with Jeremy Stone and Charles Burton took off from Vandenberg Air Force Base. It was headed for Piedmont, Arizona. They were going there to recover a sample of the virus and to search for the living man they had seen in the flyby photos. Upon arriving they search through the houses until they found Scoop VII. It had been pried open by the town's doctor. They quickly slipped it in to a bag, hoping the virus was still intact. As they walked around, they observed hundreds of strange forms of suicide and death. Some people hung, drown, shot, and lit themselves on fire, while others just laid there with a look of surprise on their face. Stone and Burton carefully took a scalpel, while being careful not to cut their airtight suits. With the scalpel Stone cut open a man lying on the street. All of his blood was hard, clotted solid. Then out of the corner of Stone's eye an old man appeared and stumbled. They quickly found him and took him back to where the helicopter was hovering high above the town. As they walked back Burton heard crying and rushed into a house to find the second survivor, a bright, red-faced screaming infant. He proceeded back to the helicopter and the two doctors and the two survivors boarded and returned to Project *Wildfire*.

At *Wildfire*, Stone and Burton met the rest of the team and started to study the virus. Stone and Levitt were both microbiologists. Burton was a pathologist, and Hall was a surgeon. Other than the scientists there was a hand full of other assistants. Hall had been given a key that, if necessary, could turn off the atomic detonation device. Its main purpose was to destroy a virus if it was accidentally let loose. The reason Hall was given the key was because of the *Odd Man Out Hypothesis*. It stated that a single male was more likely to choose the correct decision than any other gender or marital state. After several days of initial work they came up with several discoveries: the virus killed by clotting the blood or it caused brain tumors, it only grew in a certain blood pH level, and it would be mutated by an atomic detonation. With this new information they understood why the infant and old man were spared. The old man's blood pH was too acidic since he used a bottle of Advil a day, while the baby's pH was to low since it never stopped crying.

Meanwhile, near Piedmont a military plane crashed. The pilot's last words were, "Everything is just melting." The cause of the crash was Andromeda. The Andromeda virus had mutated causing it to disintegrate plastics instead of clot blood. This amazing discovery was sent to Wildfire but they did not respond to the message. The message was never received since the teletype machine it had been sent to was broken. Several hours later while Burton was working in the lab a containment seal broke and he was exposed to Andromeda. As the rest of the team rushed in to assist him they made a deadly discovery. They knew the virus only grew in a certain blood pH so they told him to breath rapidly which would decrease his pH level. Several seconds later a plastic filter which cleaned air from the central core disintegrated. The central core was an open elevator like shaft where supplies and large materials could be lowered between levels. Seconds later the atomic self-destruct device activated! The virus had broken out of containment and the computer had detected it. Stone and Hall looked at each other and a flat computer voice added, "There are three minutes to atomic self-destruct." They knew an atomic blast would alter the virus, with each transformation killing in different ways. Since Hall was the only one with the key he had to get to a substation where he could turn off the detonation. As he thought of this the heavy metal containment doors of the lab slammed down, locking them in. Hall's mind searched desperately for an escape route when he thought of the central core. He asked Stone about the idea and Stone explained the cores security system. He said as soon as an animal penetrates the core a poison gas and tranquilizer darts are released. Hall weighing the consequences of Andromeda being released decided to climb up the central core to the next level and a substation. The computer counting down to their death, "There are now two minutes to self-destruct." Hall took a deep breath and climbed in to the core. It was a round shaft extending several stories up and down. He began to climb as the computer began to pump gas in to the chamber. Port holes opened up around him and semi-automatic tranquilizer dart guns began firing. Thump, a dart slammed in to the wall by his head. He began to feel dizzy, the gas was getting to him. Just as he stopped he felt a sharp pain in his back and every move he took seemed like a dream. He could see the next level just above him as he climbed but he just could not get there. He fought off the gas and drugs with every last bit of energy as he opened the hatch to the fourth level and began walking to the substation. It was so close but it seemed to take hours for him to get there. Just before he blacked out he remembers inserting the key in to the substation.

Hall slowly wakes up, he looks around and finds himself in the infirmary on level four. "Thank God," he yells as he realizes he stopped the detonation. A young nurse comes over to calm him down as the rest of the scientists walk in cheering. The nurse tells him how he turned the key just before he blacked out and the computer was at one second.

Overall, I enjoyed the book and would recommend it to my classmates. It is amazingly suspenseful and full of realistic science fiction. It kept me tossing and turning all night as I thought of the Andromeda Strain invading our town.

