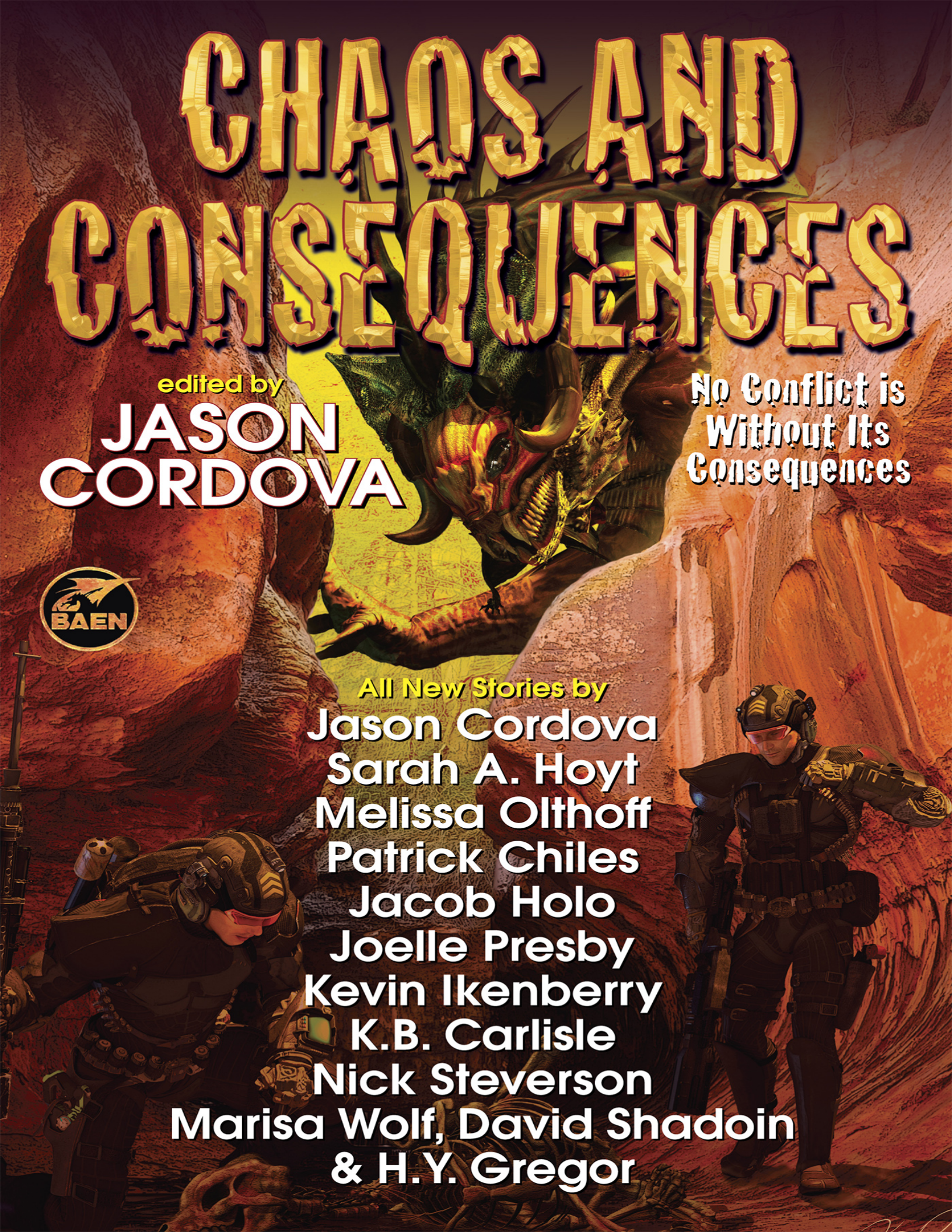

CHAOS AND CONSEQUENCES
edited by
JASON CORDOVA
No Conflict is Without Its Consequences
BAEN
All New Stories by
Jason Cordova
Sarah A. Hoyt
Melissa Olthoff
Patrick Chiles
Jacob Holo
Joelle Presby
Kevin Ikenberry
K.B. Carlisle
Nick Steverson
Marisa Wolf, David Shadoin
& H.Y. Gregor

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CHAOS AND CONSEQUENCES

edited by

Jason Cordova



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Chaos and Consequences
edited by Jason Cordova

Military Science Fiction at its Best!

Is it aliens? The government is here to help . . .

When there is chaos, there will be consequences . . . but for whom?

In *Chaos and Consequences*, we find out.

Ten stories within all tell a tale of a single moment of chaos, an image built within each author's tapestry. How they spin their chaotic yarn, though, is up to each weaver. With military science fiction stories ranging from the absurd to the deadly, there is something for everyone within.

Featuring bright new lights of military SF, many of whom are military vets, Sarah A. Hoyt, Melissa Olthoff, Kevin Ikenberry, Jacob Holo, Patrick Chiles, Joelle Presby, Jason Cordova, K.B. Carlisle, Nick Steverson, and Marisa Wolf, David Shadoin & H.Y. Gregor.

Because in the end, it's not about the chaos involved. It's about those who give in to it, and those who choose to fight.

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THE BRONZE LEGION with Melissa Olthoff
To Tread Obsidian Shores
Vessels Grim and Daring, forthcoming

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Chaos and Consequences

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To Moira.
Thanks for coming up with an awesome title.
Yes, I know…I owe you ice cream.

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Introduction

Jason Cordova

The idea of a story where a singular event is connected across multiple dimensions has always tugged at the back of my mind. The concept of a singular life-form breaching through into any reality to lay waste to it is a war on such a scale that it's almost incomprehensible. Galactic struggle, millions of lives lost, dozens of worlds erased? Those are rookie numbers. Imagine parallel universes being devoured by an all-consuming host unfathomable to the mortal mind, and spread that across hundreds and thousands of fictional worlds.

The original idea of the first anthology, *Dancing with Destruction*, was to show a single scene encapsulated by various authors in their own universes. The authors brought their own flavors and creations, exceeding my expectations.

In fact, they pulled it off so well that I immediately wanted to do a second anthology based on this theme. Kurt Miller was kind enough to have already done a second painting of the alien from the first cover on a new world, with new soldiers being stalked and hunted, or even assisting it, so the pitch was an easy one to Toni Weisskopf at Baen Books.

The mission became a little more difficult at that point. Authors are *busy*, and short stories are not always something they can just whip up in a week or two. They are meticulous beings who have schedules for when they're supposed to be writing what—at least, this is what I've been told. So the hunt for authors who had free time on their hands (ha!) and could turn around a short story quickly began.

Marisa Wolf (who also happens to be the only person to have been in every single anthology I've edited to date) brought in authors David Shadoin and H.Y. Gregor to write with her about a research project gone horribly wrong—or, perhaps, horribly right? Joelle Presby sent in a fantastic story a few days after I invited her about what happens when you're just too good at your job, and continues to knock every story out of the park. Patrick Chiles brings an Interstellar Medic short story (I love these books…you really should check them out) and Jacob Holo turned in a Sol Blazers short

story that killed any potential desire for me to go visit strange worlds named after anatomy.

Kevin Ikenberry continues his Buzzer Wars series with his contribution—tanks and aliens, oh my! Fantastic books for those who like military science fiction with tanks, invading aliens, and high body counts. Nick Steverson continued the story of his characters from *Dancing with Destruction* in a brand-new setting and fight, while newcomer K. B. Carlisle brings a solid suspense tale set on a world where not everything is what it seems and nature *really* wants to take its course.

Melissa Olthoff gives us a postapocalyptic tale of soldiers trying to keep survivors alive in a western wasteland while being hunted by something dark and powerful, and Sarah Hoyt offers up a tale where everything that can go wrong will—with varying results.

For everyone knows that when there's chaos involved, there will be consequences.

I truly hope you enjoy these stories as much as I did. My only complaint was that we ran out of room.

Jason Cordova
Raleigh, North Carolina
February 2026

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More Than Survival

Melissa Olthoff

The world was ending.

Captain Jace Benning had spent years fighting for his country, but he couldn't stop the end of the world any more than he could stop the sun from rising.

All he could do was try to survive the shattering.

Jace put one foot in front of the other and swept his gaze across the ragtag band of survivors he'd gathered during his insane trek across the Sonoran Desert. Grim resolve flowed through his exhausted soul. As tired as he was, there was never any question as to whether he would keep going.

Long past the point where the first bombs had fallen on American soil, long past the point where he lost contact with his chain of command. He would keep going, because if he couldn't save his country, he could save his soldiers. They were his responsibility now, even if they hadn't started out that way.

The six of them had been in the desert for weeks, cut off from supplies and support. Utterly alone. After their last encounter with other soldiers, Jace preferred it that way. Desperation turned people who should've been allies into enemies. He could've easily avoided the fight. Walked away, pretended he didn't see what they were doing to those refugees. Exhaustion and the need to protect his own tempted him to do just that.

But he had to hold on to something more than just survival.

Or what was the fucking point?

That particular fight had cost him two good Rangers and their remaining ground vehicle, including the backup power cells for their armor and more supplies than he wanted to think about…but they'd saved those people. That had to count for something.

Bitterly, he turned his thoughts away from what had happened *after*. It didn't matter.

All that mattered was protecting what was left of his team.

They'd been on foot ever since, their pace slowed to a crawl. First, twenty miles a day, then less as they had to divert to find water, shade,

shelter. Time had lost meaning except as a way to keep track of their progress.

So Jace didn't know what day of the week it was and didn't particularly care. All that mattered was the sun was getting low and it was almost time to end the day's march east.

The setting sun cast long shadows ahead of them, though the heat of the day had barely abated. The cooling systems built into his armor had long since given up the fight and sweat plastered his undersuit to his skin and dampened the padding of his helmet. He'd grown used to the itching grime, but he could do without the chaffing in unfortunate places. On every third step across the shifting sands, something in his left knee clicked. It had been days since they'd found a secure enough place to remove their armor, so he couldn't be sure which joint was the problem—metal or human.

Jace made a mental note to figure it out before it became a Problem and kept moving.

Angelo Perez, fellow US Army Ranger and his only surviving platoon sergeant, was on point. Rifle held relaxed but ready, head on a constant swivel as he surveyed the barren landscape, moving as easily as if he were out for a casual stroll despite the heavy rucksack on his back. Everyone else looked as battered as their armor, which varied in style and quality. Jace had somehow collected soldiers from across the different military branches, though none had managed quite as dramatic an entrance as Lieutenant Maya "Cutter" Cutler.

He glanced at the slender woman limping behind Perez with dogged perseverance and shook his head. *Damned fighter pilots. Always have to be flashy.*

At least one good thing had come from losing Peters and Johnson. They hadn't needed their armor anymore, and Cutter wouldn't have lasted long out here wearing those stupid green pajamas pilots paraded around in.

Comms Specialist Kali Chen trotted next to Cutter, dark where the other was blonde, silent where the other was chatty. The tiny specialist took two steps for every one of Cutter's, but she moved with grace, even in her second-rate armor. Jace tried to remember the last time he'd heard Chen speak, then decided dealing with the shadows of trauma in her dark eyes would have to wait. So long as she kept their short-range comms functioning, that was all he could ask.

Out of all of them, Howard Eddings, Fleet Marine Force Corpsman, was the most suited to helping her, if she could be helped at all. Eddings had certainly managed to piece together Cutter's leg, badly broken when she'd landed practically on top of them roughly a week west of their present position, her fighter jet nothing more than flaming wreckage a valley away. He was just grateful she'd been issued bone regen. She wouldn't be walking otherwise, powered armor and medical attention or not.

The last of his little band of survivors, a Marine Corps Force Recon scout with an uncanny ability to find shelter, had ranged ahead of them an hour ago. Outside of Perez, Dwayne Thomas was the only one Jace trusted to survive on his own, though the corporal had ranged far enough this time that his icon had fallen off Jace's HUD. He suppressed the flash of unease that twisted through his gut. At the very least, he trusted that if anything *did* take out that tough bastard, it would be messy enough, *loud* enough, that half the desert would know.

Out of habit more than anything else, he checked the command net, but there was no connection. In truth, Jace had given up on receiving orders or guidance. Long-range comms hadn't worked in weeks. Too much interference in the atmosphere from bombs, nuclear and otherwise. His last orders had been to defend a city that no longer existed, and his priorities had since shifted.

A slow, inexorable slide into survival mode.

Thomas would undoubtedly find them shelter for the night, but the real trick was going to be finding someplace safe. Someplace permanent, where everything hadn't gone to shit. Where they could hole up, not be on their guard constantly, waiting for an attack or the next bomb to drop. Someplace *survivable*.

Damned if Jace knew where.

Or if it existed at all.

Returning to McChord in the Northwest hadn't been an option from the beginning. They'd lost that base—his mind shied away from what else they'd lost, what *he'd* lost—months ago. Behind them, the West Coast was lost just as thoroughly, nothing but irradiated cities and raging forest fires, dangerously unstable thanks to the nukes setting off a cascade of earthquakes. The East Coast wasn't much better. Or the Midwest. Or any major city, really.

All their defenses, all their preparation, and when the major attack came, it wasn't enough. Too many nukes had gotten through. The only thing that had saved the majority of the country was the type used, the localized area of effect, and the fact that their enemies wanted their *land*.

Can't do much with a nuclear wasteland.

Shaking off his cynical thoughts, Jace stalked behind everyone else, acting as rearguard. Not only did they have to worry about bombs dropping from the sky and desperate assholes trying to take their dwindling supplies, the desert itself would love nothing more than to kill them. Both the heat and the creatures that lived there, natural and decidedly unnatural. Genetic monstrosities that had escaped—or been seeded—throughout the country. Based on sporadic reports he'd received before he'd lost all contact with the outer world, Jace could only conclude it was yet another enemy action, if one that was a little more asymmetrical than most.

The evening breeze picked up, warm and heavy with the scent of sage and creosote. Jace tilted his face back to the darkening sky, streaks of burning red cutting across the hazy western horizon. Just for an instant, his attention wandered to better times, better places…to someone else who used to sit next to him when the sun set.

Exhaustion making him sloppy and careless.

Something with too many teeth and disproportional limbs exploded out of the sagebrush as Eddings walked past. Jace lunged forward on training more than choice, snapping out the blade built into his armored forearm and skewering it mid-leap. With a sharp flick, he slid the misshapen reptile off the blade and tossed it to the startled corpsman.

"Dinner," Jace told him with a twitch of his lips. It was meant to be a smile, but he had a sneaking suspicion he'd failed. Face too stiff, too out of practice with the expression.

"Bet it tastes like chicken," Eddings replied, blue eyes crinkled up in amusement that quickly faded into wary alertness as they got moving again.

In the distance, something loosed a long, chilling cry. Something else answered, a furious roar that silenced the desert. Everyone froze, some primal instinct urging them to stay very, very still. Weapons were raised, hard eyes scanned sagebrush flats and cactus-dotted hills, searching for the threats…but the local wildlife soon resumed their avian chirps and coyote yips, and that atavistic fear faded.

“Keep moving,” Jace ordered, wiping his blade clean before snapping it back into his armor.

The world was ending.

That didn’t mean it was going to end quietly.

Mutated lizard did *not* taste like chicken, but their bio-scanner said it was safe, and it was protein they desperately needed. Thomas had found them shelter for the night in the embrace of a rocky outcrop, with protection on three sides and clear sightlines for a lookout at the top of the rocks. The sandy soil was mostly flat, and the outcropping good enough to risk a small fire.

As soon as the questionable meat was thoroughly cooked, Thomas smothered the flames, leaving them in the deepening dark. The moon hadn’t risen yet, but the stars washed across the sky in a brilliant river of light, and their eyes adapted quickly enough.

“It’s slimy.” Perez poked his share with a dubious finger before popping a piece in his mouth. He gagged and spoke around the hunk of meat. “How can it be this charred and still slimy?”

Jace cut him a sharp glance from his perch on the rocks above the tiny campsite. “Quit complaining and just swallow it.”

Cutter smirked. “That’s what he said.”

She nudged Chen playfully, hazel eyes dancing in amusement, but the other woman just kept eating her portion in neat, almost robotic bites. The irrepressible pilot kept trying to draw the tiny comms specialist out of her traumatized shell, and Jace would’ve been inclined to think it wasn’t working…but she’d chosen to sit next to Cutter that night, close enough for physical contact. Improvement over her previous refusal to allow any of them near.

Thomas barked a laugh and shrugged as he ate. “Had worse.”

“Yeah, and probably enjoyed it,” Eddings said, washing down his dinner with carefully rationed water.

“Yup.” The Recon scout slid another chunk off his improvised mesquite skewer and flashed his battle buddy a grin, teeth white against dark skin. “And asked for more.”

“Yeah, you did.” Eddings tossed his empty skewer aside and sighed. “At least the mesquite added some flavor.”

Perez chewed his last piece rapidly, swarthy complexion pale. “I don’t think flavor is the real issue here—”

That long, chilling cry shrieked across the desert again, no closer than before but edged in hunger. There was no answering roar this time. No, this time, the unmistakable sound of gunfire responded to the monstrous call. No discipline to it, only panic, at least three rifles peppered with the distinctive *crack* of small-arms fire.

Weapons snapped up, and Jace used his elevated perch to scan the gently rolling terrain with the optics built into his HUD. No movement, no heat signatures larger than their unpleasant dinner. Sound carried far in the desert night. Small hairs on the back of his neck stood up as whatever it was shrieked again. Louder, *angrier*. There was an echo to the shrill sound, a deep reverberation he’d never heard a living creature produce.

Like two voices screaming from a single throat.

The gunfire quickly tapered off except for the *crack-crack-crack* of one last handgun. A pause, as if the shooter was reloading, then it resumed —only to be cut off abruptly. Another shriek, triumphant this time. Then nothing. Heavy silence blanketed the night, pressing down on every last living creature. Not even the crickets and katydids dared break it.

Tension wrapped around Jace’s spine, tightened his gut, as he searched the night. Between one steady breath and the next, Thomas was crouched next to him, helmet on and rifle up. He’d scaled the rocky outcropping without a single scrape of metal on rock to betray him.

Sneaky bastard.

“Heard that thing earlier,” the recon scout subvocalized over comms. “Whatever it is, it’s big, and I reckon it ain’t natural either, sir.”

Jace nodded without taking his focus off the desert. He’d allowed his attention to lapse earlier. He didn’t think failing this time would result in anything so harmless as a free meal. Unless they were the ones on the menu.

Seconds ticked by, then minutes. Jace let time flow by him, muscular frame poised but relaxed, untouched by impatience or frustration. Maintaining vigilance even as insects tentatively resumed their song and rodents rustled in the scrub, even as feathered wings flared from the top of a towering cactus and an owl dropped low with a soft hoot. Jace kept searching for threats and found none, though he scanned through every available spectrum.

Slowly, the subtle tension in his spine melted away. Unless the creature was both invisible in all spectrums *and* small enough to hide behind one of the dark clumps of stunted sagebrush, they were clear. For now.

Jace glanced down to their shelter below and found Perez had organized the others. The Ranger was crouched behind the left curve of the outcropping with Cutter stacked up behind him, Eddings and Chen mirroring them on the other side. Helmets on, rifles aimed into the night, everyone calm, focused, ready.

A warm feeling shot through him, and it took an embarrassingly long moment for him to realize it was pride. Pride in his little band of survivors. Perez and Thomas were solid, and Eddings hid an iron core beneath his kind smile. As for the women, Cutter was bold and picked up shit fast, and Chen's combination of intensity and grace spiced with just enough disregard for her own well-being made her rather terrifying in combat.

"Rotating watch, two-hour stints," Jace continued quietly. "One body up here, the other guarding the sleepers. Standard pairings. Rest up. Tomorrow we're putting as much distance between us and whatever the fuck that was as possible."

Jace had only been off watch for a handful of minutes when a pained roar startled him from his fitful doze. He was up on one knee, rifle aimed into the starlit desert before conscious thought caught up to reaction. In the near distance, reptilian hisses and growls rang out, along with deeper roars and an odd trilling shriek. Chen, on watch in the curve of the outcrop, glanced over her shoulder.

"The night is hungry," she whispered, dark eyes so very haunted but her hands steady and aim unwavering.

"*Not. Helpful*," Thomas muttered over comms, positioned on the rocks above.

Eventually, the sounds of fighting died down and the usual nighttime chorus resumed. Jace got what rest he could until dawn's light kissed the sky. As golden light flooded the desert, they got on the move again, but their march came to an abrupt halt a single rolling hill away. A swarm of lizards like the one they'd had for dinner lay across the ground, reptilian eyes glazed over in death and sandy dirt eagerly soaking up the blood offering.

Eddings whistled soundlessly and tapped his armored foot next to a deep paw print. "Whatever tore these apart was one big kitty."

“Big kitty didn’t get away unscathed,” Thomas added, nudging one dog-sized lizard’s gaping maw, where a tuft of bloody, golden-brown fur was caught on an oversized fang. He glanced around the scattered pieces. “Doesn’t look like it ate any of them.”

Perez snorted. “Maybe big kitty doesn’t like slimy meat either.”

“Then why attack them at all?” Jace frowned as he crouched beside one of those huge paw prints. He spread his hand out and couldn’t cover the print edge to edge.

“Maybe they pissed it off?” The sergeant shrugged casually, but his sharp eyes took in the size of those prints and tension stiffened his lean frame.

Uneasily, Jace rose to his feet and noted the direction of travel. An icy pit of realization opened in his gut. If the swarm hadn’t been interrupted, it would’ve washed over them in a wave of reptilian fang and claw.

“We got lucky,” he murmured.

“Luck had nothing to do with it.”

Heads jerked up, rifles followed. A young woman in lightweight scout power armor perched on the hill above them, hands empty, body language relaxed, and expression friendly. But she’d managed to sneak up on them without even *Thomas* noticing, so she wasn’t as harmless as she appeared.

After a quick scan of their surroundings, Jace motioned for them to stand down. Interestingly, Thomas relaxed first.

“You did this, darlin’?” the big Marine asked, nudging one of the bloody bodies with a friendly grin.

“Sure did,” she said cheerfully.

“Really? Got any claws?” Perez shot back, more mocking than playful.

Cutter snorted a laugh, but the strange woman tilted her head in an odd, almost avian gesture. The rising sun played over her elfin face, turning her eyes a brilliant gold behind the clear face shield of her helmet.

“Yup.” She wiggled blunt armored fingers at them and grinned. “So does my partner.”

“Partner, right,” Jace said slowly, scanning the empty hills around them again. “And where is he, exactly?”

“*She*—” Suddenly, she paled and shot to her feet, standing utterly motionless. Eyes staring and unfocused, lips moving soundlessly. An annoyed roar rolled across the desert, and she shook off her stillness with a faint grin. “Sorry, duty calls. And you’re welcome for the save!”

With a sarcastic little salute and a wink, she whirled and leaped down the far side of the slope. Thomas bounded to the top, but he slid back down after a moment, shaking his head.

She was gone.

“You catch any comm transmissions from her, Chen?” Jace asked quietly.

Their comm specialist shook her head once.

“Great, another crazy one,” Perez muttered. “How many does that make now?”

“Too many,” Eddings said grimly.

Jace shook off the odd encounter and near miss. “Move out.”

As they marched into the rising sun, Jace cross-checked his rifle, his ammo supply and grenades, his knives—both the KA-BARs strapped to armored thighs, and the built-in blades—and ran a diagnostic on his armor. He suppressed a wince at the estimated power-cell life. If they didn’t find extras or a way to recharge the ones they had, they’d be on foot *and* unarmored before the month was out. Even if they did, the suits required maintenance none of them were qualified to provide. Though he’d tried his best, he hadn’t been able to fix the clicking in his joint. He’d almost rather it had been his knee. That, at least, had a chance of healing on its own.

Despair whispered through him, wearing away at his strength. For just a moment, his shoulders bowed under the weight he was carrying. He had to find them someplace safe soon, or they’d be no better off than those refugees—at the mercy of jackals wearing human skin and whatever monsters were haunting the desert.

They’d barely made it an hour before Thomas froze, rifle moving in sync with his wary gaze, sweeping the barren landscape. Without hesitation, everyone mimicked their point man.

“Something’s out there,” Thomas murmured, big frame tensed, ready to react. “Watching us.”

“You sure it’s not that girl again?” Eddings snickered. “You always did like ’em hot with a side of crazy.”

“It’s not,” he shot back tersely. “Can’t spot it, can’t pin it down, but I can feel it.”

Jace cycled through his HUD’s available spectrums and found abundant wildlife, but none larger than a handful of jackrabbits. No threats, unless it was the human kind with high-tech camouflage only available to a

certain subsection of the military. Not something they were likely to run into out here. Most telling, that deadly silence hadn't spread across the desert. In fact, the noisy birds were getting downright annoying.

But if his recon scout said something was out there, something was out there.

"Ranger file, eyes and ears up." Jace shifted his rifle to his off hand and snapped out his right blade. "No shooting unless necessary. I'd rather not announce our presence to anything if we don't have to. Cutter, do you remember how to—"

The slender pilot maglocked her rifle to her back and snapped out both blades, the promise of violence glimmering in her hard eyes.

"Take that as a yes," Perez muttered, but there was appreciation in his slow grin.

Chen was the only one whose armor didn't have built-in blades, but she drew her oversized KA-BARs and held them like she knew how to use them. Jace had seen her in their last fight, remembered the blood coating both blades. For a comm specialist, she'd been surprisingly well trained in combat.

As they got moving again, Jace cast one last glance around the barren terrain. The skin on the back of his neck crawled. He'd felt like that once before…when he'd been in the crosshairs of a sniper.

"Thomas, keep point and step it up," he growled. If anything attacked them here, they had no cover or defensible position. "Get us clear."

Their Marine took his orders to heart and set a brutal pace, one even Jace found challenging with the sandy footing. The feeling of being watched faded, but they continued trotting through the rolling terrain as the sun rose higher.

Soon, sweat rolled down his face and soaked his undersuit despite everything the environmental controls could do to mitigate the rising heat. Thirst was an ache in the back of his throat, and fatigue burrowed into his muscles. Too many weeks on the move without proper rest and nutrition taking its toll. Jace was fairly certain spite was the only thing allowing the tiny Chen to keep up, but she wasn't the one he really worried about.

By the time noon approached, their pace had slowed more than Jace wanted, but they were constrained by the scorching heat—and Cutter's healing leg. She was pushing, but bone regen and power armor could only do so much, and her limp was growing worse.

“Hey, Cutter. You’re a pilot,” Perez said abruptly as she struggled up the next slope.

“I *was*.” She cast a longing glance at the endless blue sky before she whipped an annoyed glare over her shoulder. “What’s your point, Captain Obvious?”

“My *point* is they tell pilots things they don’t tell us grunts,” he said, voice barely above a whisper but somehow still carrying a lazy drawl. “Things like who dropped the first bomb on us.”

Cutter’s shoulders stiffened and she hobbled just a little faster, as if she could outwalk the question. “We don’t know who attacked first.”

Perez stayed close on her heels. “What if it was aliens?”

“It wasn’t aliens,” she said flatly.

“But if you don’t know for sure, how do you know it’s *not* aliens?”

Jace couldn’t catch Perez’s expression, but he could hear the smartass grin in the other Ranger’s voice. He was about to order him to knock it off when Cutter threw back her head in a throaty laugh…and her gait smoothed out just a little.

Perez was distracting her from the pain.

“It’s not aliens, you dumb shit!”

“I mean, it could be,” Eddings jumped in with a dark chuckle. “Might as well go with extraterrestrial. Too many options to choose from down here.”

“Maybe it was all of them,” a rusty voice whispered.

Silence fell.

“Way to kill the conversation, Chen,” Perez finally mumbled.

Jace swore she huffed a laugh. He’d take it as good progress, even if it was more a puff of air than true amusement.

Still on point, Thomas crested the slope and immediately dropped to the ground, flattening his profile. “I’ve got eyes on a structure of some kind. Might be a good place to hole up for the hottest part of the day.”

Rather than push his way up to the top of the slope, Jace tapped into Thomas’ HUD, pulling the visual feed. With a practiced flick of his eyes, he zoomed in on the small, tan building. Built to blend into the landscape, not stand out.

“Scout it out.”

Within minutes, Thomas called it clear. The building, which turned out to be a partially built house, provided welcome relief from the sun and not

much else. No food, no power, no comfort, just bare floors and unfinished walls. But there was water in the form of several flats of prepackaged bottles.

Good enough.

Helmets were discarded, rifles set aside, and backs were braced against plywood and studs as they slowly rehydrated. Exhaustion and sweat sat heavy on everyone. As they finished eating a sparse lunch of protein bars, Jace considered extending their halt for a few more hours. After last night, everyone was tired, and sleeping on something other than dirt would do them all some good. But then that feeling of being watched returned, stronger than before.

Something was hunting them.

Just like last time, they caught no sign of their stalker. Sneakier than Thomas, but not sneaky enough to hide from battle-honed instincts. Reluctantly, Jace ordered them out into the hottest part of the day. Concealment hadn't helped, the house wasn't defensible, and they couldn't fight what they couldn't find. Putting distance between them was the best option.

"Think it's the same thing from this morning?" Eddings panted as they scrambled down a long slope, leaving their temporary shelter behind.

"How the hell am I supposed to know?" Thomas grunted, dodging a cactus at the bottom of the narrow gulley.

"Because you're the one with the gut feelings. You *sure* it's not the girl?" Eddings laughed breathlessly, misjudging his course and bouncing off that same cactus. "I can't even tell anything's out there—"

Eddings stumbled as a familiar chilling cry rang out across the harsh sunlit hills, silencing the desert. Not within visual range, but closer than last night.

"Okay, now I can," he whispered.

"No question if *that's* the same thing," Perez murmured, hands tightening on his rifle.

"Pick up the pace," Jace ordered, lengthening his stride, power armor propelling him faster than he could run unassisted. "I'll take point. Thomas, rearguard."

"Recommend keeping us heading east, sir," Thomas said as he dropped back, hard eyes scanning the silent terrain.

"Copy east."

As Jace passed Perez, he jerked his head toward Cutter, who was barely keeping up. Without a word, the sergeant maglocked his rifle to his back and dropped back beside her. She shot him a glare, jaw set stubbornly, but he just wound a strong arm around her waist and braced her weak side. Chen ran easily just ahead of them, short legs taking two steps for every one of theirs but her armor propelling her lighter frame forward with half the energy cost.

Jace opened a private channel with Eddings. “If we keep pushing, is Cutter’s leg going to hold up?”

“Bone is solid thanks to regen, but muscle’s still healing.” The corpsman grimaced, sweat gleaming on his haggard face. “I’ll check it when we’re somewhere safe.”

Somewhere safe. Jace allowed a frustrated grimace to contort his face. Nobody could see his expression when he was leading the way. If only he knew where the *hell* to lead them.

Jace tried to keep them on an easterly heading, but whatever was hunting them kept shrieking from the south, closer and closer, forcing him to bend their path farther north than he wanted…until they were heading almost due north into harder terrain.

Realization struck.

It was herding them.

He tightened his grip on his rifle, tempted to turn and face it, but that reverberating shriek rang out again, so close the sound hit him in the chest. Fear unexpectedly rose up, adrenaline countered, but the rattle of panic fire rang in his memory…and the silence that had followed. There was no cover, no defensible positions, *nothing* in the way of shelter or even a place where they could make a stand.

All he could do was keep them moving.

Rolling hills became fractured land, jutting buttes and jagged outcroppings, and their pace slowed again. Sour sweat mixed with sage and creosote flavored his steady breaths, and if it wasn’t for his HUD dimming down the painfully bright sun beating down on their heads, he’d be half-blind as well as in danger of heat stroke. The sun had started its slow descent into afternoon, but it would be hours yet before darkness provided any sort of cover for them or a break from the heat. Biometrics for his makeshift squad were within acceptable margins, but Cutter’s pulse was

elevated and Perez had taken on more of her weight. They wouldn't last much longer in the open.

The latest shriek carried a note of eager anticipation, bouncing off the rocks even though it still wasn't within visual range. A pulse of terror thumped along with his heartbeat. Behind him, Chen stumbled, dark eyes wide, and even Perez paled. A steadying breath, and the feeling faded, became manageable once more. Training was holding, nobody was panicking, but Jace could see fear in the slight jerkiness in previously smooth strides, in the white showing around eyes and tightened grips on weapons.

What the fuck is this thing?

Desperately hoping he wasn't giving it exactly what it wanted, Jace led them into a maze of canyons carved out by tectonic shifts and monsoon flash flooding. If they couldn't shake it in here, he'd find them someplace defensible, someplace they could dig in and kill whatever was stalking them. Towering sandstone walls closed in around them, and they loped down the narrow, twisting path. Moments later, another shriek on their heels, muffled and echoing at the same time.

It was in the canyons.

Jace's focus narrowed. Stagnant air, short sightlines, and loose sand beneath pounding boots. Right turn, left turn, another left, sunlit orange and tan rocks flashing by either side as they pushed hard to get ahead of their hunter. Another branching turn ahead. Jace angled to take the right path.

"Not that way! Left, go left!" An urgent but cheerful voice breaking into their comms, a flash of sandy brown scout armor instead of Ranger gray. "Incoming friendly!"

Jace slowed his headlong rush and craned his head back. The young woman from that morning raced along the top of the canyon, nimble as a mountain goat. Between one stride and the next, she leaped down the steep rock, bouncing from one wall to the other before landing in a slight crouch beside him, one hand braced on the ground.

"Superhero landing," she laughed breathlessly. "Best thing about power armor."

For an instant, Jace was knocked on his ass by that mischievous grin, so similar to *hers*.

"Not that way," the young woman repeated with more urgency, tugging on his arm, urging him down the left path. "That's a dead end."

She tilted her face up to his and he got a better look at her eyes, which were nothing at all like that warm blue that he missed so damn much. A sharp shake of his head broke memory's spell, and he stared at her eyes like an idiot.

Gold and brilliant. Not a trick of the light. They were really *gold*.

He ripped his arm from her grasp. "Who the hell *are* you?"

"Someone who knows these canyons and doesn't want to get eaten today." She flinched as another shriek echoed down the winding sandstone paths, a little closer than before, and took off down the left path. "Come on!"

Jace hesitated, but then that thing shrieked again. A layered, unnatural cry, high-pitched and low overlapping in a way that *should not be possible*, and he was sprinting after her before he'd made the conscious decision to do so, his team following on his heels.

The woman set a blistering pace, racing down the path almost too fast for them to keep her in sight, even with fear and adrenaline and armor pushing them on. Perez and Cutter started to fall behind until the sergeant growled, tossed his rifle to Eddings, and threw the irate pilot over his shoulder.

"Goddamn, woman," he gasped. "Would it kill you to cut back on the desserts?"

"Right, blame chocolate and not the *hundreds of pounds* of armor I'm wearing," she grunted, each bounding stride slamming her down onto his shoulder.

"I've got her when you're tapped out," Eddings called out, his rifle in hand and Perez's on his back.

Sweat burned his eyes, skin chaffed, and a stitch burrowed into his side, but Jace managed to keep the strange woman in sight and his team at his back. Barely. Both Perez and Chen were flagging. At a particularly narrow choke point, Jace made a snap decision.

"Thomas, hang back. Slow it down if you can."

"Bad idea," the golden-eyed woman warned in a singsong. She didn't even sound out of breath.

Jace ignored her and shot Thomas a stern glance. "Don't be stupid."

White teeth flashed in a broad grin. "Copy no heroics."

Their recon Marine slid to a stop, and they quickly left him behind. Jace marked their path on his HUD as they raced through several more

winding canyons. Achingly blue sky a narrow ribbon above, smooth rock and sandy footing below, with great desert vultures riding the thermals and small lizards fleeing into tiny crevasses in the rockface. Thomas' icon fell further and further behind, unmoving and still.

"Almost in sight, just a little closer," he murmured, voice rock steady. Then there was a terrifying shriek, so loud it whited out the comms, and their unflappable scout's iron calm shattered. *"Oh* fuck*!"*

Gunfire erupted, rapid-fire and barely disciplined. The larger blast of a grenade echoed off the rocks, and then his icon was on the move again. *Fast*.

"Thomas, status!" Jace barked.

"Fucked if I can't shake this thing."

"What the hell is it?"

"Monster," Thomas panted, the harsh bite of true fear sharpening his tone. "Big *monster."* Another shriek, a muffled curse. "*Bullets just pissed it off."*

Jace tapped into his HUD, but he only caught a glimpse of something hideously oversized, with too many claws and too many teeth. Bony face and flowing spines and leathery hide, horrifyingly bipedal and utterly unnatural. A genetic monstrosity that should never have been created.

"Not a monster, a broken beast." The woman glanced over her shoulder as she ran, golden eyes wide with worry. "My partner's trying to bait it, but it's not biting. It's got his scent."

A shadow flowed across the ground in Thomas' HUD, nothing more than another one of the great desert vultures gliding overhead. No sign of anyone out there but one desperately sprinting Marine and the monster chasing him.

Ahead of him, the woman stumbled to a halt. "Tell him to go right at the next branch!"

"HUD marker says left," Jace snapped at her, but her eyes were unfocused and she didn't seem to see him.

"Right! Go right!" she shouted over the comms. "My partner says you can climb out. *Trust* us!"

Eddings looked two seconds away from sprinting back to help his friend, probably would've already if Perez hadn't been blocking his path, Cutter still hanging over one shoulder. Chen hunched her shoulders and stared into the middle distance, disassociating herself from the impending

loss. Cold iced down Jace's spine, that branching path looming ever closer in Thomas' HUD. He glared into the woman's strange eyes, saw nothing but earnest confidence—and made a choice.

"Go right."

"Going right," Thomas replied.

Silence fell, and Jace watched through his HUD as Thomas tried to save himself. Tension gripped him in bloody claws, past choices and the ghost of his failures weighing down his shoulders. At an alarming *creak*, he relaxed his grip on his rifle before he warped it.

Thomas sprinted right, rounding the sharp bend. Sure enough, the sandstone canyon ahead wasn't sheer—it was sloped and jagged. A shadow loomed over the Marine, and he jumped with every bit of strength gifted by power armor, slamming into the wall nearly a third of the way up. The monster shrieked, claws flashing in the shimmering sunlight, and metal *squealed*. Thomas grunted, but he propelled himself up the sloped sandstone wall with a quickness, armored hands and boots finding plenty of places to grip.

Leaving the monster trapped below, shrieking in frustrated rage.

"Follow the top of the canyon until it veers east, then slide down into the next one," the woman said firmly, eyes snapping back into focus. "It'll take you straight toward us. My partner will give the broken beast something else to think about."

With uncanny timing, a feline roar that sounded more tiger than desert-appropriate mountain lion rumbled in the distance.

"Is your partner a big kitty?" Perez asked mockingly, still struggling to catch his breath, still holding Cutter in an unwavering grip.

Jace shot him a quelling glance, but a terrifying scream of pure rage echoed through the canyons, silencing his irrepressible sergeant far more effectively. Ignoring the pulse of dread, he motioned for Perez to switch out with Eddings, but the other Ranger didn't loosen his hold on the gray-faced pilot. Ready to run, ready to carry her as far as needed, tension and adrenaline and unreasoning fear holding them all poised and ready. But gradually, the shrieks grew quieter, the broken beast going the wrong way in the twisting canyons.

"It took the bait," the woman said cheerfully, but her hands clenched tight, and her voice dropped into a whisper only Jace was close enough to hear. "Be careful, Tally."

“Thank *fuck*,” Cutter breathed and smacked Perez’s arm. “Thanks for the ride, but you can let go now, hero.”

“I’ll give you a ride anytime, sweetheart,” he shot back with a leering grin, but there was relief in his voice as he eased the slender pilot to the ground.

Cutter flipped him off and paced in a limping circle, flexing her leg every other step as Eddings dug into his dwindling medical supplies for a mild pain reliever. A few moments later, Thomas bounded into sight. Deep claw marks scored his armored back, and though his expression was tightly controlled, sweat and fear marked his face.

He nodded once at Jace and turned to face their rescuer. “Thanks for the assist…?”

“Sabine Andover. I go by Saber. And you’re welcome, Thomas.” Saber grinned and tapped the side of her helmet. “I already know all your names.”

“You’ve been listening in on our comms.” Jace scowled. “You *were* stalking us.”

“Nope,” she said with that unnerving cheer. “That broken beast is stalking *you*, Captain Jace Benning. We’re stalking *it*. Big difference.”

He took a stomping step closer to her. “Is this some kind of game to you?”

“It’s all fun and games until someone gets eaten,” she said in a singsong, strange eyes catching the sunlight and a smile playing on her lips.

Perez leaned against the sandstone with a tired huff, eyes closed as he sucked in breath after deep breath. “Are we sure she’s sane?”

“Are any of us?” Eddings asked with genuine interest.

“No, but my crazy is harmless and charming. Hers is…weird.”

Cutter paused in her pacing and raised her brows. “Perez, I promise you are neither of those things.”

“Oh, come on.” Perez smirked. “You think I’m a little charming.”

“Yeah, like a frog,” Chen mumbled as she examined one of her KA-BARs, dark eyes gleaming with momentary humor.

Jace nearly smiled, but Saber stiffened, tension flooding her slender frame. Her eyes unfocused, hands flexing, weight shifting.

And then the broken beast shrieked, layered voices echoing off the sandstone. Another shriek, closer still.

“It caught your scent trail again,” Saber said softly. “Tally’s trying to stop it.”

Her eyes went vague, lips moving soundlessly. Jace studied her with a deepening frown. Subvocalizing or talking to herself?

"Still not picking up any transmissions?" he quietly asked Chen.

A slow shake of her head as she slid her blade back into its sheath and uncoiled from her crouch. Ready to run again.

Without taking his gaze off Saber, Thomas eased closer to Eddings and dropped his voice low. "Think she's actually cracked?"

"We're all mad here," Saber said with a bright laugh edged in cynicism. Her laughter abruptly cut off, head tilting as she talked to someone who didn't exist. "The sandpits? You sure? Crossing those in daylight is a bit reckless even for us."

Eddings sighed. "Yup, she's cracked."

Jace wasn't as certain. She'd tensed *before* they'd heard the monster.

"It's possible she's transmitting on a restricted freq."

"You could say that," Saber said, that mischievous grin making a brief reappearance. Those golden eyes caught the light again, shone just a little brighter as she abruptly sobered. "There's a path we can take to try to shake it, but it's dangerous."

"Dangerous for you too?" Thomas asked.

Saber swallowed hard and nodded.

"You said it has *our* scent, not yours. So why risk it?" Jace narrowed his eyes. "Why are you helping us?"

She shrugged, but her shoulders were too stiff to pull off casual. "We saved you once already today. What's one more time?"

"You mean the lizard army?" Perez took his rifle back and maglocked Eddings' rifle to his back. "Still don't see any claws on that armor, girl."

She rolled her eyes and saluted him with both middle fingers.

Jace ignored the banter, frustration sharpening his question into a demand. "Why? Why help us?"

Everyone flinched as that chilling shriek rang out again.

"We're running out of time," she said, shifting her weight again. "Tally can't distract it forever."

"I don't give a shit," Jace snapped. "Either explain, or we go our own way."

Saber growled with matching frustration and marched into his personal space like she was going to war. Jace prepared for a blistering tirade or

more useless insanity, but she paused, drew in a deep breath, let it out slowly, as if striving for the patience to not strangle him through his armor.

Something in her eyes softened.

“Because we saw you help those refugees,” she said with quiet intensity. “You lost two of your own doing it, and you walked away when they wouldn’t let you join them…even though you saved them.”

Sadness. It was sadness in her eyes.

Jace tightened his jaw, memories of the battle flashing through his mind. Bullets and blood and screaming. Peters and Johnson lying still after it was over. Civilians who backed away even as they thanked him and what was left of his team. He sighed and let the bitterness go.

“They were scared,” he told her. “Everything’s going to hell, and they didn’t know if they could trust us. I don’t hold it against them.”

“Most would.” She smiled, but her eyes became guarded again, cheerful mask firmly in place. “That group contained Mavenwood employees. My partner and I are company scouts, sent to guide them in.”

“You’re not military,” Jace said without hesitation.

“No, Mavenwood is…an independent contractor. We wanted to go back out and help you, but we were tasked with tracking the broken beast instead. It was luck that our paths crossed again.”

“Yeah, bad luck,” Eddings muttered as he hauled a grumbling Cutter over his shoulder.

“One word about my weight and I will nut-punch you.”

“Unlike Perez, I’m not an idiot.” The corpsman balanced her carefully and looked to Jace. “What’s the play, sir?”

Jace let out a slow breath and made another choice. “Lead the way, Saber.”

In short order, she’d guided them to the edge of the sandstone canyons. A wide sandy plain stretched out before them. No cover, no hills, just miles of flat desert studded with the occasional cactus or sagebrush. Late afternoon sunlight beat down from the washed-out blue sky, drenching the land in golden heat. In the distance, rocky buttes gathered like orange clouds on the horizon.

Saber paused in the shadows, visibly steeling herself before moving into the open. Her hesitation did *not* fill Jace with confidence in his leadership decisions.

“Remember,” she quietly ordered, “step softly, be quiet, and if I tell you to freeze, you freeze like all our lives depend on it.”

With one last steadying breath and what sounded suspiciously like “Fuck my life,” the small scout crept out onto the shifting sands. Jace followed, then Chen, Eddings carrying Cutter, Thomas, and Perez on rearguard.

It was like walking into an oven. Heat shimmered in the air, and after a single glance at his HUD’s air-temperature reading, Jace avoided looking at it. Some things he was better off not knowing.

It was harder to keep his spine from locking up. They were exposed, and the open desert was unnaturally silent and still. Not even the great desert vultures surfed the thermals overhead. He was inclined to blame it on the near-rhythmic shrieks of the monster working its way through the canyons, but Saber’s palpable fear and the crawling skin on the back of his neck said otherwise.

Something very bad lived out here.

Minutes crawled past, tension winding his muscles tighter and tighter. The hazy rocky buttes soon became distinct, orange and tan sandstone monoliths thrusting up into the sky. Shelter and shade beckoning them on, instinct urging them to abandon caution and run, but Saber held them to a steady stride.

Jace covertly studied her as they moved, trying to get a better read on her. She was more graceful than Chen, stealthier than Thomas, possibly crazier than Perez, and weaponized cheerfulness like it was a survival trait. Not military, but she carried herself like a soldier who’d seen battle. Human, but with eyes that were distinctly *other*. Competent one moment, batshit crazy the next. Jace shook his head and gave up trying to understand her.

His gut said she was genuine in her desire to help them. That would have to be good enough.

They were deep within the sands when Saber cried out in pain, doubling over with her arms wrapped around her middle. Before he could reach her, she lurched upright, head snapping around to the west. Her lips moved soundlessly, one hand reaching out, terror and agony etched into her elfin face.

Eyes squeezed shut, knees buckled—and Jace caught her.

“*Saber*,” he whispered urgently, but there was no response.

Even in her armor, she was too light, body limp and expression slack, as if she wasn't even there anymore. He adjusted his grip, prepared to sling her over his shoulder, when her eyes snapped open, and she pulled away from his support.

"I'm fine," she gasped, alarmingly pale and swaying. "Gave too much to Tally."

Jace bit back the urge to ask if Tally and Saber were the same person and reluctantly let her go.

"Uh, why the *fuck* is the ground moving?" Cutter demanded, tightly controlled panic raising her voice half an octave.

Eddings had set her down when the pace had proven within her capabilities, but she still leaned on the corpsman for support. Jace caught something out of the corner of his eye, something massive and gray and segmented that breached the surface like a monster from the depths and vanished just as quickly. Perez snapped his rifle toward the rippling sand, but Saber shook her head sharply.

"*Don't* shoot! You'll make it angry." She drew in a shaking breath as the ground trembled beneath their boots, one fist raised high. "Just. Don't. Move."

Slowly, the rumbling ceased, but Saber didn't drop her hand, sharp eyes scanning, head tilted in that odd way of hers. A bloodthirsty grin spread across her pale face, and in the next instant, a long, wailing shriek cut through the thick silence. The monster had found its way out of the canyons, and golden sand sprayed into the air as whatever lived beneath raced to meet it.

"Time to run," she gasped, launching herself into a flat-out sprint that made up for lack of steadiness with sheer speed.

This time, Thomas tossed his rifle to Eddings and slung Cutter over his shoulder. Sand flew beneath their boots, and layered shrieks and guttural roars chased them up the subtle slope and onto firmer ground. As they ran past the first of the towering buttes, silence fell, and for half a heartbeat, Jace allowed himself to feel hope. Then the monster loosed a triumphant cry.

"Well…that sucks."

"So much for that plan."

"Fuck…that thing…sideways…"

“Less complaining, more running,” Saber snapped, strides abruptly smoothing out as the color returned to her face.

Jace surged up beside her. “Plan?”

“Winging it.” Saber looked wildly side to side as they raced between jutting rocks and spiky cactus. “Tally hasn’t caught up yet, and I don’t know this area well.”

They rounded a wider butte, bands of reds and oranges swirling up to the sky as they lost sight of the deadly sands. Sweat rolled down Jace’s face and every breath burned like fire, but he dropped back to Thomas when he flagged and hauled Cutter over his shoulder. Rocky outcrops merged into winding rocky walls, another branch of the same sandstone canyons to lose themselves in.

The monster followed them in. It had caught up fast, too fast, and they barely kept ahead of it.

Every time it shrieked, they put on a burst of speed, an uncontrollable reaction to the horror gaining on them with every ragged breath. Vision blurring, heat or fatigue or both, the sour tang of fear-laced sweat overwhelming the sweet sage. Jace shook his head sharply, trying to focus past the emotion, trying to lean on the training that had seen him through so many battles. But it wasn’t working. He couldn’t compartmentalize it, couldn’t rationalize it away, couldn’t *ignore* it.

He darted a glance at his team—every last one a combat veteran—and saw that same fear reflected in panicked eyes, pale faces, and hunched shoulders. It wasn’t just him, it was *all* of them.

Cold clarity cut through the churning fear.

This isn’t right.

“Why the hell are we so afraid?” he snarled at Saber.

“I don’t—” The broken beast shrieked, fear pulsed, and she spun toward Jace. “Genetically engineered, broken, *wrong*! Its voice! It’s using its voice!”

Jace stared at her for a heartbeat before he understood. Quickly, he used his HUD to mute the affected frequencies. He couldn’t afford to filter them out completely. Too great a spread with that deeper reverberation. When the creature shrieked again, it was almost a flat sound in his ears. More importantly…he wasn’t unreasonably afraid.

No pulse of fear, no panic urging him to run, run, *run*. Just healthy fear and sharp adrenaline. A savage grin broke free, and he pushed the frequency

muting to everyone else.

“I’ll help suppress your fear, Tally,” Saber murmured to her imaginary partner as they sprinted toward a branching path. “Eeny, meenie, miny, fuck it.”

The small scout dashed right, veered around a tight turn, and cursed viciously.

Dread twisted through Jace’s gut. They had maybe two hundred meters of increasingly narrow canyon ahead of them before it terminated in a sheer cliff.

A dead end.

His steps slowed, but another flattened shriek punched him in the chest. It was too close, too late to go back, only time to press forward as far as they could go. Rocky walls closed in, the sky constricted to a blue ribbon, and a shadow fell over them. Gunfire erupted as their rearguard did his job, helmets automatically dampening the sharp rattle.

Cutter jerked on his shoulder and twisted. “Perez!”

“Move, move, move!” Thomas barked, shoving a paralyzed Chen forward before he spun around and added his rifle to their defense.

The two men leapfrogged forward, covering the rear and each other, as Saber led the way toward the rear of the box canyon. One wall bulged out, forcing her to turn sideways to squeeze through. Armor scraped sandstone, but she doggedly forced her way past the obstruction. The canyon widened again, a rounded pocket more than large enough for all of them.

She urgently gestured them forward. “It’s too big to get back here!”

One by one they pushed through, though Jace nearly got stuck and then had to use considerable force to pull Thomas through the gap.

Leaving only Perez on the other side.

“Frag out!” the sergeant bellowed.

The concussive blast of a grenade echoed off the stone, rattled their armor, and then Perez slid through, dark eyes hard and focused. The broken beast let out a shrieking wail as it reached the narrowest point and couldn’t get through. It jammed a leathery arm into the gap and swiped viciously, sunlight shining off bone-white claws. Perez threw himself into a desperate roll, narrowly avoiding decapitation but ending up flat on his back. It swiped again as the Ranger pushed backward with his legs, rifle raised and firing until Thomas grabbed the carry strap on the back of his armor and dragged him out of reach.

Jace, Chen, and Cutter kept firing, but with little success. Even at distressingly close range, there was no blood. Their bullets weren't penetrating deep enough, and there wasn't enough of the monster visible to do a good scan for weak spots.

"What the hell is that thing?" Thomas demanded as he pulled Perez to his feet.

"Your mom," Perez joked, though there was no amusement in his grim expression.

"A demon," whispered Chen, barely audible even over comms.

Thomas swapped out a spent mag for a fresh one. "Not. Helpful."

Eddings stood calmly in the center, rifle tight to his shoulder, blue eyes distant, calm, almost peaceful. Finger gently resting on the trigger, he waited until the beast tried to force its misshapen head through the gap. Aimed for its eyes.

Crack!

And missed.

He was their best shot, but those vulnerable eyes were deep-set and well protected by the thick bony mask, and the bullet ricocheted. Jace called a cease-fire to conserve what was left of their ammo.

"At least it can't get through," Cutter mumbled, keeping most of her weight on her good leg as she stared at the monster in horrified fascination.

"Yeah, but we can't get out," Thomas said quietly.

He was right. No way forward, the walls too sheer to climb, even with power armor. The broken beast couldn't get to them, but they were *trapped*. Low on food, low on water, and dangerously exhausted. Worse, the monster showed no sign of losing interest, clawing at the soft sandstone, chips flying with every powerful swipe.

"Stalemate," Chen whispered.

"Any ideas, crazy chick?" Perez glared at Saber, who was staring up at the sky, eyes vague and expression slack. He swore under his breath. "She picked a fine time to go crazier on us."

Cutter limped toward the western rockface and its deep pool of shade. "What about grenades?"

Thomas gestured to the tight confines. "If we want to kill ourselves along with it."

"*Fuck*."

Perez shrugged at her, expression bleak. "Yeah, that about sums it up."

“Not what I meant,” Cutter breathed as she regained her balance. She’d tried to place her hand against the wall and misjudged the distance. “There’s a vertical crack over here. Goes all the way to the top.”

Jace was at her side in a heartbeat, craning his head back to the deepening blue sky. She was right. A chimney, perfectly blended into the sandstone by a trick of positioning and shadows. He eyed the width of the crack and felt the first sweet whisper of relief. Even with power armor it would be challenging, but doable.

“Good job, Cutter.”

“Yay me.” Cutter, gray-faced with exhaustion and pain, sagged against the sandstone wall. “There’s no way I’m getting up there with this stupid leg, but I can hold its attention while you escape.” She gave them all a wan grin and snapped out one of her blades. “You know us fighter pilots. Very shiny.”

“Stupid bitch!” Perez stalked over to her and thunked his helmet against hers so he could snarl directly in her face. “Not. Leaving. You.”

Eddings knelt next to her, checking over her leg, kind blue eyes bright as steel. “Me neither.”

Chen eyed the chimney, then deliberately ran her gaze down her tiny frame with a dark laugh. “I’m too short to make that work. I’m as stuck as you.”

Jaw tight and mind racing, Jace stared up at their potential salvation and ignored the monster raging at his back. There had to be a way to make it work, but they’d lost so much of their gear with their ground vehicle. Slowly, an idea formed. He probably wouldn’t survive it, but the others would. It would have to be enough.

He turned back to his team, his friends, resolve bringing a measure of peace. He just wished he’d been able to find them a safe place to ride out the storm before he had to go.

“I can draw it off—”

“Tally, you’re brilliant!” Joy suffused Saber’s elfin face and she latched onto Jace’s arm with almost manic intensity. “We can do it. We can kill it!”

“With what, little girl?” Perez snapped, helpless rage burning in his dark eyes.

“Grenades. All of them.”

“Did you miss the part where that’ll kill us too?” Jace gently pulled his arm from her grip. “I appreciate what you tried to do for us, but if you can make it up that chimney, recommend you go.”

Saber waved her arms dramatically, practically dancing in place. “No, I mean, yes, I can make it up the chimney, that’s the whole point! Give me your grenades, all I can carry. Tally and I can lure it away and blow it to pieces.”

Jace stared at her determined expression, not a trace of mischief or cheerfulness remaining in her bright gold eyes. Then he looked at her lightweight scout armor. Meant for speed, for *stealth*, not fighting. She didn’t even carry any *weapons* for fuck’s sake.

“Saber, no—”

“It’s our mission, it’s why we’re out here. To track it, lead it away from our home, kill it if we can.” Saber grabbed his arm again and glared up at him. “*Let us do our job*.”

It would be so easy to let her do just that. Let her take the risk, let her maybe die in the doing. Stay with his team. Survive.

But he had to hold on to something more than just survival.

Or what was the fucking point?

So he adjusted his plan, made a decision, a *choice*.

“Not alone.”

“I’m never alone. Tally’s always with me.” Her golden eyes held his, fear and courage shining in their depths. “We could use a distraction, though.”

A crooked, stiff grin pulled at his mouth. “You mean bait.”

Thomas stepped forward. “I volunteer as tribute, boss.”

“Not this time.” Jace clapped him on the shoulder, then turned to Perez and dropped his voice low. “If I don’t make it back, you’re it, brother. Take care of them.”

Jace ghosted down the narrow canyon, gunfire and the frustrated shrieks of the monster before him, Saber and her imaginary partner somewhere behind him. Rifle maglocked to his back to keep his hands free for what came next. Breath steady, salty sweat and dusty desert flavoring every inhale, pulse pounding in his ears.

Dark, leathery hide and lashing tail came into sight. He didn’t need to tell his team he crept close, didn’t need to tell them to adjust their fire high.

They saw him on their HUDs and reacted accordingly. Keeping it distracted so he could get in danger close.

Step.

A snap of his wrist and his blade slid free, the faint grate of metal lost beneath the rattle of gunfire.

Step.

The monster's hide was more Kevlar than leather, highly resistant to bullets.

Step.

Probably resistant to slashing.

One last step.

Jace ducked the tail, crouched low, blade ready—and punched it straight into the thick tendon at the back of its right leg. Dark blood sprayed and it roared in pain, whipping around with liquid speed.

Ice rushed down his spine as he got his first clear look at the broken beast.

Chen had the right of it.

It wasn't a monster.

It was a demon.

Over twice his height, disproportionately long limbs and a longer tail, odd blue and green patches on dark leathery hide, and eyes that were *far* too intelligent. He was tempted to shoot one and see how bullet-resistant *that* was, but Eddings had already proved they were too protected by that bony mask.

"Come and get me," Jace growled up at the broken beast, fear fading.

If it was his time to die, he knew who was waiting for him on the other side.

He also wasn't suicidal.

Jace spun around and ran for his life, for his team, for *her*, because she'd be so disappointed in him if he didn't do everything in his power to stay alive. It gave chase, and he pushed his tired body into a desperate sprint, orange sandstone blurring to either side of him. He was long past the point of fatigue and running on pure adrenaline, but he found he had another burst of speed in him when those wicked claws came within inches of his spine.

Fast, so damn fast. If he hadn't damaged its tendon, he'd already be dead.

Jace sprinted down one canyon then the next, blindly following Saber's directions over the comms, luring the broken beast where she wanted it. He turned left, a hot wind gusting down the narrow path, kicking up almost as much sand as his armored boots. The canyon abruptly straightened out, no twists or turns to give him an advantage. He flashed past the point where Saber had planted grenades and the two shaped charges Perez had produced from who the fuck knew where, all connected by a timer.

And then he wasn't fast enough.

The monster's shadow fell over him. He dove into a forward roll. Too slow. Bone-white claws cut through his armor like it wasn't even there, hot liquid flowing down his side as he scrambled to his feet and stabbed his blade into its gut. Ripped it out. Stabbed again. Ducked as claws swiped through the air where his head had been half a breath ago.

Convinced he was going to die, stubbornly fighting to live.

Snarling, he ripped his blade out again. As dark blood gushed onto leathery hide, a bony leg lashed out and caught him square in the chest, sending him flying. His back slammed into the rocks, and the impact knocked the breath from his lungs and the sense from his head. Ears ringing, world skewed, and a bloody monster shrieking from far too close for comfort.

"*Jace!*"

Memory blurred with reality, and for an instant, he heard *her* voice again.

But his wife had been a gentle soul.

And there was nothing gentle about Saber as she leaped from the top of the canyon, armored hands extended, roaring like a lion.

The small scout hit the broken beast, hands latching on, dragging down the hide, blood spraying, monster screaming. She landed in a nimble crouch next to him, grabbed his arm and tugged frantically.

"We're too close!"

Shocky from pain and blood loss, he wasted one precious moment staring at her hands and the bloody metal blades extending beyond each finger. "Huh. You do have claws."

In his ear, Thomas snapped out the countdown. Four seconds left. Saber desperately pulled on his arm. Three seconds. Jace shook off the pain, leaned into the adrenaline, and *ran*. Two seconds. A winged shadow flowed

past them, so close overhead Jace heard its feathers rustling in the hot wind. One. The monster didn't immediately give chase, fatally distracted by the great desert bird.

BOOM!

This time, the concussive blast didn't just rattle his armor, it rattled his damn *bones*. Both Jace and Saber were knocked off their feet. Sandstone walls fractured, rocks tumbled down, and Jace threw himself over the smaller woman, covering the back of his battered helmet with one hand. Small rocks pinged off his armored back, larger ones tried to crush him. The rockfall seemed to last forever, but eventually silence fell.

Grunting with effort, Jace stood, shedding rocks like water as he snapped his head to where the monster had stood. Dust hung in the air, but it couldn't obscure the massive rockpile or the crushed body lying beneath.

They'd done it.

He reached out to help Saber up, but she was already on her feet, clear face shield cracked but her smile as brilliant as her eyes. A final rock tumbled down, and her shoulders sagged on a long sigh.

"That was fun, but I think I want to go home now." Her head tilted, eyes shining just a little brighter. "You're all welcome to come with us. I think it's exactly what you've been searching for."

She held out her hand.

After a long moment, Jace took it.

The sun had dipped below the horizon by the time they emerged from the canyons, shards of red light spearing up into the breathtaking orange-and-pink sunset. This time, Saber set an easy pace as they headed northwest, deeper into the desert. A warm wind and the distant yips of coyotes accompanied them, a comfortingly familiar nighttime chorus, but as true night fell, roars echoed across the sky.

Rifles snapped up, and Saber waved them back down. "Easy, boys and girls. We're just relocating our air assets to a different facility. They won't be much use here."

Vast shapes soared past overhead, mere shadows in the starlight. Cutter, limping between Perez and Eddings, let out a low sound full of longing, but the shapes were all wrong for aircraft, too large for birds.

"What the hell…" Jace shook his head and decided it was a problem for tomorrow, when everything didn't hurt. Eddings had treated his wounds

as best he could while he was still in damaged armor, disinfecting and sealing them, but true treatment—and pain meds—would have to wait until they got to…wherever Saber was leading them.

A few hours later, they stumbled to a halt.

"A shack in the desert," Perez deadpanned. "We're saved."

Saber chuckled and opened the wooden door, hinges creaking and barely holding onto the frame. Revealing a second door, thick metal surrounded by duracrete. A brass plaque read MAVENWOOD INDUSTRIES, and a small panel beneath it required both a code and Saber's bare palm before locks released with a quiet hiss. The door slid open.

"An elevator," Thomas murmured.

Saber laughed. "You didn't think we lived up here, did you? With bombs still dropping and monsters roaming?"

As if on cue, a familiar chilling shriek ripped through the night, terror pulsing along with it.

"I thought you killed it," Chen whispered, voice shaking as she backed toward the elevator.

"We did," Jace said grimly, rifle aimed into the dark.

"Whoever said there was only one?" Saber shook her head and stepped inside. "Well, you coming or what?"

Jace drew in a deep breath of desert air and followed her. "Better than staying out here with *that*."

Chen slid inside on his heels, a KA-BAR in one hand like a safety blanket, then the rest filed in. Perez couldn't resist being an ass as the door slid shut, enclosing them in soft light and gleaming steel walls.

"Your 'partner' not coming with us?"

Saber smiled, unconcerned by his doubt or the monster roaming the sands. "She'll ride down next."

"There's plenty of room," Perez said dryly, spreading his arms wide as the elevator dropped down and down.

"Not for her." A soft *ding* announced their arrival, and the door slid open. Saber led them out and gestured. "Will this do?"

Jace stumbled, wide eyes taking in the expansive underground facility. No, *city*, complete with buildings and homes and parks. Rows of solar lights ran across the cavern ceiling high overhead to mimic sunlight, though they were dimmed to starlight at this time of night. Despite the late hour, people still wandered the streets, moving with that casual bearing that only came

from true safety. There were *children* laughing somewhere nearby. A faint nicker drew his gaze past neat gardens to green fields dotted with sleepy livestock.

With shaking hands, he pulled off his helmet, breathed air that wasn't dry and hot and dusty. It was warm, a touch humid, and smelled of green growing things. His team murmured at his back, just as stunned but with growing hope in their voices.

"Well?" Saber demanded impatiently, suppressed amusement in her golden eyes.

Jace gave her a slow smile, nothing stiff in the expression this time. "Yeah, I think we can make this work."

She smiles impishly. "Good, because my partner and I can't defend this place alone. With our air assets relocated, we'll need all the help we can get."

The elevator dinged again, the door slid open, and someone stepped out. Chen's eyes got almost comically big as she stared over Jace's shoulder. A faint rumbling growl of amusement accompanied the pad of large paws and the rustle of…feathers?

Slowly, Jace turned around and stared up into golden eyes identical to Saber's, her partner very much real and very much not human. His battered helmet slipped from numb fingers. He dragged his stunned gaze over feathers and fur, claws and beak, aware that his mouth was hanging open but too shocked to do anything about it.

"I guess she's not crazy," Perez mumbled.

"No more than any of you," Saber said brightly as she rested a hand on her partner's furry shoulder. "Tally says hello."

Jace stared at the intelligence in those eyes, stared at dappled wings tucked tightly against sandy fur, remembered the shadow that had distracted the monster right when they needed it most. He drew in a deep breath and dipped his head in a respectful nod.

"Thanks for the save, Tally."

The creature winked and dropped her beak open in what looked like a smile.

"She says you're welcome." Saber tilted her head as that mischievous grin made a reappearance. "I wonder if any of you are bond capable?"

Jace debated asking what the hell that meant and then decided that was a problem for tomorrow, too. As childish laughter rang out across the

underground city, he looked at his team. Perez with one arm supporting Cutter, Thomas and Eddings standing shoulder to shoulder, Chen’s dark eyes bright with wonder.

Relief and hope tangled up in his battered soul and he grinned with his whole damn face. He’d done it. He’d found them safety and security, found them someplace survivable. More than that.

He’d found them someplace they could *live*.

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End Run

Sarah A. Hoyt

I was going to die. And this was not how I'd thought my story would end, on my back, between two stones, with my back broken and a gaping wound on my side.

Somewhere, where I couldn't see it, the thing that had done the damage was roaring. And over me the two people who'd hired me for the job argued in a weird language with a surplus of clicks and whistles.

It was a forsaken planet at the end of nowhere, with a thin atmosphere. Nothing grew. Nothing. Just arid sand, and a black beetle of a building, shiny black and impenetrable, squatting in the middle of nowhere, guarded by heavily armed mercenaries and monsters.

I was only here because they'd evoked the name of the one woman I could never fully leave behind. This was not how any of this was supposed to go.

Of all the dead-end bars in the universe, did they have to come into mine? And having come into mine, did they have to head straight for mine like heat-seeking missiles to the nearest fission plant?

It's not that I'm a shrinking violet. I'd been hired by the best in my time. But at fifty-five, my time was good and past, and I was retired. Or committing slow suicide by shots of nirvana, this green liquor from a place called Widow's Tears which, that I know of, produces nothing else that anyone would want to buy. But they sold nirvana by the barrelful, and it was available—at a cost—everywhere, even in this dead-end bar in Fundosaco.

Fundosaco was the place you ended up when you ran out of places to run. I'd washed up on its shores three years ago when I'd given up on the merc thing. Too old, too tired, too out of damns to give. So I'd ended up in Fundosaco, a not-unearth-like moon of a gas giant. This was a solar system of no account and no name, nominally a protectorate of Madrasta, a world that couldn't even protect its inhabitants.

Rumor had it that the scum of the Earth ended their lives here, living in one of the villas on the hillsides of this place with mild climate and not much else: deposed dictators, Ufraglian hit men, traffickers of various substances, all retired here to enjoy their last fifty years or so. And then there were the others: spaceship captains that had ruined themselves with oblivion or nirvana; call girls who were no longer called; petty thieves… and me. It's not that I could not have afforded the big villa. It's that it seemed an excess for a slow and comfortable suicide. I didn't want to leap headlong into death, but neither did I need perfumed sheets and ornate rooms to slide gently into that bourn from which no traveler returns.

So I'd bought a little place in the valley. The valley was the place the less-moneyed class of scum retired. You could buy a retrofitted retired container for almost nothing and have all the necessary amenities of daily life—clean water, warmth or cold in season, enough food—and this bar, Pandora's Box, served all the nirvana I could want for…well, a lot of money, but I had it.

And there I was, sitting at the little table, a remolded part of an interstellar shipping container, when the two of them walked in. They stuck out in the crowd of dingy, washed-out tugs and whores like a priest at a brothel. Both tall, and both fair skinned, which was already a rarity in Madrastan dependences. They had about them that look of not ever having gone without a proper hot shower and silk underwear, if you know what I mean and I believe you do. The taller one was maybe two or three inches over six feet, with hair so pale no one would be able to tell as he aged. Though that would be many years in the future. More because his kind had all the anti-agiatics. He had the sort of features that speak of generations of careful breeding, eyes such a pale grey they might as well be silver, and a body that looked like he'd had just the right kind of exercise growing up. His shoulders were broad and his military bearing bespoke the best academies of some empire or principality. You could have used his nose for a ruler to set the universe straight. His companion was maybe a couple of inches shorter and built on slighter lines. Not to say he looked like a weakling, but it was obvious the frame underlying the muscle was slighter. There was something off about the way he walked, but I couldn't tell what. He was a redhead with a lot of hair, though it had been braided and pinned up, so only a few tendrils escaped. His eyes were feral and wild, and though

the body was definitely male, his face could have graced a good-looking woman.

But more than their looks, what made them stick out was the gear. Each of them wore one of those expensive armored suits, in what looked like blue fabric but was really some nano-infused high-tech material that could protect you from anything explosive. My bosses used to refer to them as *never-get-throughs*. If you wore a never-get-through, you were safe from most zapper bolts and projectiles, though paradoxically not knives and claws. Something to do with the material not hardening to things slowly enough. Perhaps there was heat or something that triggered the protection. Anyway, it left you invulnerable to distant threats and hidden marksmen, in itself a boon to someone who lived by violence and cunning. I'd one of my own, stashed in my home, because you never knew. But I surely didn't wear it in public.

They did and after casting around the bar the kind of look that says "oh, gawd, what a dump," they fixated on me. The shorter one smiled, the taller one looked purposeful, as they sailed, invincible, past tables with what can be termed collapsed humans towards me.

Of course.

The taller one stopped, standing very straight, shoulders back. The shorter one smiled and hunched a shoulder, pulled a chair out across from me and dropped into it. "Senhor Lopes?" the tall one spoke, with the unmistakable accents of Britannia on High in his speech. "We came to speak to you."

And the shorter one smiled with his whole face and said, "We need your help."

I pulled the glass of dark pink nirvana toward me and took a sip of the liquor, savoring the taste close to cinnamon and sugar with an edge of burning. "I don't know who you are or what you want with me, gentlemen, but I'm retired."

"Nonsense," the man standing said, his companion looking up at him with a look of perfect confidence in estimation.

I took another sip and decided to ignore him. He pulled the chair back and sat across from me, one hand on the back of his companion's chair, who kept looking at him as though waiting for him to pull some amazing trick, or some miracle that would convince me.

“Senhor Lopes, we need your help. It is a case of great urgency.” A hesitation, which I didn’t expect from that haughty look, the disdainful gaze. “There are children in suffering and danger.” His companion touched his hand and he added, “And their mothers.” Then looking down at his companion, he said, as if for the sake of completeness, “Who are children themselves, mind you, Brund.”

Then they both looked intently at me. Look, my name is Lopes and some professor I did a job for once told me that came from *lupus*, wolf in Latin. He then kindly informed me that the word was also used for prostitution. A brothel was *lupanar*. So my line is infamous and old and goes all the way to Rome in old Earth, which—according to Earth’s time—was some twenty-six centuries ago. But if you count that the Schrödinger ship carrying the original colonizers of Madrasta went back in time almost five thousand years, my family line has kept its proud, ignoble reputation for over seven thousand years. If these gentle creatures thought I was about to go weak at the knees at the idea of mothers and children held captive, they didn’t know much about my childhood in the worst slum in Madrasta, which most of the universe considered a slum with an orbit and its own sun. The mothers and the children would survive. Or at least those worth spit would. I had. And some of my playfellows in the muck of those streets had risen very high indeed.

It was perhaps because the thought of playfellows rising high brought with it the thought of Mariana Alves that I thought I’d imagined what the redhead said, and had to actually meet his eyes, see the expectation. He looked like he’d said something, so I had to ask. “Pardon?”

“Mariana Alves told us you’d do it,” he said. Then paused a beat and said something that made my mouth go dry. “She says she’s waiting for you.”

“She—” She wasn’t waiting for me unless she had lost her mind. Mariana and I had grown together. When she was maybe all of twelve, a group of outworlders had tried to abduct her. This was not unusual for exceptionally beautiful children, male and female. We never knew what happened to them, but there were rumors. And even if most of us wanted to get away from Madrasta and the decaying streets of Santa Margarida, we didn’t want to get away that way. Coming across men trying to drag Mariana away—she’d refused the drink that would have drugged her into

going quietly—I fought them hard enough for her to get away. It was the beginning, if not of my career, of my path in life.

And Mariana? At sixteen she married one of the Lords of Crime of Ufraglio but at forty-five I met her again, in New London, in High Britannia, where she made a living as a singer of some renown. In her past was testifying against her husband, and safe conduct and protection from the Queen of Britannia herself. She lived in a mansion we'd have thought the abode of fairies, and she—and she still loved me. But I couldn't stay. It wasn't the money or the manners. I'd made the money and I had the ability to fit in anywhere I wanted to. The problem was that my visit to Britannia was done under the strictest secrecy, under another name—look, these identities are wonderful, except they can always be punctured. So, could I have stayed with her? Sure. But at any minute the royal police investigators would knock on the door. And Mariana didn't deserve for her life to be tarnished with my extensive rap sheet.

I must have made a sound of protest at their Lordships. Because the tall one made a gesture I didn't understand, like pulling an umbrella over the table, and said, "My name is Skip Hayden."

He said it like it should mean something. At my blank look, he pointed at his companion and said, "He is Brundar Mahar." At my further lack of reaction, he put his hands on the table, one holding the other. I noted a scar at his wrist and started. I knew that type of scar. At some point His Lordship had been under fire and a zapper had almost taken his hand off. And he'd waited for medical attention long enough the scar remained. I looked back up at his eyes.

"Senhora Alves," he said, "can promise you that, because the queen herself says you will have her full pardon, personally, for any crimes committed in any territory, and you'll have the liberty of the Star Empire and everything in it."

"Why should I trust you?"

"You really don't have the slightest idea who we are?" the redhead asked.

"Should I know?" I asked. I was tracking the fact that no one in the bar, no one at all, was paying any attention to us or our conversation. Gazes hadn't tracked these very strange visitors as they walked through the bar, and no one seemed to be listening to us. Perhaps they didn't exist? Perhaps I was hallucinating? Nirvana is not known to have that as a symptom, but…

“You don’t read news aggregators at all? Don’t follow current events?” This was Hayden, the tall one.

“Not really, I figure if I die I’ll know it, and I’ve long since stopped caring about what is going on in the world at large.”

He shook his head, not as if denying or even reproving, but to believe me. “Would you believe me if I said I am a cousin of the queen and have discussed this with her?”

I gave a half laugh. “I can fully believe you’re a cousin of the queen of Britannia and talked to her about this, but the queen is the queen. She might smile and say, yes, sure, little cousin, then not do it.”

He took a paper from a pocket on the chest of his suit, which wasn’t even visible until he put his hand in. Yes, a paper. Folded. He put it in front of me. It said her name and then mine. Before mine there was a “to.”

“What, not even a recording? Letters are easy to fake,” I said.

“So are recordings,” the redhead said, and I inclined my head in acknowledgment. It took me a while to open the note. Maybe I really was dreaming. I opened it. It started with, “Tiago, don’t be a shithead.” And you don’t need to know anything else it said. It was a letter only Mariana could have written. If these two knew these things without her say so, they’d read her mind. Or I was hallucinating. And Mariana said the queen would give me a pardon. I gathered myself before I looked up at them. Never show weakness, particularly when capitulating.

“Very well, but first: How come no one can seem to see you, except me? And why are you speaking of these things in public.”

“Oh,” the redhead—Brundar was a very strange name—sighed. “You’d know if you read aggregators. We will explain, but not here.”

“Will you do it?” Hayden asked.

“I’d never dare defy Senhora Alves,” I said. It was weak, but there it was. Full capitulation. I finished my glass of nirvana, noting the wrinkled nose of distaste in the redhead’s face. The expression made him look like my cat—Mariana’s cat—Rags. When I’d stayed with her, he’d become my buddy of naps and walks. The resemblance made me chuckle.

“Those will kill you,” Brundar said.

“Yes, that is the idea,” I said. But I wasn’t sure that was true anyway. If I could have Mariana, if I could live in a place like Britannia, without looking over my shoulder, without—

I stood. “Let’s go.”

We went, out into the brisk night; and again, no one looked at us, no one paid any attention.

“Do you wish to pack?” Hayden asked.

I thought. If I was going to do something that rhymed with my previous life, I needed at least my suit and maybe some of the other tools of the trade. They went with me to my home, walking through the quiet night. No one stopped me, no one asked questions. No one seemed to see them. I was now evolving a hypothesis in which I’d already died and this is what came after.

I packed, nonetheless. I mean, I know where I’m headed in the afterlife. Taking weapons and armor is only sense, right?

Then we walked out again, and… “We’re going away from the spaceport,” I said.

“We just need a place of privacy,” Brundar said.

All right. Were they going to jump me? At this point I was almost more entertained than worried.

And then…and then they took a turn into a blind alley onto which no window looked, and the tall one made a gesture…

I wouldn’t understand it if someone told it to me. I saw it and didn’t believe it. He ripped reality, everything I could see. He made a hole in it. Right in front of him. About the size of a double door. On the other side was a room with black-and-white-checked marble. I knew that room. And I knew the woman smiling at me through it. I would have walked through it if it were the portal to hell. I barely noticed them coming behind me, though I did feel the coldness of the alley in Fundosaco vanishing, so they must have closed the thing. I didn’t look back.

“Mariana?”

She smiled at me, her dark eyes crinkling at the corner. “Tiago. Idiota.” Then she looked at them and said, “He gave you trouble. I should have gone with you.”

“No,” Hayden said. “It would have been dangerous.”

I chuckled at that because what Mariana knew about danger would make his hair curl.

She made dinner for us and we ate sitting on the balcony of her villa, in the warm summer night. She had grapevines trained in the stone parapet around the balcony. And she cooked grilled fish and potatoes and salad, a repast of kings when we were small.

I noticed the noblemen ate the simple food with every appearance of enjoyment and seemed unbothered by the informal place settings. When Mariana brought out cake and chocolates, the redhead sat up, his eyes shining, and his companion said, “Easy Peaseblossom,” and I thought that was strange, but then who was I to judge. Look, I’ve seen so much worse. People make these arrangements to get through life.

I didn’t know the half of it. They told me. With Mariana putting in what had come through the aggregators, what she knew of them.

Where do I start? His Lordship Scipio Africanus Hayden—I’m cutting down on his wealth of names, see? Never saw a point to more than two—did know a thing or two about danger. He did, in fact, know a lot.

He was the hero of a big space battle at seventeen, and lost his father in it. And he was one of those people that—as my mother used to say speaking of me—are loved by the spirits of chaos. He’d become an ambassador, which was one of those jobs high-ups got that were safe and sweet and never hurt them. Only he’d somehow been betrayed by the people who were supposed to sign a treaty, and fallen into a lost colony.

And what lost colony. As they explained I looked at the redhead. “Both?” I said looking at him. “You are male and female both?”

He laughed. “That’s what Skip first said. Yes. Or neither, if you prefer. Our founders thought to make us all alike in that, because they thought it would bring about perfect equality and peace.”

“I take it it didn’t?” I said.

He made a face, then grinned. “Senhor Lopes,” he said. “We’re humans like other humans.”

But I was starting to see the size of the problem. I’d seen children snatched from the streets of Madrasta. Just because they were pretty. And they weren’t exotic. Much less—

You see, true, functional hermaphroditism has long been a goal of the genetic engineers since…well, since ever. But they’d never achieved it. Like every other thing the sex trade paid big for, it could be faked but not done.

“You look male,” I said, softly. He did, except for his lack of facial hair, his much too pretty features, a certain…gracile appearance. And…and the way he moved. The way he walked. It wasn’t effeminate. It wasn’t masculine. It was, however, different.

“Brund,” Hayden said. “Don’t undress.” And I thought he was joking but wasn’t sure.

“The designers thought it would make us…that is, they designed us to be able to do everything even while pregnant, because by being independent we’d be more equal.” He shrugged. He gave his companion? friend? lover? a look. “I wasn’t going to undress.”

“I never know with you,” he said, then turned to me. “It’s all recorded. The medical community is very interested in them.”

I imagined. So would the slavers be. “The kids you talked about and their mothers? Were they kidnapped for the sex trade?”

Brundar made a face. “Probably that too, but no.”

And then came the truly bizarre part. And remember I’d seen them open a portal and cross the stellar distances in one step. Brundar’s people—Ellyans, they called themselves—could do magic. Okay, it wasn’t magic. It was some kind of space-time and reality quantum manipulation, fueled by nanites that were also special designed and hooked into something in their genetics.

“But wait,” I said, “You’re the one I saw open a portal. You’re secretly one of them?”

Hayden laughed. “No. I’m male. From Britannia. But it turns out one of my ancestresses accidentally transported from Elly into a mining colony.” He shrugged. “She did well. Her children did better. There’s Ellyan blood all through Britannian aristocracy.”

I chuckled because I thought it figured, but I said nothing. And then I thought—Oh, yeah. The power to open portals alone…

Look, I’d worked most of my life in the half world, somewhere between right and wrong, somewhere between good and evil. Sure, I broke a lot of laws, but I tried not to commit evil. I guess the preaching of the Benedictines back in my childhood had taken and taken hard. I was more Robin Hood—Mariana had found a book about him when we were little—than a ravening wolf. I’d killed, sure, but most of the jobs I took were to protect the innocent.

Mariana came back to the table, carrying a bottle of Honeydew. Honeydew is a Madrastan wine, golden and sweet. She set glasses down and poured for all four of us. “You see why I told them you’d help? Before Skip fell into Elly, there were people selling Ellyan children. They breed

them. They—the ones that have the power—are enslaved to use it for teleportation, for illusion, for other things. The ones that don't—"

"They find other people who'll pay for," Skip said.

"We found a place they're breeding them and raising them," Brundar said. He drank his wine and made a face, which surprised me, because Honeydew is sweet. But then he said, "Some of them are my sibling's children. I never met them, but they are my parents' grandchildren."

Well, then. "And where are they?" I asked.

They told me. It was a system much like Fundosaco's. Not good for much of anything, and the world was desertlike and—

"But why do you need me if you are both effectively magicians?" I asked. "I take it you used magic, whatever you call it, back there? To make you invisible and have no one see us."

"Yes," Hayden said.

"We call it magic," Brundar said at the same time.

Well, then. That was different. That was family. I understood that. I also understood the plight of those kids, and—

That's the kind of job I did. Mariana was right. "But why do you need me?"

"We need someone that can pilot a hopper," Hayden said. "And we need someone who has access to underground knowledge, who can find us a schematic of the place and tell us what to expect."

"And someone who will fight beside us," Brundar said. "We're not… bad, either of us, but you have more experience than both of us combined. And we can't use our magic there, because there's a…shield over the world. They had someone put a shield so you can't use magic inside the world. They couldn't keep magicians prisoner otherwise. Even untrained ones would figure it out. I don't know what they use after, but they probably link them to something that only allows them power for what their owners want. I've heard of…things that will kill you if you use it wrong."

I looked at Mariana. She was sure I'd take the job. She was sure I was Robin Hood. Had I ever fallen from the path? A job or two had been dubious, maybe. But she trusted me. To her I was a warrior for good.

"How long do I have to gather information?"

They looked at each other. "Two days, maximum, probably. Because even with jumps, flying to the world where they're kept will take us a day and they'll hear. As soon as you start prodding."

Yeah. Probably. But aloud I said, “Trust my finesse, gentlemen.” They looked at each other.

Later that night I told Mariana, “They’re like an old married couple, speaking with their looks.”

She laughed and said, “They’re married but not old.” Which—well, more than one way to be interested in exotic, and none of my business.

I got up early and worked feverishly through the day. Mariana had the best equipment and had prepared. I was as quiet as possible. By nighttime, when I asked to meet them I was sure of two things.

One, we were going to die doing this. Or at least I was.

Two…if I could, I’d get them and the kids out alive. You see, I’d seen the ads to sell those children. And I knew the people who were handling them. Demons in hell were more merciful.

I explained what we’d face. The two of them were admirably stoic. “I’ll do what I can to prepare your retreat. We’ll have to get a jumper that takes a hundred people, though,” I said. “So we can bring them back. And that will be obvious on approach.”

Brundar shook his head. “Their shield is powered. They need to power it from a generator. The compound they keep the children in is an old retired interstellar…I think they use the engines. If we can take the engines off, or…or tap their power, we can portal.”

“I’m afraid I took all the electricity down in Fundosaco for the portal,” Skip said drily.

And Brundar said, “But that means we must get past all their shields, to access the power.”

Right. “So a small ship should do,” I said.

A small ship did. And I’d gotten us all the coordinates. I told them about all of it. The underground compound beneath the ship. The dragons they’d bioengineered to guard the compound. All of it.

We decided not to land. Ship-sized objects which landed, even small ships, would be far too visible, so instead we went all the way around the world and ejected and came down with…they weren’t parachutes. Well, they were for the final descent, but not before. Entering the thin atmosphere, we used a sort of capsule that later disintegrated, leaving us to parachutes.

I'd somehow missed that the atmosphere was thin. Let me tell you, slogging across the rocky, sterile terrain was a treat. My companions let me sit and rest when I wished, but I tried not to. Because we were all aware of the urgency. And I was grateful Hayden had made us bring a lot of water. A lot of water, despite my bitching; it was too much weight even in grav-compensated backpacks. And I'd rather have the space for armament.

We saw the compound from atop a hill after a few hours, then ducked down and took a path between boulders for a few more hours.

I'd noticed they had no guards, but my research told me they had electronic surveillance.

And they did have guards. Inside.

As we climbed the slope down to the compound, we came across the skeleton of a large…well, it looked like a dragon. The skeleton was weathered and old, but my companions knelt to examine it. "Bioengineered, but—"

"Someone is throwing time around. Moving time around," Brundar said, and sounded terrified. Well, good then, but I heard a snort behind us and turned and saw the mama of the skeleton. Okay, probably not, but large enough to be. I have one way to deal with monsters. I kill them before I wonder where they came from.

In this case I decapitated it, before wondering how something twenty feet tall could live in this thin atmosphere, before I noticed the malignant humanlike intelligence in those yellow eyes.

My companions, on the other hand, grabbed me, and pulled me, as we ran pell-mell down the path, and the corpse fell behind us.

"They know we're here!" Brundar yelled.

I was about to say *probably*, because if the beasts were the alarm system they'd have a way of informing their masters. But Hayden said, "I'd say they do."

He had two burners out, one in each hand, gangster style, and was burning a swath through what looked like an army of black-clad men running toward us.

Brundar joined in, as handy with the burner as he. And I joined in, not to be left out. Let me say we'd have been dead in minutes, even with returning fire, without the suits. I lost count of how many times I was hit. Which is why, by the way, we were hitting the attackers just below the chin, where the armor didn't reach. There were a lot of heads rolling, the way we

were doing it in a continuous swath. In fact, it made the expression “heads will roll” sound silly. There was blood and heads everywhere, and for reasons known only to mental health techs, I wanted to laugh.

And we were running. Did I mention we were running through all of it? As much as they had said they weren’t that experienced, my companions were good. They could have made a living in any outfit they chose.

Even with all the running, as we ran the last few feet, avoiding heads —and bodies—but there were a lot of heads—we could hear alarms inside and the doors shutting.

“They will kill the children!” Brundar screamed, and somehow got a burst of speed and ran at the nearest door, dropping and rolling underneath just before it shut.

“They won’t kill the children,” Hayden yelled, speeding up. “That’s their paycheck. They’re not stupid. Oh, damn him.” The *damn him* trailing his spouse rolling under the door into the lair of the evil kidnapping slavers.

He then proceeded to do the same but at the last second and in danger of losing a foot. Me? I’m too old for that. I turned the eye of the door to the right. Eye? Yes, the thing that tells them who is outside. Look, I’ve broken into these ships before. While they were landed somewhere, of course. I knew the door controls were behind the eye. So I burned its eye, punched my hand in, and pulled out the control that made the door obey commands. Then I twisted the safety release.

It opened, showing me my—I guess—employers with their back to the door, burning ammunition power like pros.

I joined in, of course, and as soon as we cleared a path, I guided them down the right hallway. Look…no, we didn’t clear all the opposing forces. I don’t know how many men they’d hired, but it was a lot. And I tried not to think that some of them were just poor bastards doing this for a paycheck. It wasn’t true anyway. They had to know what was going on. They had to know. And yet they stayed and helped. And that meant they were the lowest of the low. You could do some pretty low things to adults and I’d tolerate you, and even assume it was your only choice at the time. But children?

No.

Die.

So the two of them faced forward, running down the right hallway, and I faced backward and ran in the same direction protecting their back by mowing down the people trying to shoot them.

I can tell you how far we went. Are you interested? Probably not. It's not even vaguely interesting to tell you there was another hallway, then we turned right and another hallway and then—these were a featureless ship's hallways, just…there were people shooting at us front and back, and there were two doors that almost shut us out, but those we could open.

And then…and then we were in a vast room. And there were a group of frightened kids. I'd say a hundred or a hundred and twenty, and they… and they had a dozen mercs in full armor, head and all. Not the kind of suit you can move well in, but hell, you didn't need to. We would have to hit them in the eye.

And they were holding guns pointed at the kids. And a smug bastard—I can't remember his name, but I'll call him Ax (he was known for an incident with an ax at the beginning of his career so it fits)—was standing there, smiling at us.

"Ah," he said, looking at Brundar. "Your Majesty. How kind to turn yourself in to us. And your royal consort, too. Did you know the king of Draksah has a bounty on your head?" He looked at Skip. "Your ransom from Queen Eleanor wouldn't compare. You might not be worth our effort." He looked at me. "And you, old friend. You brought them in as we agreed."

Brundar turned to look at me, which was a bad, bad idea. They jumped toward him.

And I did the only thing I could think of at that moment. Dear Lord, I might kill him, but it was the only thing I could do.

I needed a distraction. I aimed at Brundar's chest and said, "Fuck you, Ax, you can't have them."

As I fired, Hayden, the idiot, jumped toward me. As though he didn't know Brundar had armor on. I sidestepped just slightly to hold his shoulder and say in his ear rapidly, "On three."

Because you see, the minute we'd start fighting, all eyes would be on us, not the kids.

I thought he nodded, but there was no way of knowing. I pushed him away from me, and he gained his feet like a ballet dancer. And then we were running, and he had a knife in each hand. And Brundar had launched himself at Ax, screaming something, and he too had knives he'd gotten from somewhere.

I was a little busy the next few seconds. Or minutes or hours. It doesn't mean much in this kind of situation, but knife fights tend to be less than a

minute, though we had to fight twelve people or so, of course.

At some point I saw they were down, and turned around to shoot at the people who had just caught up with us and—

And behind me, Brundar was making some very weird sounds.

"What on earth?" I asked Skip Hayden as he caught up with me and stood by my side shooting down mercenaries.

"It's Ellyan," he said. He looked like he'd been dragged through hell backward. He was covered in blood and his hair was plastered to his head with sweat. The blood was almost surely not his, unless the mercenaries had pulled out a knife. One of mine had. "He said, 'I am your king. You are my people. I am your parent. You are my children. Follow me. I'm taking you to Elly.'"

"Does that work?" I asked. "Look to your left!"

He took out the threat. "Amazingly well, for Ellyans. He has the ring of kingship. It…has its own powers."

He looked back over his shoulder, then said, "We go," and started making his way in reverse.

"What about the shield…on the world?"

"I'm trying to take it down," he said. "But my power can't reach it. You said that it was…" He described the schematic with enormous accuracy. "If we make our way down, inside, it will…"

"Say no more," I said. All the time we were firing forward, and clearing the way for Brundar and the kids. At a turn in the hallway I looked back, and he was firing now and then, but he had a fat baby on his arm and a bunch of scared kids following him close. "We're going through the outside."

"Precisely. The shell should be just below the sand. If you and Brund keep watch, I can cut the shell with the big burner, and then—"

The burner was a giant zapper. We each had one but hadn't used them yet.

He might very well need all of them. But I wasn't going to tell him that now.

I knew where he was going. We continued our way in reverse, slower because of the mass of rescues. Now and then Brundar said things in his language, with all the whistles and clicks. Two babies were crying loudly. I was surprised more children weren't balling or trying to run away, as we stepped through corpses and blood.

But children who have been enslaved don’t. And besides, if I understood right, the ring had some kind of power.

I almost didn’t notice as we stepped through the door. Brundar’s voice came from further away. Turning, I realized he must have gone to the rear of the group to guard the retreat in case more people came out of the compound.

We made it to a flat area on the northwest side, three hundred meters or so from the compound. “There aren’t any more coming from the compound, but I’ll guard!” Brund shouted in Britannian English from behind.

We weren’t being shot at either. Skip kicked sand around. The shell was really only a few inches down. The sand was more a matter of having blown on it. They hadn’t bothered hiding. Why would they? No one would come here without them knowing. And they had a never-end of mercenaries. Also, who would want to take their power out?

Skip, that was who. He burned downward, into the shell protecting the subterranean part of the compound, and I joined him in burning. It didn’t take long till he had a space he could jump in on.

“Do you want me to go?” I asked. “I know.”

“No,” he said. “Hold on.” He just put his head through the hole, his burner aimed.

“You’re going to blow—”

But he burned inward a few times, then took a deep breath and pulled his head out.

“I just killed the powerline out of the reactor,” he said. “I wouldn’t burn the reactor.”

Alright. A madman, not a fool.

He stood and closed his eyes. Then opened them again, stepped away from the ceiling of the underground facility and…cut a door through the air.

I don’t know what I expected, but I think I expected his world. Instead, I recognized the garden of Mariana’s house.

“I thought—”

“We can’t do it to my world,” he said. “We have a shield over the world, and too many interworld portals weaken the shield and then the Draksah—”

“The people who wanted to buy Brundar. Is he really a king?”

“Yes. And don’t call him Brundar. It implies you slept with him. Call him Mahar.”

“Uh. Okay. So—”

So Brund—Mahar was leading the kids to the portal, and herding them through.

“We’ll take them to Britannia, and then by ship to Elly. There are people who’ll help at both ends.”

The kids were almost all through, and I could hear Marianna and other people on the other end, welcoming them, in a tongue they probably wouldn’t understand, when I heard the roar.

I turned, saw a little one of the dragon things, shot at it.

And its momma grabbed me by the side and threw me. I fell hard between two rocks, and could feel my back crack.

I woke in pain, and Mahar and Hayden were arguing in clicks and such over me. “Go,” I said. “I’m done for.”

I noted the big blue monster was dead next to me, but I didn’t know what that meant. Probably that we’d attract more of their kind to eat me. “Give me mercy and go. Take the kids out of here. Go. I knew I’d probably die when I landed.”

Mahar knelt down on the blood-soaked sand. His eyes unfocused.

“Damn it,” Skip said in English. “Hurry up. We don’t know there aren’t other dragons.”

“You don’t need to pray for my soul,” I said. “I gave up on it long ago.”

But—

Look, I saw it and I don’t believe it. Whatever he was doing, the gaping wound on my side disappeared. There was just healthy, somewhat pink skin. And from the way it felt, my back was all right. I sat up. The world whirled.

“You lost a lot of blood, you idiot,” Hayden said. “Let me help.”

And it was alright for him to call me an idiot as much as we’d bled together.

The king of Elly and his consort grabbed me and carry-walked me to the portal. I think I passed out just inside it.

I woke up in Mariana’s bed, with Rags purring near my ear. And Mariana said, “If you’re well enough, I made you coffee.”

There was a proclamation of a full pardon for all my crimes known and unknown in the morning's news from the palace.

"They didn't wait," I said.

"No," Mariana said. "But they transferred a disgustingly large sum into your account. I don't know what you negotiated, but—"

"I forgot to negotiate for money," I admitted, and she laughed. "But I'd hoped they'd say goodbye."

"You slept for forty-eight hours. And I understand they had some urgent thing to do, because a war might hinge on it."

"Oh."

"They said if you ever want anything from Elly or from the Haydens, either Webson or his mother, the Countess Harcastle…"

"I don't want anything," I said. I petted Rags' silky soft ears and he kneaded my shoulder. "I've got everything I want right here."

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Embracing the Suck

Patrick Chiles

“Corpsman up!”

I’d heard that call so many times by now that it had become background noise. Every time the “balloon went up,” meaning somebody had started shooting, I could count on my services being needed. Many times over, in fact.

The hell of it is, I’m not even a real combat medic. But we’ll get to that.

Truth is, the Marines didn’t really need to call for me on comms. It was just so ingrained in them that the habit couldn’t be broken. Combat zones are not the best environment for learning new habits, or so I’m told. I’ve also seen firsthand the axiom that no battle plan survives first contact with the enemy, so there’s that.

The injured Marine’s location appeared in my heads-up display, as if we were in a massive video game. Of course, this was no game and that was a real live human being out there who needed help.

I pressed my throat mic. “Mooney’s in copy. On my way.”

While my HUD showed the position of every Marine within my line of sight, what it couldn’t tell me was how to get to them. The path forward was through a hailstorm of tracers and plasma bolts, with the occasional blast from an old-fashioned grenade thrown in for good measure.

The terrain ahead was undulating hills interspersed with rocky outcroppings that gave plenty of opportunities for cover, which also gave the enemy plenty of places to hide. I ran in a low crouch, ignoring a stab of pain from my lower back, knowing the downed Marine ahead was dealing with something far worse.

I made it to the first rise and stuck my head up just long enough to get a look ahead. It was flat ground: easier to run on, but also easier to get blasted. I took a deep breath and ran like hell for a nearby outcropping.

Snugged up tight against the rock, it became clear that there was only one path forward over more open ground. Awesome. The fallen Marine was close, less than fifty meters now. One of his buddies was kneeling over him,

frantically waving for me. I didn't bother crouching this time and took off for them at a dead run.

It went against everything they'd taught me about movement under fire: Always change direction. Run, drop, get up and run again, zigzagging to the objective without giving the enemy a predictable target. *I'm up, they see me, I'm down*. An older corpsman had warned me that the Red Cross symbol on my helmet wasn't a "get out of combat free" card, especially when the enemy wasn't human. All it did was make you an easier target.

The air exploded with plasma bolts. A voice behind me cried "covering fire" and soon a rain of angry red tracers stitched an outcropping to my left. The brilliant white bolts stopped just long enough for me to make a clumsy home-plate slide alongside the wounded Marine. The kid's arm had been grazed by a plasma round, which doesn't sound bad until you understand that a direct hit from one of those things will blow a basketball-sized hole in you. This kid had been lucky, if "lucky" means his right arm was shredded below the elbow. His buddy took up a covering position while I got to work. He'd already applied a tourniquet above the elbow joint, which had probably saved the kid's life.

"What's your name?" I did this out of habit, even though my helmet visor displayed the kid's name and rank.

"Garner," he managed to wheeze out. And that's why I always ask before relying on technology: You can learn a lot about someone's condition just by listening to them.

I slapped a scanning disk on his chest and began collecting vitals. His BP was low, pulse thready—everything you'd expect from blood loss. I whipped out a reflective blanket and draped it over him before he could start getting shocky on me. He was going to need fluids and blood plasma, so I started an IV and set the bags above him on a rock ledge. Normally I'd have his battle buddy hold the bags, but he was otherwise occupied, draped behind the ledge and firing away at something ahead.

"We've gotta move soon, Doc," he shouted over his shoulder. "Skinnies are advancing. If we don't hook up with the platoon right quick we're gonna be stuck out here with our dicks in our hands." He looked at me sheepishly. "No offense."

"None taken. Trust me, I'm hurrying." It was funny how polite these guys could be to the civilian chick even under the worst circumstances.

I opened Garner’s body armor and checked his abdomen. No signs of internal bleeding, so he had that going for him, although his forearm was mostly gone. All that remained were strips of skin tissue and strands of muscle fiber hanging like blood-soaked confetti from his elbow. Plasma rounds carried a lot of heat with them, but not enough to cauterize everything. They were more like incandescent tennis balls of kinetic energy, ripping and tearing through whatever they came in contact with. Any nearby tissue they didn’t vaporize was covered with second- and third-degree burns, so Garner was probably going to lose his elbow too.

The Reticulan docs on the command ship could generate replacements, but that was still an agonizingly slow process. They hadn’t had many human patients prior to First Contact, and the war had kicked off not long after that. It was the main reason the Galactic Union had revealed themselves to Earth in the first place, but that’s another story. His buddy—my visor said his name was Menendez—scrambled down from the ridge and handed me the IV bags.

“Time to go, Doc!” He positioned himself under Garner’s good shoulder and helped him to his feet. “Can you walk?”

“Yeah…yeah.”

“Good. Then you can run.” Menendez pointed to a drop ship that had just landed behind us, maybe fifty yards away. “Dustoff is here. Move move move!” He pressed his headset mic. “Bravo Six, this is Bravo Two One. Oscar Mike. Heading for the slick that just landed. Doc Mooney is with us.”

A distant voice replied through the static, an artifact of our comms frequency-hopping to get past the Skinnies’ jamming. “Two One, Six copies. We’re bugging out. Report back at the assembly point.”

Menendez clicked his mic twice to acknowledge. We scrambled across the rocky ground, each of us holding Garner under his shoulders. The drop ship’s ramp opened and its crew chief was frantically waving us forward in between bursts from a machine gun mounted beside him. Couldn’t tell you what kind as that’s not really my thing. It was big and loud. I think they called it a “Ma Deuce.”

We ended up dragging Garner the last few feet and laid him down on the deck. The crew chief slapped a nearby button and the ramp began closing, but not before a plasma bolt blasted through the gap and exploded into a pallet behind us, covering us in foaming liquid and filling the air with acrid smoke.

“l hope that wasn’t anything important,” I shouted above the thrum of gravity drives spooling up.

“Just the weekly beer ration,” the crew chief said laconically.

Menendez removed his helmet and angrily scratched at his head. “Well shit. Now they’re just adding insult to injury.”

The crew chief stood with his hands on his hips, surveying the mess. “Embrace the suck, brother.”

Menendez scooped up a puddle of beer with an empty canteen while I tended to his wounded companion. “Embrace the suck.”

We were docked to the command ship within minutes. Menendez and the crew chief hustled Garner through the airlock while I briefed the battalion surgeon on his condition (besides the obviously missing forearm). A Reticulan physician stood nearby, telepathically taking it all in. The Grays’ natural abilities still threw off any humans who’d had little exposure to them. By now the whole world had seen the videos of their arrival at the UN, the White House lawn, No. 10 Downing, the Kremlin…you get the idea. There’d been nothing subtle about it. Once the Union had decided First Contact was necessary, they hadn’t wasted time. Humanity had needed shock therapy to prepare for what was coming.

Recall I said “necessary.” They’d been watching us for thousands of years and making contact with a select few humans along the way, myself included. It had been a surprise when they told me the time had come to reveal themselves. Until then they’d been waiting to see how we made it through a series of “filtering events” that all advanced societies must eventually confront. In our case, the ultimate filter had forced their hand: imminent invasion. As it turned out, the Union wasn’t the only alien collective with Earth on its to-do list.

To the extent that I’d paid attention to it before, the notion that any civilization advanced enough for interstellar travel would *of course* be peaceful seemed hopelessly naive. It was the kind of comforting fiction that could only emerge from faculty-lounge thinking by cloistered scientists with little grasp of human (or alien) nature. Advanced technology doesn’t necessarily impute civility. If anything, it enables the opposite. Anyone remember social media?

If that sounds like I’m dunking on sheltered eggheads, it’s because I am. I’m a scientist myself, so it’s allowed. After spending a few years as an

emergency medic with the Union, I returned to Earth and earned a PhD in marine biology. I can tell you there were many faculty-lounge debates that were alarming in their cluelessness, especially after First Contact. If the Olympics held events for leaping to conclusions or drawing false inferences, my peers would've cleaned up in gold medals.

The hilarious bit was how few of them believed me when I revealed my role in it. Even showing off the alien tech I'd smuggled out of Union space hadn't been enough for some of them, though I'll note the engineering professors had been convinced. And I won't lie, being able to talk to whales, thanks to my Union translator implant, had been quite the career booster.

The Union had been commiserating with Earth's marine mammals for as long as they'd been observing humans. Whales and dolphins are as smart as we always imagined they were, and they've known what's up for a long time. It seems kind of evolutionarily unfair that their anatomy doesn't give them the ability to manipulate their environment, but then again I've never encountered a species with such a tranquil, Zen-like peace about them. They know what they are and their place in the world, and they're good with it. We could learn a few things from them, so think about that the next time you take the kiddies to SeaWorld.

Of course that assumes there'll be a SeaWorld left to go to. Nothing has been the same since the first Emissaries showed up.

The Union had made a full-on diplomatic push, with gleaming silver teardrop-shaped craft appearing above all the major world capitals at once. They'd thrown in the UN for good measure just to keep everyone else happy. After decades of observing, the Union had concluded it was as big of a joke as the rest of us had always thought.

Human culture had always thrown the Union off a bit. Most of its member societies are fairly homogenous, having little variation within species. We, on the other hand, still have the unfortunate tendency to self-segregate ourselves into tribes. That makes us unruly, something the Union takes a dim view of. Fortunately for us they take an even dimmer view of other civilizations invading worlds on their short list for membership.

Which brings us to here: licking our wounds in orbit above a dusty red world in the Centauri system. From what little I was briefed on, our operation was supposed to be a diversion, but we ended up running

headlong into the enemy's main force. It turns out that even the super advanced Galactic Union can get suckered by bad intel.

Of course none of this is my bailiwick. I'm a biologist; I only kept my medic quals current because I work in a lot of remote areas with a small team. I never expected to have to use it full time again, much less get drafted into being a combat medic. Kind of like how the rest of Earth got pulled into an existential war it couldn't see coming. Thank God the Union had.

I'd heard stories back when I was still a Union resident working in their Medical Corps. One of my best friends was a Thuban, a race of reptilian warriors who make *Star Trek*'s Klingons look like poseurs. I'd also encountered some of those threats myself: There were the Da' Farrii, a race of eight-limbed twiggy sluglike pirates, and another species with no name who exist outside of our three-dimensional plane of existence. I'd be happy to go the rest of my life without ever crossing their paths again. The human mind is not prepared to venture outside of our normal space and time. I'll just leave it at that.

The enemy confronting us now were distant cousins of the Reticulans, the gray-skinned aliens that dominated our UFO folklore. Every country had their own nicknames, but the Americans called them Skinnies. They were much taller than the Grays, and a lot more aggressive. Both races were meticulous and focused. Where the Grays tended to be curious and circumspect, the Skinnies were greedy and adventurous.

They'd been lurking around the boundaries of Union space, observing the same outlying worlds with an eye toward conquest. Too impatient to build a willing coalition of civilizations like the Union, they instead had begun to make moves against those who were just advanced enough to be useful, but not so much that they could put up a fight. Earth had been the next planet on their radar. For all the culture shock that had ensued when the Union revealed itself, they were also the only thing standing between humanity and slavery.

The Emissaries were smart enough to have saved the bad news for closed-door meetings with the various world leaders. Alarmingly few had taken the threat seriously, deluding themselves into thinking they could stave off the marauding Skinnies with a show of goodwill. Fortunately the countries with large armies had started preparing. Our various nascent space forces were of course no match for what was coming. At one point it had

leaked that a Navy admiral said it would be like taking on a battleship with a handful of rowboats and BB guns.

That's where the Union stepped in, specifically the Thuban defense fleet. While our airmen and sailors were still shadowing them, learning to operate alien tech centuries more advanced than our own, it didn't mean the Thubans couldn't take our ground troops into the fight. Old-fashioned bombs and bullets worked just fine against armor and shielding meant to deflect energy weapons. That's how we found ourselves here in orbit around Proxima Centauri IV. The closest star system to Earth would be the Skinnies' staging area, close enough for them but safely out of human reach. They hadn't counted on us having some help.

Getting back into the groove as a medic had been another surprise. I've learned quickly that military operations almost never go as planned. I'd been brought along as a go-between, thanks to my close relationship with the Thubans. When the expeditionary force I was accompanying started running short of medics, they pressed me into service.

I won't lie, getting back into EMS life hit all of my dormant adrenaline-junkie buttons. But there's a big difference between running into a burning building to render aid and doing it when someone is actively trying to kill you.

After the docs had taken my patient off to surgery, I wandered into a makeshift ready room the Navy corpsmen had set up near sick bay. It wasn't much more than a storage closet with some folding chairs and a coffee pot, but it did the job. It was our place to decompress after a field op while we got ready for the next one.

I stripped off my filthy desert camo blouse and flopped onto an empty chair. A balding chief petty officer handed me a mug of hot coffee. The chiefs were never too far from a fresh pot.

"Rough one, Tiny?"

I took a sip from the battered metal mug and sighed. "Four wounded, one KIA. Don't know if that counts as rough to you guys but it sure felt like it."

He stared at the ceiling—"overhead" in Navy parlance. "Depends. For a company-sized op, that's not bad. Doesn't factor in how much hostile fire you had to deal with though."

I wiped at my forehead and tied back my hair. "Felt like a lot."

"This is what, your second firefight?"

“Third.”

He nodded. “I’d say they get easier, but I’d be lying.”

“Those plasma guns…” I trailed off.

“Yeah. Only good thing about them is they make triage easier. You’re either dead or you’re not. But mostly dead.”

A gravelly voice sounded behind me. “Easier for the Skinnies to aim, too. The bolt travels in a straight line. Point and shoot, whereas we’re still having to compensate for bullet drop and windage.”

It was the Marine Raider company’s gunnery sergeant. He was tall and lean, weathered beyond his years. 35 going on 50. He handed a tablet to the Chief. “We’ve got a warning order to redeploy to the planet’s eastern hemisphere. We’ll be supporting a scouting expedition. Our corpsman’s hard down, picked up some alien crud. Gray docs filled his ass with nanobots and he’s stuck in the isolation ward.”

“So you need to pull one of mine,” the Chief said tiredly.

“Sorry Jim. Wouldn’t ask if they didn’t need it.”

“When?”

The Marine looked at me and checked his watch. “0330.”

I rubbed my eyes. My hands came away smeared with red dirt. “Not much time.”

“Enough for you to get a shower and a couple hours of rack time,” the Chief said.

I acknowledged them with a reluctant grunt and wandered toward the berthing compartment and a hot shower.

“Make it a Hollywood shower,” the Chief hollered behind me. That meant I’d get a full five minutes under continuously flowing hot water. They’d been more accommodating for me, being the lone civilian in their midst. I usually didn’t take advantage of their courtesy so as to not upset the actual sailors and Marines, but this time I made an exception.

I stared at the vortex of red-tinged water flowing into the drain and told myself it was just dirt from the planet, not other people’s blood. It was a lie, but a comforting one.

I woke up three hours later, rested enough to keep from falling asleep during the team briefing. I would be tagging along with the Raiders ahead of a much larger operation, a joint action of human and Thubans. I could tell the Raiders were a little uncomfortable with the plan. They’re what the

other grunts call “high speed, low drag,” special operations types who were used to working on their own.

Despite being new to all this, I understood that on a certain level. While I was only working as a combat medic out of necessity, the grunts trained together to the point where they could anticipate each other’s actions. Especially Raiders, who could read each other with almost Emissary-level empathy. Bringing along a civilian and a pair of alien warrior lizards wasn’t something they’d been remotely prepared for. And to be honest, it worried me too. What would inserting us into their plans do to their hard-earned unit cohesion?

The mission briefing didn’t do much to allay my concerns. The regimental commander, a “full bird” colonel in military parlance, ran the briefing himself. I understood this to mean that what we were about to embark on was a big deal indeed.

He was built like a fireplug with a head of close-cropped gray hair. His leathery face spoke to a lifetime spent outdoors in unpleasant conditions, though his voice was calm and quiet. This made everyone lean in and pay close attention.

The colonel stood in front of a holographic map of our objective on the other side of the planet. “Gentlemen,” he began, “and you too, Mooney.” This earned some chuckles from the grunts. He went on to lay out the concept of operations and I won’t bore you with the details (there were a *lot* of details). This was going to be what they called a “smash and grab” mission to raid a small enemy outpost and capture as many Skinnies as we could fit into a drop ship.

As he wrapped up, the colonel focused on me. “Mooney, you’re not just here because we’re short a corpsman. We need you on site to assess any Skinnies we capture with that alien tech you’re carrying. This is an intel-gathering op, specifically intel on the Skinnies’ physiology. You’re the best we have aboard to do that.”

I nodded, and maybe gulped a little. “I’ll do my best.”

“I expect nothing less,” he said firmly, then addressed the assembled team. “I want them alive, gents. That is all.”

While the gathered Marines quietly began conferring amongst themselves, the gunnery sergeant pulled me aside. Behind his weathered face, there was concern in his eyes. “I’m not going to blow smoke up your

ass, Mooney. This could get spicy. What's your comfort level with firearms?"

"I keep an old .357 in my nightstand at home. My dad had a 1911, taught me how to shoot it a long time ago." I sounded more confident than I actually felt, not letting on that the only reason I knew the model name was because Dad had loved the thing. I kept a revolver because they're a lot simpler to use. Dad had given it to me in college.

He handed me a battered, desert-tan pistol and an empty clip. "M19, standard-issue sidearm. Show me how you'd load a magazine and charge the weapon."

Magazine, not a clip. Right. Gun guys could get upset about confusing the two. Struggling to remember Dad's lessons, I slid the empty *magazine* into the grip and pulled hard on the slide to open it. It took me a second to remember how to close it. My thumb finally found the release and the slide snapped shut.

"Good. Show me your firing stance."

My stance? Oh boy. Any muscle memory I might've had in that regard was rusty. I remembered to not wrap my support hand around the bottom of the grip. You could get away with what they called a "teacup" hold with a revolver, but not a semiauto. I'd remembered that much from practicing with Dad. His old pistol had worked perfectly for him, whereas it had jammed every time with me until he pointed out what I was doing wrong.

"Not bad." The gunny reached for my hands. "Here. Be sure to keep your thumbs below the slide. Always rest your trigger finger on the guard until you need to shoot. Don't point it at anything you don't want to kill. Line up the sights level with each other, center them over your target, pull the trigger. Easy."

I looked down the sights. "Sure. Easy."

He patted me on the shoulder. "Good. Nervous?"

"Nervous was ten minutes ago. Now I'm scared shitless."

"I'll let you in on a secret: everybody's scared. Courage is when you mount up anyway." He took the pistol, slid it into a holster, and handed it back to me along with five full magazines. "We do this right, it'll go fast and you won't need this. Stick close to me and the captain, okay? You're safer with the command element."

"Until somebody needs me forward."

“Well, there is that. Your kit good to go?” He pointed at my backpack on the deck behind us.

“Full. All that Union tech the colonel wanted. Also loaded it up with extra sutures, clotting compound, and nanoprobes.”

The gunny did an exaggerated shudder. “We’re used to getting shot at. Those are another thing entirely.”

I gave him a nervous smile. So we both had something to be worried about.

Our dropship had two pilots: one Thuban, the other a Navy lieutenant in training. The Marines seemed much more worried about this than I was, but I’d been on these things plenty of times for garden-variety EMS runs back when I was a Union medic. They were usually flown by a single pilot, so having a human copilot along was a courtesy. The guy had to learn somehow.

The control deck was elevated above the main hold, where we sat in web seats that had been jury-rigged to accommodate humans. When Navy stuck his head down into the hold to announce they’d be doing a “slam dunk” approach, the Marines groaned. A few went so far as to pull out airsick bags from under their seats. Everyone cinched down their shoulder harnesses as tight as they could stand.

A normal drop from orbit in Union ships felt no different than sitting in your living room chair. Combat drops were different, as it was too easy to I.D. a ship by its gravity signature. And if the gravity drive was turned off, then so were the inertial dampers that made the g-forces manageable. We were on a high-g ballistic trajectory, dropping straight down through the atmosphere well clear of the Skinnies’ sensor arrays.

That might have hidden our gravity signature, but turning our ship into a meteor was also going to put on a hell of show for anyone watching from the ground. To cover our descent, the Thuban command ship did a trash dump, dropping every bit of solid waste imaginable from orbit to create enough plasma trails to make it look like a meteor shower.

There were no windows in the hold, but I could see the orange and pink glow of our plasma sheath from the cockpit as we plummeted toward the surface. The g’s kept climbing until it felt like I had an elephant in my lap. Everything began to turn gray and my peripheral vision narrowed until it was like staring down a tunnel. I may have blacked out. Probably did.

The ride smoothed out after that. They had to turn the gravity drive back on for the flight to the drop zone, but they followed a winding path through hills and valleys to mask our approach. We were cloaked, but being invisible couldn't hide everything. There was no amount of magic physics that could hide our heat and gravity signature. In the mission brief, an intelligence officer explained that terrain masking worked a lot like avoiding radar, up to a point. The Skinnies had something he called "backscatter" technology that used temperature deviations in the atmosphere to extend their sensor range to where it could practically see around the terrain.

It all sounds fancy, but what it meant for us was that we weren't going to just be dropped on top of their position with guns blazing. We'd have a good ten kilometer hike into the objective.

These were all terms and concepts I'd never considered before, and it still feels strange to describe. Barely a month into this and I already sounded like a vet. Guess I've always been good at acclimating to whatever situation I'm thrown into.

The mission was to be a quick in-and-out operation, so we weren't loaded down for a long stay. The Marines moved swiftly and it was all I could do to keep up. I do a lot of cardio, but these guys were masters at moving fast over uneven terrain. I may or may not have busted my ass a few times. The two Thubans with us were even faster. This planet was their kind of environment and they took to it like fish to water. Or rather, lizards to desert. Each one skittered expertly over the rock face surrounding us, climbing on all fours up to the ridgeline on either side to cover our approach and sniffing the air ahead with their reptilian olfactory glands.

Everything slowed down once we were within a kilometer or so of the objective. The men brought their weapons up and began pushing forward more methodically.

"Heel and toe," the gunny whispered to me. "Watch that you're on firm ground." Each step was silent and purposeful. Heel first, then gingerly plant the rest of your foot, always making sure you weren't about to trigger a rockslide that would give away our position.

It took us a good half hour to finish that last kilometer. The only sound I could hear was my own breathing. The captain made some hand signals and the Marines began taking up positions around the perimeter of a flat

clearing. A cave opening was on the opposite edge. It looked unnatural, as if it had been cut out of solid rock.

One of the Marines trained a spotting scope on the site. “That’s not a natural formation, sir.”

The captain nodded his agreement. In the darkness I could see him frown. “They went to a lot of trouble to clear this site. I don’t like this. No signs of activity.”

One of the Thuban scouts low-crawled up between us and sat up in a crouch. “All clear ahead. No sign enemy.” He sniffed the air. “But many signs from cave. Not all skinny.”

The gunny waved a handheld monitor at the clearing ahead. “Hell of a lot of EM and IR energy coming out of that cave, sir.”

The captain checked his watch and worked his jaw in thought. “One hour to sunrise. Let’s move.”

The Marines stayed close to the rocks to conceal themselves, not taking the risk of strolling across the open clearing. Even I knew that would be asking for someone to shoot at you. They were perfectly silent, eschewing their radios for hand signals. The infantry has a whole vocabulary of gestures which I didn’t pretend to understand beyond “halt,” “forward,” and “come here.”

It was unnaturally quiet. If there were Skinnies anywhere within a few hundred meters, the infrared sensors in our helmet visors would’ve given them up. That only made me more nervous. I felt the hair on the back of my neck stand up.

To my uninitiated self, it all seemed too easy. I think the men around me felt the same. They were tensed up, more than usual. The Thubans’ trident tongues moved rapidly back and forth across the ridges of their mouths, a sign that they weren’t happy either.

A team of four stopped at the cave entrance while the rest of us hugged the rock outcroppings in a semicircle. Ordinarily they’d have tossed in grenades before charging in, but we were here to gather intelligence. The higher-ups needed intact Skinnies, preferably live ones.

The captain signaled for a second team to move up to the entrance while the first slowly made their way into the cave. I waited for the first shots, for chaos to be unleashed, but it never came.

You’d think that would have calmed my nerves. It didn’t.

A voice called from inside the cave, shattering the silence. “Clear.”

The captain and the gunnery sergeant traded puzzled looks. That just confirmed this was too easy.

The captain whispered into his microphone. “Copy. On our way.” He headed for the cave and motioned for the remaining two fire teams to guard the entrance. The gunny and I followed him in with a Thuban bringing up the rear.

The first hints of daylight had been creeping over the ridge; inside the cave it was still pitch black. We kept our moonbeams—which is jarhead for “flashlight”—off and picked our way ahead with our helmet’s night vision and infrared. There was a lot of infrared.

“These walls are hot,” I whispered, hoping it wasn’t due to some radioactive element in the rock.

The captain had been thinking the same thing. He checked a dosimeter clipped to his body armor while stepping over a bundle of cables. “Nothing tripping our rad counters. There’s a lot of power conduits running through here. Probably just residual heat.”

Our Thuban companion hissed in a singsong pattern. It took a second for our translation chips to catch up. “Transmission lines older generation. Using cave walls as radiators. Very comfortable.”

The gunny grumbled. “Well it’s hotter than hell’s front porch for us. What do you think their power source is?”

The Thuban shrugged. “Would know if radioactive. Likely antimatter.”

“Wonderful.”

“Is normal,” the Thuban said. “Everyone use.”

“Still new to us.” I’d say the gunny frowned but resting bitch face was kind of his normal state. He spoke into his mic. “Power source is probably antimatter, gentlemen. Weapons tight.”

I felt his concern. I’d spent plenty of time on runs in antimatter-powered ships as a Union medic, but never shook off the healthy fear of something that could vaporize everything within a few hundred square miles if uncontained.

As we turned a corner, my worries about hidden enemies and accidental antimatter releases subsided. This wasn’t due to any newfound courage on my part; it was because of the godawful smell that grew more overpowering with each step.

It was rot. The byproduct of organic matter breaking down, like someone had left the fridge open for a few weeks. The smell of death, or something close to it. A couple of the Marines were holding back puke, but I was used to it. That's nothing to be proud of; you just see a lot of it in EMS work.

We caught up with the breaching team, who were gathered around a collection of transparent pods arranged on the rocky floor like petals on a flower. One of the Marines was retching in a corner.

"What the hell…" the captain breathed.

The fire team leader approached him. "We don't know, sir." He shined a light on one of the pods, where something that might have once been human lay inside. "These are full of bodies, every last one. A couple of Grays, one Thuban. The rest are…were…human."

The captain waved me forward. "Mooney, you're up."

"Right," I stammered. I shrugged off my pack and knelt by the nearest pod to place a pair of scanner discs on either side. It took a minute for them to calibrate themselves; usually they'll start sending data immediately. The lag signaled that they didn't quite know what they were looking at.

"This isn't human. It's not alien, either. It's…hybrid."

"What, you mean they're crossbreeding?"

"Not exactly." I looked to the Thuban. "I've heard stories. You know what I'm talking about?"

"Have heard same," he hissed. "Coto-marii."

I rocked my head back. "Damn."

The captain's hands made an impatient circling motion. "Clue me in here, Mooney. What are we talking about?"

I stood and wiped at my trousers. "There were stories about them in the Union. Legends, really. Distant cousins of the Grays. Nobody had encountered them for centuries." I jerked a thumb at our reptilian companion. "Thuban border patrols supposedly had a couple of run-ins with possible Coto-marii incursions, but it was all a long time ago."

"Nothing about them in your after-actions?"

The Thuban cocked his head to one side. He needed a moment to translate. "Ah. Yes. Report. No, no reports. You call 'classified.'"

The captain shook his head and blew out a sigh. "Of course it was. First to go, last to know."

“FUBAR all the way down,” the gunny agreed. “Okay, so they’ve been biding their time around your borders and gobbling up planets that can’t defend themselves.”

Like ours.

“What it is that makes them so extra-special dangerous? Because both of you look spooked.” That was really saying something for a Thuban.

The Marines turned their gaze on me. My words came slowly. Deliberately. It was so farfetched that I had to convince myself with each syllable. “They’re metamorphs. Shape-shifters.”

I majored in biology as an undergrad and spent two years in veterinary school. I hold a PhD in marine biology. And there was nothing, zilch, in my Earthbound schoolwork which suggested the possibility of a creature able to change its form at will. It was the stuff of ancient mythology. I doubt the subject would’ve come up even if I’d studied at a Union university. They were cryptids, like Bigfoot or the Loch Ness Monster are to us.

Those questions could wait. Right now we had to deal with the psychological effect it was having on the team. The Marines were all looking at each other with suspicion. How could you know if the guy next to you was who you thought he was? Any one of them could be a disguised enemy. That poisonous notion had to be put to rest, quickly.

The captain kneeled beside me in front of a pod and spoke in a low whisper. “Need your call, Mooney. We have to put a lid on this shit fast.”

I nodded while moving the scanners down the length of the pod, building a full picture of whatever it was inside. It had once been human. Or maybe it was becoming one? “There’s nothing in the Med Corps archives about these beings on my data crystal. Maybe there’s information buried in their archives, but I’d have to connect to the command network.”

He frowned. “Not until we’re aboard ship. Too risky to establish a data link from here.”

I finished the scan and dropped the discs into my backpack. “So long as you understand how that limits my options. All I know about them is from legends.”

Our Thuban companion had been watching intently. “Melanie correct. Very little known. We think metamorphosis not instant. Takes time.”

The captain turned to him. “So they can’t just touch one of us and turn into a human clone?”

“Do not believe.” He pointed at the pod. “Perhaps need this machinery.”

I swiped at my crystal to project a hologram of the scanner data. “You could be right. Not exactly sure what this is, but it isn’t human. I think it’s a Skinny being transformed. The DNA doesn’t match. That’s the tell. It’s human DNA intermingled with something else. Like they’re creating shells.”

“A skin suit,” the captain spat.

“That’s the most likely explanation.” The grunts nicknaming them “skinnies” hadn’t been too far off. Of the million different questions coursing through my head, I was most mystified by how they could change their bone structure to support a vastly different anatomy. I had no idea how that was possible, but this wasn’t the place for scientific inquiry.

The gunny raised his voice. “Listen up, gents. You heard the doc. The skinnies can’t just turn into whatever they touch, so get that thought out of your skulls right friggin’ now.”

I wasn’t a hundred percent sure he was right about that.

The gunny continued. “We’ve got a lot of intel to collect here. I want a full sweep, whatever you can fit in your packs and cargo pockets. Anything organic, run it by the doc first.”

The Marines got to work, stripping the chamber of anything that wasn’t nailed down while I inspected the pod with the captain. He leaned over my shoulder as I cautiously poked at the maze of conduits that snaked around the chamber. “What do you think makes this tick?”

“You understand I’m guessing, right? Some of these are obvious power sources. The rest are probably temperature, humidity control, nutrients…”

Then I realized where he was going. “You want to take one of these back, don’t you?”

“Absolutely. If this is what you think it is, we need to know how it works. The Skinnies aren’t going to be inclined to let us hang around and study it here.”

He wasn’t wrong, but getting one of these pods out wasn’t going to be easy. “We’re going to have to be careful. The patient may not survive being disconnected.”

“That’s on me,” he said grimly, and motioned for two of his men. “Disconnect these couplings and see if we can lift this pod out.”

I moved in between the Marines and the pod. “Look, I get why you want to bring out one of your own, but we should take a different pod. Preferably one of the Reticulans.”

The captain’s mouth twisted in offense. “Why a Gray and not a human?”

I explained as calmly as I could manage. “Better datasets. If we’re going to understand how their metamorphosis works, we need a sample with the largest baseline population data.”

“You’re human. You’ve got access to a whole damn regiment of humans. That’s not good enough?”

I held up my data crystal. “The Union doesn’t have it. We’re new to them, whereas they have centuries’ worth of data on the Grays.”

He worked his jaw again. “All right, you’ve convinced me. Probably be lighter anyway.” He pointed the men to an adjacent pod. “Corporal, you heard the doc. Grab that one, and make it snappy.”

“Aye, sir,” the corporal said. The chamber became a bustle of activity as equipment was stripped, data terminals were looted, and containers were dumped in a mad search for anything that looked like useful intelligence. The Marines were guided by our Thuban companion, who helped them sort through all of the unfamiliar tech to snatch up those bits which looked promising. “Leave that, take this” was a recurring refrain as they tore the chamber apart.

They worked quickly. Within twenty minutes we all had backpacks full of Skinny tech while four Marines hefted a pod onto their shoulders. If they were bothered by the alien goo dripping from its severed connections, they didn’t show it. We were all in a hurry to leave.

The captain radioed to his men at the cave entrance. “We’re coming out. What’s your situation?”

“All clear, sir. No signs of activity.”

“Copy that. Call for dustoff, tell them site is secure.”

I stayed close to the command element—the captain and gunny—as instructed, just ahead of the men carrying the pod. Two more were ahead of us, another two bringing up the rear with the Thuban. Everyone had their rifles at the ready, even the men awkwardly shouldering the pod. They were on even higher alert than before; a reminder that the time to have your

guard up was when you were almost home free. Following their lead, I reached down and unsnapped my holster.

There was a muffled curse from up ahead. The gunny perked up. “What’s up, Felton?”

“Almost busted my ass, Gunny. Watch your footing, the floor’s slick as snot up here.”

I watched the gunny for a reaction. “Awfully arid climate for that much moisture to be leaching out of these rocks.”

He grunted agreement and turned to the captain after almost slipping himself. “I don’t like this, sir. This shit wasn’t here on the way in.”

The captain placed a hand on a nearby slab of rock. “Cave walls have cooled down, too.”

We lifted our eyes to the ceiling. No signs of anything dripping from overhead. I swept my light over the rocky floor. It was covered in translucent goo with the consistency of mucus, like a giant had just blown his nose all over the cave.

On a hunch, I turned back to the Marines carrying the pod. Sure enough, the crud dripping from the severed couplings looked just like the stuff we were stepping over.

There was a shout from ahead. Bursts of automatic rifle fire lit up the cave. In military parlance, that was the moment everything turned to shit.

“Keep moving!” the captain yelled over gunfire echoing up and down the tunnel. Another shout, this one from behind us, mixed with the staccato hiss of an angry Thuban.

“In floor! Skinnies in floor!”

I turned to see him leap onto something that was taking shape out of the rock. He tore at it with bared claws, shredding the solidifying goo. The scaly ridges of his mouth curled into a disgusted sneer as he blasted what was left with his plasma rifle. He pointed at the smoking pool of incinerated goo. “Melanie, you may need.”

My eyes widened, my senses strangely immune to the sounds of chaos ahead of us. Shouldn’t we be getting the hell out of here? But he was right. I collected myself and snatched a sample container from the side of my pack. We needed all the intel we could gather, especially tissue samples now that we knew what the enemy was.

The captain ran back to us, silhouetted by the strobing lights of a close-quarters firefight ahead. “Mooney, hurry the hell up! This isn’t a research expedition!”

“It is now,” I shot back while scraping more yet-unformed goo into another sterile container. I held it up to him. “This may be the closest we ever get to capturing one of these things in its natural state.”

The captain studied the undulating slime beneath the glass with disgust. “Okay, you’ve got your samples. Now *move*!”

There was a flash of lightning and a thunderous report as the Thuban unleashed another salvo of plasma bolts behind us. “Agree. Must go now!”

We turned a corner just as someone shouted, “Frag out!”

Grenade. The captain grabbed me by my chest armor and shoved me to the floor. He jumped on top of me and pushed my face into the dirt. The tunnel lit up in a blaze of orange. The concussion knocked the breath out of me. The captain moaned as he rolled off of me, holding the back of one leg. Blood spurted from between his fingers.

I scrambled over to him and ripped open the fabric of his camo trousers. A smoldering metal fragment was embedded in his calf. “You’re hit.”

“No shit.” He pointed at the Thuban, who was pulling grenade fragments from his scales. “Your lizard friend may need you more than I do.”

I glanced over my shoulder as the Thuban dismissively flicked away a handful of metal shards. “Those guys throw daggers at each other for sport. He’ll be fine.”

I unsnapped the first aid bag from my hip as another grenade exploded ahead. This time our Thuban friend shielded us with his body, casually absorbing a back full of fragments. Among his kind, they’d be good for bragging rights later.

Ignoring his pain, the captain shouted into his mic. He was having to concentrate on each word, his ears undoubtedly ringing as badly as mine. “Report! What’s happening up there?”

The gunny replied with the chilling, measured calm of a man accustomed to applied violence. “Blasting our way out, sir. Small arms don’t work, rounds go right through. Blowing ’em up works just dandy.”

“Well good for that,” the captain muttered. “Mooney, get this damn thing out of me.”

I ran a scanner disk along his leg and shook my head. “Not yet. It’ll just make matters worse if I yank it out now. Best to leave it in until we’re aboard ship.” I wrapped a compression bandage tightly around his calf, then held up a silvery, cigar-shaped nanoprobe. “Unless you want one of these instead.”

He looked at the Reticulan anal probe with more horror than the wound in his own leg. “Yeah, no. I’m good.”

Thought so. I gave him a quick injection of painkillers and helped him to his feet. He couldn’t put any weight on his leg, and it would be a slow trip out with me supporting him. The Thuban scooped him up in his arms.

“This faster,” he said, and began running ahead. I scrambled to keep up. We had to dive for the deck one more time, with our reptilian friend again covering us with his body. I was just small enough for his tail to protect me.

We finally emerged into sunlight, covered in pungent slime. Dust whirled around us as the drop ship settled onto the ground ahead. We made for it in a dead run.

The Raiders lost two men that day, both to friendly fire. One caught a grenade fragment in the neck, a victim of the uniquely dreadful chaos that comes from a pitched battle in close quarters. The other I try not to think about. He was overcome by Skinnies, trapped in their slime as it overwhelmed him. It was already breaking down his tissue when someone on the team put him out of his misery. There was an investigation, but in the end his teammate was cleared. Any one of them would’ve done the same, and every member of the team stated they would’ve wanted someone to do it to them if they’d been in his shoes.

As chaotic as the whole operation felt, it was deemed successful. We brought back a lot of useful intelligence, which thankfully pulled me away from medic duty to work with the Reticulan and human docs to figure out exactly how Skinny metamorphosis worked. From that point on, I spent most of my time squirreled away in a heavily guarded lab sequencing their DNA and building physiological models from the samples we’d taken.

It turned out the pods were there to do the same thing. They couldn’t just touch you and turn into a simulacrum of a human, at least not right away. They needed live subjects first. I won’t get too deep into explaining

the mechanism because frankly it makes my stomach turn. I'll compare it to digestion and leave the rest for your imagination.

Once they have that DNA, it turns into a horror show. Any being that gets caught up by a Skinny in its dormant state—that is, a formless puddle of slime—is rapidly overcome and turned into a walking skin suit.

I didn't mention what happened on our way out. The captain was still in command despite the painkillers, and ordered the whole site to be taken out with something called a FAE bomb. Our drop ship turned about and let loose a single round that for all the world looked like a small nuke when it went off. The captain later explained to me that it was a fuel-air explosive, which works exceptionally well in enclosed environments. Like, say, a cave full of alien nasties.

I know what you're thinking: Nuke the site from orbit. Only way to be sure.

Of course, the whole thing had been a trap. They'd wanted us there to speed up their own research on human physiology. I like to think that blowing the site to hell slowed them down enough to make a difference.

The lab work we were doing was highly classified, but that didn't keep word from getting out. Everyone aboard, human, Thuban, or Reticulan, was a little more cautious. Not quite untrusting, but wary. Tentative. How could anyone be sure the person next to them at chow, at the armory, in their berthing spaces, wasn't a shape-shifter?

It took weeks for that nameless fear to die down. Only after a couple more successful operations did we finally begin to trust each other again. Everyone breathed a sigh of relief when our turn came to rotate back to Earth, even though we'd all be looking at a month in quarantine after landfall.

Ours had been the first real joint operation with humans and Thubans. From then on, every human unit had Thuban warriors attached to them, and vice versa. Regardless of nationality or service branch, the grunts blended with their reptilian partners much better than the sailors and airmen. Based on my own friendships with them from my Union days, that wasn't surprising. More than a few of the Marines on our ship even tried their hand at Thuban *ta'au'ae'he'lee* knife fighting. With appropriate body armor, of course. It was a hell of way to integrate Earth into the Galactic Union.

For myself, that marked the end of my time as an ersatz combat medic. Now that we know our enemy's secrets, Earth has decided I'm much more valuable as a scientist. And that's just fine with me.

I'm telling myself that while looking at a small puddle of Skinny goo in a level 4 containment lab as it desperately searches for an unwitting subject. In this case, it's a lab rat going about its business.

Considering that I'd once studied to be a vet, I really hate this part.

The translucent slime begins to coalesce, creeping toward the unsuspecting rodent. It makes contact, and the poor thing is quickly consumed. I let the process play out just long enough to collect the data we need. I know what's coming and can't stand to watch anymore. I push a scarlet button above the containment unit. It instantly fills with flame, putting the rat out of its misery and sending the Skinny to whatever hell awaits it.

Just like the man we'd left behind at Proxima Centauri.

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Alone

A story of the Buzzer War

Kevin Ikenberry

Chimera 92
Descending at 20,000 meters
Tau Ceti e

The Marines talked a good game about coolness during combat operations, bragging about how easily they could fall asleep while waiting for a combat drop. They bragged that Earth Maneuver Forces soldiers, like him, were anxious, undisciplined. That they were better despite their lack of experience. That their training was harder. Better. He took their jibes and insults in stride and with as much jovial banter as possible. Giving required the ability to take, after all. Counting his own experience, handling the young Marines was easy by comparison. Troubles light-years away on Earth were another matter.

Specialist Six Carson Balyeat closed the message dialog on his portable slate and left the email unopened. Unread. Leaving for another combat deployment soured his father's disposition. The eldest son always inherited the farm on Earth. Tradition, his father said. Legacy. Something that war didn't bring. War caused pain. Loss. Why the hell would any man go do it once, much less for a third time?

"You want glory? A nice memorial down in city park? You can have one of them without going to war, son."

You wouldn't understand, Dad. It's not about glory.

It's about…them.

Balyeat watched the young, self-described carefree Marines as the assault aircraft reached atmospheric interface. Combat insertions were seldom like the smooth, controlled approaches in training. At least they weren't jumping out of a perfectly good spacecraft this time. The target would've allowed it on any other habitable planet. Safety procedures on exoplanets were designed with a bias toward combat survival, and that meant more maneuvering and less concern for comfort during the flight. Especially here.

Tau Ceti e was a rocky super-Earth in the midst of Tau Ceti's habitable zone, but unlike Tau Ceti f, it wasn't exactly habitable to humans. Massive storms rocked the planet, sometimes as wide as a continent and possessing winds of several hundred kilometers per hour. Jet streams moved air at speeds in excess of Mach 2 all over the planet. Entry wasn't an easy proposition.

An indicator light over the troop door to Balyeat's right flashed red, indicating the aircraft had entered the atmosphere and had aerodynamic controls again. He risked a glance at the Marines slumped in the cargo web seats along the exterior of the fuselage. The team of seven, eight including Balyeat himself, came from all over Earth, swept up in the call to arms against the Buzzers a few years before.

Many of them had been in the Marines before the surge, serving in seemingly wasteful shipboard posts for security forces and other dead-end assignments. War meant more than a change of mission. This was an opportunity all of them wanted but hadn't been allowed for one reason or another. There were no FNGs in their entire detachment. Every expeditionary ship had always carried Marines, but now they enjoyed a true combat role, and that called for seasoned veterans, not fucking new guys.

Within seconds, the aircraft bucked hard to one side, rolling more than thirty degrees with a jerk. All but two of the Marines woke up and grasped the edge of the seat at the first bit of turbulence. Another opened her eyes, looked around, and stared back at Balyeat, a hint of a smile on her face.

Gunnery Sergeant Michaela Kowalski was a twelve-year veteran of the Marines and had perpetually turned down promotions to remain a gunnery sergeant in command of combat detachments. While those had been few and far between in the Marines of old, since the kickoff of the Buzzer War nearly three years before, she'd been busy. When the expeditionary forces were added to the battle groups and began carrying their own Marine detachments, she'd volunteered to lead one.

Kowalski often used the phrase "tip of the spear" in her nasal Pittsburgh accent when describing what her company of Marines did. The EMFS *Vespucci* carried a full infantry company of Marines, and for search operations like the one currently underway, four eight-Marine teams dropped with their own dedicated Chimera to different zones of the planet.

She retied her long brown hair into a low ponytail and studied the slate built into the gauntlet on the left wrist of her ATLAS suit, tapped a sequence

of keys, then stood. She took two steps toward Balyeat and dropped into the cargo netting beside him. Built to handle the heavy load, the seat flexed as she leaned back.

"You get those updates patched to the team?"

"I did, Gunny." Balyeat tapped on his own gauntlet. "Everybody's got the latest and greatest combat and self-defense package with enhanced snooper and sensor updates. Should be good to go."

"'Should be' isn't in the Marine lexicon, Balyeat." Kowalski grinned. "I know a *soldier* like you still doesn't understand that."

Balyeat smiled. "Just happy to be here doing my part, Gunny. Hope I can help the ball club."

"Shut up," she grunted, smiling.

The interservice rivalry was as old as time, but the truth was he liked Kowalski and he was sure she appreciated him. One of the more interesting changes of the Buzzer War was the reintroduction of the specialist rank at higher levels, above the traditional Specialist Four. Purists hated the idea that the specialist rank no longer belonged solely to the E-4 Mafia, whether it truly existed or not. But the reality was that in the twentieth century the specialist rank identified those with a particular competency area that was far greater than most. While an E-5 sergeant would be the same as a Specialist Five in rank and authority, one had more technical proficiency than the other. Nor did the distinction mean that one had more leadership capability or tactical proficiency than the other. In most cases, it was a question of schooling and specialized training.

In Balyeat's case, he'd become a master technician on the ATLAS suit two years before, and as part of the ongoing research and development with Task Force Victory. He'd volunteered for the Tau Ceti mission to ensure the ATLAS suits in possession of the Marines operating as part of the expeditionary force were as good as they could be. He'd lost friends and colleagues in the war, and after seeing combat himself on Heske and Trion-2, he pursued a different path working with the suits and their emerging technologies to make them better, stronger, faster, and deadlier. When this deployment ended, the ATLAS would be almost completely moved to the Marines. Balyeat wasn't sure that was the right idea, but such decisions were above his pay grade.

Movement to his right caught Balyeat's attention. He looked and saw Lieutenant Paolo Rios stepping out of the cockpit area and moving quickly

toward the maintenance rack where his ATLAS suit hung. While the look on Kowalski's face never changed, he heard her exhale slowly and powerfully through her nose. Their lieutenant had again deferred donning the ATLAS suit until the last possible moment. On his third combat mission with the Marine detachment, the Brazilian officer was eager and decently trained, but leadership by example seemed to be something he was incapable of doing. He'd once again be the last of the Marines to perform a pre-combat check and pre-combat inspection, and if he didn't do it within four minutes according to the mission timer on Balyeat's wrist, he'd be left behind. The standard for an ATLAS Marine to get into the suit, power it up, and have it ready for combat operations was one minute and thirty seconds. Rios was never that fast.

"Any news, Lieutenant?" Kowalski asked.

Rios looked up as he stepped into the ATLAS suit's legs. "Nothing much. We're coming off the night side through the terminator into daylight, so we'll at least have sun up over the targets when we get there."

Kowalski nodded. "We're still looking at potential ruins, is that right?"

Rios chuckled and put on an aw-shucks grin. "Given how many rocks we've looked at on this planet, maybe I should've been a geologist instead of an infantry officer."

Balyeat smiled, as did Kowalski. Rios had a decent sense of humor and used it well. If he could master things like time management and small-unit tactics, he'd be okay. Balyeat saw Rios look at his gauntlet and then up at Kowalski. There was an unasked question on his face. He wasn't seeing the action he wanted to. Kowalski's boots hit the deck with a sharp *clack* as she strode down the line, tapping each Marine's shoulder plate in sequence.

"Let's go, Devil Dogs," she barked. "You got your beauty sleep, now get your shit wired tight. Two minutes to drop."

Groans and rustling filled the cargo bay as five more sets of armor activated and flexed. The hum of power cells, seals hissing into place, and the metallic grind of gears in motion gave the space a rising tempo. With it came voices.

Lance Corporal Ellis Okoye locked in his helmet and twisted it once for good measure. The lanky kid from Nigeria was faster than the others at pretty much everything and hated waiting. He was still new enough to the Corps to realize "hurry up and wait" wasn't just a funny saying. "Anyone else feel like we've been on standby since last Thursday?"

“Feels more like Friday the 13th,” muttered Sergeant Ramon “Brick” Santoro as he hefted his heavy rig from the lock cradle. “Or Groundhog Day. Again.”

“Ten bucks says Brick’s gun jams before we hit the ground,” said Private First Class Jessica Campbell, snapping a fresh magazine into her rifle. Her tone was playful, but her hands trembled just a little. Balyeat knew it wasn’t fear but barely contained adrenaline. Campbell was a killer.

“I don’t jam,” Santoro rumbled without looking at her. “I just reload loud.”

Balyeat watched Corporal Noa Tanaka, the team’s point man and sniper, check the seals on her knee joints and load a magazine into her long-barreled rifle. Then she nodded once, silently, at him. She was the other Marine unbothered by the sudden turbulence. Balyeat wasn’t sure anything bothered the quiet woman. He grinned.

“You’re too quiet, Tanaka.” Balyeat noted. “Makes me nervous.”

“She spoke before we hit the ground on a mission once,” said Corporal Sasha Monroe, the corpsman and UAV operator. “Didn’t like it. Creeped me out.”

Okoye tilted his helmet toward her. “Doc? Why are all you medics weird?”

“Because we know exactly what your insides look like.” She thumped the back of his helmet for emphasis.

“I speak only when there is something to say.” Tanaka grinned at Balyeat. “With this group, they say everything on their minds all the time. A constant typhoon. Why add to the wind?”

“Listen up, Grizzlies. Final drop checks now,” Kowalski called, her voice low and even as she moved toward the Chimera’s rear ramp. She secured her helmet and triggered the external speakers on her suit. “Two minutes out. Lieutenant, you squared away?”

Rios snapped into the last of his gauntlet seals, straining a little as he rushed to catch up. “Almost there, Gunny.”

Kowalski didn’t look at him. “You’ve got ninety seconds, sir.”

Rios didn’t reply. Balyeat was already standing, helmet sealed, suit and weapon at the ready. His ATLAS suit felt like an extension of his spine, keyed to every flex and twitch. He scanned the team. Young, seasoned, sarcastic, dangerous. All of them were fully ready, helmets on and weapons in hand. They’d trained hard and worked well together, yet despite multiple

searches, an air of overconfidence hung over them. As if breaking that, Kowalski spoke in his helmet over the comms loop.

“This planet’s unpredictable. We don’t know if what’s down there is leftover Buzzer trash, rubble from a past nest, or something brand-new. Eyes up. Trust your Interface. Trust each other. When the light goes green, step off like you mean it. Set the rally point from SOP and be ready when the lieutenant gives the go order.”

The red panel above the lift turned amber. The Chimera’s nose pitched toward the ground as it descended rapidly through the planetary dawn.

Monroe brought up her rifle. “Showtime, boys and girls.”

Campbell smirked. “Try to keep up, Doc.”

“With you? Easy.” She grinned and stomped aft. The two young women were bunkmates and friends despite their competitive banter. They touched fists as they moved to the ramp.

“Ladies first,” Okoye muttered as he stepped aside dramatically.

Campbell grinned. “Damn right.”

Santoro cracked his neck left and right. “Just another rock hunt, huh?”

Balyeat rolled his shoulders once and locked eyes with Tanaka. She gave a tiny nod toward the drop lights. He followed her gaze and saw them switch from amber to flashing green. The ramp opened with a hiss. Light spilled in from the widening crack in the fuselage as it swung down to the open position over the hostile, cold planet below.

“One minute, Marines.” Kowalski turned to the open end of the fuselage. The Chimera rocked back and forth in a sudden gust. The ATLAS didn’t move thanks to its magnetic boot soles locked on the metal deck, but the visual made his head spin. Kowalski laughed on the channel. “A little breezy out there today. Thirty seconds! Get ready!”

“Brace for landing!” Rios yelped into the channel. No one replied, though Balyeat could’ve sworn he heard Kowalski’s eyes roll inside her helmet. The lieutenant’s status icon went green as the Chimera’s nose lifted for landing.

Better late than never.

At touchdown, the drop light turned solid green and the floor magnets disengaged. The team disembarked the Chimera by standard operating procedure, running directly off the ramp approximately three hundred meters before assembling in a loose perimeter and taking a knee, each Marine facing outward. Balyeat’s first impression of the planet was that it

reminded him of the staked plains of West Texas—a place he had traveled as a boy exploring some of the towns where his parents had lived during their adolescence. He hadn't felt a connection to the land then, but the stark beauty of the Llano Estacado had stayed with him. Tau Ceti e reminded him of the same austere beauty and desolation filled with stunted, gnarled flora in all directions.

The Chimera had set down roughly five hundred meters from their target: a large mesa-like structure with multiple canyons visible along its perimeter. Captain Bridgwater and the expeditionary leadership aboard the *Vespucci* had identified one canyon as the start point for the search. The mesa itself wasn't necessarily tall, and it would be relatively easy for them to climb should the mission call for it, but along the base of the structure were numerous inconclusive radar returns. Something artificial buried beneath meters of sediment, most likely. Their target.

Balyeat's position on the perimeter was roughly ninety degrees offset from the team's forward march direction. Gunnery Sergeant Kowalski was next to him on his right, with Tanaka posted at twelve o'clock taking point for their approach.

"Perimeter set. Listening halt," Lieutenant Rios said in a whisper through their encrypted comms.

Balyeat, during a left-to-right scan across the terrain, looked down at the gauntlet display on his left forearm and activated his snooper package. The ATLAS suit's extensive and capable sensor suite added its own readings to his assessment of the terrain, providing far greater accuracy across the visible, infrared, acoustic, and electromagnetic spectrums. The listening halt was an infantry procedure as old as warfare itself—stop and listen in a new environment, especially when relying on one's own senses. Get a feel for what might be out there. With the most sensitive sensor package ever issued to an infantryman, the Marines were still doing the same things they'd always done.

Balyeat looked down again and, just below the screen, scratched a sixth line with the tip of his right index finger. *Six planets.* One corner of his mouth curled in a private smile and he brought his eyes back up. *You wouldn't understand that either, Dad.*

He sighed. *Time to get to work.* "Siobhán, status of scans?"

Each ATLAS suit carried an instance of the Interface: a semiautonomous intelligence that collected, correlated, and analyzed sensor

data; assisted with communications and navigation; and could even administer lifesaving nanites or medication in case of incapacitation. The newest Interface patch was fully customizable to the operator. Gone were the default settings and personalities. He knew Monroe called her Interface "Leonardo" and had given him a smooth male voice after some old holofilm star or something. Balyeat had chosen a female voice with an Irish lilt. He called her Siobhán.

"*Sensor sweep complete,*" Siobhán replied. "*No life signs. No emissions. Potential targets from the* Vespucci *are marked on your HUD.*"

"I see them. Thank you, Siobhán."

"*You're welcome,*" the Interface replied. "*Lieutenant Rios is correlating the data now.*"

"How's my connection to the other suits?" As the ATLAS technician, Balyeat had a secondary set of communication tools that allowed him to monitor the health and connectivity of every suit in the team. It wasn't just a damage control network, it gave him insight into the entire squad's operational profile.

"*All systems nominal. Sergeant Santoro's left knee joint is approaching a maintenance threshold.*"

"Make a note. When we're back on the ship, I'll take a look."

"*Acknowledged.*"

Balyeat glanced over his right shoulder toward the mesa. From his position, the escarpment ringing the rock formation looked to be ten to twenty meters high in most places. Its hue resembled terra-cotta. If he didn't know better, he might have assumed it was sandstone, like the formations in the American Southwest, but he wouldn't know for sure until they got closer. It would be just one part of the investigations to come in this mission zone.

"*Sensor sweep correlated. No targets identified.*"

Rios chirped on the radio, "On your feet. Move out. Tanaka, you've got point. Standard team wedge, max dispersion."

"Bravo Team, on me," Kowalski's voice cut in. Balyeat and Monroe stepped up alongside her and fanned out to their respective positions. Rios would lead the others as Alpha Team. When they were roughly fifteen meters from Kowalski, she said, "Monroe, get me a comms UAV up with an active sensor package. I want to see beyond visual range."

"Copy, Gunny. Need thirty seconds."

“You’ve got it,” Kowalski replied.

Balyeat focused on walking across the rocky, uneven terrain. There were places where the ATLAS boots dug into the sand and other places where it nearly felt like concrete against his feet. As he walked, his dual-barreled heavy cannon hung at the low ready, muzzle pointed down and his firing hand near the trigger assembly. He swept the horizon with his eyes, then found himself focusing more and more on the ground as if the stunted, gnarled vegetation hid something. Irrationally, his mind flashed to snakes and his own childhood encounter with a rattlesnake at age ten. He shoved the thought away and kept moving.

“Mosquito One ready for launch,” Monroe said.

“Send it,” Kowalski said.

Balyeat turned and saw a puff of propellent from the back of Monroe’s suit, near the left shoulder. The small, rocket-assisted projectile shot skyward. He followed its trajectory into the purple-gray sky. Three seconds later, another puff indicated the UAV had deployed.

Monroe immediately reported, “Mosquito One is up. Sensors sweeping. I’ve got nothing in visual range, Gunny.”

“Keep it out there and in front. Tanaka, what do you have?”

Balyeat glanced toward the point position and realized Tanaka had slowed considerably. She was still moving with her sniper rifle at the low ready, but she appeared to be creeping forward.

“Gunny, I’ve got a whole lot of stuff on the ground up here.”

“You’re gonna have to be more specific than that,” Kowalski said.

“I’m really not sure what I’m looking at. It’s almost like…something happened here. Something large and particularly violent.”

“Corporal Tanaka,” Rios said over the channel, “I need a proper situation report and description of what you’re seeing. You’re my forward eyes.”

Kowalski smoothly cut in, “Tanaka, give me a camera feed. Monroe, relay it off Mosquito One.”

“Relay active,” Monroe said.

“Camera on,” Tanaka replied.

Given Balyeat’s connection to all the suits, he found the feed being piped into Kowalski’s helmet and tapped in. After a moment, he realized what he was looking at. What appeared to be bones were scattered in all directions. There were no coherent skeletons, but it was clear that

something had happened. Something big. Whether it was herding animals that had fought over territory or something far more modern and violent, he couldn't say.

It's like a graveyard.

Tanaka kicked at bones with her feet as she moved. Then she froze and carefully extended the left boot of her ATLAS, lifting something from the ground. "Gunny, I have a Class One object. This is definitely a weapon."

"Marines, up on the bounce," Rios said. "Perimeter around Tanaka—double-time it. Move."

Balyeat easily shuffled the ATLAS into a jog even with the planet's gravitational pull. Tau Ceti e was roughly three times the size of Earth, and while it didn't have the same type of iron core, its mass inflicted a gravitational force of approximately 2.2 times the force of gravity on them. The ATLAS made it seem like they were back on Earth. It handled the additional weight and mass but still forced the human body to do a little more than normal. As they reached Tanaka's position, Rios approached the corporal as she crept through the bones. He pointed into the distance.

"The bones follow a pattern. They're headed back toward the mouth of that canyon over there. Gunny, I want you to take Bravo Team. Set yourselves in a support-by-fire position looking down the mouth of that canyon. I'm taking Alpha Team inside."

There was no reply on the open channel. Balyeat knew Kowalski was taking the lieutenant aside on a private channel to try to talk him out of the risky move. Separating forces and placing one team in restrictive terrain was less than optimal. After a minute, Kowalski came back on the net.

"Bravo Team, on me. We're going to set support by fire. The lieutenant's going to take Alpha Team down that canyon. Monroe, I need Mosquito One hovering over the entrance and moving in front of them for a digital map. Get Mosquito Two ready to fly. Does it have a weapons package?"

"Aye, aye, Gunny," Monroe replied. "I've got two air-to-ground missiles. They're low yield, but they'll do the trick."

"Very well," Kowalski said. "Balyeat, I want you oriented down the canyon with the heavy weapon. Tanaka's going to move to higher ground above you; along the wall up there."

An icon appeared on Balyeat's HUD showing Tanaka's new position. Mosquito One's mapping functions populated as well. Inside the canyon

were several columns of weathered rock stabbing upward. From Balyeat's position, he could see three or four of them near the mouth of the canyon itself and the top of another in the distance.

"Siobhán, tap that feed and send a holographic map to the squad, even the lieutenant. Mark his as priority."

"Acknowledged," the Interface replied. *"Digital map sent. Would you like me to report this to the* Vespucci*?"*

Balyeat almost stopped in surprise. He didn't recall any of their discoveries being called up to the ship. He flicked to a private channel. "Hey, Gunny, we need to make a report, don't we?"

"Shit. Just a minute."

Roughly thirty seconds later, Rios came on the channel sounding a little too composed. Rehearsed. "Santiago, this is Grizzly One. We have evidence of multiple species on the ground—remains, bones. No tissue that we've been able to see. The debris field is more than two hundred meters at its widest and extends toward a canyon along the southern side of our target mesa. I've arranged Bravo Team in a support-by-fire position and Alpha Team is conducting reconnaissance into restrictive terrain. How copy, over?"

"Grizzly One, this is Santiago," replied the radio operator aboard the *Vespucci*. Santiago was the brevity term for the ship. While not exactly the name of one of the historical ships Amerigo Vespucci used to explore the New World in the 1500s, it was close enough. *"Understood. Godzilla Six concurs. Over."*

"Santiago, Grizzly One. Roger. Out."

Balyeat and Monroe established their position roughly fifty meters from the first column, pointed almost directly northeast into the opening of the canyon. Reconnaissance data from Mosquito One showed the canyon curved left and right for more than three hundred meters before twisting hard left, then right again. Inside the canyon, the sandstone was striated and layered, much like slot canyons on Earth. Water clearly flowed through the area at one time and, depending on any nearby storms, might again. Water in a slot canyon moved fast and created a dangerous situation.

"Siobhán, tap Santiago's atmospheric feeds. Any storms in the vicinity?"

"There are no storms or precipitation events within twelve hundred nautical miles."

Balyeat nodded. At least it would be dry.

Sergeant Santoro and Lance Corporal Okoye passed on the right, leading Alpha Team into the canyon. Santoro smiled and jerked his chin in smug acknowledgment. Okoye was focused on the ground ahead, silent and wide-eyed. Reality setting in.

“I have eyes on Alpha,” Tanaka called over the channel. “Can see past the first spire to what looks like a curved wall. Will need to reposition when you get there.”

“All right, fine. Alpha Team,” Rios commanded. “Let’s go.”

A chime indicating a private connection wanting to connect caught his ear. A window opened on his HUD. Kowalski.

“Yeah, Gunny?” Balyeat said.

“I want to see what the LT sees.”

What was the point of having integrated sensor suites if you couldn’t see and hear what one of your elements was doing? There was nothing that said he couldn’t tap into the lieutenant’s feed after all. When Kowalski had learned how good Balyeat was, not only with the ATLAS physical systems but the Interface and its sensor suite, she’d made a deal to be able to tap into other suits as necessary. The idea wasn’t to second-guess or even to armchair-control the event from afar; she merely wanted to know what was happening as it happened.

“You want the lieutenant’s full feed?”

“Yeah, everything. But do me a favor and push whatever you’re seeing to all of our team.”

“Everybody?” Balyeat blurted. While not unauthorized, it was an unusual request.

“Yes, everybody.” The edge returned to her voice. “If we’re going to support by fire, I need to know what they’re seeing and how we’re able to engage it.”

“Fair enough. I have the feed. Relaying it now.”

“Bravo Team, listen up,” Kowalski said on the team channel. “Relaying in what the lieutenant’s seeing from his element. Not a word, you get me? Over.”

No one replied, which Balyeat assumed was exactly what Kowalski had wanted. Over the platoon channel, he heard Rios talking to Okoye and Santoro in the lead. Rios chose to keep Campbell near him. She was the

best marksman in the team except for Tanaka and, given her tactical prowess, Balyeat appreciated his choice.

"Okay, you two. Extend, move around to the left of that column ahead," Rios said. "Campbell fall in behind and cover us."

They were firmly inside the box canyon at this point. Santoro moved to the left of the rocky spire, which stood roughly four meters tall. Between the spire and the canyon wall to the south was a space about two meters wide. Okoye stepped that direction—and froze. His left fist came off his weapon and he held it rigidly above his head.

The signal was universal. Freeze.

"What is it?" Rios barked.

"Sir, I think you'd better get up here." Okoye moved forward a few steps to establish security. "I've got twelve o'clock on the route of march. Remains behind me now. Class One."

"Moving up alongside you," Santoro said.

Rios was moving, according to the feed, at a good jog. He glanced over his shoulder. "Stay behind me, Campbell."

"Aye, sir."

Rios moved into the canyon, roughly seventy meters from the opening, and angled to where Okoye stood frozen over what appeared to be a fully intact skeleton. "What's the big deal, Okoye? It's dead."

"Yeah, sir, it is. But…look." Okoye pointed. "What's that look like to you?"

"Looks like…a dinosaur," Rios said. "Interface, what kind of dinosaur is this?"

Rios's Interface replied in its toneless default setting. *"The skeleton has no Earth analog, but its skull structure is reminiscent of Deinonychus. This species, which could grow up to 3.4 meters long, lived on Earth during the Early and Late Cretaceous Period, about one hundred million years ago."*

"Interface says it's kinda like a Deinonychus," Rios said over the channel. "I don't understand what the big deal is. It's just—it's just a skeleton."

"Sir," Okoye said quietly, "this is fresh and complete."

"What?"

"Not like recently, but fresh." Okoye took a breath, composing himself. "This skeleton is complete and hasn't completely decomposed to

the point where the bones would disengage and scatter. It's been dead a few decades, but it's still…together. Mostly. Look here; this appears to be some type of equipment belt underneath it. Worn and eroded, but still coherent."

Rios stepped closer. "I can't see that. What equipment belt? What the hell are you talking about? Move out of the way."

Balyeat saw Rios push Okoye's ATLAS aside with his left hand. He knelt down next to the dinosaur skeleton, pointing the camera on his helmet directly at the remains. There was clearly something there, and it was definitely artificial. One clawed appendage, folded underneath the skeleton, appeared to be grasping some kind of tool. Maybe even a weapon.

"Yeah, there's something there," Rios said. "Let me just—"

Rios touched the bones and a deep rumble filled the air. From above, several large rocks tumbled into the canyon.

"Rockfall!" Kowalski shouted.

On the feed, Rios stood and the feed cut out. Balyeat checked his HUD. The indicators for suit connections to Rios, Santoro, and Okoye turned black.

"Lieutenant!" Kowalski barked. "Lieutenant, answer me! Bravo Team, up! Self-defense packages to maximum. Balyeat, get in there!"

Balyeat didn't respond; he started running. When he reached Campbell, she followed him into the swirling dust and debris, her mouth agape.

"Monroe, what do you see on sensors?" Kowalski asked on the channel.

"Something's moving on the far side of the canyon—on top of the escarpment."

"Gunny, permission to move higher," Tanaka broke in. "I can't see anything from my post."

"Go," Kowalski ordered. "Get up there and see what you can find. I need Mosquito One with its cameras on whatever that is."

Monroe sounded rattled. "Gunny, I don't have control of Mosquito One. It's giving me an EMI warning and trying to RTB."

Electromagnetic interference—a blanket term for anything interfering with device operations across the EM spectrum. In this case, the command-and-control frequencies from Monroe's ATLAS to her UAV were being disrupted, and it wanted to return to base. The last thing they needed.

Balyeat flipped on his sensor suite and swept the area, searching for the source of the EMI. He couldn't find it. "Gunny, I've got a negative on any emitter nearby. Recommend everyone go full hot with sensors."

"You heard him, Marines. Snooper and sensors full hot. Monroe, get that thing under control. Tanaka, give me eyes on whatever's up there. Balyeat, get into that goddamn canyon. Now!"

Campbell ran beside him, her eyes on the canyon walls above. Inside the canyon, dust swirled and then settled. Several large gray boulders, out of place against the red rock walls, had fallen on top of the Marines and the alien remains, blocking the pathway by the stone column.

The canyon narrowed, its course partially veiled by swirling grit kicked up from the rockfall. His HUD flickered as sensor packets filtered information—heat, movement, radiation—but there was nothing coherent yet. Just interference and static. Ahead, he could already make out the bodies of Okoye and Santoro near the base of the tall, weathered spire that jutted from the canyon floor like a broken fang. Both were partially covered by boulders, their visible remains twisted grotesquely.

"Gunny, I've got no life signs ahead," Monroe called, her voice tight. "Still no visual confirmation, but something's moving. Up on the rim. North side of the canyon. It's fast."

"I'm not seeing it," Tanaka said from her elevated perch. "Moving to get an angle."

"I'm still negative on an emitter," Balyeat added. "No jammer detected but the spectrum is crap."

The wind picked up and a thin curtain of dust blew across the canyon floor. He was thirty meters from the spire when Kowalski darted up behind them, weapon up, checking the scene. Something moved at the base of the spire. A chunk of rock thumped to the ground and hairline fractures spider-webbed up the length of the stone monolith.

"Stop!" he shouted. "Gunny, pull back!"

The rock shrieked. A sound like grinding metal filled the air, and then the entire structure shuddered. Red dust sprang out from the base as the entire spire tilted, cracked in half, and tumbled forward.

"Move!" Balyeat yelled.

The spire came down in a roaring avalanche of stone. Its base sheared free and slammed down into the canyon with the sound of a dropped skyscraper. Fractured stone slabs tumbled outward like thrown playing

cards. The force of the impact lifted a wall of dust and debris that obscured everything. Kowalski spun. Her suit jerked as the self-defense package fired tiny jets in the boots and on the ATLAS' leg joints as if leaping for safety, but a sizable chunk of stone impacted the back of her ATLAS and careened off her head. As she fell to the sand, Balyeat feared the worst, but his HUD said otherwise. Kowalski was alive. Stunned.

Balyeat skidded to a halt just short of the collapse zone, eyes wide as his HUD struggled to cut through the chaos. "Campbell, pull Gunny out of there and check her out. Monroe, stay with that Skeeter."

The young Marine stood still, her mouth open. Balyeat found his command voice. Just like on Heske. "Campbell! Move your ass. Gunny is alive and needs help. Go!"

She moved. He surged forward through the veil of dust and found Okoye half-buried in shattered rock, his legs caught beneath a slab the size of a truck. The young Marine's head and helmet were missing. Dark blood stained the sandy soil.

"Tanaka? Do you have visual on the threat?"

"Negative! I'm repositioning now. Climbing higher. I've got elevation, but visibility's crap with this dust."

Calm fell over Balyeat's mind. Disjointed, adrenaline-fueled thoughts coalesced into a plan of action in milliseconds. They needed information and communications support assets. Like yesterday.

Balyeat turned to Monroe. "Mosquito One?"

"Still under EMI," Monroe replied. "Trying to get it back. Switching to line of sight. Commanding through Tanaka's suit. What about Gunny?"

Impressed, Balyeat replied, "Let me worry about her. Get control of your Skeeter and find that emitter. When you do, take it out."

"Got it."

"Tanaka, move as you need, but keep an eye on us moving into the canyon." A burst of static made him release the transmit button and wait until it passed. "Campbell, cover me while I check Gunny. If I need you, Monroe, I'll let you know. If you see something, Tanaka, kill it."

Dust continued to curl off the shattered spire as Balyeat crouched next to Kowalski, his pulse thudding in his ears. The now-still canyon surrounded them with an unnerving silence. Kowalski stirred, groaning into the channel.

"Jesus," she muttered. "This wasn't natural."

“No way,” Balyeat replied. “You okay?”

“I’ll make it.” She pushed up with her arms and rolled over until she was sitting on the sandy ground. “SITREP?”

“The spire collapsed. Fractures at the base look artificial. Could’ve been drilled or pre-weakened. Collapse was too clean, and I’m not sure how you only got hit in the head, Gunny. Glad you’re still with us.”

“Thanks.” Kowalski held out a hand intending Balyeat pull her to her feet. He did, and she asked, “Self-defense package works, huh? You thinking booby trap?”

“I think so, yeah.”

Kowalski turned to him. “Okay, good job securing the area. We’ve got a threat we can’t locate and a canyon that smells like a goddamn ambush. Without better SA, we’re screwed.”

“Copy,” Balyeat said, already turning. Situational awareness was everything, as was maintaining a proper scope of the operation. Especially if it called for help. “Do we want to call this in? Get some air support?”

Kowalski’s hesitation told him everything he needed to know. Given their relative punishment over the last twenty years, Marines didn’t put much faith in Fleet for much of anything, and air support was at the top of that list. Kowalski, like most career Marines, believed the Corps could do things for themselves, like they had always done. While Earth Maneuver Forces had taken many of those assets away over the last two decades, the sudden reintroduction of cooperation and trust didn’t come lightly. Not yet.

She shook her head. “Priority air support is four hundred klicks out. At best speed, they’d be here in a couple of minutes. This’ll be over by then unless we get our shit together.”

Balyeat forced his face to stay neutral. “What do you want to do, Gunny?”

Kowalski pointed at the two visible rims of the slot canyon. “I’ve got Tanaka on the north side. She’s going to get higher. Monroe? Get Mosquitoes One and Two over the canyon. Full-spectrum analysis, everything we can sweep. Relay comms above the EMI range, relay full-motion video. Relay everything. Whatever band you can to punch through the jamming.”

“Pre-launch checklist for Mosquito Two initiated. I have control of Mosquito One, but I need to keep her close, Gunny. Line-of-sight laser is best.”

Kowalski faced the rock spire and the canyon walls beyond. “I’m going to join Tanaka on the north rim. Given the instability of that column and how the cliff on the south side looks, I’m not getting anywhere near it. Tanaka and I will secure the high ground. You two,” she pointed at Balyeat and Campbell, “are going down into the canyon to seeing what’s down there. Monroe will stay between us. Stay away from the walls and spires.”

Balyeat’s jaw tightened under the edge of his helmet. They’d already split their forces once and three Marines were dead.

He said nothing.

“If there’s something in the area,” Kowalski continued, “you’re either going to kill it in that box canyon or push it up to the rim. The UAVs will see it and we can prosecute the target with air-to-ground from Mosquito Two. Tanaka and I will bring fire down if needed.”

When he didn’t immediately reply, she turned back and glared at him through her faceplate. “You catch that?”

Balyeat nodded, but the nod turned into a shake of his head. “I mean… we’re not dealing with a wild animal. If that collapsed spire really was a trap, it’s pretty damn smart. We need to make our response just as smart.”

Kowalski frowned. “You saying my plan isn’t smart, Balyeat?”

He raised a hand in a quick stopping gesture. “That’s not what I’m saying. I think it’s best we call in air support, evac our dead, and not tempt fate here.”

A dry chitter of laughter popped over the squad net. Balyeat and Kowalski both turned toward Campbell. The young Marine was pointing down the canyon.

“Even if it is smart,” she said, “we get it down there and we can kill it. If it doesn’t fall in front of us, it’s going to scramble up the wall again and Tanaka can put a round through its skull before it even thinks about its next move. We have the initiative.”

Kowalski nodded. “This is the right call. This is how we should do it.” She pointed at Balyeat. “Unless you’ve got something connected to the suits that can give us intel, we go with my plan.”

Inspiration struck. Balyeat lowered the barrel of his heavy cannon and tapped furiously on his left gauntlet. “Hang on, Gunny. There’s a chance I might be able to tap into Okoye’s helmet.”

“His helmet?”

“Yeah. Helmets carry a separate battery just in case the main suit loses power. It’s designed to power the emergency locator beacon and onboard cameras. Think of it like a black box; same methodology. If the battery’s intact, we might be able to reactivate the camera and get a signal. If that thing took it, that is.”

“Triangulate its position off the two UAVs,” Kowalski finished, nodding. “That’s a damn good idea. Can you make it happen?”

“Trying to locate the relay now,” Balyeat said. He worked the controls on his gauntlet for thirty seconds. “Nothing so far.”

“Forget it,” she said. “I’m headed to Tanaka’s position. We need to keep moving. If that thing’s in the canyon, you move in that direction. If it’s on the rim, Tanaka and I will push toward it and see what we’re dealing with.” She paused and lowered her voice. “As for the bodies, mark them. Make sure we’ve got coordinates. When this is over, we’ll come back for them.” She glanced at the broken stone where Rios was buried. “I’ve never left a Marine behind and I’m sure as hell not going to start now.”

Monroe stood. “Gunny, Mosquito Two is ready for launch. One is overhead, but EMI’s still blanketing the area. It’s not natural. There’s a signal, but it’s dirty. Data signatures, but nothing like a pattern, just random ones and zeros. It’s not anything known. I have a solid laser lock, but if I lose that, we’ll lose the Skeeter.”

Kowalski frowned. “Launch Mosquito Two. Maintain direct laser. Recon sweep low and tight, eyes on those canyon walls.”

“Five seconds,” Monroe replied. The UAV shot out of her suit and deployed overhead. “Positive comms. Beginning sweep.”

“Monroe, move back a hundred meters to a command position.” Kowalski pointed out of the canyon. “Tie your data feeds to the Skeeters and be ready for anything.”

“Aye, aye, Gunny,” Monroe and Campbell said in unison.

Balyeat locked eyes with Kowalski and nodded. She returned the gesture and started for the north canyon wall. Balyeat resisted the urge to watch her climb toward Tanaka’s position on the upper surface. Instead, he dialed in the feeds from the two UAVs overhead and found the offending noise signal that threatened to blanket their command-and-control frequencies. Using the two, he found a possible emitter position and sent it to UAV Two for closer inspection.

“What was that?” Monroe asked as she made her way out of the canyon.

Balyeat tapped his transmit button. “I have a possible emitter location. Need your bird to take a closer look.”

“If we lose the laser—”

He interrupted, “Yeah, I know. The emitter could blanket the C2 frequencies. Use the camera and the IR sensor at max range. Make sure to relay the direction they’re looking. That might be enough, okay?”

“Roger that. Increasing their spread by distance and altitude. Should get a better position.”

“Why make anything easy?” Balyeat grinned.

“Okay, good signal. Setting a waypoint. Marked.”

An icon appeared on Balyeat’s compass ring on his HUD. “Got it. Is it on the rim?”

“Can’t tell, Sergeant.”

Balyeat bit his tongue. He was technically equivalent to a sergeant, but a specialist. Still, he understood what she meant and he appreciated both her professionalism and the respect she showed him. “Okay, as soon as Gunny and Tanaka are ready, we’ll move out. Keep the location marked and if we see something we’ll take it out. But keep the Skeeters away from it. You set?”

“I am.” The relief in Monroe’s voice was palpable, but before he could say more, Kowalski called out.

Kowalski sounded winded. “I’ve linked up with Tanaka. We have eyes on Monroe below us and the UAV feeds. Balyeat, move out and we’ll see if we can clear the emitter and the hostile, whatever it is.”

“Moving now.” Balyeat nodded to Campbell, and they crept deeper into the canyon.

“Your heart rate is abnormally high,” Siobhán reported.

“I know, Siobhán.”

“Snoopers are active. Abnormal noise levels on frequencies between three hundred megahertz and one gigahertz. Be advised, the canyon walls are hampering my observations.”

Balyeat nodded. “Mine, too.”

“Heads up, team, I’m patching in Godzilla Six and Santiago. They’re listening in now. Over.” Balyeat hefted the cannon and walked deeper into

the canyon, Campbell close behind. He heard Kowalski over the converted channel. “Godzilla Six, this is Grizzly Four, over.”

The connection hissed with static, and while he could recognize Captain Bridgwater over the channel, the words were indecipherable. He glanced at the spectrum analyzer readout on his gauntlet and shook his head.

“Jammer is up,” Monroe chirped. “Hang on…got it! Emitter located. Generating shooting solution.”

“Kill it,” ordered Kowalski. She didn’t ask to know where it was or anything. Balyeat decided to get the feed.

“Siobhán, move the UAV feed into the channel. Find the target and mark it on my HUD.” He switched to the open channel. “Let’s go, Campbell. Get on my six.”

“You got it.”

Balyeat was already running deeper into the canyon. “Siobhán, give me countermeasures at the ready.”

“Acknowledged. Countermeasures are active but will degrade real-time communications.”

Can’t be helped.

He rounded the first curve of the canyon. Red and orange layers curled into the distance in surreal rock waves. Focusing on the path and all the areas for a threat to be took every ounce of concentration Balyeat could muster. His eyes swept right to left. Up the canyon walls and down. Every nook. Every cranny. Every shadow. In the forests of Heske the goddamn Buzzers could’ve been anywhere, silent and camouflaged until they screamed.

zzzzzZZzZZZZZZ ZZZZZZZ ZZZZZZZZZ

He shook his head violently to clear his thoughts. Merely the memory of the sound caused sweat to break out across his forehead. Indicators for his heart rate still showed it was elevated, his breathing shallow and fast, but not from the running. Another blind corner loomed ahead, the canyon snapping back violently to the right into shadows. He slowed, willing his body to comply and calm down. There weren’t any Buzzers here. They wouldn’t have been so subtle as the jamming or the booby-trapped rockfalls.

Rockfalls.

Balyeat glanced up to the right as something moved. A large boulder, easily the size of his upper body, careened off the canyon wall toward him. The suit froze and quickly backed up as the boulder fell to the ground in front of him with a thud. Another save.

Shit-hot system for a change.

"Eyes up, right side." He radioed to Monroe. "Kill that goddamn emitter!"

"Target acquired! Firing!"

Above them, Balyeat heard the UAV release both of its air-to-ground missiles. A half second later, the missiles detonated with a dull *thud-thud* against a target along the upper surface of the canyon's southern edge. The interference cleared from all frequencies at the same time they heard something through the audio processors on the ATLAS suits. Something… awful. The sound reminded Balyeat of a bleating goat, but deeper and unearthly. A cry of surprise. A howl of pain.

A full-throated roar of rage.

Balyeat saw Campbell step back and angle behind him as the creature's howls echoed off the canyon walls. More movement above caught his eye. His brain instinctively registered something flying toward them as a threat. Balyeat brought up his right arm to protect the faceplate of his ATLAS as a shower of fist-sized and larger rocks slammed down around them like an errant blast from a massive shotgun.

A rock the size of a bowling ball slammed into his gauntlet and shattered, showering his faceplate with dust and debris before scattering onto the ground near his booted feet. Damage indicators lit in his faceplate, but he ignored them. Something like a rock and bone tool burst against Campbell's left shoulder. After the impact Balyeat saw a shape larger than he had originally thought possible leap across the canyon, clearing a gap over four meters wide, seemingly from a standstill. In that brief second, he saw it and gasped.

It appeared lizard-like, with mustard-colored skin, long, slotted oval eyes, and large, exposed teeth—including multiple incisors at the front of its angled head. It was easily the size of a bull moose, perhaps larger. It would have dwarfed Balyeat, even in his ATLAS. Its skin appeared to be covered by two different types of armor. One was made from a dull, greenish-gray material fashioned into spikes and a curving shell, almost like the protective fringe of a triceratops. A crazy thought ran through Balyeat's

mind: The armor was the bones of another enemy, one whose skeleton they hadn't seen yet. In the same millisecond, he noticed the armor across the beast's shoulders and down its arms was made of bones. Those bones matched the smaller skeletons they had seen outside the canyon and scattered on the canyon floor.

Holy shit.

As the alien touched down at full speed on the far side of the canyon, Balyeat heard Tanaka's rifle fire twice in rapid succession. Bits of armor sprayed off the beast. Balyeat was sure he saw the rounds penetrate both armor and skin, throwing blood and tissue across the top of the canyon to no effect. The beast howled again and accelerated to the north and east at high speed.

"Monroe, follow it!" Balyeat yelled.

"I have full control of Mosquito One. In pursuit," Monroe said.

Balyeat saw the feed in his faceplate pick up again as the UAV raced north, following the beast. "Capture everything. Make sure your recorders are on."

"They're on," Monroe snapped.

Balyeat was about to say something else when he remembered they were still in the canyon, likely in the beast's nest, and there could be more of the things. He brought his eyes back down to the local area and surveyed the scene, scanning left to right. The canyon narrowed as it progressed farther northeast. At a point no more than a couple of meters wide, it seemed to turn hard to the right and butt up against the rocks. There was some kind of structure, like a shelter, made of the bones of its enemies. Okoye's crumpled helmet lay nearby.

The smoldering remains of a fire burned in a pit made from skulls. Rusted containers littered the ground on one side. He could see where the alien had slept, eaten, and called home, but there was nothing else around. The canyon and the nest were empty.

"Monroe, bring Mosquito Two down over the canyon. I need its cameras. Ensure the relay is active to the ship."

"I don't have much bandwidth for that. I'm going to lose Mosquito One if I do."

"I don't care about Mosquito One. Let it go."

No sooner had he said it than Kowalski snapped onto the net. "What do you mean, let it go? What's your status?"

“We’re fine. It threw some rocks at us, but it ran. You saw it run. Tanaka shot it. Two good hits. Didn’t stop it from running away.”

“We were too far away to see an impact,” Kowalski said.

“She hit it twice. Chipped off armor, and I saw blood and tissue. Didn’t stop the thing. We’ve found its nest. You need to get down here, Gunny.”

“Roger,” Kowalski replied after a pause. “Monroe, terminate pursuit. Bring Mosquito One home. Get it recording everything outside the canyon walls and the local area. We’re on our way to you. Coming up the canyon. Don’t shoot or do anything stupid.”

“Aye, aye, Gunny,” Balyeat said. He walked softly toward the alien’s nest, suddenly cautious, not wanting to disturb anything. “Siobhán, bring my snoopers online, full record. Maximize the database. Do whatever you can to get everything here.”

“Acknowledged,” the Interface replied. *“All cameras running. I am also investigating the area in infrared and panchromatic.”*

“Give me everything you have.”

As he stepped closer to the nest, Balyeat became aware of discolorations on the wall to his left. He turned and took them in. From the ground to a height of more than two meters—far enough that he wasn’t sure he could reach the top—were tick marks. Individual scratches. In an instant, Balyeat knew what they were.

“Siobhán, given the length of day on this planet, correlate the number of marks on this wall to the number of Earth days—or years—as necessary.”

“Analyzing,” the Interface replied. A few seconds later: *“Based on the number of tick marks and the length of the planet’s day, I estimate this creature has been counting the days on this planet for approximately 43.75 Earth years.”*

Balyeat felt his mouth drop open. A lone survivor. Possibly marooned. Possibly waiting for a rescue that never came. His mind flashed to stories of Earth soldiers from earlier wars who had continued fighting for decades after the conflict was over. Some of them described guilt and shame for being left behind—or not being able to fulfill their mission. Now Balyeat tried to imagine fighting a lonely war for four decades. All he could think about was the solitude, the isolation. The enormity of it.

“Gunny, we’re backing out of the nest. We haven’t touched anything and we’re not going to. We have recordings. We’ve marked the grid

coordinates, but I'm not touching anything. I'm leaving this as it is."

"What's going on, Balyeat?"

He laughed, then sobered. "This alien has been here for decades, by itself, fighting its own little war. I'm not about to tear up anything it's built. I think it's best we collect our things and un-ass this position."

"Copy," Kowalski said. "I'm coming up behind you. Give me a full sensor and Interface report on the way."

"Siobhán, please send all of your information and collected data to Gunnery Sergeant Kowalski now."

"Message sent. Do you want me to continue recording and analyzing?"

"Please," he said. He changed channels. "Campbell? Touch nothing but record everything. Leave everything to the pros."

"Aye, aye," she said, her voice soft with wonder.

Two minutes later, Kowalski joined him. Balyeat turned and saw the astonishment on her face. "You're right. This isn't our job. We came, we did our reconnaissance, we confirmed something is here. The xenobiology team can come and do this right." She lowered her eyes. "You okay?"

He looked at the nest and nodded, but his mind was elsewhere for a microsecond. Somewhere more personal. There was something he needed to do. "I'm okay."

"Did you get a good look at it?"

"I did," Balyeat said. "You got the images from my Interface. Huge. Hideous."

"You wouldn't think a beast like that could build a shelter, fashion a life from bones, or count days like a prisoner marking time." Kowalski shook her head.

"It's not a beast," Campbell said from near the firepit. "It's not a monster. It was waiting for someone. Maybe not us, but someone."

"With our xeno folks and the Rhinos, maybe someone out there knows what happened here," Kowalski said. "Maybe they can get some answers."

"Yeah," Balyeat said. "I hope they're friendly, whatever they are. They'd be hell to fight."

Tanaka joined them. Balyeat watched as she took in the scene and bowed her head slightly in her ATLAS.

Monroe recovered the second UAV. Campbell hefted her rifle and moved to the mouth of the canyon. The rest of them followed without a

word.

Balyeat looked back at the nest, the crude tools, the carved shelter. On a whim, he reached up to his chest plate and removed his name strip and rank insignia. He stepped toward a hexagonal container, roughly a meter tall, and laid the items on top.

“Maybe you’ll know who was here,” he said aloud. “Maybe we can be friends. Maybe there’s a future for you in this galaxy and you won’t have to be alone.”

None of us do.

The sound of an approaching Chimera drew his attention. Balyeat turned and jogged. His sensors were clear. The sky above was thinning. It would surely be a night for the alien to remember. Hopefully, it wasn’t hurt too badly. Hopefully, it had a future.

At the canyon mouth, the Chimera touched down two hundred meters away. Tanaka and Monroe had taken positions to cover the retreat. Balyeat jogged past them, nodding at each one and making eye contact. Tanaka smiled. Monroe gave him a thumbs-up, one Campbell repeated when he reached her position and stopped so she could make contact with the Chimera and board it for home.

“Automatic communication protocols engaged. Messages downloading,” Siobhán said.

As Balyeat clomped up the Chimera’s ramp, he opened the messages. Most were standard command traffic. He scrolled past them to his saved messages. The one he had kept but never replied to. He tapped on it as he sat and leaned back against the cargo netting. He nodded to Kowalski sitting across from him. Tanaka and Monroe joined her. Campbell slumped in the seat next to him, her armor heavy against his shoulder. He didn’t mind. By the time the Chimera lifted off, everyone’s eyes but Kowalski’s were closed.

“Nice work, Carson.”

“Thanks, Gunny.”

She smiled and closed her eyes as the Chimera bucked amid the winds. Leaving his helmet on, Balyeat leaned back. He took a deep breath and laughed at himself for not knowing what to say. Then he leaned forward, brought up his gauntlet, and tapped quickly. It didn’t matter what he said. He wasn’t alone. He might not have a plan for the future, but he wasn’t alone.

Hi Dad. It's me.

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An Omnishambles Assessment

Marisa Wolf, David Shadoin & H.Y. GREGOR

There was no mistaking it. The Inceptive Brushspine, a meticulously designed predator introduced to control the herbivorous population, was dead. Its carcass had decayed enough to reveal the tracking implant in its curved, barbed neck. Krishtakta snatched up the lifeless device and pocketed it to retrieve any extra data later.

With the brusque determination of an explorer on the verge of important discoveries, she marched up her ship's awaiting ramp. In the cargo hold, her equipment and systems sat with a low buzz, set to parse samples and data. She popped the recovered tracker into a download slot, then moved on to the next terminal. From this one she pulled new data and transferred it to a portable device. Another couple of keystrokes set her ship into standby so she could venture further across the surface. The scientist grabbed her satchel and clicked it in place on her back, then recovered the tablet from its dock.

Before she could leave, her ship's communications systems pinged her for an incoming transmission.

"Controller Krish, we show you have safely arrived at the outpost planet. We are delighted to hear of your successful journey. Do you have any initial findings?"

"Overseer Crtankt, case test 145092 seems to be flourishing successfully. The plant life within fifty meters of my landing zone is taking root well. I have not had a chance to analyze the array's descent scans but did find the remains of one of our seeder species," she responded dutifully.

"Your assessments are noted and we will await further reports." The line silenced and Crtankt's tone broached her tympanic drums no more.

Time to go to work.

Krishtakta skittered off her ship, preoccupied by the initial reports she'd received from her scans of the planet during her approach. The data was…something of a jumble. The population size of each introduced species, including the plants, had grown as the models had predicted. Everything seemed to be humming along nicely. And then a month back, an

unknown anomaly appeared. It went from a nil population to a whole community inside of a day. The time between initial planet seeding and now had not elapsed enough for mutations and evolution. The variance had no obvious explanation.

The scientist racked her brain as she paced along to the next location, following the signs of a herd of Santicores, trying to find a way to account for this new factor.

“Dammit, Tim, I’m a scout, not a metaphysical philosopher. I don’t know why we’re here, and I sure as shit don’t have time for your current existential crisis!” Randy called to her companion.

Tim continued to grumble as he stomped through the underbrush ahead of her, clearly not done scrutinizing their leadership’s misuse of his perceived talents. He did have a point. Tim was much better at the manual labor involved with terraforming than he was at handling himself in a fight.

Randy sighed at her unfortunate pairing as she trudged along behind him.

“I’m just saying that if they pulled their heads out of their arses, they might finally be ahead of the game instead of behind it. Honestly, it’s just hurting your ability to do your job.” He turned to her and shrugged. “It’s not our fault the damn Junto didn’t account for their probe returning bad data. How was the advanced team supposed to know the planet wasn’t dead, when the rutting Council didn’t even know?”

Tim let out a giant huff as Randy waved for him to continue. The one good thing about having a partner like Tim was that he would respond to commands almost without hesitation. He’d bitch about them, sure, but who didn’t these days?

“I mean, it’s not like they kept the whole thing hush-hush and hid the data from all but their own handpicked data analyzers.”

“I know, right?” Randy responded as she scanned their surroundings for signs of movement. She’d already learned to tune him out during this particular bit. But he had a point. Their survival depended on her ability to spot the predator species of both animal and plant life before they sprang their traps…on a dead planet…that was supposed to be devoid of any kind of active life-forms. A planet ripe for repopulation and terraforming.

Evolution clearly thought so, too.

Randy’s boots had barely touched the planet, designated X-426, when an alert went out. Not only had they found lush jungle where they’d expected rock and dirt, but life had evolved far beyond plants. In fact, almost immediately, someone had found a body. One of the other vanguards sent images of a dead reptilian wolflike creature. And it hadn’t been dry bones like one might stumble upon on a dead planet, or a calcified corpse from the last time life had been attempted, but a fresh, meaty carcass, complete with some form of larvae and carrion birds. The whole landing party felt chills and circled up to decide what their next move was. The creature’s size, combined with its spiked neck and serrated mouth, pretty clearly made it a predator.

Meaning whatever killed it was bigger and deadlier. They hadn’t arrived armed for bears. Why would they?

The Junto Council, in their finite and ill-advised wisdom, took their report, ripped it up, and scattered it to the four space winds. Not that any such thing existed, but it sounded better than the bin to Randy. Further, their reply had equated to, “Yes, yes, very sad. Now…about that colony you’re building for us? Do try not to die before you’ve established sustainable growth.”

“Gormless bellends. The entire rutting Council. I should be breaking ground and planting for the next harvest to keep the whole colony from starving.” Randy returned from her reverie just in time to catch the tail of Tim’s tirade and notice the creeping vine by his right calf. Randy holstered her pistol and drew her machete. Without alerting him—Tim’s panic would make everything immediately worse—she crept into the underbrush, following the vine’s length. It led to a carnivorous pitcher plant trellised against a skyscraper-type tree with a tangled root base measuring wider than some of the buildings back in their colony. The plant was virulently pink and orange, except the sections spiked into the tree, which were an upsettingly neon shade of puce.

Somewhere to her left, Tim stomped like an angry rhino along their chosen path. Randy surveyed her plant-adjacent opponent, trying to find the weak spot. Maybe best to hack it up like a practice dummy? She was deep in her analysis when her partner’s strangled, surprised shout echoed across the forest floor.

The vine she’d followed serpentined back through the leaves, clinging to a struggling Tim, despite his heavy armor and gear. She stepped closer to

slice through the immediate threat when the world tilted upside down and she was hanging by her own ankle, dangling face-first into the plant's maw. Her pistol fell away, but she kept a firm grip on her blade.

Randy curled up and swung for the green appendage above her boot but couldn't quite reach. Her heart beat wildly against her ribs and the burning in her throat threatened her sinuses as she searched for a new plan. Based on the semi-muffled curses from up ahead, Tim was handling his circumstances equally well. She paced her breaths to calm her nerves, but the pitcher-plant walls drew closer. Pressure built in her chest. She craned her neck enough to see a pool of sloshing liquid at the base of the bell. Digestive enzymes? Raw acid?

Definitely not something she wanted to experience firsthand. Or with any body part, really. She could only imagine what kind of trouble she would be in if she was engulfed by that churning nastiness.

As the walls rose up around her, Randy struck. She cut anything she could reach, her machete lashing against the insides of the carnivorous plant-creature. If she was causing any damage at all, she couldn't tell. Her attempt at another steadying breath failed, as the air had become uncomfortably moist and overwhelmingly sulfuric. Instead, she forced herself to focus and tried to find a structural point to hack at. The noxious air was a pressing issue, but not one she could do anything about. She kept swinging even without a clear target.

Blood pounded through her temples. Just as her will to fight wavered and her energy dwindled, her descent halted. The whole plant shuddered. Ignoring the general creepiness of such an action, Randy redoubled her struggle, using what oxygen remained in her bloodstream to fuel the endeavor. She aimed for one of the gashes piercing the membranous, waxy skin, and widened the opening. The flora shuddered again. Distressingly bright puce bled through the breach. Puce. The growth that held the predator plant to the tree.

"Rutting attack weeds and their gormless vines. Get me out of here, Randy!" Tim's shouts reached her through the chaos.

Randy bellowed her own battle cry and flexed her core muscles to swing toward the tree. Rage for—or maybe at—her hapless partner boiled over, narrowing her vision on the sole objective: survive. Her strikes became less frantic. Instead, she wielded her blade like a scalpel.

The pitcher plant tried to pull her out of range and protect itself.

Too little, too late.

The plant dragged the scout through the air by her ankle, but Randy reacted before she was out of range. One final slice detached her enemy from its support, and the whole monstrous vegetation crashed to the ground. Air whooshed out of Randy as she struck the dirt.

No time to recover; the pitcher fluid flowed across the ground, directly toward her. She dropped her machete, tucked her arms, and rolled until she hit the base of another tree. Danger temporarily avoided, she lay still and surveyed her immediate surroundings. Beautifully fresh air flooded her lungs.

The plant deflated without its structural support. Viscous enzymes soaked into the ground, leaving nothing behind but the toxic smell. Randy sat up, hands braced on either side of her body, and hoped her machete had escaped the nastiness.

“Don’t worry, Randy. I got this.” Tim popped up with her pistol in his hand. He fired it twice into the pitcher plant before he sidled over to her, eyes still fixed on the once deadly almost-plant. He extended the weapon and she took it without a sigh or snarky comment. She deserved a medal, but instead holstered her gun and congratulated herself for not turning it on him.

“Bloody hell, girl, you look like shite! It’s a good thing we handled that little situation.” He brushed off the detritus from his armor and extended his hand.

She still didn’t use the gun on him. Still no medal. She did allow herself a sigh this time as she took his hand and let him pull her up. “Yeah. Good thing you didn’t panic.”

“Maybe I could do this scout thing after all. Maybe they saw more in me than I saw in myself.” Once more, he brushed himself off, though the loose dirt was gone and nothing left behind was going to be easy to clean.

“Alright, Tim. Let’s keep proving them right, then.” After a moment, she located her machete—miraculously untouched by toxic slop—and then froze, half-crouched, as she picked it up. Her angle, position, and lack of impending death had revealed something.

“Wanna guess at what happened to that thing?” She nodded her head at the new discovery in their glade.

Another corpse with a spiked neck and sharp teeth. Barely half of it was devoured.

Something on their not-at-all dead planet was well-fed enough to hunt for sport.

Krishtakta's field kit contained enough vials and reagents to test a decent enough sample size of their seeder species and ensure their viability. The Overseers required data, and the trip was not made lightly. She'd packed enough to stock two full science labs. Parcel modules made the equipment easier to lug over all sorts of terrain, and made a field setup both possible and somewhat practical. While she'd vastly preferred to use her full lab on her ship, repeatedly transiting the planet's surface by using her fuel cores would be tremendously inefficient. Overseers valued efficiency. Nor were they the only ones.

So, the scientist crawled through the trees, and it took far longer than expected. Every few lengths she paused to snap images of different vegetation—some had grown as predicted, but others, more interestingly, had developed new traits. Far more variations than any of the predictive curves had suggested, and so she took notes on each observation in great detail, measured the stigmas and petals of several flowers, and flexed the pliability of the *frondific alaptus* branches. Just when she'd set out a feeder for the Thornmidge, a rhythmic thunder jarred her sense of balance.

"What in the name of science?"

Krishtakta's sensitive tympanic membrane reverberated with the concussion. She leaned against the stand until the feeling passed. When her eyes refocused, she immediately pulled her tablet to annotate the disturbance, hoping to use further analysis to solve the source. But she couldn't afford to give it all of her attention; she had way too much data accumulation to accomplish.

Her predetermined route took her straight through the center of the forest. She wiggled around the dense brush and hugged the trunks of giants holding up massive canopies. Here and there she stopped, only momentarily, to gather samples or check a newly discovered feature. A particularly aggressive *audobonous carnivorous* required a defter touch when she stopped to draw her samples. The gaping maw of it did not so much as twitch during the process, and she congratulated herself for her dexterity.

She even managed to capture an image of a flock of the fragile Doridori gliding between the branches under the main canopy. Overall, the

restoration of 145092 progressed as expected. To be fair, even with unexpected variation included, it could potentially be classified as better than average compared to projects on similar planets.

Then she reached an area that turned all her carefully banked pride to space dust.

Carnage.

She nearly tripped over the half-rotted corpse of a fourth Brushspine as she gazed across the clearing. Several of the surrounding plants showed damage in a direct line—wilted fronds, torn maws, bent and hanging stems. Signs that a massive creature had passed through. A pungent odor wafted across her nostrils, and she gagged until she could drop her nasal screen.

It had been familiar, that reek, had it not? She scanned the clearing, and then connected the culprit. Noxium nightshade, a tree she'd designed to help control the avifauna and winged-pest populations. Its budding flowers were set to open only during the first few hours of light, creating an easy pathway to its sap for unsuspecting airborne creatures. Krishtakta's approved design had indicated it as an efficient and self-propelling way to ensure the cycle of nutrients returned to the soil and kept vegetation thriving.

This nightshade, however, sported three distinct slashes. She studied the markings, which had been made by an object sharper than her scalpels. Predator? Interference by a well-resourced but bitter colleague? After she unpacked one of the parcel modules, she measured the gashes, then pulled out a collections kit and gathered samples. The scientist sighed as she set the reagents to work, placed each vial in the micro-analyzer unit, and added a new column for each sample to record the data in her findings. If she had luck and science on her side, whatever had executed the damage had also left behind trace amounts of evidence for her to uncover.

She returned to the body of the dead creature. The original Brushspine, the one she'd found at her landing site, had turned up no discoverable causes of death other than perhaps dehydration. She assumed the piecemeal state of the body had been caused postmortem. The two subsequent corpses were equally non-definitive, though one had blunt-force trauma and the other was missing half its torso.

The current state of the predators was…indeterminate.

Krishtakta made sure to log the exact coordinates of the body before she activated her camera. She rattled off the date and repeated the

coordinates to ensure the device recorded properly before she moved closer to her subjects.

“Third day of exploration on Case 145092. In expanding my search from my immediate landing area, I have found further evidence of unforeseen variables. In addition to the discovery of a fourth Brushspine corpse, an average-size noxium nightshade has been attacked by a beast of unknown origins. I can only conclude that many of the disturbances in the ecosystem have been caused by this beast. It is as yet unclear what level of variation on what base species had resulted in this creature.”

Krishtakta took several still images of the corpse first. Or rather, what was left of it. “Cause of death requires further investigation at this time. Specimen shows signs of middling decay, less so than the first Brushspine corpse recovered. Clear evidence of some carrion species stripping flesh from the body, but again, less so than the first.” From the smell and overall…ooze factor, this death was much more recent.

A single gash near the creature’s throat indicated something far larger than a scavenger bird had taken a bite from the corpse—and then perhaps thought better of it. “Decay is more severe around the creature’s ventral region, notably the back legs and stomach. Some scarring and pitting evident in the hide around this area.”

Krishtakta collected her samples dutifully, fighting the sense of dread growing in her mind. So much of the planet was thriving as expected. This world had been meticulously designed; they’d accounted for every contingency either past experience or imagination could predict.

Their superior predator specimen dropping dead with no explanation was not one of them.

Unsettled, she turned back to the nightshade. Doing her best to avoid the corrosive sap leaching from its gashed bark, she climbed to inspect the flower buds. Her nostrils flared, as her nasal screen could only do so much to protect her internal passages from the caustic scent.

Krishtakta touched one long claw to the delicate flora. It shuddered under her touch and clammed up, just as it had done countless times in her lab. Down each of the lower branches, many of the buds retracted, as they were meant to. However, a handful of nodes were empty, their flowers simply gone. She clambered back to the ground, and crouched low to investigate the surrounding botany. Much to her dismay, there were no further signs of distress, no new discoveries to be made.

“Initial analysis of the tree provides indications of affliction in missing buds, but no immediate evidence as to why or what. Many of these cuts did not fully pierce through the protective bark. And…” Krishtakta froze as her eyes focused on a hollowed-out pathway leading toward the edge of the forest.

“…and I must wait on the reagent times for any further results. For now, I will continue to process the information I have and hope for a better solution.” Her recorder would save the video of everything she inspected, but she was hesitant to describe this latest discovery. Though perhaps she would later regret the series of actions, she ended the recording and set out along the new path.

Randy would be damned if she ever trusted satellite images or remote data capture again. She waved her hand dismissively at the interactive 3D topography map on the table in front of her. It made the territory surrounding the newly established Vanguard Colony look tame. It was anything but. “I don’t care what the map says, there’s something else going on here.”

“I admit that the planet has been something of a surprise.” The colony’s foreman, Barnaby Tucker, was an imminently practical man. His brow creased as he frowned at the map, fingers steepled before him. Despite his early onset white hair, Tucker was young. He’d earned, and then maintained, his position through rational leadership and occasionally painful honesty.

“The Council lied to us.” Tim leaned against the back wall with his arms crossed. “Is this actually some kind of penal colony and nobody bothered to tell us until we showed up here? If you’re secretly a convicted killer, now would be a good time to let us know.”

Randy’s brows nearly touched her hairline as she stared him down. It was a bold accusation, and truthfully she was surprised he knew what a “penal colony” was. Tucker, to his credit, chuckled.

“No, Mr. Slater. Disappointing though it may be, I am not a convicted killer.”

“Tim’s not wrong, though. We have no idea what we’re up against. This planet was supposed to be all but dead. We were meant to come here and hunker down to *start* a terraforming process, not…walk into a deeply unsettling jungle that is very much alive and *absolutely* should have shown

up on the first survey.” Randy resisted the urge to pace. One of her early mentors had pointed out it was a bad habit and made her look anxious. So what if she *was* anxious—better to keep that to herself. “There’s obviously predators here that we’re not equipped to deal with.”

“Not to mention woman-eating plants,” Tim added.

“Oh, only women? Would you care to test that theory?” A brief twinkle of amusement lit Tucker’s eyes before he let out a long sigh. “I’ve sent a message to the Council. We’re far from self-sufficient, and I was hoping to delay my report until we were a little further along. Unfortunately, this is too serious to ignore. For now, I’ll ask you both to escort me and Chambers to the site for further documentation. The more witnesses the better, and we can bring a stretcher to recover the body.”

“*Why?*” Tim shouted and threw his hands up in the air. If Randy were less kind, she’d call the motion flailing, but she resolved to record it as an emphatic gesture.

“The more data we can gather, the more informed we will be, which means the more prepared we will be. Do you want me to go on?” Tucker said mildly.

Randy nodded—in agreement, not in answer to his question. His logic was sound, though her nose wrinkled with disgust at the thought. The alien corpse was bad enough. The pitcher plant’s stench was on a different level entirely. “Fine, but we should mask up.”

Her request was approved and an hour-and-a-half hike brought them back to their assailant’s grove.

“Might I ask why you neglected to mention this?” Tucker tapped his fingers against the barrel of his rifle, the only tic that indicated he might be uncomfortable carrying the weapon.

“We damn well would have said something if we’d noticed it.” Tim threw one hand up to his helmet, looking on the verge of tearing his hair out. “Hey, Randy, I take back what I said before. I am *not* a team player. Put me down for any job that isn’t a scout. *Literally* any job.”

For once, Randy couldn’t blame him. She stared down at the clawed footprints marring the soft jungle earth all around the attack site. The word “colossal” came to mind.

So did “monstrous.”

A long litany of other, equally graphic, words wound through her head.

“Hey, guessing game over. We know what killed that thing.” Chambers, a barrel-chested man with a brassy attitude to match his bulk, looked almost cheerful. Where the foreman handled logistical and operations within Vanguard Colony, Chambers led the scouts and security forces.

Such as they were. Even though she was one of the senior-most members of the team, Randy felt woefully unequipped to deal with this situation. She made a mental note to spare Tim a slight bit more sympathy the next time he had an existential crisis.

Chambers stomped through a perimeter’s worth of the thick jungle foliage and swung his machete indiscriminately at things in his way. And at things not in his way. Randy amended her opinion of his reaction to the situation. He was enjoying himself way too much.

“One more item to consider.” Tucker’s pragmatic manner was often hard for Randy to read. An “item to consider” could be a minor curiosity, or just as easily a direction to check out a looming fifteen-foot predator. Randy braced herself and turned slightly.

“Just one, huh?” Chambers jabbed his machete against the wilted petals of the pitcher plant. “How many more of these things do you think are lurking around?”

Despite the beating the plant had taken, it twitched in response to his prodding. Undergrowth rustled, and something snaked around his ankle, so fast it jerked his foot out from under him before anyone could react. Chambers landed flat on his ass, and his machete flew out of his hand. He swore and scrabbled for the blade but was dragged away before he could reach it.

“Oh, no. Let me help you with that.” Randy didn’t even feign a sense of urgency. This sort of thing happened when no one took a scout’s reports seriously.

Tim bit down on his lip like he was trying not to let a smile spread across his face. Randy caught his eye and winked, and he burst into uncontrollable laughter. The vine had already lost its steam, as it had only managed to pull Chambers a foot or two. Randy refused to feel bad—even if that hadn’t been the case, the pitcher itself was mangled beyond repair. The only risk to Chambers was from his pride.

Randy strolled over and kicked the machete toward Chambers. He grabbed it with a snarl.

“What, no ‘thank you’?” Randy asked, but he was busy savaging every inch of the vine he could reach.

“I was *going* to point out that the corpse of the beast you spoke of is nowhere in sight.” Tucker continued like he hadn’t been interrupted.

“Yeah, I’d noticed that too. Maybe the plant finished eating it?” Tim didn’t look convinced.

Randy frowned and walked toward the spot where they’d seen the half-eaten creature. The new tracks centered around that same spot, and she was careful not to tread on them. They’d want to take pictures so they had the image on record and brought it back to the rest of the colony for study. Whatever creature had left those tracks, she had a feeling it wouldn’t be hard to identify.

“Even if it got its hands—er, mouth back on the carcass, I don’t think the acid works that fast. There would still be bones and— Hey, Chambers, do you see any bones?” Randy shouted.

“Do I what?” he yelled back. His face was red, though Randy suspected it was more from embarrassment than effort.

“I just figured since you were already intent on getting eaten by that plant, you could give us some data before you got digested.”

“Ha. Ha. Very ha.” To his credit, Chambers’ prolonged assault on the pitcher plant became more methodical. He used the weapon to lift up one of the enormous petals and peer around the interior basin. “Nothing in here that I can see. Smells god-awful, though.”

“Thus the masks. It’s almost like you were warned,” Randy muttered to herself. Chambers was an easy mark, but it wasn’t worth pushing him any further.

“So whatever this thing was, it came back for the body,” Tim reasoned.

“And took it away?” Tucker asked.

Tim shrugged. “Maybe it could tell we disturbed the area and wanted to make sure we weren’t going to steal its food.”

“Or it came back and ate the rest whole?” Randy wrinkled her nose as she pictured it, then clenched a fist as an image of this new predator formed in her mind. Fifteen feet tall, claws on its feet as long as her leg, razor-sharp teeth, mandibles strong enough to snap bones like a toothpick, and a jaw unhinged enough to fit half a giant beast at once.

How utterly delightful that Vanguard Colony had settled in such a friendly, hospitable place.

“We’ll double the guards around the perimeter at night, and make sure everyone’s equipped with body armor when they’re on patrol. Might want to start looking at building a wall, boss.” Chambers sounded excited about the prospect of increasing the guard, though less so about walls. Walls were better when patrolled, and he didn’t have a big force to begin with.

“Certainly.” Tucker joined Randy and frowned at the ground. She toed an indent with her boot.

“The body was right here,” she insisted. There were no drag marks to indicate it had been pulled away. The monstrous hunter had lifted it. Or swallowed it in one piece. Why couldn’t she stop visualizing the latter?

“I feel like we’ve been used as test subjects in some kind of mass-hallucination experiment,” Tim whined, and she couldn’t even pretend to want to backhand him for it.

“Great, glad to hear I hallucinated *that*.” Randy jabbed her thumb at the plant that had tried to eat her. But it would be nice, in the end, if this were all a hallucination. Unless it was the sort of end-of-life hallucination some other unexpected creature on this planet had lured her into for the purpose of keeping her inert until she, too, was fully digested.

“Happy to help.” Tim rubbed his arms and attempted another smile, though this one fell flat.

“Are you willing to pursue this larger creature further, even if we head back?” Tucker swept his piercing gaze across Randy and Tim.

“Shit,” Tim said, but Randy interrupted him before he could continue into unrecoverable too-stupid territory.

“That’s the job.”

Krishtakta clambered over some rocks, searching for the last known position of one of the tagged predators. This one was allegedly alive. She had discovered at least two more bodies as she’d traversed the forest. It was a relief to find one at least had survived. Her tablet and the trackers they’d implanted were not reporting in real time—they would need a separate, regenerating power source for that. She couldn’t just put solar-catchers on the Brushspine’s backs, now could she? That would be pure madness. And it would call her results into question, an opportunity the other case-testers would not hesitate to claw into.

She huffed as she bouldered over the desert terrain between her and her target. The less she had to deal with her fellow scientists, the better.

Jealous competitiveness kept them from indulging in nightly frivolities like other disciplines were known for, and then of course the work on-planet did not leave much room for socialization. Occasionally she missed the less stressful life of their early academic clusters, but she'd been built for this livelihood, and she was accordingly good at it. And she liked it. Mostly.

It had been her sworn oath to do her best and achieve greatness, not spend long intervals on useless pastimes. This had led her to be disinvited from many of her peers' outings, but that just reinforced her need to work harder, be smarter…be better. None of them were crossing their planets on the trail of solving an evolutionary mystery.

None of them were about to…fall into a ravine.

The scientist jumped back as her weight swayed dangerously forward. Her foot found solid ground as pebbles trickled down a long, long way. Her reveries had almost walked her into a ravine. Krishtakta glanced left and right. It would take her at least half a day at top speed to get around the gaping hole in the ground.

She pulled out her tablet and checked her target location. She was practically on top of the Brushspine's last reported position. Without any sign of life-forms, the researcher reapproached the edge of the crevasse and peered over. An unmoving lump was, in fact, in sight. When she pulled up her adjusting lenses the shape resolved to one much like a Brushspine. An unmoving, unliving, picked-clean body humped in the middle of the gorge. Krishtakta sighed. Overall, her experiments flourished. The planet was rich in stationary and ambulatory life. It should be a resounding success, variations or no, but something was hunting down her beautiful biodiversity regulators. She'd followed the strange prints from the forest in vaguely this direction. Fortunately—or unfortunately—she was too much a responsible scientist to assume whatever made the prints was responsible. The tracks had disappeared a little while ago as the ground dried out through the change in habitat.

After a thorough search, she found a path down into the canyon off to her right. Created by a runoff, most likely, given the worn sides of the rock face. But Overseers take her, who could be sure? Maybe it was a giant, bonelessly flexible tunneler who had mutated entirely out of spec, grown small oval-ish pedipalps, and constantly rubbed itself over ravine walls in order to hunt Brushspines.

It wasn’t. Of course it wasn’t. She repeated those words to herself multiple times as she picked her way through the boulders. With an effort, she kept a respectable distance between herself and the edge on her left—she’d already lost track of her footing once and didn’t need that scare again.

Despite her biological advantages, it still took Krishtakta quite a bit of precious time to navigate. The path widened slightly, enough that she could assume it had been used by some of the fauna. Probably not simply water or a tunneler, as it was not just a washed-out trench, but rather a series of curves that made it easier for paws or clawed feet to descend.

With a bit more safety, the scientist snatched out her recording device and spoke into it. “To whomsoever may find my ship, if this is my last recording, it is imperative I keep the record. I am climbing into a recently discovered ravine in search of potential answers to the demise of the Brushspines. It’s a vexing mystery that has taken me across the surface of 145092. While this should be a simple expedition of fact-finding, one never knows what may happen on case planets. If I perish, I bid all of my colleagues a fond goodbye. Please take care of the planet.” She paused as she thought if there was anything else of import to add. Nothing came to mind, so she closed down the apparatus, uploaded the file to her tablet and ensured it was sent to her ship.

She’d passed the halfway point before she realized she might have miscalculated what could fit further along the path. Her equilibrium was continuously challenged as she maintained the path with inches between her and a long fall to her own departure from life. Just as she convinced herself to move a little faster and spend less time hanging off the side of escarpment, she lost her footing.

“…and now we’re stuck here in the middle of this rutting box canyon. Whoop-de-fuckin’-do.” Tim finished his tirade. Randy couldn’t fight off her smirk.

“What was all that stuff about God?” she asked as they clomped through the ravine.

“I—” Tim whirled around. “I don’t know, really.”

“Wanna talk about it?”

“No.” He huffed and continued onward, picking his steps carefully through the rocky terrain. It had been two hours since they’d convened on

the jungle massacre only to find a ginormous three-toed footprint clawed into several places around the site.

How did we miss it the first time around? Randy considered the implications and shuddered. She much preferred to think they had indeed missed the tracks in their post-adrenaline rush of escaping their predator plant. The alternative would be nightmare fuel for weeks on end. Why had the Council chosen this godforsaken planet that insisted on doing its best imitation of Australia?

Randy stopped in her tracks, staring at Tim's back. *Shit. Really? No.* She shook her head, thinking through all the signs. *It had to be a coincidence, right? Yes. Right…right?*

"Right?" she said it aloud, almost despite herself.

"Right! I'm so glad you agree with me." Tim puffed his chest, his voice a bit more jovial. "We'll have to let Tucker know straight away upon our return. They'll give us medals for this."

Randy had no idea what she'd just agreed to. She tried to wind her memory back to the conversation, but had been lost in her own intrusive thoughts and couldn't imagine where Tim had ventured in the meantime. With an effort, she banished her own spiraling internal monologue. No. This wasn't a penal colony made for punishing them. She would have remembered being convicted of a crime. *Forget it—this isn't worth thinking about. Focus.*

She stepped beside her partner to investigate why he'd stopped and figure out what he was going on about.

"The real question is: How do we carry the skull back?" Tim had his elbow propped in the cusp of one hand, with the other hand cupped around his chin. He resembled an explorer doll for kids, and intensified the resemblance when he snapped his fingers. "I've got it! We—no, wait, it was—oh—" His mystery realization made his words a jumble but his face fell, indicating it wasn't great.

Randy raised an inquisitive eyebrow at him. Up ahead, resting in the middle of the base of the gorge they'd hiked, they'd stumbled upon the remains of another large predator-like creature. This one must have died much longer ago, as it was all dried-out bones, partially covered by sand and stone. Hence the skull Tim had wanted to cart back.

"What?" Tim stared at her, then continued talking without truly waiting for an answer. "Oh, you mean, what was I thinking?" He waited for

an answer that time, but Randy didn't oblige him. "Well, I thought maybe we could try to catch some of that strange herd of six-legged equine species we saw on the plains, but we don't have any tack."

Oh, Tim. That's your concern?

"No tack, sure. Nor sense." She breathed in sharply through her nose. "Why don't you just pack the skull onto your backpack?" Shifting her rifle to one hand, she slapped the top of his pack with her other.

He stumbled a bit, but unfortunately it didn't redirect him into sensibility.

"Yes, I had thought of that." His tone edged into lecturing, as though he had any superiority to justify such a thing. "But then I'd have to lug it all the way back to camp."

His sigh indicated that would be the most ridiculous option available to them. Before she could ask how that could possibly be a worse option than catching wild animals, he heaved an even larger sigh and continued digging his metaphorical hole.

"And then what if whatever took the last body came back and tracked us to take *this* one?" Tim chewed on his lower lip, eyes darting side to side as though the mysterious beast could be sneaking up on them right that moment. "Even if there isn't meat left, the hunter might think we're stealing from it. Trying to take a treasure from its kill—that's a possibility, right?"

"Sure. But that same creature would know we hadn't killed it. It's completely decomposed already, and the whatever-it-is never came back for it. Not much of a treasure pile, this one bit here." Randy did not roll her eyes, though the temptation was strong. Instead she searched the area for other signs of life, struggle, or any clues whatsoever as to what had happened to the beastie. She didn't expect to find anything—the carcass had to have been in place quite some time, apparently undisturbed in this spot—and therefore was absolutely unsurprised when nothing turned up.

Tim's features scrunched as he considered her words, then his look of dismay returned tenfold. Not as though he'd seen something of concern, but as if she'd just taken his favorite toy.

"You're right, obviously. Not a whole skull maybe, because that would be a pain, and more obvious if something comes looking. But we should still take something back…" He muttered under his breath and rocked on his toes, considering. Randy held silent, letting him work through whatever deep thoughts he was wrestling with.

Finally, he reached down and broke off a spiked bone from what looked like a neck. Fragments skittered across the ground and back the way they'd come. A pebble settled at her booted foot. More rocks clattered against the stone floor.

Instantly, Randy was on guard, pistol raised as she turned to scan the ravine they'd recently covered. The skin on the back of her neck prickled, and she narrowed her eyes in concentration. Another small scattering of echoes confirmed her suspicions.

They'd been followed. Still were. Something—the hunter, the monster, whatever—was stalking them. A shiver ran under all the fine hairs of her arms, as though an ominous presence had loomed up behind her. Nothing there, of course, but…where?

There you are. Just around the shelf of rock on the left. She trained her sights about three feet up, ready to snap to the target, no matter what it was. When the sounds of falling debris calmed, it left only Tim's heavy panting next to her, which frayed the end of her last nerve.

He'd drawn his weapon and sat against a boulder a few feet over. She scanned the area several more times and was just about to tell him to take a deep breath when a stuttering growl interrupted her.

The time between clicks varied and the growl echoed off the walls as a creature the size of a small tank peeked out from a slight curve along the right-hand side of the ravine. It roared again, its clawed hands or paws slashing at the air menacingly as it started forward. Two large fangs and two tusks protruded from its upper jaw in opposition, as if nature had deemed it necessary to be able to both spear and tear its prey apart in seconds. The beast looked like a dinosaur had been unceremoniously bred with a roach and a porcupine. Randy opened fire at its yellow underbelly as it reared upright. The first couple of bullets glanced off the shale stone on either side but one found its mark. The creature's growl shifted into something higher pitched and sharper. A cry of pain, if they were lucky. If everything had suddenly shifted in their favor, a cry of mortal pain.

The clicks slowed as it turned its dark, spiny carapace toward them.

Randy's weapon immediately stopped chattering. Not for lack of effort on her part—she continued to pull the trigger, but nothing happened.

Empty.

She sidestepped into cover and pulled out her only other mag. She worked even faster now that her view was blocked. This had to be the apex

predator responsible for the bodies they'd found. It was certainly big enough for every awful vision she'd pictured.

Across the ravine, Tim leaned out of his protective cover and squealed at the sight of the creature. He fired a few shots that barely got five feet down range before they bit into stone, and leaned back. He stood ramrod straight with his rifle held up in front of him, forehead pressed into it as he appeared to mutter.

"*Tim!*" she hissed. "*Tim!* Over here!"

Tim's gaze slowly swept toward her as his haunted expression bore into her soul. This man was beaten. He wasn't a soldier. And yet, she wanted desperately to awaken something in him that would help them get out of this alive.

"Snap out of it, man!" She finished reloading and racked the slide. "We're going to get out of this. Let's rain holy hell on this beast." She nodded her head sideways toward their enemy.

"How? The thing barely flinched when you hit it." Tim's eyes pleaded with her not to let him die out here. His fear was overtaking all of his fight-or-flight instincts, paralyzing him to the spot. If Randy didn't find a way to get him to see sense soon, he would be alien-hunter lunch.

She took a deep, steadying breath, threw up a prayer to whatever gods were listening, winked at him, and stepped out of cover again. In that moment, she saw Tim's expression change from defeated to surprised. The scout hoped it would hold and shock him into some sort of action to protect himself.

She hadn't expected to see the creature take shelter. Her sights found empty space, but she could see it trying to bunker down behind some taller boulders, its hardened quills poking up over the cover. Strange behavior for a predator. She fired toward it again, careful to only fire two bursts, and caroming a few off the top of the shale. It hunkered down further. Strange.

She reached up and tapped her helmet to open a comms link. "Command, this is Scout X-ray 158. We need extract and support ASAP. We've come in contact with what we believe is the creature responsible…" In the middle of her transmission she heard another primal roar, this one from above, and cut off her transmission as she aimed skyward, readying for whatever came next.

She was not going to let Tim, the whiny, philosophical, conspiracy farmer die. Not on her watch.

“What in the actual broxecta?!” It was not normally in Krishtakta’s parlance to swear, but these bipedal gastropods’ weapons stung with the fiery intensity of a thousand shards of glass. One had sprayed small projectiles, and it had bitten white hot through her abdomen.

This was not the week she’d expected. Nor a particularly pleasant one. But at least she had solved the mysterious deaths of her prized Brushspines. They must’ve been hunted by these weird, unsegmented, soft-bodied creatures.

The researcher ducked behind the nearest boulder big enough to hide her hulking form, pulled out a medical injection, and stabbed it next to the wound. The effects were immediate. The booster caused her body to clear out the perforation, dropping a metal piece to the ground, and coagulated the blood, drawing another curse.

“For the love of science!”

She stretched out her clawed foot, which had yet to fully heal from her fall. It had been a steep drop but she’d curled as she plummeted and her carapace had taken most of the brunt of impact. Krishtakta hadn’t quite managed to cover her foot, but it was mild enough, and the canyon had beckoned.

The ravine had revealed several more Brushspine bodies as she explored. A quick check of her tablet told her results were still pending from her previously collected sample. With her attention down, focused on her link, she was startled by sudden unidentifiable sounds. She slowed her pace to get a little closer, enough to realize two bipedals were also navigating the ravine. Curious to see if they were the threat to her creations, she’d followed them quietly. They’d communicated constantly…well, so she thought. One had a deeper register than the other and sounded off quite a bit more, but it seemed more organized than simple grunts. In fact, it seemed to Krishtakta, no matter how insensible, that they were much more sentient than any of her work would indicate. Both carried tools attached to their shells, much like she did, indicating that maybe they could be reasoned with.

So, the scientist attempted to make contact. Apparently, the basic greeting of “Good morning, can I bother you for a sample? You seem to be quite effective at maintaining the ecosystemic balance” was an offense to them. They immediately swung around and tried to kill her with their

strange, biting weaponry. As hypotheses went, she was having a very low success rate today. She coughed as more projectiles pinged off her back.

For no discernible reason, the attack ceased.

Krishtakta sneaked a glance out. Neither gastropod was visible, but she could hear them communicating again. For a species that acted like uncivilized fauna, they sure did like to hear their own intonations. She ambulated to the nearest boulder and attempted to make contact once more.

“Please, do not attack. I am only trying to research and understand! I think you may have evolved from the water-based life-forms.” They seemed squishy enough. “I mean no harm! I only want a sample!” She waved her arms to show that she was unarmed.

The smaller one stepped out again, its projectile tool aimed at her once more. With a sigh, she tucked herself in, resigned to the fact that she would have to study them from afar until they got used to her presence and became more docile. These mollusk-like creatures were dangerous and it was little wonder that there had been a territorial battle between the Brushspines and these new evolutionarily advanced bipedals. Shards of shale rained down on her as she hunkered in and attempted to determine her next course of action.

Then a primal roar echoed around her. It did not sound like either of the bipedals; perhaps they had different—no, no. Belatedly, she recognized it as one of her Brushspines.

She had to find where it was coming from. There existed a need to warn it off before it too suffered the same fate as its kin at the mercy of this unexpected newly evolved predator. Wouldn’t the other testers have a field day, that she’d made something so deadly, by complete accident? Perhaps she could reverse engineer their chemical makeup and…that was for later.

She stepped out from behind the boulder in an attempt to draw fire. Nothing happened, and she uncurled slightly, only to see the gastropod staring upward and paying no attention to her at all.

A shadow of a four-legged beast with a spike-collared neck plummeted between them. It resolved into a too-solid body, one which splatted against the ground in an inglorious ending of life. Krishtakta stared at the new evidence with incredulity.

Were there more gastropods above, set to chase the Brushspines into the ravine for their fellows to harvest? Were they pack animals?

For a moment, she and the murderous mollusks stared at each other, glancing at the newly minced meat splotch between them.

A ping sounded, indicating that her sample had turned up an answer. Forgetting the immediate danger, she tore her gaze from the flattened Brushspine and hurriedly pulled her tablet out. The results scrolled through at her command.

Analysis of systems and material—species use-name Inceptive Brushspine
Dermatological: Inconclusive. NOTES: fully functional and developed, only natural elements found.
Gastronomical: Inconclusive. NOTES: fully functional and developed, only natural elements found.
Cardiovascular: Inconclusive. NOTES: fully functional and developed, only natural elements found.
Lymphatic: Inconclusive. NOTES: fully functional and developed, only natural elements found.
Nervous: One anomaly found. NOTES: mostly functional and developed, only natural elements found. Synapse pathway gap in skull, between prefrontal cortex and amygdala, not included in design or projected evolution.

Krishtakta stared at the detailed results and the included graphs and notations. The gap was the issue, not the gastropods. Given the current evolutionary build, the Brushspine likely lacked any sort of impulse control, self-preservation, *and* survival instincts.

The best conclusion that could be drawn, without exhaustive further testing, was that her apex predator was ineffectual at living.

Incompatible with life. Would likely be extinct within a cycle or two.

The scientist waved her tablet in the direction of the bipeds, who simply stared at her with jaws open. “Well, that was an abysmal failure. I must go file my findings.”

Perhaps it wasn’t a complete loss. The gastropods seemingly stepped into the role meant to be held by the Brushspine. Of course, they didn’t seem to respond to her attempts at communication, but it didn’t hurt to be polite.

“Feel free to help with population control! I’ll be back for your samples soon!”

“Did that monster have a…tablet?” Randy asked in an impressively calm and composed manner, if she did say so herself.

“And did that beast just throw itself off the edge of the canyon like it thought it could fly?” If Tim’s voice was a little shaky and borderline hysterical, Randy couldn’t bring herself to judge.

Not everyone could handle things as well as she did.

“Well.” After a slight pause to make sure the word held steady as it emerged from her mouth, Randy nodded to herself. “Well. I bet everyone will read *this* report.”

And if not, she’d make a point to print it out in quadruplicate and shove it directly up the backside of every single Council member.

Maybe with a woman-eating plant to follow.

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Murderplex

A Sol Blazers story

Jacob Holo

“You unloaded those first, right?”

Vessani S’Kaari watched her captain juggle the two pistols—one of them hers—with crossed arms and narrowed eyes. Her catlike ears were partially flattened against a head of short black hair, and her long, furry tail flicked with each silvery arc of the weapons.

“Of course they’re not loaded. What kind of idiot do you take me for?”

Captain Nathaniel Kade gave the cat girl a quick scoff. Unlike his pilot, he was as baseline as humans came. He tossed one of the pistols behind his back, flipped the second gun high, then caught the first over his shoulder. He transitioned to a one-handed spin—finger through the trigger guard—then caught the second and resumed juggling.

“What’s the worst that could happen?” Nathan added.

“Would you like my answer alphabetically or categorically?” Vessani replied tartly.

“Everyone’s a critic.”

“Just don’t drop my gun. I spent a lot of time customizing it.”

“The flame decals along the barrel are a bit much.”

“Well, I like them, and besides, it’s *my* gun. If I knew you were going to goof off with it, I wouldn’t have handed it over.”

“And miss a show this awesome?”

Vessani put hands on her shapely hips. “Are you really this bored?”

“Yes, but I also choose to be efficient with my time.”

“By practicing your gun juggling?”

“Never know when an obscure skill might come in handy. Best to keep them sharp.”

“Now you’re being silly.” Vessani folded her tail around her waist and crashed into one of tandem pilot seats on the *Neptune Dragon*’s bridge. She leaned back and propped her boots up on the opposite seat, then glanced out the corvette’s domed front. There wasn’t much to look at besides the spaceport’s high walls and the twinkling stars above that.

The cat girl's ears perked, and she glanced behind Nathan moments before the pressure door opened. Two more members of Nathan's crew filed in: the baseline engineer Joshua Cotton and the fully synthetic Aiko Pratti. Or one of her, at least. The rest were on or around the ship taking care of various miscellaneous tasks.

His multi-bodied second-in-command could inhabit a wide range of synthetic bodies, and this one hailed from her days as a commando within the Jovian Everlife. Sleek red and gold armor led up to the triangular head Aiko had painted a flashy shade of purple. That head tilted to the side, cameras focusing.

"Nate, what the hell are you doing?"

"What does it look like I'm doing?"

"Are those things loaded?"

"No, and why's everyone keep asking me that?"

"Because it feels like an important question given the kind of trouble this crew lands in. Trouble that, to be fair, is sometimes our own fault."

"Well, they're not loaded. Speaking of which, do you have a pistol you can spare?"

"Not on me. What do you need a third pistol for? You only have two hands."

"Just trying to up my game. Are you two the bearers of good news or bad?"

"Good." Joshua stepped past Aiko and beamed at them. "We got the job."

"*He* did, actually." Aiko bobbed her head toward Joshua. "Managed to rope the client in with tales of our glorious exploits."

"That's my boyfriend!" Vessani thumped the air with a fist. "You go, Josh!"

Joshua mimed tipping a nonexistent hat toward her.

"What's the job and where're we off to?" Nathan asked.

"The job is an artifact hunt," Joshua said. "Client wants us to retrieve a relic called the 'gamma shoe.'"

Nathan snorted.

"I know. Strange name, but the client seems convinced that's what the ancients called it. As for the destination…did you know there used to be a planet between Saturn and Neptune?"

“Seriously?” Nathan caught both guns. He holstered one and handed the other over to Vessani. “A whole missing planet?”

Joshua nodded.

“How big?”

“About the same size as Neptune.”

“That’s a lot of planet to go missing. This happen back during the Age of Communion?”

“Presumably so. The evidence for its existence is actually quite strong. Most scholars believe the Pentatheon’s super-AIs dismantled it to fuel their great works in the outer solar system, though some argue it was converted into weaponry to battle the Devil of Proxima during the Scourging of Heaven. Whatever the truth may be, the planet isn’t there now, nor has it been for thousands of years.”

“But this gamma shoe is?”

“Presumably.”

“You keep using that word, Josh.”

“Sorry. At the very least, the client believes enough to pay us half up front.”

“Now *that* I can get behind. Where do we start looking?”

“Near the presumed location of the missing planet.”

“I hope he’s not expecting us to track down a planet that isn’t there.”

“No, he was kind enough to provide coordinates.”

“Where’d he get those from?”

“The gamma shoe. It sends out signals at irregular intervals. No discernable pattern so far, but two recent periods of activity were enough for his team to plot the orbit. These transmissions are also why he’s so interested. He believes the artifact will shed light on the lifestyles of the ancients.”

“What’s the value in knowing that?”

“Purely academic interest, I believe.”

“He’s looking in the wrong place if you ask me.” Aiko knocked on her armored chest. “If you want to see how the ancients lived, just take a trip to Jupiter. No way were they walking around in their original meat sacks.”

“She has a point,” Joshua admitted. “Though no one’s certain how common synthetic bodies were back then.”

“Those gamma shoe transmissions reveal anything so far?” Nathan asked.

“Nope. Just gibberish.”

“Then why’s he think this gamma shoe is worth the effort?”

“He didn’t say.”

“Hmm.” Nathan frowned for a while, then shrugged. “Well, as long as his money’s good. What’s next for us? Head for those coordinates? Are we all squared away with the client?”

“Yep,” Aiko pointed over her shoulder. “Ship’s fully stocked and ready to go. We can leave once the other Aikos are back. Are we picking Rufus up along the way?”

“Nah. He’s still tied up in Order business. Will be for another few weeks.”

“Then we might as well get to it. We’re as ready as we’re going to be.”

“Sure. What’s the name of this mystery planet, anyway?”

Joshua gave Aiko a guarded look.

“Something wrong?” Nathan asked.

“It’s just…” Joshua grimaced uncomfortably. “There’s considerable debate within academic circles about the planet’s name and how it should be interpreted within the lexicon of the Crafted Tongue. The name is one of the reasons why some scholars discount the possibility of the planet ever having actually existed.”

“Okay, but what’s the name?”

“You see—”

“It’s called ‘Your Butthole’!” Aiko chimed in cheerfully.

Nathan stared at the pair, dumbfounded, then raised an eyebrow.

Joshua sighed, then nodded.

“Seriously?” Nathan asked. “That’s what the ancients named it?”

“The debate over the proper interpretation of the name is ongoing. The consensus holds the current translation is flawed.”

“You don’t say?” Nathan shrugged. “Well, who am I to argue with the wisdom of the ancients?” He faced the cat girl. “Vessani, would you be so kind as to set a course for—”

“Choose your words carefully.” Her ears flattened.

“There’s no need to be dramatic. I was merely about to ask you to take us to—”

“Nate, I can sense where you’re taking this.” She narrowed her eyes, and her tail fluffed out. “Don’t. Say it.”

“Say what?” Nathan wore an innocent smile. “I’m confused. Can you just set a course for—”

“Nnn!” She wagged a finger at him.

“…the client coordinates?”

“*Thank* you.” Vessani sighed. “You had me worried there for a—”

“Also known as ‘Your Butthole.’”

“It’s smaller than I expected,” Nathan said, studying the telescope image on his console. “You sure we have the right place?”

“As sure as we can be about these things,” Joshua replied. “If nothing else, I’m reasonably certain this is where the gamma shoe signals came from.”

“Hmm.”

The megastructure resembled a windowless cylindrical habitat, but the dimensions were off. Most cylinders rotated around their central axis for artificial gravity, turning the curved interior into living space while the center of each flattened cap served as low-gravity space docks. This one followed that basic mold, but it was unusually stubby—to the point of being almost disk-shaped rather than a proper cylinder. Five huge trapezoidal solar collectors extended from the base on the far side, giving Nathan the impression of a mechanical flower.

“The cylinder is about forty kilometers across and twelve deep,” Joshua reported. “That puts the interior at around fifteen hundred square kilometers, assuming it actually *is* hollow.”

“How’s the size compare to my old home?” Vessani asked. She’d grown up as a princess on a low-tech windowed cylinder before her stint as a morally conflicted space pirate.

“Much smaller.” Joshua’s lips moved silently for a few seconds, then he spoke up again. “Call it about one-fiftieth that size, though that doesn’t account for the windows yours had.”

“Wow, that *is* tiny.”

“And your home was on the diminutive side of the habitat spectrum to begin with.”

“You thinking this place might not be hollow?” Nathan asked.

“Won’t know until we get inside.”

“Assuming we can. Vessani?”

“The ship’s commect has a solid connection to a docking airlock. Shall I try our luck?”

“Sure. Why not?” Nathan wore a crooked grin. “When has that approach ever failed us?”

“You mean besides the last job we took?” Aiko pointed out.

“Well, if you’re going to be picky about it.”

“And the job before that one?”

“Extenuating circumstances.”

“And the one before that?”

“Everyone has a bad day now and again.”

“And the—”

“Just comm the airlock already.”

The dock’s ancient, automated systems cycled the *Neptune Dragon* through the airlock, and Vessani eased them inside as the habitat rotated languidly around them. The interior was oppressively dark, and their ship’s external floodlights did little to relieve the gloom. Curved walls were lined with honeycomb-shaped recesses for ships far larger than theirs, and there was no clear way to fly deeper into the structure.

“See that?” Vessani pointed below and to the left. “One of the docks is occupied. And…yep, looks like a second ship close to the first.”

“That second one is painted in Neptunian naval green,” Aiko noted. “Could be a Space Force corvette.”

“That’s unexpected.” Nathan grimaced. “Vessani, conduct a full sweep of the interior. I’ll see if I can raise those two ships.”

“You got it, boss.”

Nathan keyed the ship’s commect and tried for several minutes to reach the two vessels. No one responded.

“The rest of the dock’s clear as far as I can tell,” Vessani reported. “No surprises.”

“Except for two silent ships already here.” Nathan harrumphed. “Are either of them damaged?”

“Not as far as I can tell from way up here.”

“I don’t like it.”

“You want me to pull us out of here?”

“Now where’s the fun in that? Set us down in between the two ships. We’ll go outside and have a look.”

Vessani dropped the *Neptune Dragon* into an unoccupied recess at the rough midpoint between the ships. Nathan unbuckled and bounced on his heels, testing the local gravity. He judged it to be about one-tenth of a gee, and a quick glance at the ship's instrumentation confirmed they were still in vacuum.

He and Vessani donned their hard suits—combinations of environmental protection and body armor—then grabbed their pistols and belts of spare ammo before venturing out with Aiko in her commando body. *She* didn't need protection from vacuum. Joshua and Aiko's numerous noncombat bodies stayed behind to mind the ship.

Broad tunnels joined the various docks, and Aiko led them to the military vessel first, carrying her favorite heavy rifle. The dark green, boxy craft towered three stories high and bristled with missile tubes and gun emplacements. Bold white lettering declared it the NCSF *Kingfisher*, and the painting of a grayish-blue bird adorned the nose.

Nathan keyed his commect and called again, but no one responded. He circled the ship, shined his helmet lights through any windows, then rounded to one of the airlocks and banged on it hard.

Nothing.

"Ship's in good shape," Aiko summarized over his commect earpiece. "No reason the crew couldn't fly it out of here."

"Which implies no one was left *to* fly it out."

"Yup."

"Let's check the other one."

They departed the way they came, crossed in front of the *Neptune Dragon*, said hi to Joshua, then approached the second ship. This one had seen better days, but was still what Nathan would consider "reasonably safe to fly." Its nose art featured a buxom woman in a string bikini bearing two frothing beer mugs with the title FULL FLAGON stenciled beside her.

"Those aren't flagons she's carrying," Aiko pointed out. "Flagons have spouts."

"Somehow, I believe you've missed the point of the art."

Nathan called out over his commect, checked every window, and banged on both airlocks.

No one answered.

"Ship's got a bit of wear and tear," Aiko said, "but nothing unusual. Nothing that would explain why it's still here."

“Two ships, then. One military, the other freelance…”

“Something on your mind, Nate?”

“Just thinking out loud. Joshua mentioned two recent periods of activity from this place. And here we have two abandoned ships.”

“You think there might be a connection?”

“Maybe. Can’t really say why. Just got one of those feelings, you know?” He banged on the airlock one last time, then faced Aiko and Vessani. “All right. This job suddenly turned serious. We’ve potentially got two crews who, for unknown reasons, can’t return to their ships. They could be in heaps of trouble for all we know.”

“Or dead,” Vessani noted with a frown.

“That, too, but we’ll run on the assumption they’re alive for now. My guess is they came here for roughly the same reasons we did: to scope this place out and see what’s what. If that’s the case, then they would have tried to reach the habitat interior, which is where we should head next.”

“We can follow these tunnels deeper.” Aiko shined a light toward the nearest one. “Docks like this usually have elevators down to the habitable zone.”

Nathan called the ship, gave Joshua a status update, then followed Aiko down the dark tunnel. They crossed two empty docks before spotting a splash of warm, yellowish light. They followed it to the source and came to a huge, semicircular platform lined with tall windows.

Nathan approached the railing and gazed out across the habitat’s expansive interior. Even a megastructure this small encompassed a truly gargantuan space on a human scale.

The cylindrical walls were a patchwork quilt of varying terrains divided into high segments. Each segment must have been around two kilometers across. A sun rod ran down the length of the abbreviated cylinder, terminating against a distant, featureless wall. An intricate ringed structure encircled their side of the sun rod like a black band with numerous broad panels and machinery spines jutting from it at all angles.

“Weird place,” Aiko said.

“Tell me about it.”

Motion vibrated up Nathan’s soles, and he spun to find the entrance closing.

“Shit!” He dashed across the platform but only made it halfway before it sealed them in. Another shudder, and the room began its descent down the

wall.

“Guess we found ourselves that elevator,” Vessani murmured.

“Did either of you bump or press anything?” Nathan asked.

“Not me.” Vessani held up both hands.

“Me neither,” Aiko replied. “Must have been an automated response.”

“Swell.” Nathan gave the entrance a thump with his fist, then shoved it with his shoulder. It didn’t budge.

He spotted vents opening along the ceiling and heard the faint sound of flowing air. Vessani checked a readout on her wrist, which blinked green.

“Air’s breathable, Nate.”

“I’ll leave my helmet on, if it’s all the same to you.”

Nathan called the ship on the way down and was relieved when he reached Joshua. He didn’t have much to report other than the nature of their predicament, but it felt good to have help nearby. The engineer wished him luck and told them a pair of Aikos were leaving the ship to see if they could figure out the elevator controls.

Gravity increased steadily on the way down until it was roughly one gee. The platform came to a rest with feathery lightness, and the windowed front split aside. A slate-gray path led toward a huge, spindly arch bordered by two stepped hills that resembled stadium bleachers. From there, the ground transitioned to rusty sand punctuated with ridges that formed a maze of rock.

Nathan exited the elevator and took in the view.

“Nate, up ahead,” Vessani said grimly. He followed her gaze to a misshapen mound. It took him a while to realize it was composed of human body parts.

“Gods,” he breathed. “Aiko, have a look around. Vessani, with me.”

He jogged around the arch with Vessani while Aiko headed in the opposite direction, rifle raised.

The mound was a gruesome mixture of severed heads, torn limbs, and crushed torsos. About a third of the victims were clad in Space Force body armor with plenty of heavy weapons, though the impressive gear didn’t seem to have done them much good.

“These have been here a while,” Vessani said.

“What a gods-awful mess.” Nathan knelt to pinch the muzzle of a tri-barreled repeater. He pulled it out of the mess and checked the drum

magazine. “Drum’s empty. They put up a fight, at least. Any idea what took them out?”

“Not a clue. But it looks like they didn’t fight here. No spent casings on the ground.”

“Right. Some of these guns are pretty big, too.” Nathan looked around. “Yet, the terrain looks fine. Not so much as a divot from a stray bullet. They get moved here after death?”

“Seems so, but why?”

“Maybe the killers really like a good pile of nightmare fuel. Aiko?”

“There’s nothing moving out here but sand blowing in the wind.” She hustled toward them through the arch. “The thing I don’t get is—”

The black ring rotated around the sun rod. It extended several spines, and a brilliant red line materialized on the ground in front of the arch, stretching as far as Nathan could see to either side. Behind that, the elevator sealed up and began a rapid ascent.

“Great. What now?” Nathan rose and pulled out his pistol. Vessani did the same, and Aiko joined them.

The red line advanced across the ground in their direction, closing at the pace of a slow walk. Nathan looked up and spotted reddish glints along the black ring that may have been laser emitters.

While he studied the ring, a huge, square panel oriented to face them. A screen that must have been a kilometer to each side flickered as it booted up, then shone with the image of a rounded gauge. The gauge’s arc transitioned from red to yellow and then green with a fat needle resting in the exact middle of the yellow portion.

“What?” Nathan muttered.

“Nate, that red line on the ground is getting closer,” Vessani warned. “What do we do?”

“It’s just a line,” Aiko replied.

“Yeah, but what happens when we cross it?”

“Want me to find out?”

“No!” Vessani snapped. “What if it’s a death wall?”

“Pretty sure it’s just a light show.” Aiko glanced over a shoulder. “What’s the call, Nate? I’m the expendable one here.”

Nathan found his eyes drawn to the arch and the now-absent elevator platform. He and Vessani had gone around it, but Aiko had approached from a different angle after her quick scout of the area and had passed *through* it.

That's when the place started waking up, he thought. *Trouble is, we don't have a clue what it's trying to do. Even a little information now could mean the difference between life and death later.*

"Check it out for us, Aiko," he ordered. "But be careful. Start by sticking one arm through it."

Aiko approached the red line while Nathan and Vessani backed away. The Jovian stuck her arm out, and a red ribbon gleamed briefly on her elbow. She pulled the limb out and backpedaled.

"No reaction so far. Want me to try walking through—"

"*STALKER UNLEASHED!!*"

A boisterous man's voice boomed from everywhere at once and even chattered through Nathan's earpiece.

"Movement to our left!" Aiko called out.

A hulking monstrosity of chitin, teeth, and claws mounted the top of a stepped hill. The beast rose to its full height—twice as tall as a man—and spread four muscular arms as it loosed a terrifying shriek through its bifurcated lower jaw.

"What the *fuck* is that?!" Vessani blurted.

The monster dropped onto all six limbs and galloped effortlessly down the steps, barreling toward them.

"Your mistake, sucker!" Aiko opened fire on full auto. Her heavy rifle roared as it spewed a stream of tracer-lit death. Dozens of bullets impacted across the charging creature and—

—didn't seem to do much of anything.

Aiko held her ground and kept firing until the beast tackled her. She skidded across the ground, her armor sparking with the monstrosity on top. It clenched her triangular head within one of its huge hands and then plucked it off with the ease of beheading a plastic doll.

Aiko's head soared through the air and landed by Nathan's feet. It rolled to a stop and looked up at him.

"Welp, that didn't work," she said glumly. "Nate, I suggest you run."

He saw no reason to argue.

"Did we lose it?" Vessani rested her hands atop her knees as she caught her breath.

"Doubtful." Nathan put his back against a rocky wall layered in oranges, reds, and tans. He gulped water through a straw built into his

helmet and checked back the way they came, gun in hand.

For what little good that would do.

The creature—this Stalker, the strange voice had called it—had tailed them across the dusty plain and then into a confusing mess of rocky passes. They'd bolted inside, trying to lose the monster, though every time they'd turned around, that thing had been watching them, crouched atop a nearby cliff or clinging to the side of a huge spire.

They'd fled deeper and eventually stumbled across a stream that cut between two high cliffs. The stream's burbling flow provided some semblance of direction, and they'd followed it deeper into the habitat. They must have crossed the whole segment because a blank, imposing barrier loomed high above them, marking the boundary between them and the next patchwork of land. Its smooth, featureless surface would be impossible to climb without dedicated gear.

Which they didn't have.

He keyed his commect again, but the device didn't respond. It hadn't worked properly since that obnoxiously exuberant voice had come across it. Whatever was going on, he and Vessani were cut off from the rest of the crew.

A red glimmering line slid across a nearby outcropping and a shadowy figure shifted into position. Its eyes flashed golden as they caught the light.

"There," Nathan said quietly and nodded in the Stalker's direction.

"What's it waiting for?" Vessani stood by, pushing off her knees.

"That red line, maybe? It's following us, but have you noticed how it stays behind the red line?"

"That doesn't make any sense."

"No, but think about how quickly it reached Aiko. It's faster than us. *Way* faster, so speed isn't an issue. It can catch us whenever it wants. Kill us, too, but something's holding it back."

The red line crested the outcrop and began to slide across the ground toward them. The Stalker skittered down the side on all six limbs, then snarled.

But it didn't advance.

Not through the red line.

Okay, so that tracks with the theory, he thought. *But why is it acting this way? Is it a creature or a machine designed to look like one? In either case, how intelligent is it?*

No insights came to him.

“Move it,” Nathan urged, and Vessani followed his splashing steps across the stream. The trickling waters led them to a narrow slit, which they shuffled through sideways. The gap widened, and they jogged out into a rounded basin with high rocky walls forming a U-shape against the impassable barrier wall in front of them.

“Dead end, Nate.”

“Not necessarily. There’s a culvert in the wall.”

They hurried over.

“Through this?” Vessani dropped onto her hands and knees and peered inside. The opening was large enough to crouch-walk into, but the flowing water quickly disappeared into dark, unseen depths. “I guess we could slide down this, but there’s no telling where it leads.”

“You see any better options?”

“Not really.”

Nathan caught sight of the red line reflecting off the ground behind them. The Stalker clambered through a wider portion of the gap two stories up then jumped down. It landed heavily and began to, well, *stalk* in their direction.

“Vess?”

“Hold on.” She crawled inside the culvert on her hands and knees. “I can’t see shit in here.”

“Less flapping of lips. More hauling of ass.”

“Give me a sec. I’m trying to find a safe way to slide down.”

Nathan kicked her hard in the butt.

“*MROAW!!!*” the cat girl screeched. She splashed onto her belly and disappeared down the culvert with the retreating echoes of her profanities. Nathan leaped in after her and slid down the pipe.

The tube was long, completely dark, and filled with a combination of water and swearing.

It eventually spat them out into a shallow lake. Nathan tried to swim across it, but his hard suit’s lack of buoyancy won out, forcing him to plod through dense, wriggling algae until he reached the shore.

“Damn it, Nate!” Vessani wagged a silver fish about by the tail, which made it look like a floppy dagger in her hand. “What the hell?”

“Big Ugly was almost on top of us. Sorry. You mad at me?”

“I’ll get over it.” Vessani gave the fish a forlorn look then tossed it into the lake. She brushed the algae off her arms and shoulders.

Nathan climbed a small rise, boots squelching with each step, then took in the scenery.

It was, in a word: soggy.

In two words: very soggy.

It was as if the habitat designers had crafted a pleasant stretch of rolling hills—complete with quaint, little buildings—but had left the faucet on too long. The soil was soft, and the water stagnant and cloudy from who-knew-what. The buildings were all dilapidated and partially reclaimed by the muck. A low mist hugged the ground, and unseen critters traced rippling wakes through the waters.

“Lovely,” Vessani muttered.

“On the bright side, our friend’s too big to fit through that pipe.”

“STALKER EVADED!!”

“Speaking of which…”

“You hear the voice, too?”

“Yeah.” Nathan keyed his commect. “Hey, mystery voice. Can you hear me?”

No response.

“You in charge around here? Any chance you’ll let us return to our ship? We promise to behave ourselves.”

Nothing.

“Pretty please?”

Silence.

“Worth a shot.” Nathan released the button. “Not sure what to make of the voice yet, but this place has some very strict rules. Violate those rules, and you get penalized.”

“Like the death penalty for crossing the red line?”

“Seems so. The voice might be some sort of automated PA system piped through our commects.”

“Whatever’s going on, we keep getting pushed away from our ship. How do we get back?”

“Not sure.” Nathan looked around again.

High over, the black ring shifted along the sun rod, and the red line materialized on the far side of the lake. The immaterial boundary began its slow, steady advance toward them.

“No rest for the weary.”

He led them into the swamp.

The drones showed up about halfway through the second segment. They were fat, buzzing machines that floated about on four outboard propellers, sweeping the waterlogged landscape with bright searchlights as the sun rod ebbed into evening.

“What are they looking for?” Vessani asked as the pair crouched beside the tilted, sunken ruins of what might have been a house.

“Us?” Nathan replied. “Maybe?”

“But they’re just flying around in predictable loops, shining those lights straight down. If they’re searching for us, they’re not doing a very good job of it. Hell, all they need to do is look up. It’s not like we’re hard to spot as we’ve sloshed our way across this place. What sense does any of this make?”

“I’m sure it made perfect sense to the ancients.” Nathan checked behind them, where the red line shimmered atop dank waters. “We can’t stay here. Let’s give those drones another half minute to shift out of position. We should be able to cut through the middle before they regroup.”

“Unless they decide to look up at the two idiots splashing through their turf.”

“They won’t.”

“Why not?”

“Call it a feeling.”

“You willing to bet your life on that ‘feeling’?”

“I’d rather try that than tackle the Stalker. Come on. Those drones don’t look armed. What’s the worst that could happen?”

“Are you *trying* to tempt fate?” she grated.

“It’s a hobby.”

He rounded the corner at a brisk walk. She followed him across the marsh, slogging through ankle-high water as the drones stuck to their circuitous routes, only reconverging once the pair was safely past their searching lights.

She glanced back. “I can’t believe that worked.”

“Have a little faith.”

“I would if your advice made sense. We’re already down our toughest Aiko.”

“She’ll be fine. The damage to her neck should be an easy fix, assuming we can recover her body.”

“I’m more worried about us at the moment.”

“Yeah,” he sighed. “Me, too.”

They marched into a thicket of reeds twice as tall as they were. The sun rod darkened into bluish-purple dusk, and bright glimpses of yellowish lights flickered through the reeds. Nathan parted the outermost stalks and studied the area ahead.

Vessani peeked over his shoulder.

“Well, yank my tail. How are we supposed to cross this?”

“Very, very carefully?” Nathan replied.

An open plain led up to the next segment wall, where Nathan assumed they’d have to find a way through like the last one. The skewed roofs of sunken buildings dotted the landscape, and a pair of distant green lights pulsed near ground level along the wall.

Did those lights indicate the way forward? If nothing else, it was an obvious landmark on an otherwise featureless wall, and would have been their next destination if not for the swarms of drones roving back and forth, sweeping the marsh with ovals of light.

“Do we risk it?” Vessani asked.

“We don’t have much of a choice.” He spent a minute studying the patrol patterns. “All right, let’s try crossing, see if we can reach those two green lights.”

Nathan led them to one side, then up through a gap in the formation. Drones buzzed all around them, the sound of their rotors deafening as they passed dangerously close in front and behind them. They’d made it about halfway through when—

“Ah!” Vessani gasped, tripping headfirst into the water with a dirty splash.

“You all right?” Nathan waded back to her.

“Something grabbed my leg!” She kicked twice with her free leg, then shuffled toward him, half submerged. He grabbed her outstretched hand and hauled her upright.

“Move it, Vess! Before—!”

The gap ahead of them closed, now transformed into a moving maze of searchlights.

“Shit!” he hissed.

“What now?”

“We improvise. This way!”

Nathan led them along a weaving path through the drones, his carefully plotted route forgotten. They’d almost made it out when the crisscrossing pattens became too swift and constricted for them to slip through. A searchlight grazed Nathan’s shoulder, then snapped directly onto him as if magnetic.

Distant sirens wailed rising and falling tones, and that energetic voice spoke over their commects:

“SHAMBLERS ALERTED!!”

“That can’t be good.”

“Nate, behind us!”

A drenched, emaciated figure rose from where Vessani had tripped. It was roughly humanoid with greenish skin, a sunken face, and long, stringy hair. Its arms were unusually long, and its eyes were dark, vacant pits. It shuffled toward them with outstretched arms and let out a guttural moan.

Nathan drew his pistol and snapped off a quick shot. The impact blew a chunk out of the creature’s chest, and it dropped with a splash.

More of the creatures emerged from all across the marsh, rising out of the muck or crawling out of recesses in the ruins.

“Time to go!” he declared.

The pair splashed their way toward the twin green lights, which bracketed a small tunnel leading into the barrier wall. Shamblers converged on them—not swiftly, but with enough numbers and prepositioning to make the trek hazardous. Nathan led them in a serpentine path around the worst concentration, leaving only two creatures between them and their immediate goal.

“I’ve got these!” Vessani braced her legs, raised up her pistol in a firm, two-handed grip, and rattled off two shots.

Both shamblers went down with ventilated craniums.

“DOUBLE KILL!!”

They sprinted past the corpses and entered the tunnel.

The tunnel led them to a forest with massive, gnarled trees towering until their crowns meshed to partially occlude the sun rod, which now brightened back to midday intensity. They stole glances back through the tunnel, but none of the shamblers had pursued them out of the marsh.

“Two down,” Nathan murmured. “Maybe three more to go?”

“What makes you say that?”

“The patchwork of land segments we saw earlier. It was five deep, and so far we’ve been consistently pressured toward the habitat’s opposite endcap. Reach that, and maybe we can get out of here.”

“Think there’ll be a prize at the end?”

“Wouldn’t that be a nice surprise.”

The red line appeared behind them, and they took the hint and headed into the forest. The trees grew larger and less tightly packed as they progressed, though the buzzing of search drones forced them to double back several times.

“I don’t get it,” Vessani said as they jogged onward. “What’s the point of this place?”

“It must have been built for a reason.”

“Yeah, but was it a *good* reason?”

“I’m going to vote for…no.”

The further they trekked, the tighter and swifter the drone patterns became. They were about ready to dash through a particularly difficult zone when a two-tone buzzer warbled, sounding like it came from high above. Nathan shielded his eyes, but managed to make out that giant gauge affixed to the black ring. Its needle had dipped into the red and was continuing to inch downward.

“What do you make of that?” Vessani asked.

“Don’t know, but I doubt it bodes well for us.”

Additional drones poured out of knotted holes high in the trees. They switched their beams on and slid into formation, creating a nigh-impassible network of luminous ovals.

“Well?” Vessani asked.

Nathan spotted the red line a few dozen meters behind them. They’d burned too much time backtracking to avoid the drones.

“No choice but to chance it. Let’s go!”

They darted through the patrolling drones, but soon were caught by one of the searchlights.

“MEGAFAUNA DEPLOYED!!”

“Here we go again.” Nathan drew his pistol as they raced on.

The ground trembled, and they stopped as a seam formed in the soil ahead of them. Two massive panels sank about a meter down then slid apart

to reveal a huge, square pit. A platform rose to fill the gap, then locked into position with a shudder.

“What?” Vessani lowered her aim.

The platform was piled high with bones that must have belonged to one hell of a monster, had it still been alive. A skull with eye sockets large enough to serve as windows for a small house led back to the clustered remains of giant vertebrae, ribs, limbs, and claws.

“MEGAFAUNA DEFEATED!!”

The platform lowered, and the two panels slid into place to seal the pit off.

“That feels unearned,” Vessani commented.

“I’m not complaining.” Nathan holstered his weapon and led them on.

They reached the segment’s exit without any other encounters, though the exit itself presented a new problem.

Unlike the previous two barrier walls, this one bulged along an uneven diagonal, indicating some form of damage from the past, and the obvious path through its base had been pinched shut. They returned to the wall exterior and began searching for an alternative route through.

The red line was visible by the time they found a way forward. The base of the massive, diagonal bulge had created a gap tall enough for them to crawl through on their bellies. With no other options and the red line closing in, they switched their helmet lights on and crawled inside.

The mangled passage angled downward more often than up, tightening to the point where Nathan feared they might not find a way through, him more so than the lean cat girl. He considered abandoning his hard suit more than once, but decided to leave that as a last resort. They had no way of knowing what hazards awaited them around the next bend.

The path widened eventually, and they stood up once more. The floor flattened, and they proceeded at a brisk jog, their light beams dancing across vast, towering structures to either side.

“This looks like a storage area,” Vessani said.

“Could be. Feels about right.”

Nathan illuminated a blocky shape as they hurried past. It did seem to resemble a storage container of some sort, with identical blocks stacked on top of it all the way up to the ceiling.

They crossed the space in darkness, past containers of various sizes: some barely large enough to squeeze a person into, others with ample room for spaceships like the *Neptune Dragon*. They followed a straight, open path down the middle, only deviating when they encountered a container that had toppled off its rack.

They stopped when the path ended in an impassable wall of containers that were too much like coffins for Nathan's liking.

"Do you see a way through?" Vessani asked, craning her neck.

"Not yet."

They looked around for several minutes, but all they found were more blocked-off walls.

"We might be able to climb these," Vessani suggested, testing her grip in the seam between the first and second container layers.

"Maybe, but these stacks go all the way to the ceiling. Even if we do find a way to squeeze through, we're likely to hit a dead end. We didn't follow a deliberate path in here, which means there may not be a clear way out. Not for people, anyway. Face it, Vess. We're not supposed to be here."

"You could say that about this whole blasted habitat."

"Yes, but this area is different. It's like we're, I don't know. Like we've glimpsed behind the curtain at a magic show."

"If that's the case, then what now? Do we backtrack?"

"I'm not—"

"BOREDOM ALERT!! ACTION GAUGE RUNNING LOW!! ENCOURAGEMENT PROTOCOLS ACTIVATED!!"

"Oh, what now?" Nathan groused.

The floor thrummed with activating machinery, and hatches swung open along dozens of the coffin-like containers. Shamblers pushed out and began gathering into a disorderly, lurching mass. Both Nathan and Vessani drew their pistols, but neither fired as the shamblers all turned away from them and shuffled out of sight.

Vessani glanced to Nathan, who shrugged and lowered his aim.

"Let's follow them."

"What? Nate!" Vessani hissed under her breath, then jogged to catch up.

They tailed the shamblers to a row of five pillars, each with a hatch at the base. The hatches opened to admit the shamblers one at a time, and the

creatures—or, more likely, machines crafted to look like divergent humanoids—had formed orderly queues in front of each.

Vessani bobbled her head toward the scene, then shrugged her arms with a look equal parts confusion and exasperation.

Nathan replied with a sly wink, then shouted:

“Hey, uglies!”

Vessani cringed. “Nate, what are you doing?”

“Testing a theory. I may be starting to understand this place.”

To his complete lack of surprise, the shamblers all remained in their lines, shuffling forward with each cycle of the hatches.

Nathan sauntered up behind one line, placed his pistol against the back of a shambler’s head, and pulled the trigger. The shot blew its face off, and chunks of skin spackled the next shambler’s back. That one didn’t react either, and Nathan toppled the first with his free hand on its shoulder.

“What are you *doing*?” Vessani whispered worriedly.

“Getting us out of here.” Nathan aimed at the shambler directly to his left and aerated its cranium. The creature/mechanism/thing stumbled another two steps then collapsed onto its side.

“Come on.” Nathan waved the cat girl forward with his gun. “Get in line.”

“But—”

“Trust me. I’ve got a good feeling.”

Vessani hesitated for several bewildered seconds, then marched into line with a grimace. The hatches cycled repeatedly before it was their turn, and both Nathan and the cat girl stepped through their respective hatches in unison.

The hatch sealed Nathan in.

A sense of great motion whisked him upward, and the hatch slid aside.

He staggered out, mildly dizzy.

The sun rod glowed high above a dull, metallic landscape full of flat planes faceted together at sharp angles, and the black ring’s giant gauge flashed an insistent red, its needle dipping low.

The hills were sharp and polygonal, and Nathan wondered if the other landscapes looked like this under their surface features. It was a barren, geometric expanse, empty except for the dozens—if not hundreds—of shamblers.

Who all turned as one to face them.

“Uh, Nate?”

“Run! That way!” He pointed, transitioning into a sprint. “I see the exit!”

Nathan and Vessani raced down the barrier tunnel with a horde of shamblers moaning, groaning, and stumbling after them as their boots thumped swift, echoing drumbeats. A shambler listed into view, its silhouette backlit by the tunnel exit, arms outstretched. Vessani blasted it in the chest then shouldered past it. The shambler flopped to the ground, limbs twitching.

The tunnel opened onto a dusty stretch of parched, reddened earth pierced with spires of black rock the size of skyscrapers. The path ahead led across gentle rises, and the spires seemed to be placed in a converging manner, funneling toward a squat pyramid with a metal arch adorning its flattened top. The black ring had moved all the way to this end of the sun rod, and the gauge had been dropped into position directly over the pyramid.

“Looks like the top of that pyramid leads to an elevator!” Vessani shouted as they ran.

“Good eye! Let’s go for it!”

They climbed the nearest rise, which put them in sight of swarms of shamblers flowing in from all around. They weren’t fast, but they crawled, slid, or dropped through any holes in the terrain, often emerging close by.

Nathan glanced over his shoulder. A solid mass of shamblers pursued them, and the red line had appeared again, advancing faster than before with the Stalker keeping pace behind it. He wasn’t certain, but he thought any shamblers that fell behind the red line were gaining bursts of speed.

He and Vessani crossed the reddish waste between them and the pyramid. A group of shamblers clustered ahead of them, and Nathan slowed long enough to crack off two shots, then followed Vessani around the group. Both targets dropped, and more tripped over the bodies.

“DOUBLE KILL!!”

The gauge blinked, and its needle danced up a hair.

They followed a shallow ravine that snaked between the hills, raced out, and crossed an open field. Shamblers converged on them from the sides and from behind as they reached the foot of the pyramid.

“Up we go!” Vessani panted.

“Yup!”

They huffed and gasped their way up the smooth, slate-gray slope until they crested the top, coming within sight of the arch—

—and the elevator beyond it.

“Almost there!” Vessani exclaimed, exhilaration winning against her fatigue.

“Uh huh!” Nathan ran alongside her, but then one of his feet flew out from under him. He stumbled forward, regained his footing, then glanced back. A spent casing from a large-caliber gun gleamed on the ground, rolling away. He searched ahead, which looked relatively clean until he checked the area immediately past the arch.

The ground there was littered with the glint of casings and the dark streaks of what might have been old blood. He spotted a few divots in the arch and a few more along the ground. Impact points from heavy weapons fire?

His mind raced, his instincts sensing the presence of danger without fully comprehending why. He looked up at the gauge to find its border flashing red. They were so close to the goal this insane place had been driving them toward, and yet…

And yet…

There are penalties for not following the rules, he told himself darkly.

“Stop!” He grabbed Vessani by the bicep, and she staggered to a halt.

“What’s wrong?”

“This is where those soldiers fought and died.”

“Yeah?” She looked around, sucking in deep breaths. “And?”

“And it’s clear they fought *after* they crossed that arch.”

“Okay. But…the elevator?”

“We won’t be allowed to leave. Not with all our limbs attached. Not unless we follow the rules.” He backtracked to the edge of the plateau and studied the horde clambering up toward them. They were dangerously close.

He raised his pistol and emptied the rest of his magazine. A trio of shamblers dropped.

“TRIPLE KILL!!”

He drew a full magazine from his belt and checked the gauge as he reloaded. The needle had inched up again but was still deep in the red.

“More. We need more.”

“More what?” Vessani asked.

“We need to push back the boredom. Otherwise, we’ll get penalized into the grave.”

“What are you talking about?”

“We need to farm for points.” He flashed a winning grin. “I’m not sure if we get extra for style, but given the deficit we’ve racked up, I’m going for it.”

“Nate, I have no idea what you’re babbling about.”

“Don’t worry. I’ve got this.” He shrugged. “Maybe. Here, hold this for me. And give me your gun.”

He unclasped his ammo belt, and she exchanged it for her flame-decaled pistol.

“Nate, what the hell has gotten into you?”

“No time to explain. Just reload the guns when I throw them to you. Toss them back when I signal you.”

“*Nate?*”

“Wish me luck. Here goes.”

He raised the pistols, one in each hand, then emptied one of them into the crowd. He tossed the weapon to Vessani and then blasted away with the second.

“DOUBLE KILL!!”

“TRIPLE KILL!!”

“MURDER SPREE!!”

Vessani reloaded the weapon with swift, fluidic grace and tossed it back on Nathan’s signal. He chucked another empty pistol toward her at the same time, caught the reloaded one, and fired away at the closest shamblers.

“STYLISH RELOAD!!”

“TEAMWORK BONUS!!”

The announcements overlapped slightly as the needle twitched upward into the yellow. Nathan found himself grinning. He was on to something.

“‘Stylish,’ you say? How about some more of that?”

Vessani reloaded the pistols faster than Nathan could rattle them off, and soon he found himself holding both again. He tossed one experimentally behind his back, caught it over his shoulder, twirled it with a finger through the trigger guard while he blew a shambler’s head off with the other gun.

“SENSATIONAL!!”

The needle jumped noticeably.

“Like that, huh?”

Nathan juggled the pistols, snapping off quick shots before tossing each gun back into the air. One of them clicked empty, and he chucked it toward Vessani, then spun the other.

The shamblers slowed their advance, bunching up into a semicircle, almost as if they were crowding in to see what he did next. He caught the reloaded pistol from Vessani, twirled it with gleeful flair, then brought both up in an akimbo stance.

The plateau seemed to hold its collective breath.

He opened fire. At this range, he couldn’t miss, even shooting with his off hand, and the accolades poured in.

“DOUBLE KILL!!”

“TRIPLE KILL!!”

“MURDER SPREE!!”

He kept up the pressure, pivoting in place, transforming into a tornado of destruction. He flung one of the guns over a shoulder toward Vessani, then caught her return toss once he’d spun back around, all while blasting away at the shamblers.

“WANTON SLAUGHTER!!”

“WALKING ATROCITY!!”

“WAR CRIME RAMPAGE!!”

The needle jumped with each excited proclamation, and the border flashed yellow.

“More,” he breathed. “We’re not in the green yet. We need *more*.”

He caught the next set of reloads, and his eyes landed on the Stalker, who had reached the front ranks—now ahead of the red line for the first time. Nathan charged the towering beast, arms outstretched, guns barking, and the Stalker flinched dramatically with each impact.

He fired both pistols until they clicked empty. The Stalker began to recover, but Nathan kicked it in the approximate location of its groin and followed that up with a vicious roundhouse kick to the torso.

It was like he’d rammed his foot into a warship. The Stalker didn’t budge.

A moment of icy terror shot through Nathan, and he spent that split second wondering if he’d misjudged this place. But then the Stalker winked at him. It flinched and staggered back in an exaggerated, overacted manner

and performed a little pirouette before crashing down onto its side. A long tongue uncoiled from its loosed jaws, and it exhaled a loud death gurgle.

Announcements assaulted their ears, overlapping each other in a celebratory fusillade:

“SAVAGE!!”

“SENSATIONAL!!”

“TEAMWORK BONUS!!”

“STYLISH ASSIST!!”

“SICK SKILLS!!”

“FLAMBOYANT ASSAULT!!”

“COMBO BONUS!!”

“STALKER DEFEATED!!”

The needle maxed out, and the gauge erupted with green graphical sparkles.

“ENCOURAGEMENT PROTOCOLS SUSPENDED!!”

The shambling horde began to meander. A few paused to grab the fallen before dragging them away, and soon the plateau was empty except for Nathan, Vessani, and the “defeated” Stalker.

Nathan rejoined the cat girl and handed her gun back.

“You look confused.”

She nodded emphatically.

“Well, I don’t blame you. But hold that thought. Unless I’ve missed my guess, there’s still one more task ahead of us.”

“And that is?”

“We need to cross the finish line.”

He led them up to the arch where signs of an old battle still littered the other side. Vessani hesitated at the threshold, but Nathan grabbed her wrist and tugged her through with him.

The arch lit up with sparklers, twirlers, and bursts of confetti.

“I do believe that’s a good sign,” Nathan declared triumphantly.

“Nate, the Stalker!” Vessani began to backpedal, but Nathan held her hand tight and tugged her back into place.

“I see it. Just hang in there.”

“But—”

“This’ll be fine.” He frowned ever so slightly. “Probably.”

The Stalker hurried up to the arch and then retrieved something from behind a small hatch. It came over to them, dropped to its knees, and held

out a large crystalline bowl cupped within two of its huge hands.

"For me?" Nathan asked.

The Stalker nodded and inched the bowl toward him.

Nathan picked up the crystal bowl, shaped to resemble the bottom half of the Stalker's head and surprisingly heavy due to its wide, sturdy base. The etching along the base was written in something close to the Crafted Tongue, and he took a stab at interpreting the text.

"'I survived the infamous Your Butthole Murderplex.'" Nathan looked up with a genuine smile. "Aww. That's sweet. Thank you very much, Mr. Stalker. I will cherish it forever."

The creature rose and swept two of its four arms into a gracious bow.

The elevator took them down instead of up, then connected with a tram that conveyed them back to the first opposite endcap before scaling the side and letting them off within the docking zone.

"I still don't get what just happened," Vessani said.

"It's simple, really. We had to put on a good show."

"A *show*?"

"Yep. We somehow got roped into a game, probably when Aiko crossed the first arch. After that, as contestants, we were expected to play by its rules. That's what the gauge was measuring and, if we hadn't performed well enough, my guess is we would have been killed once we crossed the finish line."

"That whole thing was a *game*?"

"So it would seem."

"But that's horrible! What kind of twisted mind would build a place like this? It killed two whole crews and nearly took us out, too!"

"All that is true, but you need to think like an ancient to understand this place. For them, 'death' would have been an inconvenience because they would have played with synthetic bodies. Sure, being dismembered is rough, but it's not fatal. I mean, just look at how many times Aiko has 'died.' That's also why we found that horror show near the entrance. The body parts were being returned to their owners. See? This place is actually quite considerate toward its players. The Stalker even gave us a little latitude near the end by taking a fall."

"Yeah. Real considerate."

“And speaking of synthetics.” Nathan keyed his commect. “Aiko? Joshua? Either of you there?”

“Hey, Nate,” one of the Aikos replied. “Good to hear from you finally.”

Nathan grimaced. “I was expecting a little more fanfare than ‘good to hear from you.’”

“We saw the whole thing. Well, except for the parts where you went underground. Anyway, Aikos Three and Four managed to bring One’s body back to the ship. You’ll be pleased to hear we’ve nearly got her head reattached.”

“Splendid!” Nathan nudged Vessani in the arm. “See? Everything worked out in the end.”

“What about the gamma shoe?” the cat girl asked.

“You know, good point. Way to keep your eye on the prize. Any thoughts on that front, Aiko? Vess and I have been too preoccupied with running for our lives.”

“According to Joshua, you two already found it.”

“We did?”

“Yeah. The gamma shoe? That’s the transmission this place pumps out during each death game.”

“You’re kidding.”

“Afraid not.”

“So…no priceless artifact?”

“We got a clean recording of the transmission but that’s about it. I suppose we *could* try going back in for a look-see.”

“Nah, let’s not risk it. We’ll collect the bodies, put skeleton crews on the two ships, then fly everything back to Neptune. The NCSF will pay for the corvette’s return, and we’ll see if we can track down a next of kin for the *Full Flagon*. If not, we can always sell it as salvage. On top of that, we can approach the client with the recording you took. I won’t ask for full price, given we don’t have a tangible artifact, but maybe he’ll be interested in buying it at a discount.”

“Sounds like a plan. You two heading back to the ship?”

“Already on our way. Also, we’re not leaving *completely* empty-handed.” Nathan grinned as he appraised the trophy. “We managed to snag you a new mixing bowl for the kitchen.”

“Yippie,” Aiko replied dryly.

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When the Third Moon Rises

K.B. Carlisle

“Got it all loaded?”

“Nah. I’ve just been out here sitting on my ass this whole time.”

Gus laughed. “I figured as much. Want some coffee before we head out?”

“Tell you the truth,” Brandon said, scanning the horizon, “I want a shot before we head out. Hell of a storm brewing out there.”

“Yeah. Well, the whiskey is by the coffee pot. Make yourself a cup and let’s get this over with.”

“Hell yeah.” He rushed into the small house.

Gus chuckled and took a sip of his own whiskey-free coffee. He liked to be on alert when they were working a mil contract. This one didn’t seem like it was going to be too bad. A few of their trackers had gone missing and it wasn’t important enough for them to waste their precious resources, so they hired him to find them. Gus had lived on Cihera since he was a kid. No one knew this planet better than he did.

Brandon used to be a soldier at the Diego base, but he was dishonorably discharged because of a prank involving superglue and a poorly chosen toilet that his commanding officer happened to be the next person to sit on. Funny thing was, Brandon wasn’t even mad about it. He said if someone would have done that to him then he would have done a lot worse than discharge them and deny them a ride off planet. The folks at the base had given Gus a hard time when they realized that he had picked Brandon up as a helper. Gus told them that they could say who could go on their base all day long and he would respect it, but the next time they tried to tell him who he could and could not employ, he would happily take his business elsewhere.

They never had a problem with anyone he brought on base again after that.

Gus did the jobs that no one else wanted to do. He found anything that those idiots in the base “misplaced,” he led runs to Karmen—the base on

the other side of the canyon—to exchange supplies, and he could hunt down anything that threatened the safety of soldiers and civilians in the area.

The sound of static rang from the seat of Gus's ROV. "Painter. Jameson. You copy? Over."

"Loud and clear, Radio. Going to see what we can find before this storm hits. Over."

"The boys at Karmen are saying that they are losing trackers as well as…want to check the…flare…" Whatever Radio had been trying to tell them was being drowned out by static. The storm must already be hitting the base. All the sand in the air destroys the signal.

"Brandon!" Gus threw the radio down on the seat. "Let's ride."

Brandon jumped in the passenger seat with a helmet full of snacks and a thermos that Gus was fairly certain contained zero coffee. "What's up?"

"We're headed to River Canyon. Guys over at Karmen are losing trackers too. Figured the best place to start looking would be right in the middle. If they found their way in there then that would explain why none of them are coming back."

"Trackers are smart; how could they get stuck in a canyon?"

"I'm pretty sure your CO was smart, didn't stop him from getting stuck to a toilet, did it? Maybe some asshole is trapping them down there or something. You packed the guns, right?"

"Was I supposed to pack anything else?" Brandon grinned and unzipped one of the bags behind them. Gus saw two rifles, an assortment of sidearms, magazines, loose bullets, and one grenade before Brandon zipped it back up.

"You know those things have cases for a reason."

"Yeah? Well you told me to hurry, so they went from rack to bag."

"Was the grenade on the rack too?"

"The grenades stay in the bag. Never know when you might need to light shit up."

Gus raised an eyebrow. "Did you say *grenades* plural? And what do you mean *light shit up*? Are those incendiary?"

"I'm sure at least one of them is. I like to keep a variety."

"Did you pack any food besides a helmet full of snack cakes?"

"Three days' worth of rations in the box. Even remembered water this time."

“Good, we might need it.” Gus nodded toward the cloud of sand that looked like a wall blocking the low-hanging sun.

“It’ll be clear in the canyon,” Brandon said, shoving a coffee cake in his mouth.

“We can only hope.”

It was dark when they arrived at the canyon. The sun never set on this part of Cihera, but it was blocked by the hulking mass of the dust storm that thankfully hung on the edge of the horizon for now. Gus was grateful that both Min and Tutu—the twin moons that always hung in the eastern sky—were full. They would still be able to see if any dangerous creatures decided to show their ugly mugs, but even that small comfort would be gone once they began their decent down the steep canyon walls.

“Damn. I knew I forgot something.” Brandon slapped the dashboard.

“NVGs?” Gus hopped out of the truck and looked into the depths below. “That’s going to make this a fun trip.”

“Well, in my defense it never freaking gets dark this time of year.”

“It’s dark now.”

“Well if they were so important then why didn’t you pack them?”

“Because I pay you to handle shit like that. You brought grenades when we are supposed to be out here finding lost trackers. Did the thought not cross your dang brain that we might need something to help us see?”

“I brought flares and flashlights.”

“Great. Maybe your grenades will come in handy once we announce our presence to everything that lives down in this pit.”

“Maybe they will.” Brandon smirked at him.

Gus snatched a flare out of the bag, lit it, and threw it. They both leaned over the edge of the canyon and watched until the flare hit the bottom. Brandon whistled.

“That’s a long fall. How are we getting down?”

“You didn’t pack anything for that?”

“I didn’t think we were going to be rappelling down into the damn thing. You never said that.”

“First of all, I shouldn’t have to. Rope of any kind is useful when we do a job, but especially a job here. Second”—Gus turned on a flashlight and pointed it behind Brandon—“I figured we could take the stairs.”

Brandon shook his head. “You knew there were stairs the whole time?”

“Yeah, and you should’ve too. Didn’t you used to ride over this bridge all the time?”

“Yeah, but I never bothered to get out and look under it. There’s no pit stops on delivery runs between bases.”

“Fair enough. Grab what you can carry.” Gus slung the bag with the provisions over his back along with his rifle.

“That all you going to take?” Brandon asked, strapping the bag of weapons to his own back.

Gus nodded. “Those trackers don’t hunt humans. I’m assuming they all came to the canyon because Hapi is working its way to this side of the planet. Once it shows up in the sky, River Canyon goes back to being Canyon River and this whole desert will turn into the greenest place you ever saw in your life.”

“Yeah, they mentioned something about a third moon when I was first stationed here. They never said anything about it pulling a river across the planet with it.”

Gus started down the first set of metal stairs. “You never wondered why there’s a big-ass canyon that cuts all the way across the only chunk of land on this planet? They didn’t put these bases out here for nothing. You got hundreds of bases all along the coast to gather resources from the ocean, but the only other ones are all dotted along the edge of this hole we are climbing into. They were put out here to harvest wood. Only problem was back when they built the bases along the river, they didn’t know that the river disappears when Hapi is hanging out over the ocean side of Cihera. That’s why your base is little more than a training facility and a storage house right now.”

“Hey. We train trackers too. Well, they do. That’s not my job anymore.” Brandon took a light out of his bag and attached it to his shoulder strap.

“You’re right. Now your job is *tracking* the trackers.”

“Isn’t it ironic.” Brandon laughed. “Maybe I’ll find Smokey down here.”

“Smokey?”

Brandon jumped the last step on the first landing and caused the entire staircase to sway. “Technically his name is Tracker S-407, but I liked to call him Smokey. He’s the only one I trained before I had the bright idea to get

discharged. Did I ever tell you about the time he got loose and made a beeline to the kitchen?"

"No. You literally just told me about him for the first time."

Gus was too focused on getting to the canyon floor to pay attention to Brandon telling stories about the only tracker that he ever had any personal interaction with. Gus had trapped and returned his fair share of trackers to the base. He knew how to deal with them. Individually they weren't a problem, but he had never had to deal with a whole pack of them. By the time they were halfway down, the dust storm had completely blocked out the sky. They would be stuck down here until it passed. There was no way to drive or make camp until the dust settled.

"What's that?" Brandon pointed to the west.

A silver glow illuminated the far side of the canyon that sent shivers down Gus' spine. Hapi was already on the horizon. They didn't have much time before everything here was underwater. Gus adjusted his pack and started walking away from the giant moon.

"We aren't setting up camp?" Brandon asked.

"We don't have time. The big moon is rising."

"Is that a bad thing?"

"Only if we are still down here when the water comes. Finish the job and make it back out in time and we will have plenty of money to blow when the traders start coming up from the coast."

"Sounds like a plan."

They walked for hours looking for any sign of the trackers, stopping only when Brandon found a lizard or a snake that he deemed pet-worthy, claiming that he would come back and catch them once they finished the job. Gus just shook his head and kept walking. They were going to be damn lucky to finish the job before everything in this canyon was drowned or washed away. There would be plenty of stuff for Brandon to catch once things started growing again, but he hadn't been on the planet long enough to ever see a grow season, so he didn't know what was in store for them.

"Hold." Brandon knelt down and waved for Gus to come over. "These look fresh, don't they?"

There were two soldiers on the ground. One of them was nothing but bone from the chest down and the other looked like he had been killed by a single slash across the stomach and left there to rot. Whatever killed them must have gotten its fill on the first soldier. There was a tracker's skeleton

between the two soldiers' bodies. It looked like it had been there a while longer than the two unfortunate humans who had come looking for them.

"What's left of 'em does. Tracker looks like it was picked clean, though. These two anybody you know?"

Brandon shook his head and snatched a set of keys off the corpse that still had some meat on it. "Nope. They were pilots, though. Maybe there's a chopper down here somewhere."

"When did they start flying choppers into the canyon?"

"They don't. Not the big ones anyway. They have small little two-person ones that could make it down here, though. You know how to fly?" He tossed the keys to Gus.

"Yeah." Gus attached the key ring to his belt loop. "It'll definitely make getting out of here easier, assuming it still works."

"Why wouldn't it work."

"If whatever got ahold of them got ahold of the chopper, then it might be in too many pieces for us to be able to use it."

"Good point. Well, what do you make of this?" Brandon stood and Gus could see the gears start turning in his head.

"I think we have a bigger problem than missing trackers." Gus pointed to claw marks on the canyon wall. "Either we got something big that can climb walls, or we got something huge that can leave claws in rock thirty feet above the ground."

"And no comms." Brandon paced back and forth with both of his hands resting on his head. "Well, we found a tracker. We could always just go back and give the report. Take some pictures of this and let's get out of here."

"We found one. A dead one at that. The others might still be alive. You might get to use your grenades. Figured you'd be excited for an excuse to do that."

"I like to have them. I don't like to actually need them."

The ground shook under their feet. It sounded like a boulder falling into the canyon.

Brandon froze. "What was that?"

Another loud thud shook the ground.

"I think that's your excuse." Gus heard a popping noise to his left and saw a small stream of white smoke shoot into the sky ahead, followed by a red flare falling back to the ground. The heavy stomps of whatever creature

was lurking just beyond their sight as it chased the flare shook rocks loose from the canyon walls.

“Over here!” A soldier popped out from behind a rock. “Hurry.”

Gus and Brandon made a beeline to the soldier. When they got close, he turned heel and ran into a crack in the massive canyon wall. They followed. Gus could barely keep up with him in the dark crevice, but he kept pushing forward until he found the soldier leaning against the entrance to a small opening that had bunks, supply boxes and a comms system. It couldn’t have been more than twelve feet across in any direction. There were tracker kennels stacked in one of the bunks.

“Whoa.” Brandon plopped down on a bunk as soon as he saw them. “Nice setup you have here.”

“Who are you?” Gus asked. “And what was that out there?”

“Bailey. I’m a research officer from Karmen,” the soldier answered, digging something out of one of the supply boxes. “And that thing outside is called a muptonogo.”

“*Mup* tonogo?” Brandon asked. “Ain’t that what they call wild trackers?”

“No,” Bailey said, handing both Brandon and Gus bottles of water. “Those are tonogos. Muptonogos live along certain areas of the coast. They are what the trackers grow into. I have no idea why one is this far away from the ocean.”

“Because the ocean is coming to us,” Gus said. “Hapi is rising earlier than expected. You had to notice.”

“I haven’t heard any reports of that. I only came on this mission to discover why the trackers tore their way out of the bases.”

“Wait a minute.” Brandon sat up on the edge of the bunk. “Trackers grow into what exactly? We didn’t actually see anything out there. We just saw claw marks and heard it run away when you fired that flare.”

Bailey typed a command into his laptop and spun it so Brandon could see the screen. Gus sat down next to him. The creature in the picture—the muptonogo—looked like a tracker decided to grow ten times larger and grow an exoskeleton that was covered in spines, fins and claws.

“Trackers grow into *that*?” Brandon asked. “Why doesn’t the military use those things instead?”

Bailey laughed hysterically. “You want to try to train one of those?”

“How does that happen?” Gus asked. “I’ve heard of trackers living as long as humans and dying of old age without ever looking like that.”

“If they make it to the ocean, they enter a chrysalis form. They stay in that form for a full Hapi cycle, and then they reemerge as muptonogos. They don’t start out as big as the one out there, but as far as we can tell, they never stop growing. They only die when they get too big to be able to find enough food to sustain themselves.”

“You guys didn’t think this information was important enough to share with the civilians that live out here with you?” Gus stood and stared down the much shorter form of Bailey. “I came out here expecting to wrangle some trackers and get a paycheck with little more than the odd canyon cat or kangarat to get in my way. If I would have known there were freaking dragons down here then I would have told Brandon to bring more grenades.”

“You brought grenades to deal with kangarats and canyon cats?” Bailey asked.

“No, I brought grenades because I like the *boom boom*.” Brandon laughed. “Good thing I did, too. Can I ask you a question?”

“Go ahead.”

“Why did the boys over at Diego hire us to come find these trackers if they knew you were already down here doing that?”

“They didn’t know we were down here. They told us that their trackers disappeared. We told them some of ours had as well. Nobody ever discussed mission plans with Diego. We are a research base, they are a training base. We don’t usually wind up in the same place at the same time. We assumed they were letting us know so we could figure out what was causing it ourselves. They don’t have the brains to—”

“Hey,” Brandon said. “I was stationed at Diego.”

“And you chose to stay here when you were discharged? Why?”

“Didn’t have a choice. Dishonorably discharged and denied transport off planet.”

“First of all, that’s illegal. Second, how did you manage to get dishonorably discharged at Diego. That’s hard to do.”

Brandon shrugged. “Superglued my CO’s ass to a toilet seat.”

Bailey’s eye widened in surprise, then he laughed. “That was you? Oh, man. You’re a legend over at Karmen. We joke about giving Dr. Robinson the old Jameson treatment whenever he—”

Gus cleared his throat.

“Right,” Bailey said. “So the last time that Hapi was in the sky, we hadn’t adopted using the tonogos as biological trackers yet. We had no way of knowing that they would take off as soon as Hapi started peaking over the horizon. Now, I do have a way for us to get out of here, but the higher-ups want us to bring back as many trackers as we can. Only problem is—”

“That big-ass muptonogo outside,” Gus said.

“Yes. That.” Bailey pulled up an inventory list on his laptop. “We have a Wallcrawler under Sand Bridge. If we can get there then we can just jump in that and ride it back up to the top.”

“They have a Wallcrawler?” Brandon groaned. “Why did we have to take the stairs?”

“I’m only cleared to use the bridge when I’m assisting with supply runs,” Gus explained. “Wallcrawler is on Karmen’s side. The stairs are on Diego’s. I forget it’s over there sometimes.”

“You couldn’t have *asked* for clearance?”

“Not with firearms and explosives.”

“At least you get to take one back up,” Bailey chimed in. “Climbing up those stairs would be a lot worse than climbing down, especially if we manage to catch a few trackers between here and there.”

“Is there any point in catching trackers?” Gus asked him. “If the ocean water turns them into that, then who’s to say this canyon won’t be full of bagogo chrysalises as soon as it’s full of water.”

“Tonogos.”

“What?”

“They are called Tonogos, not bagogos.”

“Listen, Bailey. They are trackers as far as I’m concerned. And I ain’t concerned with catching them anymore. We need to hightail it to that Wallcrawler and get the hell out of this canyon. Or have you not noticed that our feet are getting wet yet?”

Several roars echoed through the tight corridors that led back to the canyon. Bailey frantically stuffed supplies into a rucksack and passed two small pills to Gus and Brandon.

“What are these for?” Brandon asked.

“They are for if you get caught by the muptonogo. Instant, painless death.”

“And I want this why?”

Bailey threw his bag on his back and shrugged. “Because getting eaten alive hurts. You can ask Bill if you don’t believe me. I don’t think he has much to say anymore, though.”

“Who is Bill?”

“The one that’s basically a skeleton with some hair out there. They left Stuart bleeding out. Guess they were saving him for later. Or maybe they were punishing him.”

“Punishing for what?” Gus asked.

“That big one found us when we found that tracker skeleton out there.” Bailey pushed past Gus and started back down a different set of tunnels. “I guess it thought we killed it or something. I made it in here. I don’t know where Amber ran off to or if she’s even still alive. She’s not a pilot, so I doubt she flew out of here, but she did take off in the direction of the LZ.”

“How did you fly down here with that storm up there?”

“Storm didn’t stir up until the day after we landed. Been down here about six days. Be careful, there’s a drop right here.” Bailey held the wall and stepped down. “This way. Come on.”

They were in ankle-deep water when they came out of the cave. It wasn’t the same spot where they came in. There was no boulder, no skeletons or giant claw marks on the walls. There *were* at least fifty sleeping wild tonogo and military-bred trackers hanging from the canyon walls by their front claws. That is, they looked like they were sleeping.

“What are they doing?” Gus whispered. “I’ve never seen a tracker sleep like that.”

“They’re preparing for the chrysalis phase.” Bailey sloshed through the water, propped his bag up on a rock and pulled out a flare gun. He aimed over the edge of the cliff behind them and pulled the trigger. A roar from the other side made the snarls and growls coming from the cave go silent. “That will distract them for a few minutes. We should head to the Wallcrawler.”

A splashing sound behind them made them turn around. Whatever was coming was still in the cave, but it would be on them in the blink of an eye when it got out. Gus raised his rifle and took aim at the opening, the sights shaking with each beat of his heart. Brandon took slow, deliberate steps making his way back to the mouth of the cave. The tracker shot out of the cave so fast that Gus’ attempt at putting a bullet in the thing echoed through

the canyon. The tracker tackled Brandon into the water. It pinned him by the shoulders. Gus took aim at the creature.

“Don’t!” Brandon and Bailey shouted at the same time.

Gus was confused. The tracker seemed to be licking Brandon’s face like he was excited to see him.

“It’s Smokey!” Brandon laughed. “I told you he’d be down here.”

“Shut up!” Bailey wasn’t watching Brandon getting a tongue bath from Smokey; his eyes were on the ones that were hanging from the wall.

“Let’s just get out of here.” Gus grunted. “We even have a live tracker we can take back now, so we might actually be able to get paid. Water’s rising.”

They trudged along the canyon through water that was almost knee deep by the time the bridge came into view. Gus let out a sigh of relief and leaned on a boulder to catch his breath. Smokey was jumping from rock to rock avoiding the water, sometimes even walking on the walls themselves. That was one tracker ability that had always creeped him out. Giant black, leathery-skinned dogs walking on walls as easy as they walk on the ground didn’t sit right with him. They were damn good at what they did, though. Trackers could be used for anything from hunting down targets to finding resources out in the desert. They could remember a person’s face from just seeing a picture and they could follow a smell better than anything Gus had ever seen before. Gus wondered why the flares Bailey had been shooting were distracting them as easy as they had been. If the trackers were actually after them, they should have found them by now. Trackers didn’t usually kill when they found their target, but they weren’t just dealing with trackers, they had the wild tonogos to worry about. Wild tonogos weren’t trained to be nonlethal. They were predators. Their target was always their next meal.

“Why aren’t they chasing us?” Gus asked Bailey. “They have our scent. The water won’t make them lose it that easy.”

“They have a leader now. That muptonogo is the only thing they are worried about. They go where it tells them to go. Well, all of them except this one.” He pointed to Smokey crawling along the wall ahead of him. “He seems to like your friend.”

“He was issued to me when he was born,” Brandon said. “He never left my side since the day…wait. If they grow into something else, how do they have puppies?”

“Becoming a muptonogo is the final stage of these creatures’ lives. Their only purpose is to protect the younger generations. They can’t reproduce after they undergo metamorphosis.”

“You think us domesticating them during the last cycle is what caused this big one to come all the way up here?” Gus asked.

Bailey stopped walking. “You know…I’m embarrassed to say that I never thought of that. We were tasked with understanding why the tonogos were acting in such an unusual manner.” He laughed. “No one on the entire team thought of that. Maybe it was being violent because it saw us trying to get them all back into kennels and thought we were hurting the ones that wanted to return to the coast. Maybe we are interfering with a whole natural ecosystem that is beginning to fight back.”

“Seems like something that we have historically excelled at as a species,” Gus said. “I mean, hell, the only reason we’re out here trying to settle other planets is because we torched ours, right?”

“I’ll make a report as soon as we get back to Karmen. I’d like you to join me if you wouldn’t mind. Your insight would be valuable. I’ll make sure you’re paid, of course.”

“Sounds good. I got nothing but time, and I don’t think Diego’s going to be giving me anything since they hired me to get the trackers back. The only one I managed seems like it ain’t going anywhere without Brandon anyway, and I doubt they’re letting him reenlist.”

“I wouldn’t even if they wanted me to.” Brandon laughed. “Those guys have zero sense of humor.”

“We might could find a place for you at Karmen,” Bailey suggested.

“No thanks. I’m perfectly happy annoying Gus for a paycheck.”

“You glue me to any toilet seats and you’ll see a side of me you don’t want to see,” Gus warned.

Smokey leapt to the top of a boulder and started growling. Gus heard splashing and the sound of light, fast feet echoing off the canyon walls.

“Anybody got eyes on where that’s coming from?” Brandon asked, pulling something out of his bag.

“Over there.” Bailey’s flashlight pointed down another path to the left.

The walls were crawling with trackers and wild tonogos alike, scrambling across the vertical surface and lining up like they were getting in formation. Brandon reeled back like he was about to throw something, but Bailey yelled and tackled him.

Gus saw the grenade land on a pile of rocks sticking up out of the shallow water no more than twenty feet away. “Hit the deck!” he yelled, jumping on the ground behind the big boulder that Smokey was perched on top of.

Smokey then dove at Bailey and ripped him off of Brandon, right beside his bag.

Bailey’s eyes widened in fear as he crawled toward Gus.

Smokey pulled Brandon away and threw its enormous body over him.

Gus reached out for Bailey’s arm to pull him to safety.

The explosion echoed down the canyon.

“You moron!” Bailey yelled, stomping through the water toward Brandon. “They were lining up to enter the damn chrysalis phase. They weren’t chasing us.”

An angry roar followed by heavy, ground-shaking footsteps drowned out whatever Bailey said next.

Smokey growled, exposing his fangs and lowering his head. The muptonogo wasn’t far away. They didn’t have time for this.

“That thing is chasing us now,” Gus said. “We can either stand here arguing and die, or we can haul ass to the Wallcrawler and have a chance at seeing tomorrow.”

“No more grenades,” Bailey said.

“Fine!” Brandon snapped back.

The muptonogo was gaining on them, but it didn’t seem to have the ability to track them like the tonogos. It ripped rocks from the ground, stuck its head into crevices and roared in frustration when it couldn’t find them. They were able to sneak all the way to the Wallcrawler by just going slow and not making much noise. The constantly rising water made Gus uneasy, but watching Bailey climb into the operator’s seat made him think they might actually make it out alive.

“This thing is not quiet, and I’m not going to be able to help with defending us if it gets its attention,” Gus said. “An explosion will knock this thing of the rails,” he continued, looking at Brandon, “so stick to bullets, not grenades.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Brandon said.

“You two are going to be on the loading docks on either side,” Bailey said. “This thing is designed to haul heavy equipment and samples, so your

weight won’t be an issue, but I want to put one of you on each side to keep it balanced just in case.”

“In case what?” Gus asked, getting into position on the platform facing east.

“Emergencies.” Bailey shot a final flare as far down the canyon as he could and powered up the Wallcrawler.

Gus dropped to his knees and looked through his scope. It was still too dark to make out any details outside of the flare’s red glow, but he did see the muptonogo rush to the light. A loud crunch made Gus lose his balance.

“What was that?” he cried out.

“Just the pulley system determining the weight,” Bailey answered. “It’s not much, so it should just pull us up without engaging any of the counterbalances.”

Gus looked back through his sights. The muptonogo was nowhere to be seen. “It got his attention.”

“Shit. Okay, I’m going as fast as I can.”

“Might want to put the pedal to the metal there, Bailey.” Brandon pulled out a flare and chunked it as far as he could away from the lift.

The muptonogo didn’t pay it any attention. It was on the wall and in their face before they even caught sight of it again. Gus saw one of its giant claws slash through the air. He ducked just in time to prevent it from separating his head from his neck, but a squelch and a soft grunt made him realize that Bailey hadn’t been so lucky. They were barely forty feet up with about another two hundred to go. The muptonogo went for Brandon next, but Smokey leapt off the wall beside him and latched onto the beast’s face. Strange, green liquid shot out of its eyes that Gus assumed was blood. The muptonogo snarled and dove into the water with Smokey still attached to his face. Gus took the opportunity to pull Bailey out of the operator’s seat and climb in it himself.

“Sorry, man,” he whispered as he watched Bailey’s body fall into the depths below.

Brandon was shooting below them and screaming in rage. Smokey leapt out of the water and attached himself to the side of the cliff. He climbed up and sat next to Brandon, scratching what looked like little flakes of stone off of his shoulder. The Wallcrawler lurched to the side. Gus was doing his best to get them up as fast as he could, but this thing wasn’t exactly designed for speed.

“We’re not going to make it!” Brandon yelled. “That damn thing is coming up right under us.”

“Drop a grenade,” Gus responded.

“You got it.” Brandon smiled as he opened his bag. He pulled the pin out of whatever grenade he chose and dropped it straight down.

The muptonogo opened its mouth and snatched it out of the air. A few seconds later, flames shot out of the gills on the side of its neck and out of its mouth. “That’ll give him some heartburn.”

Brandon laughed and dropped another one. This time, the creature jumped to the side, opting to climb the canyon wall instead of the tracks of the Wallcrawler. Gus was strapped in and worried that he was about to share the same fate as Bailey until he heard gunshots raining down from above him. The muptonogo responded with a thunderous roar that seemed to shake Gus’ soul from his body, then the creature leapt back into the water and disappeared from sight.

Gus swore under his breath. The Wallcrawler wasn’t going fast enough. If whoever was shooting from up top couldn’t keep the muptonogo under control long enough for them to get up there then all it would take was one good jump and it would be game over. The beast would be on them again before he could do anything about it. Brandon must have been thinking the same thing. He chunked two grenades as far from them as he could to try to draw the monster away, but the distraction failed. The muptonogo erupted from the waters below, its jaws open wide enough to swallow a man whole.

Time slowed for Gus. He saw Brandon pull a pin out of another grenade. He saw Smokey leap past Brandon, grabbing the grenade between his fangs before diving off of the Wallcrawler. Brandon jumped to try to catch him, but Smokey fell. His claws dug into the side of the muptonogo, making it cry in pain. Smokey clawed his way up the side of the beast and ripped into its gills. It twisted and convulsed, trying to reach Smokey, but it couldn’t get ahold of him. Smokey shoved his head into the creature’s slashed open gills and then shoved himself away from the thrashing monstrosity.

Then Gus heard a muffled explosion, and the muptonogo’s sides expanded as if it were taking a deep breath before its entire right side burst out in a shower of green blood and black organs.

It took another ten minutes to get the Wallcrawler to the top of the cliff. There Gus and Brandon were greeted by the woman named Amber who Bailey had mentioned—Amber Valentine. She wasn't a pilot, but she did manage to find a way to climb out of the canyon using scaffolding that was in the landing zone. She claimed that she had gone to get help and that they were just getting to the Wallcrawler to go rescue Bailey when they realized what was happening on the wall.

"The timing couldn't have been better. You saved our asses," Gus told her.

"We didn't save Bailey, though. Wait. What the hell is that?" She pointed her sidearm at the Wallcrawler. Smokey crawled over the edge of the canyon and collapsed on the ground.

"That's my tracker." Brandon ran over to him. "You okay, boy? Come on. Talk to me."

Smokey licked Brandon's hand and whimpered.

"Is that the one that took that muptonogo out?" Amber asked.

"Sure is," Gus told her.

"Yup," Brandon added. "Trained him up good, didn't I?"

Gus leaned in and whispered to Amber. "I have a report on those things that Bailey wanted me to give. He said he'd make sure we got paid for it."

"Okay. What kind of payment are we talking?"

Gus looked at Brandon and Smokey and sighed. "We don't want to live on this planet anymore."

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They Should Call Us Gods

Joelle Presby

Mission 1

“Can’t believe that girl actually did all those silly gravity-prep exercises. These dirt grubbers aren’t worth the fuel, let alone the work hours.” Senior Specialist Walter Bonhoff stepped on a living broadleaf plant as if it were station plasti-grass.

I goggled with the realization that this so-called remote landing spot really was chock-full of living things. So many that it didn’t matter to life support, that is to say “atmosphere,” if living green plants were walked on.

Hills rose in the distance.

I’m not a complete space-brain. Yes, I do know what a hill is.

But trees! They looked so different seen from the side compared to the normal down-from-above view of a satellite. For the tall ones it was all trunk at eye level with a mini-cloud of shadow hazing the ground and the greenery only noticeable if I craned my neck way far back.

Which I was not to be doing.

Of course.

I was trained.

I focused on the nearby. I looked no further up than the horizons.

There were a few real-life trees that shot up taller than our launcher decorating that horizon. It was delightful to get to at least stare at those.

The senior members of my mission team were talking about me, but not to me. They weren’t going to pay attention to me and mark me down for my never-been-on-a-planet-before distractibility. I still tried to stare less at the plants and pay more attention to them: the very senior members of my team who were going to get me through this mission safely.

I’d missed some of what they’d been saying but, seemingly, not anything too important.

“What do you expect from the kids naive enough to volunteer for planet duty? Hard to believe we used to be that dumb,” Team Leader Jeffy Schmidt replied on the headset radio. “At least none of the natives seem to

be around this time. Now those are truly stupid people. Living on a planet when we could all have just built more stations."

I wished, not for the first time, that I'd been assigned to less rude team members. Sure, they had to assess my performance, but it wasn't good manners to talk about me with me right there. Well, they were talking about me *and* the descendants of people who moved onto the planet and stayed there. The natives weren't here behind those far trees listening in and getting offended.

Or so I hoped.

Rumor was they didn't particularly like us, for all that we continued to supply them…well, some of them. But only if they put something out of approximately equal trade value. And, yeah, only some of the time. Because maintenance for the lander/launcher-capable craft isn't ever as important as station maintenance, so sometimes cache transfers get delayed for five or ten years.

"Hate these natives. Worthless grubs," Walter said.

"Got that right. Can't wait for this to be done," Jeffy agreed.

Walter and Jeffy strutted out across the grassy plain to the pickup cache. The trade package lay in the mud just barely far enough from our craft to not be damaged by our liftoff plume.

I lingered behind in awe of horizons and sky and the planet gravity that somehow felt way more real than spin. I wasn't anywhere near as exhausted from higher planetary gravity as I expected. The "preparing for gravity" instruction manual had said being lower mass would be to my advantage.

I turned back to our airlock and lifted the rocket launcher to my shoulder.

Whoa, it was heavy.

Now, walking hurt.

"Kid," Walter yelled over his shoulder, as if the speaker in my ear wasn't squeaking at the excess volume, "don't bother with the guns. We either won't need them or it won't be enough that we had them."

Jeffy belly-laughed. "Got that right. We were teasing you, kid. Nobody ever carries the weapons. Third and final time on-planet for both of us and never even seen one of the big beasties that show up on the satellite feeds, much less one of the locals. They're probably all scared of us. We are gods to them, of course."

The two men leaned down over the cache and each took one of the handles to carry it back to the ship, ignoring the crudely fashioned but clearly serviceable wheeled cart the standard supply box rested on.

I stumbled along behind, keenly aware that the whole mission was being recorded. They might be on their final trip to the planet, but I wanted to be allowed to come back again. So many astonishing things to see here!

The vegetation was very spread out, growing only in the occasional tufts instead in neat beds like a proper station garden. And the fauna! The strange noises were bugs, I'd been told. I tried to spot one of them, searching the earth under my dusty boots.

Of course, that's when all the creature noises went silent.

Well, fine then. Be hard to find.

I thought about sitting on the dirt to search more carefully, but I'd need to keep the muzzle pointed in a safe direction if I wanted to stay ground-team-mission eligible for the next trip to drop off goods for the poor humans on-planet and take back up whatever they'd left as the best they could do for equivalent trade goods.

Just a few steps carrying weight and my whole body hurt too much. I didn't dare put the rocket launcher down, because then I'd have to try to pick it up again.

They said you got used to planetary gravity and your muscle development could be sustained by the between-mission calisthenics so that by the last trip down it was almost easy. I wasn't sure about that, but I'd signed a work contract for this mission that said I had to be the gunner. So, I was going to carry the impossibly heavy rocket launcher, even if I felt like an idiot and my shoulders hurt more than they had ever hurt before.

Walter turned back toward Jeffy as if he were about to tell another of his black-humored stories about horrible things happening to the down-to-planet mission sent from the other stations.

They were all made up.

I was almost sure.

An entire herd of ground creatures suddenly stampeded way faster than anything that size should be able. Quadrupeds half the size of our craft —at least!—somehow pounded the ground hard enough to billow up a dust cloud in their wake. I only realized I was treating them like something on the other side of a screen when eight of the massive herd passed between the two senior members of the crew and me.

“You better not shoot us, you dumb kid!” Walter yelled at me through the headset radio.

“Warning shot, warning shot now!” Jeffy radioed.

I changed my wavering aim away from the beasts between the two men and me to turn in the direction the herd was streaming from. I’d used a discharge barrel for all my practice warning shots. There wasn’t one here.

I was about to put a shot into the dusty sky and pray that the great emptiness of the planet was enough for it to not hit what it shouldn’t. But the sky filled up. My eye tracked a slightly smaller but much faster shadow emerging from the dust and my aim point shifted with it. My trigger finger twitched in panic.

The “warning shot” went straight into the mouth of the gator-rex the herd was fleeing.

It fell.

The thundering boom of its impact seemed to go on forever. But, obviously, I was just a dumb newbie. I’d been scared into frozen idiocy.

Jeffy and Walter beat me back to the ship, the native’s cache dragged between them.

Only fear that they’d leave me behind on the horrible planet got me moving again and granted me the energy to spin and sprint after them with my gun in a death grip.

I didn’t stop shaking until we reached orbit. They never thanked me for bringing the weapon. Instead, both of them, the bastards, recommended me for permanent ground-mission assignment.

Enough time passed before the next mission came up that I came to think of myself as some sort of damned hero and turned all the accidental moments into the direct result of my personal virtues and all the awfulness into one in a million quirks of that particular mission that’d certainly never happen again to anyone. And especially not to me. So, naturally, I accepted permanent assignment with the extra pay and higher station status.

Mission 2

Gravity was so, so heavy. But I’d exercised more this time. Still, trees did look…oh, that transmission was for me.

“Forget the supply run, get back on that ship! We left the stuff for the locals. The next team will just have to— Take off! We have to take off! Take off now, hero girl!”

That I could hear the mission commander’s muffled voice at all when he’d forgotten to key on his suit microphone meant he hadn’t sealed the ground suit properly. Or maybe the seals had just failed.

All ground-mission uniforms were very, very old gear fabricated on the massive first-lander ships from the system-entry era when the whole human population had expected to actually live on-planet.

I checked on Team Leader Warren, who’d not actually keyed the emergency abort signal. Some sort of rodent had run over his foot. He’d warned me that the planet made him nervous. But he really wanted the team exit bonus due to a former on-planet mission leader before he transferred to the executive leadership program in the satellite maintenance career field. He’d made me promise repeatedly not to leave him behind on the planet, as if that were something anyone would do.

He’d had three previous on-planets. (They increased the number needed to retire from this hazardous duty again. I’d still only had the one.)

Meanwhile, our station’s hydroponics was having trouble again. We needed these supply runs for the ground-siders’ seeds. Their return offerings to us weren’t the tokens of an impoverished planet I’d always been taught.

We wouldn’t keep sending teams down, despite the rumored deaths of other stations’ teams if we didn’t. The last so-called successful mission from our station had been my last mission.

I shouldered my rocket launcher far more easily this time—the benefit of these last six months of heavy-mass training informed by personal experience with how heavy planet gravity really was.

We had a pair of high cliffs on either side of us with lots of big monsters in the wider plains just beyond, but not much in the landing pad carve-out area just behind. Thank heaven (or our ancestors) for the asteroid impact that had created it for us.

With the scope, I tracked the closest monster as it paced slowly past our rocky hideout. I felt no need to point it out to Team Leader Warren. He’d keyed on the radio finally but was only heavy-breathing into the mic.

This one was an herbivore and listed on our survey as lower intellect. But it dragged behind it a tail that’d make a stegosaurus proud. A directed whack with it could turn us into red paste inside the stiffened polyethylene of our suits. That the creature wasn’t mentally equipped to paint intriguing splatter patterns on the rock walls with our corpses didn’t mean it wouldn’t

find a base delight in squashing small things who caught the attention of its violent pea-sized brain.

The thump of too-large feet passed away long enough for the disturbing sounds of insect life to resume.

Team Leader Warren had nearly started breathing normally now. He was poking at a bleached-out animal skeleton while doing his self-calming breathing exercises.

Okay, I guess.

But why not find the supply cache that was supposed to be somewhere within this region according to our satellite photos? If he would just grab onto that and drag the thing to the craft, we could get out of here.

I kept scanning the area for threats.

“Julia Kiddo,” he radioed in with a forced calm in his voice. “This was a mammal. Where’d they get mammals this big?”

Oh, so we were going to pretend he hadn’t squealed like a first-timer? Again, okay. Whatever it took to get us back onto the ship and off this rock quickly.

I lowered the rocket launcher so it wouldn’t point at him and turned to look.

Team Leader Warren had his scoped rifle—which admittedly wouldn’t help much against the planet-side creature who’d just passed by—resting in a loose, one-handed grip, butt in the dirt while he knelt behind the completely bleached-out mammal skeleton that was absolutely no threat to us.

I reached up to key my transmitter to speak to the ship relay and get the refined directions sent to me about where our supply cache was supposed to be when a massive shadow fell over us.

The distinctive spiky mantel in the upper shadow made me wish I hadn’t so thoroughly checked the area just a few minutes prior. No, there were not tall, horn-shaped cacti on the ridge above us that could be casting that same shadow in the yellow planet-side gloom.

Team Leader Warren squeaked, and God bless him, he attempted to fight before the lightning-quick Kali-rex jaws clamped over him. His single bullet pinged back and forth against the stone cliffs.

I fired into the beast’s soft underjaw and threw myself back under the rock overhang as the massive body fell.

I hate planets.

“Kiddo,” Warren squeaked on the radio, “save me.”

Lord have mercy, he was still alive.

“Hang in there, sir,” I said soothingly. “What’s your suit telling you about its nice interplanetary-era medical support right now?”

I had no idea if his suit could save him even if the bite hadn’t shattered the battery pack or sheared off too many control nodes. These things were so old. They looked decent, sure, even had the chevron marks on the headgear that supposedly indicated full power to the systems. The glow on the chevrons was dialed down as low as possible. The original planners clearly had no idea how effective the long-distance terraforming efforts would be or how large the fauna would get or these suits would’ve had nothing at all that could glow and they would’ve spent way more design budget on camouflage instead.

I scanned the area, and the insects were screaming again. I deeply appreciated insects.

The auto response from our ship identified our pickup cache as directly beneath the fallen monster.

I prayed that a monster this big would have defended a territory that other deadly things respected. I had to set down my rocket launcher to dig out Warren and the supply case covered in loose sand underneath the old skeleton.

Either my prayers were answered, or I got lucky; like on all these horror trips, I never knew which one was true. I wanted out of the hero business.

Mission 6

I had the shakes. Of course I did. I was on the planet, wasn’t I? I’d tried to tell the psych doctors that this should disqualify me from going down again.

Didn’t work.

Obviously.

Walter Bonhoff’s boy, Walt Junior, looked at me with that puppy-dog expression all the first-time on-planet newbies have while they still think I’m going to make this mission a raging success and get them back up and home again.

Most missions these days fail to retrieve a cache with fresh seeds, but other people had had successful ones without me. I wasn’t uniquely lucky!

I was senior now. Mission Commander Julia Kiddo, for all the nothing that was worth. I had access to all the past mission files and got to see just how horrible planet-side trips were, not just from our station but from all the orbital stations. Walt and Jeffy had been making up nothing.

Usually, most disaster missions killed us for reasons of pure stupidity, but also sometimes from the old gear being a tiny bit too old or the raw, unlucky chance of more predators wandering by than our ammunition could defeat.

I tapped Junior on the shoulder and pointed at the rocky cliffs just ahead. We'd landed on a flat, sandy area this time that hopefully hadn't destroyed our ability to relaunch later, but that meant cover near our craft was a long sprint away.

The wildlife, if we were unlucky enough to be near any, generally held back for the first handful of minutes immediately after landing, so I wanted to be somewhere with hard shelter to my back before the strangeness of our ship prompted the attention of the local monsters.

Junior found the supply cache and dragged it back to the ship without us ever seeing anything larger than a mouse. My newbie managed to contain his obvious disappointment about not encountering something to brag about to his mission veteran father.

On-Station

"You'd think that the freaks of nature who moved onto the planet surface about a hundred and eighteen years ago would be properly terrified of us still up here in orbit above them."

The new planet-side mission volunteer was playing with a stupid contacting-the-ground-siders training module while I focused on actually useful survival exercises.

"You'd be wrong," I gritted out. The red blob almost hit the inside of my visor, but I caught it with a flail of the rag held by my teeth.

"That's a worthless program," the kid said. "You can't win."

Manny Darwin was partially right. The spurt of my breath didn't hail more tiny droplets onto the visor. The practice session's setting started on easy, and I couldn't move it up manually without playing through all in the intermediate settings. Worse, you had to restart with a new account after you worked through all the advanced training modules. I waited impatiently

for the next zero-gee choking hazard to be generated. “Root access, root access, my kingdom for the root access.”

“Well, maybe they did start their silly dirt-side civilizations a hundred some years ago, or maybe as much as two hundred forty-eight years depending on which settlement wave they descended from, but still. Oh yeah, maybe the more distantly related ones do view us as gods. I mean we come down from the heavens on a pillar of smoke and fire, right? I know what’ll work.”

“No, you don’t. Nobody does,” I muttered, but he didn’t hear me.

A new blob finally appeared. I wiped and wiped some more. Yes, yes, yes, the fastest way to grind through the initial training model for facial-bleed-in-suit issues was to continually shake your head back and forth. But since that doesn’t actually work with a real live nosebleed, I refused to train my neck to do that.

“Be not afraid!” Junior Specialist Darwin shouted loud enough to make his voice crack.

Poor kid. I pretended the speakers were off and that I couldn’t hear him. A newbie practicing for his first trip down to the planet was so like me that I wanted to slit his Achilles tendon and make him permanently physical unfit for this nonsense. If I was lucky, it’d be my last trip. And Station need people to do it.

Leaving orbit always gives me the shakes. I hate going planet-side so much that after the first couple missions, I seriously considered applying to transfer to one of the other inhabited orbital stations where they don’t include women in their drafts for dangerous jobs. Women also don’t vote on a lot of them either, but I’m still not sure it wouldn’t have been the wiser choice. Of course, I hadn’t known then about how much worse some of their hydroponics situations had gotten than ours.

Life could’ve been worse. A whole lot worse.

I’ve been to the planet eight times in my life. The last four times it was dreadfully boring and absolutely nothing happened. The first two times we all got out alive, but I think now that it was nothing but luck and divine mercy. The other two I try not to think about.

The combined stations council who watch all downward missions with high-magnification telescopes say it was my wise and quick-witted actions that saved the team and thus proved they were right to continue to include women even after that one time when another station sent a team with no

men at all and everyone died. Now when they say they send mixed crews, what they actually mean is that they send me and some other fool boys I have to keep alive. This next one was a two-person mission: just me and Manny Darwin.

God help us.

Two-person missions are stupid.

And yes, I've told them that.

Anything that doesn't warrant a four-man team should be done with just drones. I stand by that point too.

But just because the powers that be have decided that I'm useful for missions does not mean that they bother to listen to me at all.

Unlike them, I have to listen to Manny. He may be a snot-nosed idiot convinced that the ground-siders will see him as an angelic all-powerful being, but he's the snot-nosed idiot who might be the next randomly lucky newbie. And even if he's not, the people who go to the planet with me come back up.

I shut off my own training session and lifted the helmet. Time for the actually hard work.

I buckled high-mass weights on my arms and legs and started another set of exercises. Getting ready for planet-side really, really hurts. I'd only managed last month to barely get back to minimum-mission-strength level. But I had lots of lots of protein, and of course they'd been threatening me with steroid shots if I had trouble meeting the updated physical requirements.

Those requirements were ones that I'd pushed through to try to disqualify myself, but like most of my ideas, it had backfired and now I had to work out like a beast. Because one more mission and they'd let me stop going downside ever again.

I could stay where the horizons were properly limitless and sunrise was something that happened when the system's star eclipsed the planet we orbited and not when it did that bizarre planet illusion of rising up from the mountains.

Mountains are deeply creepy, but at least they aren't prairie. Or oceans. They'd stopped sending teams down to the wild islands before my time. Instead, they go for the desert wilds in the foothills of the Dragon Tooth Mountains. I reminded myself again to practice cleaning filters quickly; the microparticles and sand-and-dust mixture worked hell on the engine-

thruster intakes. If a craft can't relaunch it doesn't matter that you survived the animal encounters required to get a cargo pod from the pickup site and into the ship.

Going out in an atmospheric explosion was probably a better death than being chewed alive by ground-side beasts, but I'd really like to live to receive my promised low-gravity retirement.

"Hey," Manny said, interrupting my thoughts. "Why do we even go down there anymore? The new mushroom farms and yeast vats are doing great again. We don't really need the seed stock they put in our cargo pods anymore. If we just stopped helping the ground-siders out, wouldn't they become self-sufficient?"

"They sent food to Station Eleven," I said. I shouldn't have to explain this to anyone.

"That was probably an accident."

A common argument among stationers.

"Ah, they do so many rocket launches that it was a fluke?"

Some ground-siders on the wild islands had launched a few other rockets to nowhere, but that was a different group of ground-siders. "Are we to think the one time a station broadcast an all-bands mayday about crop failures and the nearest stations broadcast back on all-bands a refusal to help because they were effing cowards afraid of crop blight spreading, but then those assholes on Station Nine had the gall to offer to send sedation meds instead…we are to think that there's no one on the surface with a functional radio left who could have heard it all? You think that a ground civilization from the foothills of the Dragon Tooth Mountains fired a rocket stocked with ready foodstuffs, seeds, and plantings with just the right flight path to be docked with Station Eleven and not be tractor-pulled in by nearby unhelpful Station Twenty-One or Station Twelve as a complete coincidence? This when we didn't even know that they still had people alive who understood orbital mechanics?"

"It's not like they built their own rocket," Manny said, pointing out the usual irrelevant stationer argument. "They used one of our early ones from back when we thought we'd be able to refuel the mothership and go on to a better planet."

"Some generation, we might get the right kind of asteroid entering on a capture-able orbit or slamming into the planet where we can recover the ore. The mother could fly again."

Manny sighed. “And if it does, all the descendants with pilot-capable brain nanites are on-planet. I still don’t understand why past generations let them all go down.”

“Living in small spaces without getting to use their skills on interplanetary transits makes them crazy,” I pointed out. “Crazy people are easier to keep alive in a planet-sized people space than in even the largest stations.”

“Maybe the researchers will figure out a new fuel. Or maybe they’ll find a way to fly ships without brain modifications.”

“Maybe.” I wasn’t counting on that. And I also didn’t like letting humans go extinct on a planet any more than I liked what almost happened to Station 11. Humanity ought to stick together.

Mission 9…Hopefully Last Mission

I hate landings. Nothing was too obviously damaged. And Manny Darwin whooped with pride at his first ever touchdown on a planet.

Heavens have mercy.

I glared him into silence and climbed out of my seat. Gravity tried to force me back into the chair, but, promising myself I’d move to a low-spin hab as soon as I got back to space, I dragged myself out.

Brightness and too-yellow overheads far, far above increased my shakes. Sky. It’s called sky, I reminded myself.

Automatic self-preservation instincts reminded me to scurry back to the craft and retrieve my not-big-enough commander’s rifle.

Manny cursed and fixed some sort of bladed thing onto the end of his rocket launcher. I didn’t object. He might just save my life today.

Newbies have before.

I knew I’d have enough mass just carrying myself and the cache. I didn’t bother with any rifle attachments. If you are too old and weak to swing the weapon, it doesn’t matter whether or not it has a blade on it.

We scurried together over to the pair of standing boulders where ground-siders had left supplies for us the last time a unit had landed at this location. These were the ground-siders who had resupplied Station 11, we were pretty sure. Or these locals were, at least, associated with the same towns closest to the rocket-launch site. They were getting extra metals from the latest asteroid capture and a small manufacturing unit the technicians

from 11 had sent over in hopes that the ground-siders would be able to recognize and operate it.

I just hoped they wouldn't shoot at us. Actually, I hoped every living thing over the size of a beetle was very, very far away from the landing site.

Heavy cloud cover had made decent pre-landing observations impossible.

"Team Leader Kiddo, advance photography of the ground sites are not required to be from the forty-eight hours prior. We have detailed imagery from several clear periods in the last year. And besides, you yourself agreed with Station Eleven that the next drop should go to the spot closest to the launch point of the so-called 'ground-siders' rescue.' Stop fretting and do your job. It's not like a ground-sider team is going to steal your rocket. That'd break the exchange treaty, and of course they'd never understand it. They probably call us all gods anyway. They certainly should with how much higher than theirs our tech level is."

If we were fortunate, the exchange treaty still held at least for whatever planet-dwellers held control of this part of the surface.

We were rarely fortunate. But even I couldn't argue with the track record that I, personally, seemed to be quite lucky.

The cache spot for this site was a cube-shaped hole carved out of the ground one meter to each side. A very lovely trade spot as these things went with indications that a hundred years ago or so orbiter types with power tools had applied sealant to the sides of the space to prevent cave-ins and placed a grate and drainage system at the bottom to prevent rainfall puddling.

It lacked only one thing. No wood crate or pile of animal-skin sacks of native trade goods. It wasn't that I'd refuse to leave them our trade stuffs and gift supplies without a return thing, it was that they might not ever come back here to look for our contribution if they'd put their cache in another trade location.

Manny stood tall like a good newbie gunner and turned in a slow circle scanning the horizons for threats. I'd have been more reassured if he'd stayed a bit further from the boulders where he could actually see over them. Oh well, faster I drop this, the faster we could get back off-planet.

I gave the place one more search of the nearby area for any sign of the natives having dug their own hidey-hole. The boulders had been moved

recently, but there was nothing more than an extra muddy patch and scraped stone showing their recent shifting.

The return-payment backpack plus the extra Station 11 gifts were pulling hard on my shoulders. I lowered them into the hole and hoped—

“Down!” my newbie yelled.

I was crouched flat in the bottom of the hole with the contents of the backpack digging into my shins before I even thought about whether I should be doing what the newbie said.

He fired short bursts instead of emptying the rocket launcher immediately, and I thought he’d scared off whatever it was when he leapt into the hole on top of me firing wildly. A giant foot closed out the light over us both.

“I need more space,” Manny wheezed at me as if I wasn’t on the bottom with way too much pressure from the backpack digging into my diaphragm to answer. One cubic meter might’ve fit us both plus the bag if we’d had time to carefully arrange ourselves. As it was, I’d at least bruised some ribs, and I didn’t think Station 11’s fine gift would be functional anymore.

The monster stepped off and I had enough forethought to toggle my suit radio on and whisper, “Hold tight and don’t kill it while it’s on top of us.”

Teeth snapped at the top the hole.

“Kill it!” I squealed and fired my rifle.

The dust and debris settled to show clear yellow-orange sky and lightning-fast scaled beasts scrabbling at each other above us.

Unbelievably, I think I had missed every shot. My one monster was now a pack of theys. But, we weren’t being stepped on and the horrifically large-toothed mouth had left the opening of our blessed hole, for now.

Manny slumped against the side of the hole. I asked the suit to check on him and the diagnostics, miraculously, worked. He was fine. He’d fainted.

But here I was in a hole with slick one-meter-tall sides, a rifle with no ammo left, Manny’s rocket launcher with, sigh, also no rounds left, and my dear newbie to carry back to the ship while the local wildlife frolicked overhead.

“I’m not going to make it, am I?”

The monsters continued to tussle with each other over our heads. Teeth nuzzled at the hole from time to time.

I made use of Manny's bayonet more than once. But he didn't wake up. Our too-smart-for-our-own-good suits had decided his excessive nerves required sedation. Heavens help us.

The heavens didn't answer. But this hell planet did.

With arrows.

The first several pinged off reptile hide overhead without me realizing what they were, but when one bounced off and landed in our hole, I finally had to realize that my luck had run completely out.

I'd finally gotten the worst of all possible ground missions: one with direct contact to both wildlife and ground-side humans.

I moved Manny's bayonet from the increasingly heavy rocket launcher to my rifle. When a foot landed overhead, I stabbed at the webbing. When a set of jaws too big to fit deep into the hole snapped at us, I slashed at gums and lips.

It was exhausting, hard to tell if it helped, and I was now afraid I wouldn't die in this hole. Planetary humans had abducted and killed mission ground teams before. We didn't get along at all when we met face-to-face.

"Die, die, die," I panted at the monsters while my aching arms lifted the bayonet again and again.

Manny stirred beside me, finally. "Commander, your blood pressure is high…"

"Die, die…"

"Suit asks if you need medical help."

"What?"

"Yeah, help commander," Manny whispered.

A needle stabbed into my shoulder from inside the suit before I could scream out my "No!"

I slumped down to the bottom of our hole.

While we were unconscious, the natives drove the reptiles away long enough to drag us out of the hole and across the field to the shadow of our craft where they dumped us with a wicker basket of trade goods.

A pair of them lifted me up and held open my eyelid for the retinal scan to open the doors. Then they dumped us inside the rocket and tramped out again. The suits administered wake-up shots, and Manny was the one to

press the button to close the doors as another group of monsters wandered onto the field to feed on the carcasses left by the earlier tussle.

The doors of our spacecraft slammed shut at exactly their standard rate. My head throbbed from the wake-up med's side effects, but my thoughts were newly sharp and crystal clear.

"Launch, launch!" Manny pleaded.

"Not until the ground-sider beasts are further off," I told him.

I waited for a long scaley side of a carrion-eater to finish brushing past while we rocked on the struts. These ones were in the animal catalogue. If it were smarter than a mealworm, it would use that enormous tail to knock us over, preventing launch. Then it only needed to wait and we'd either starve in our metal shell or come crawling out where its tongue could wrap around us and gobble us down.

I mentally cursed yet again the misbegotten science experiment that had seeded this planet with earth-compatible microprobes in hopes of growing a new earth for us by the time humanity spread this far. We could have had a nice sterile rock instead. The planners had so much to answer for.

Maybe in the thousands of attempts there was some second-Earth planetary paradise out there. But this one wasn't it.

If only we could convince the dirt-dwellers to join us back in orbit and also increase the station habitats enough to accommodate them all, we could serve up a well-deserved asteroid and kill off all the too-large predators who thought themselves worthy of fighting humanity for the top of the food chain.

I wasn't going to drop a nuclear-winter-level rock on this planet. But if I lived through this, I sure as hell wasn't retiring quietly.

I was going to be the sort of former ground-crew member who had opinions and arranged to make unapproved planet drops for the rest of my life.

You see if I didn't.

I had friends now on this planet. I might never learn their names, but they were about to receive heaven's own gifts as often and as quickly as I could manage it.

Now I just had to refocus our orbiting telescope system to try to figure out who they were and what materials from orbit might be useful to them.

Save my life and walk away as if it’s nothing! Ha. Who did they think they were, some kind of planet gods? I was going to show them. I was the damned space goddess. And may heaven have mercy on their souls. They were about to be blessed whether they wanted it or not.

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Bohemalowdown

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479 Ralshion Satellite Moon-d
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“This is some grade A bullshit.”

From behind, heavy footsteps came to a dry, crunchy stop. Gunnery Sergeant Sam Warwick wore a familiar look of annoyance stamped on his rugged face. “Moretti, has there ever been a day where you *didn’t* bitch about something?”

Private First Class Vincent Moretti nodded. “Absolutely, Gunny. The day our leave got approved. I didn’t complain once.” He returned his attention to the desert canyon, put his hands on his hips, and sighed dramatically. “But then that got fucked all kinds of sideways—*again*. All I want is a week on the beach, beers, bikini babes, and maybe a misdemeanor or two. Is that so much to ask?”

Gunny Warwick shook his head. “You’re every NCO’s whiney-ass nightmare, Moretti. Besides, haven’t I told you before? Every day in the corps *is* a vacation.”

Moretti gave a dry snort. “Oorah, Gunny.”

“Damned right, oorah. Now, quit your crying and get up there and check those cables. I want to make sure they aren’t shifting in the sand.”

Moretti turned and faced the canyon wall. At the top stood the comm relay they’d assembled two hours earlier. It was a wide-based, twenty-foot-tall aluminum tower equipped with an array of antennas, microwave dishes, and remote radio heads. Six thick steel cables threaded to steel eye anchors driven six feet into the ground anchored it in place. Putting the damned thing together had been a pain in the ass. More than once Moretti had wished PFC Kim Nguyen was still with them. The comm specialist would have had the tower assembled, up, and running seamlessly in half the time it had taken the two of them. Moretti and Gunny had enough training and working knowledge to get the job done and make minor repairs, but that was about it.

Thinking about Nguyen drew Moretti's memories to that of his late best friend, Bryan Hoosier. His hand dropped to the hilt of the oversized combat knife on his hip, thumb running over the initials B.H. scratched into the hilt. Both his fellow Raiders had been killed in action two months back on 234 Velex-b. Their team had been deployed on a recon mission after Sigma Outpost went dark. When they arrived, all they'd found was the remains of a massacre—minus the bodies.

Two newly discovered races of aliens later, and a huge battle between three sides that eventually whittled itself down to two, Moretti was down too many friends. A few weeks later Moretti found Hoosier's combat knife on his bunk, cleaned and sheathed. There was a note next to it written in small, blocky handwriting.

Thought you'd want this.
Semper Fi,
G.

Once the initial shock wore off, Moretti immediately swapped his blade out for Hoosier's and stowed the note away. At muster, Gunny's keen gaze had settled on the blade during inspection. His war-hardened eyes trailed up and met Moretti's. Something unsaid passed between them, and Gunny gave him a quick nod of approval. From that day forth, Hoosier's blade was part of Moretti's official uniform.

"You gonna stand there rubbing that thing all day or what?"

Moretti snapped back to reality. "On it, Gunny." He snatched up a bag of tools next to the crate of spare parts, slung it over his shoulder, and headed for the canyon wall. Rather than smooth and flat from centuries of water erosion, the wall was jagged and relatively easy to scale. He could have managed it even without their power armor.

Setting up camp right next to the relay would have been much more convenient, if it weren't for the random sandstorms. There was no shelter as far as the eye could see in their relay location, aside from the canyon. Rather than chance it under a tent, Gunny had made the call they'd set up shop in the small cave below. It offered protection from the elements and, best of all, it was shaded. All that considered, the climb up and down wasn't a bad trade-off.

Once at the top, he pulled himself up and over. Moretti stood, unsuccessfully tried to knock the dust off his armor, and looked around the empty desert. It could have been worse. They could have been sent to an ice planet. He hated the cold more than anything. Give him swamps, deserts, and jungles before ice and snow. He unslung his bag of tools and set to work. As he checked the tautness of each cable and the stability of each anchor, he spoke over the comm.

"Gunny, what the hell are we doing out here?" He kicked the eye of the next anchor. It didn't shift and the steel cable was taut, so he moved to the next.

"Manning, maintaining, and protecting this comm relay, Moretti. Were you not paying attention during the brief?"

The next anchor shifted when he kicked it, so Moretti pulled out the five-pound hammer and applied a healthy dose of percussive engineering. He kicked it again and it didn't budge. Satisfied, he moved on to the next.

"I was listening, Gunny. I mean what the hell are *we* doing out here? Don't we have low-man-on-the-totem-pole grunts for this kind of work?"

"You *are* a low-man-on-the-totem-pole grunt, *Private*."

Moretti looked down at the rank stamped on the shoulder of his powered armor. "Oh, yeah. I forgot I got demoted."

"*Again*," Gunny added. "Boy, at this rate, you'll retire a private when you *should* be no less than an E-9. You need to quit fucking around and get serious."

He'd actually been promoted from lance corporal to corporal after the battle with the Bugs and Bohemalo, but a wild night of shore leave, some homemade pyrotechnics in the name and memory of his late explosives expert, Danny, followed by hooking up with apparently the *wrong* general's niece, and he'd been knocked all the way back down to PFC. He smiled at the memory of that night.

You'd have been proud of that explosion, Danny boy—and at how hot that general's niece was. Totally worth it.

Danny had gone out with a bang—literally. Injured and evacuated to command base, when the Bugs overran the facility he'd gathered all the ordnance he had available and blown every Bug in the vicinity to smithereens. He gave his own life so Moretti and the others could have a fighting chance.

Moretti kicked a rock away from the next anchor. It flew a ways and bounced into a pile of small boulders. “Retire?” He shook his head. “Doubtful. Dying an old man warm in my bed after twenty years of service followed by twenty more of being bored out of my mind while dealing with PTSD. No thanks. I’m gonna go down the same way I came into the world. Kicking and screaming, possibly naked, and covered in blood. Hopefully with some crazy explosions going on in the background and a Kyriel’s throat in my hands. That’s how my pops and his old man went. Like a couple of badasses. Family traditions must be carried on.”

“They’ll *end* with you, if you don’t watch it.”

His face shield automatically dimmed as Moretti stopped to look across the canyon to the high mountain ridges in the distance. The sun was almost directly over the highest peak. He’d never spent enough time with any one woman to have a kid. To his and everyone else’s utter astonishment, he didn’t even have an illegitimate semen demon out there running around. He was pretty sure, anyway.

“Might be for the best.” After a moment, he shook his head and snatched up the bag of tools. “Anchors are all good, Gunny. Coming back down.”

“Copy that.”

Going down was much faster than coming up. Rather than climb, he just repelled. A few hops and a drop and his feet were back on the canyon floor again. He stepped into the cave and dropped the bag next to their supplies. Despite the much cooler temperature in the shaded cave, when he removed his helmet the heat of the desert hit him like a tidal wave of dry misery. He grabbed the steel cup lashed to their water tank and filled it. The water was cold and refreshing as he drank it down. He could have simply drunk from his suit, but if he was given a choice between fresh water and the recycled fluids his suit filtered and turned into water, he’d take the former every time.

He offered the cup to Gunny Warwick, who snapped his helmet off and accepted. After taking a deep drink, he asked, “What are you bitching for anyway? This is an easy assignment. All we have to do is sit here, maintain the relay, keep our eyes peeled, and wait for the LT to get back. If we don’t find the Bohemalo in the next thirty-six hours, we bug out. Not even you can fuck that up, Moretti.”

Moretti feigned offense with a hand on his chest. “I’m hurt that you would underestimate me like that, Gunny.”

He tucked his helmet under his arm and stepped to the edge of the cave, the toes of his armored boots on the line of shade and unrelenting sunlight. His eyes scanned the piles of boulders and scrub brush, up the rust-colored walls of rock, and along the edge of the canyon. There was nothing but dust tornadoes and heat shimmers across the thousand-degree sands.

Reports of a lone Bohemalo spotted on the moon had come in a week prior. The brass had immediately canceled any leave, priorly authorized or not, and ordered the Raiders to investigate. What was left of their small team was scattered throughout the small moon, mixed with other teams. Baker and Hopkins were the closest team to them, about a hundred klicks north of their position. Callahan and Yeschqa, the young female Bohemalo who’d joined them after the battle on Velex-b, were in the VTOL with Enoha, performing arial recon. The entire moon was crawling with Raider teams, and VTOLs filled the airspace. So far, no team had reported a confirmed sighting. Chances were high that they were on a wild Bohemalo chase.

“I just assumed we’d be back on the front lines already,” Moretti continued. “Sending us out here to this ball of sand and misery for a single Bohemalo doesn’t make much sense. Plus, it’s gonna get cold as shit out here tonight, Gunny. Deserts are so bipolar. Hot as fuck during the day, cold as balls at night. Fucking pick one.”

“Your suit has heaters, Moretti. Stop whining.”

“Uses up too much battery life. I don’t wanna get stuck out here with a dead suit.”

“We have backups.”

“Yeah, but—”

“Shut up, Moretti.”

“Shutting up.”

Gunny shook his head. “As for the hunt, it’s one more Bohemalo than we’ve got on our side, right now. Even with Yeschqa and the males from Velex, we’re not strong enough to take the bug facilities we know about. Not if they’ve got Bohemalos on guard. And Yeschqa’s not strong enough to overpower a herd of full-grown males if she needed to. We only survived the last encounter by dumb luck.”

Male Bohemalos were basically feral when there wasn't a female around to keep their minds clear. Otherwise they pretty much just wanted to kill everything around them. It was some sort of telepathic thing that Moretti didn't quite understand.

"And lots of violence," Moretti added.

"That too."

Moretti spit out into the sands. The glob of saliva landed on a rock, sizzled, and evaporated almost immediately. "I get we need all the help we can get, and another Bohemalo is basically the equivalent of another squad, but this shit's just so damned boring."

His eyes closed and his head fell back as the words left his mouth, but it was too late. Gunny Warwick already had that look in his eye.

"So, boredom is your problem, is it?" He gave Moretti that evil NCO grin that crushed enlisted souls the galaxy wide. "Well, lucky for you that I've got the perfect solution."

Moretti's heart dropped and his shoulders slumped. "Of course you do."

"Oh, yes." Gunny pointed at their pile of gear and supplies. "You can start by inspecting the spare weapons and armor. After that, you can inventory our food and water. When that's done, you can take a trip back up to the relay and run a diagnostic and check the cables again."

It was all Moretti could do to not slap himself. Everyone knew better than to tell a damned NCO they were bored. It was the equivalent of reminding the teacher to assign homework. Everyone hated that kid. At least it was just him and Gunny there. If any of his fellow Raiders had been, they'd have been submitted to his punishment as well. All in the name of "team building."

What a fucking rookie move.

"On it, Gunny."

He slid his helmet over his head and snapped it in place. The bright glare from the sun immediately dimmed and the cool air from the temperature-regulation system soothed his face.

At least our suits are air-conditioned.

"Goddamn my big fucking mouth," Moretti groaned as he scaled the wall again. It wasn't the climb that annoyed him, it was having to do a

diagnostic on the relay. He hated doing anything with technology—and Gunny knew it.

“One day you’ll learn to keep it shut,” Gunny said over the comm.

Moretti winced. He had forgotten the line was still open. “One of these days, Gunny.”

“Let’s see you get bored, now…” Gunny grumbled.

Running the system check took way longer than it should have. Moretti cursed every bad decision he’d ever made that had led him to that moment and wished Hopkins were there. She’d give him all kinds of shit about sucking at working with technology, but at least she knew what she was doing. When he finally got that handled and was certain the relay was working and comms were good, he checked the cables and stakes—again.

His tasks completed, he dropped down the canyon wall. When his feet touched the ground, he heard a loud *crack* echo across the canyon. Moretti’s head snapped skyward toward the rim. Several small boulders and rocks were tumbling down the east side of the canyon wall about a hundred meters ahead of him. With each impact a small dust cloud formed in the air and more rocks were wrestled from their resting place. For a moment, he worried there was about to be a full-fledged avalanche, but his fears were quickly snuffed out when the stones came to an anticlimactic stop in the sands below. He zoomed in on the canyon’s edge but didn’t see any sign of fellow Raiders, native wildlife, or the supposed lone Bohemalo.

“Report, Moretti,” Gunny ordered.

Moretti shook his head. “Not sure, Gunny. Bunch of rocks fell down the canyon wall. I didn’t see what caused it. No sign of movement.” He scanned the area in all spectrums. “All scans come up clean.”

“Mine too. Must have been a natural occurrence. Shifting sand or a crumbled rock. Keep your eyes peeled, just in case.”

“Potato vision engaged, Gunny.”

Both men remained silent for a long time, listening for anything out of place and watching for movement. They made several patrols but never saw anything else. They were standing just outside the cave, Gunny looking up and above it, while Moretti’s attention was on the far end of the canyon. A stirring of dust in the distance caught his eye and something rumbled in the air. Once again, rocks tumbled down the eastern side of the canyon. Only one or two, but they were closer than the last ones.

“Incoming,” Gunny reported.

A second later, a VTOL ripped across the sky above the tumbling rocks. Dust and dirt flew up in great swirls above, filling the air with a sand cloud.

Must have been the vibrations from the VTOL that loosened that set. Lieutenant Enoha was flying pretty low.

The craft set down fifty meters from the mouth of the cave. Moretti grabbed for the plasma rifle slung over his back when what looked like a large, dark figure moved in the dust cover behind the VTOL.

“Movement!” he shouted as he shouldered the weapon.

Gunny was next to him in an instant, his own rifle up and ready. “Where?”

“Behind the VTOL, in the cloud. Saw a huge shadow moving fast.”

“Bohemalo?”

“Maybe.”

“Not unless you think I’m a giant alien,” a familiar female voice said over the comm.

“Hopkins?”

As the dust cleared, Moretti saw two Raiders in the process of unloading a large water tank and skiff loaded with crates.

Gunny turned to face him. “Is she what you saw?”

Moretti shook his head. “Thought I saw something much bigger.”

“Doc, Hopkins, eyes up, check your six. We’re moving in.”

Both the new arrivals raised their weapons and spun, their heads swiveling as they searched for threats. Moretti and Gunny moved up to their position, past the VTOL ramp, and around the other side. Nothing.

Moretti scanned the ground for tracks, but anything that might have been there was erased by the VTOL. He scanned up past the affected area but saw nothing. The four of them did a complete three-sixty around the craft but came up empty-handed.

“I swear I’m not crazy, Gunny.”

The old NCO’s hard eyes were still scanning the immediate area. “Never said you were. I remember how sneaky these things are. Everyone stay alert. Let’s get the supplies unloaded and into the cave. Hopkins, Doc, double time!”

“On it!” they both answered.

Gunny’s mouth kept moving, but Moretti couldn’t hear anything he said. He was talking to the pilot now. Likely asking if they’d seen anything

from the air.

“Is the LT here, too?” Moretti asked once they had everything unloaded.

“Negative,” Gunny answered. “She’s still airborne. We received some unexpected support from another division and she ordered these two to our location.”

“I didn’t hear anything on the radio.”

“Because you’re not the gunny, Private. Or have you forgotten how the chain of command works.”

Moretti winced at his slip. He’d been saying some pretty stupid things lately.

Might need to get my head checked.

“I remember, Gunny. Sorry.”

“Moretti.”

Moretti turned to face the gunny. His normally stone-hard face seemed a bit softer.

“It takes time.”

He didn’t have to say more. Moretti knew what he was getting at. He’d lost his best friend and most of his company in one mission. Almost lost himself and Gunny in the process. While he’d physically bounced back pretty quick, it was entirely possible that he was still recovering mentally. He certainly found himself thinking about it a lot. About Hoosier and Danny. His head definitely wasn’t on straight, yet. Maybe he’d been looking at this mission all wrong from the start. While it may be boring, it was a good distraction, and he could certainly use one.

“I’ll lock it in, Gunny.” After a heartbeat he added, “Thanks.”

A hard slap on his back rocked him and Gunny ran over to greet the new arrivals. Moretti shook off the thoughts and hustled to catch up. The VTOL’s ramp closed and Gunny saluted the pilot, who returned the gesture. The air filled with the whine of spooling engines before the craft lifted into it and rocketed over the canyon wall and west of their position.

As the wind and sand settled, coating their armor in a layer of dust, Hopkins and Baker turned to face Gunny.

“Reporting for duty, Gunny,” Hopkins said.

“Glad to have you. Let’s get the gear into the cave and stowed. Moretti, you and Doc do a perimeter check once we get everything in. See if you can spot any tracks of whatever you might have seen. If you see

anything, and I mean anything, report it immediately. Hopkins, you and I will update the inventory and run up to the relay so you can make sure Moretti and I didn't screw anything up."

"Yes, Gunny," Moretti, Hopkins, and Baker all chorused.

Once the skiff full of crates and the water tank were secured in the cave, Gunny turned to the new arrivals.

"Lance Corporal Hopkins, Doc, welcome to our humble abode."

Hopkins had been promoted from private first class to lance corporal after the last mission. With Nguyen gone, she was the team's only remaining comms specialist. Baker, or "Doc," had been promoted from hospital corpsman third class to second. They'd lost so many Raiders that day. Nobody had celebrated their promotions. Instead, they'd gathered to celebrate the lives of those who'd fallen. Too many drinks and wild stories had been shared that night, and more than a few tears shed.

Moretti slid up between Hopkins and Gunny. "We've been calling it Camp Sandy Crack."

Hopkins' green eyes rolled under her ginger eyebrows. "You're losing your touch, Moretti."

Moretti shrugged. "I'll remember that when you start complaining about having sand in places it should never be."

"Moretti," Gunny's gruff voice interrupted. "Don't you have a perimeter check to get to? Or are you bored again? I can add more to your list."

One of those ginger eyebrows rose and Hopkins' eyes lit with her smile. "You just can't stay out of your own way, can you?"

"We can make it a group exercise if you want to keep it up, Lance Corporal."

The smile vanished and her eyebrows reset. "No, Gunny. I think Moretti has it under control."

"Thought so."

Instead of getting back to his task, which was really pushing his luck, Moretti asked, "So what gives? How come you guys are here slumming it with us now? I thought you had your own relay to keep an eye on."

Baker shrugged his narrow shoulders. Even in power armor he wasn't a large man. "I just work here, man. They say 'Go here and do that,' I go there and do it."

“The Corps managed to dig up some unexpected reinforcements,” Gunny said. “So the brass wants all efforts doubled in finding this Bohemalo.” He turned to Moretti. “And just so you know, I feel like an idiot every time I have to use that word. Next time we encounter a new alien race, you keep your mouth shut.”

Moretti grinned. “You know I can’t make that promise, Gunny.”

Gunny grunted. “All the teams are being doubled up. I requested Doc and Hopkins be assigned to our position.”

“We appreciate it, Gunny,” Hopkins said simply. She turned to look at Moretti. “Even if we have to deal with Moretti’s mouth.”

Moretti grinned. “Oh, you’d *love* to deal with my mouth.”

“Knock it off, you two,” Gunny grumbled before they could really get going. “I ain’t got enough patience to listen to y’all go back and forth.” He shook his head and stepped to the mouth of the cave. “What’s the payload, Lance Corporal?”

“A week’s worth of food rations, toiletries, ammo, extra parts for the relay, suit batteries and two extra skin suits for each of us. The tank has enough water to last us another week.” She turned to look at the smaller tank Moretti and Gunny already had. “Looks like a week and a half total with what you’ve got here. Plus the rations and equipment you already had.”

“Son of a bitch,” Moretti griped and kicked the ground, sending up a dust cloud.

Baker’s brow furrowed. “What crawled up your ass?”

“The Corps,” Moretti grumbled.

The corpsman spread his arms. “Someone want to explain to me what his problem is?”

Without turning away from the canyon view, Gunny answered, “They’re preparing us to remain for the long haul.”

Gunny turned and stepped back over to their little powwow circle. “They just gave us supplies for a week, extra gear and ammo, and doubled our manpower.” He turned to lock eyes with Moretti. “The Corps don’t just hand shit out all willy-nilly. Not without a damned good reason.”

“Or without something to gain,” Moretti added.

“Bingo.”

“What’s that mean?” Hopkins asked.

“It means,” Moretti answered while stepping to the shade line at the mouth of the cave, “that someone called in a confirmed sighting. If they got video of it, the Corps will have us here as long as it takes to capture it. They might even move the main contingent to another position and leave us all here until we capture it, then send a ship to pick us and the payload back up.”

Gunny crossed his arms and nodded. “They want that asset.” He walked up next to Moretti and stared out and up at the relay. “Now I know why they sent a senior enlisted down here to babysit a relay station.”

Moretti gave the gunny an incredulous look. “Didn’t you give me crap about asking that same question?”

“You can ask me stupid questions when you make sergeant again. If they think we’ll be here for a while, they’ll want senior leadership on the ground to keep the wheels turning smoothly and you lot in line. Explains why I’m down here. Also means they’ll keep the lieutenant and Yeschqa here, too.”

Gunny tilted his head to the side. “If they keep up the aerial searches, they’ll have to set up a small airfield for the VTOLs and a command base.”

“Wouldn’t they tell us if there was a sighting and planning to set up a long-term mission?” Baker asked.

“Mushrooms,” Gunny answered.

“Feed us shit and keep us in the dark,” Moretti supplied, looking at Baker. “If one was located near our position, they’d have alerted us. Since they haven’t, it either hasn’t happened or it was too far away to matter to our location. Since that doesn’t appear to be the case, they’re gonna tell us fuck all.”

Baker snorted. “I’m familiar with the metaphor.”

Moretti shrugged. “Just being a super helpful private and shit.” He turned back to Gunny. “Would they really leave Yeschqa here like that? If she’s not on the ship with the other males, won’t they go back into berserk mode?”

“That’s a great question,” Gunny answered. “Hell, if they get too impatient, they might drop them down to the planet to help hunt the other down with her. But I seriously doubt it.”

Moretti shook his head. “I don’t know why they got her up in the air, in the first place. Seems like she could be a lot more effective on the ground. Especially if they dropped the males down here with her. Not only

would it give her practice leading her own herd, or whatever you call it, but they can probably cover a lot more ground than we think. Shit, the one here might be attracted to them and come join all on its own."

"Brass don't think like that, Moretti. They see Yeschqa and her ilk as assets. Very *valuable* assets that could bring the Kyriel to heel. They won't risk dropping them all on the planet at once and losing them. What if they decided they weren't interested in going back? If that happened and we tried to force them, it wouldn't be any different than what the Bugs did. Good luck getting their help then."

Gunny shook his head and continued. "No, they'll keep the males on the ship. Yeschqa likes the lieutenant, listens to her and follows her orders, so they'll keep those two together for the sake of cooperation. If something does happen to her here, they can still drop the males on the Kyriels' heads in battle and let them go crazy. Unhinged assets are still assets."

"Effective too," Baker said. The faraway look in his eye said he was remembering the carnage of Velex-b.

"I prefer my attack dogs to be well trained, thank you very much," Hopkins added.

Moretti snorted. "I dare you to call them dogs to their face. You won't have one after. Still, Gunny's right. The brass is putting the war first. They won't risk losing our biggest advantage. Can you imagine if we got ten thousand Bohemalos on our side?"

"Gotta find 'em first," Gunny added. "But you know as well as I do they hate the Kyriel. They want them dealt with as much as we do, and as fast as possible. The question is what will the Bohemalo do *after* the war. Will they go home? Do they still *have* a home? Will they remain friendly to humanity?" He clicked his tongue and jerked his head. "Guess that'll depend on how well we treat them." His flinty eyes met Hopkins' bright greens. "Even the best-trained attack dog will bite the hand of an abusive master."

"No offense, Gunny," Moretti said, "but I think considering us their 'masters' is a little bit of a stretch. If they join us, it won't be out of servitude. They're not animals, even though they look like it. They're freethinking and intelligent. If we'd tried to take them the way the Kyriel and Bugs did, I'm pretty sure we'd have had a time of it."

"Which begs the question of how the Kyriel and Bugs managed it," Hopkins said.

Gunny just nodded, his gazed fixed on the desert stretching before them. A swirl of dust rose into the air high on the west ridge as the wind churned it into a small sand twister. “It certainly does.”

They all stood there for a long moment as the implications of such a feat sunk in. Gunny broke the silence. “Alright, enough chitchat. Everyone get to it. You have your orders. Stay alert. Moretti thought he saw something earlier, so no taking chances. Nobody goes anywhere alone.”

Moretti and Baker climbed back down the canyon wall. When they’d turned up empty-handed inside the canyon, they’d decided to check topside for any signs around the relay and beyond. Again, they’d come up with nothing. It was really beginning to eat at Moretti. He knew he’d seen something. Hadn’t he? Or was he just being paranoid? Either way, he was keeping his guard up. At least it was getting easier each time he made the trip up and down.

Clack.

Moretti’s brow furrowed. He and Baker were back at the bottom again. Gunny and Hopkins were in the cave. He looked in the direction of the sound. All he saw were boulders, including one big one with mounds of red dirt on it, other tall mounds of red dirt, piles of rocks, lots of sand, sad little brushes that hadn’t seen rain in he didn’t know how long, and that was pretty much it for as far as the eye could see. He looked up at the canyon walls. There were no falling rocks this time.

Baker stopped and turned around. “What’s up?”

“You didn’t hear that?”

He shook his head. “I didn’t hear anything.”

“It sounded like a rock or something fell.”

“We did just rappel down a cliff. Probably just knocked something loose and it fell.”

“Yeah…” Moretti said hesitantly. “Maybe.”

Scrape.

His head snapped back around and his rifle came up. Slowly, he eased around the rock pile and stepped toward the boulder nearest him. It was the one with the red mounds of dirt on top of it.

“Did you hear *that*?”

“Yup. Heard that one,” Baker answered, his rifle up.

“Gunny, checking out some noises.”

Before Gunny responded, there was another sound.

Tick. Tick. Thunk.

"A lizard, maybe?" Baker suggested.

Moretti watched as a small stone tumbled down from one of the dirt piles and landed in the sand next to the boulder. His head tilted to the side as he inched closer. The rock itself seemed harmless enough. It was about the size of a quarter, red, and weathered. But what had caused it to fall from the mound of dirt on top of the boulder? A lizard, like Baker said? He couldn't recall seeing any actual animals since arriving. But it was a desert, so Moretti assumed there had to be the alien equivalent of lizards running around. He moved to the side and stepped up onto a smaller rock to try and peer over the top of the boulder.

Nothing.

He jumped down and stared at the stone again. "You're fucking up the feng shui over here, rock." Moretti kicked it, sending it sailing in the air to tumble back to the sand and bounce off another boulder at the base of the canyon wall.

His eyes went back to the mounds of dirt on top of the boulder. They looked dried out and frail, as if they might topple over at any second. Moretti kicked the boulder. Even through his armored boot, he felt the jar of the strike in his bones. Despite that, something wasn't quite right. The impact sounded…off.

Moretti's brow furrowed as he stared down at the spot he'd kicked. The red dirt was scuffed and scratched, revealing a black layer beneath. He swore he'd seen something like it before. Volcanic rock, maybe? For all he knew the canyon had been the result of a volcanic eruption a million years ago. He was no geologist and figured that might be feasible. That didn't explain the dull, almost hollow sound it made when he kicked it. Curious, he kicked the boulder again, harder this time.

"*Moretti!*"

At Gunny's shout, Moretti snapped fully around. "Let me guess, it's not time to kick rocks yet?"

Only Gunny wasn't looking at him. He was looking at something *behind* him. Baker, mouth agape, was wide-eyed and slowly walking backward, rifle aimed high. Moretti heard the sound of more tumbling rocks and the soft sound of falling sand. Slowly, Moretti turned back to the boulder.

The “boulder” now stood ten feet tall. Red sand cascaded past curved, black horns and dark, angry eyes stared down at him. The pillars of dirt crumbled to expose the telltale tubular growths along the back. Clumps of sand hit the ground as hands tipped with terrifying claws clenched and unclenched. Dry, cracked lips parted in a sneer, exposing a mouthful of razor-sharp teeth. The air seemed to vibrate as the monster before him unleashed a deep, guttural growl.

“Ahhh, fuck me.”

Moretti raised his rifle but wasn’t fast enough. Dust and dirt flew as the camouflaged Bohemalo struck out with an open palm, black claws gleaming in the sunlight, and hit him across the chest. His feet left the ground, and he felt himself flying through the air. A second later, his back and head exploded in pain as he slammed into something hard that gave under his weight. Smaller impacts hit the ground all around him and across his chest, head, and legs. He lifted his head and saw he’d been slammed right through another pile of rocks that now lay spread across the ground and himself.

“I fucking hate rocks,” Moretti groaned as he pushed himself up to one knee. He raised his rifle to fire at the charging alien, only to find half his rifle missing. “You gotta be fucking *kidding me*!”

Moretti tossed his useless weapon, ripped Hoosier’s blade from its sheath, and grabbed a large rock from the ground. He stood and took a defensive stance, ready to take the beast head-on.

“Bring it, motherfucker!”

Rounds of plasma impacted the Bohemalo along its side and back, missing its vulnerable underside. At the last second, the monster pivoted to the right and up along the side of the canyon wall, its claws digging into rock and sand with ease.

“Shoot to wound! Shoot to wound!” Gunny shouted as he, Baker, and Hopkins continued to fire. “We need it alive!”

In a flash, the Bohemalo was on them. It grabbed Baker around the waist and tossed him into Hopkins. The two went down in a heap of legs, arms, and pained curses. Gunny, less likely to back down than a raging honey badger, continued to fire and held his ground. The Bohemalo was smart and kept low, protecting its soft belly, only presenting an impenetrable target of scales and armor.

With the added strength of his power armor, Moretti threw his rock as hard as he could. His aim was true and it struck the Bohemalo in the eye. Its head dipped but it didn't stop. Gunny went flying as a huge hand swatted him aside like a bug. He hit the far wall of the cave and fell to the ground.

"Gunny!" Moretti shouted and ran as fast as he could.

Baker and Hopkins were back on their feet and firing, but the rampaging alien was already in the cave. Crates shattered and equipment flew as clawed hands raged. Suddenly, the Bohemalo stopped, its head twitching to the side, and eyes locked on one item in particular. The smaller water tank. It was still mostly full. Plasma slammed into the Bohemalo's armored back and side, but the pain seemed to barely register. Moretti slid to a stop next to the downed gunny. He dropped Hoosier's knife, snatched up his superior's rifle, and aimed for the beast's face.

"Alive, my ass."

The Bohemalo charged at the exact moment Moretti's finger squeezed the trigger and the round hit just behind the head amongst the tubular growths. There was the screech of ripping steel as the tank was ripped from the base and tucked under one arm. A trail of dust flew up behind the monster as it ran from the cave on three legs.

Moretti, Baker, and Hopkins tried to follow, firing as fast as they could, but to no avail. Moretti watched in angered amazement as it made short work of scaling the side of the canyon before scrambling over the side.

"No!" Hopkins shouted, but it was too late.

The sound of screeching steel filled the air, followed by a thunderous crash as the relay tower slammed into the ground next to the cave. The raging Bohemalo had knocked it over the side of the canyon.

"Fuck!" Moretti shouted. He spun back to his fellow Raiders. "Everyone good?"

Hopkins put a hand to the side of her helmet. "Besides having my brain rattled? I'm okay." Her eyes trailed to the wrecked relay. "That's not good."

"Doc?" Moretti asked.

The man shrugged. "Hopkins broke my fall. I'm good."

"Asshole," Hopkins muttered.

"Go check on Gunny, Doc," Moretti ordered.

With Moretti being a newly minted private, Hopkins really should have been the one giving orders, but she didn't protest. Baker ran toward the cave while Moretti and Hopkins continued to scan the area.

"Did you guys call it in before the tower came down?"

She shook her head.

"Shit." His eyes trailed over to Baker who was bent over Gunny. "Come on. We gotta get to high ground and try to get a message out. Maybe we'll get lucky."

The problem was that their relay had been the main relay. The one directly connected to the ship and connected to the surrounding teams. With it down, it was likely they weren't the only team experiencing a comm blackout.

Together, the two made short work of the climb. When they reached the top, they were more than cautious about sticking their heads over the side. Moretti risked a peek, but saw nothing. He gave Hopkins the signal for a three count. As one, they rolled over the edge and popped up, Hopkins rifle up and ready.

"Clear," Moretti said.

Moretti checked his comms. Sure enough, he had shit for signal. "Can you boost the signal to our suits?"

Hopkins shook her head. "I can try different frequencies, but that's about it. Without that relay, we're pretty screwed on comms."

He figured it was worth a shot anyway. "Charlie Six, Relay One, come in, Charlie Six." When no answer came he repeated the call. All he heard on the other end was static. "Charlie Six, Relay One, we've got a positive ID on the target. Repeat, positive ID on target. Contact has been made. Repeat, contact has been made. Please advise."

Again, static was the only response.

They remained there for several minutes, surveying the land and watching for movement and trying the comm on different frequencies. Moretti studied the carnage left from the tower. Everything was mangled, not to mention the crumpled mess below. Unable to make contact, they climbed back down to see how Gunny was doing and assess the situation. The tower was trashed, the supplies in the cave were scattered and smashed, and a water tank was missing.

Gunny slowly got to his feet, helmet still on the ground. Baker was doing his best to get the old NCO to take it easy, but it was clear the gunny

was having none of it.

“Leave me be, Doc. Dirty son of a bitch’s got one coming to him, I know that.” His face was a picture of frustrated anger as he snatched his helmet from the dirt. Gunny spun to face Moretti and Hopkins as they neared. “Moretti! How the fuck did that thing slip in under our noses like that?”

Moretti shook his head. He leaned down and picked his blade up off the ground and slammed it back into its sheath. “No clue, Gunny. Looked like he did some kind of crazy mud/dirt camouflage shit and somehow slipped by our scans.”

Gunny grunted and his eyes narrowed as he glared at the hollow spot the Bohemalo had been bedded down. “How long you reckon it was waitin’ there for?”

“No idea, Gunny. I can run back the replay in my helmet feed and see if that fake-ass boulder was there the whole time or we just missed it showing up.” Moretti thought for a minute. “There were those rocks that fell. Maybe it knocked them loose as it moved in. Could have been inching closer really slow.”

“Maybe,” Gunny said with a slow nod. “How’d it slip by the scans?”

“My guess is it sat in the sun so long that it became the same temperature as everything else around it. Their backs are pretty resilient, so the heat probably didn’t bother it. It’s also smaller than the ones back on Velex-b. Those were all around fifteen feet tall. This guy was probably right at ten.”

“I thought he looked undersized,” Gunny said. “Must be young.”

“But what about the life signs?” Baker asked. “Heartbeat should have been detected regardless of size and camo.”

Moretti shrugged. “Not if they can slow down their heartbeat and go into some kind of hibernation mode. Humans can do it to hold their breath longer; why wouldn’t an alien race be able to?”

“Yeah, I guess that checks out.”

“Where’d it disappear to?” Gunny asked.

Moretti pointed toward the lip of the canyon. “Climbed the wall like a scaley monkey and took off over the edge that way. No clue beyond that. I’d radio for eyes in the sky, but…” He gestured to the downed relay.

“Son of a bitch,” Gunny spat and marched over to the wreckage. He gave a rueful shake of the head. “What a fuckin’ mess.” The gunny’s

expression stiffened and the air of command returned to his voice. “Hopkins.”

Hopkins stepped up next to him. “Yes, Gunny.”

“Report.”

“As you’re aware, comms are down, Gunny. Relay is out of commission. We have spare parts, but I’ll have to see what’s still good and what isn’t. We might be able to rig something up.”

“Then get to it. We need that comm back up and running. Command needs to know what happened here.” Hopkins gave a quick reply and double-timed it to the tower. Gunny turned and gave Moretti a quick once-over. His eyes widened for a split second when they met Moretti’s chest. He pointed. “Damn near carried on that family tradition, Private.”

Moretti looked down to examine himself for the first time and his eyes bulged. Three long gashes ran across his chest armor where the Bohemalo had swatted him. He’d come close to being split like his rifle.

“Well…shit.”

“Shake it off, Moretti. Ain’t the first time you cheated death. Won’t be the last.”

He could tell Gunny was trying to make light of the situation, be he also saw the hidden concern in his otherwise hard eyes. Gunny shoved his helmet on and turned to the disaster in the cave.

“Shit. Moretti, find your spare weapon. You and Baker do a perimeter check. I’m gonna help Hopkins with the relay. With any luck we can get comms back and contact the lieutenant.” He shook his head. “I should have called it in as soon as that rock stood up.”

“Can’t be perfect all the time, Gunny.”

Gunny harrumphed. “You’re damned sure living proof of that, Moretti.”

Moretti shrugged. “There’s all kinds of perfection, Gunny.” He grinned. “I like to think I’ve perfected a few things.”

“Yeah, like being a pain in my ass.” Gunny jabbed a thumb back over his shoulder. “Get to it, Private.”

Moretti looked around the cave. “Gunny, it’s my honor to be a pain in your a—”

“*Moretti!*”

A big grin split Moretti’s face. “Shutting up, Gunny. Grab gun. Look for Bohemalo. Yell loudly if giant death alien spotted. Got it.” As he sifted

through the crates for the spare rifles, he added, “I tried to comm the lieutenant while Doc was tending to you. I’m not sure if they got it or not. Doubtful.”

Gunny nodded. “Looks like we’re on our own for a while.” He turned to their remaining water supply. Their suits could produce water for them, but they only had so much battery life. It was another three days in 120-degree weather before their next scheduled check-in.

Moretti knew what he was getting at. He found the crate of rifles. The top had been shattered but the weapons were thankfully unharmed. He dragged the crate over to the side, tore the busted lid off, pulled a rifle out and inspected it.

“We got this, Gunny.” He gave the old NCO a wink. “We’re Raiders. Fuck the odds. Embrace the suck. Dying can wait ’til later cuz we got shit to do right now.”

Gunny gave him a gruff chuckle. “Oorah.” With that, Gunny headed off to help Hopkins.

When the gunny was out of earshot, Baker turned to face Moretti and said, “I’d prefer not dying at all, thanks.”

“So how bad is it?” Gunny asked two hours later. The sun was beginning to set over the canyon.

“Well, on a scale of one to fucked”—Hopkins held up a crushed mass of copper wire and plastic in her hand—“we’re pretty fucked. The high-frequency transformer got destroyed.”

Gunny reached out, took it from her hand, studied it for a moment, then handed it back. “Do we not have a replacement?”

“Definitely,” Hopkins answered. “As a matter of fact, we have three.”

“Then what’s the problem?”

Hopkins walked over to a flattened metal crate and kicked the lid over. Inside was a smashed mess of wire components. “They’re all in worse shape than this one.”

Gunny crossed his arms and cursed under his breath. “I don’t suppose you can repair any of them.”

She shook her head. “Not a chance. I can salvage enough parts to get the tower up again, but it’s not going to work without that transformer. Comms are going to be dark until we get a supply drop, or until we don’t check in and they come looking for us.”

“Which is three days from now,” Moretti supplied.

“So what do we do in the meantime?” Baker asked.

“We follow orders,” Gunny answered. “We maintain a watch and look out for that damned Bohemalo. When they come investigate why we haven’t checked in, we report our sighting. Hell, another team might spot it before then.”

“Or,” Moretti added, “it might stick close and come back.”

“What makes you say that, Private?”

“It took our water, Gunny.”

The older Raider nodded slowly. “And it knows we have more.” He turned to stare out into the desert. “Damn sure knows there ain’t much out there.”

“We’re also its closest food supply,” Baker said. “I haven’t seen any animals running around. God knows what it’s been feeding on or how long it’s been since it had a meal. I’m honestly shocked it didn’t take off with one of us, too.”

“Water takes priority over food,” Moretti said. “They’re not stupid, just feral without a female around to keep their minds clear. My bet is it’ll be back.”

Hopkins patted her rifle. “We’ll be ready for it this time. It can’t pull that trick twice.”

“Negative,” Gunny said in a commanding voice. “Orders are to take it alive.”

“Sooo, what are we supposed to do?” Moretti asked. “Ask it really nicely not to steal our water or eat us until Yeschqa gets here to unscramble its brain? Something tells me that won’t work out all that well.”

Hopkins smacked him in the back of the head. “Shut up, Moretti.”

“Thank you, Lance Corporal.”

“I’ve been wondering…” Hopkins said. “If the Corps really did get reports of a confirmed sighting and we’re right about why the added hands and supplies, then how did they not track it here? How did it have time to get here, camouflage itself, and hide, all without being seen? Isn’t it more likely that there’s two of them here, not just one?”

Moretti shrugged. “Might be as simple as there wasn’t a sighting and the brass is just preparing for an extended mission. Or the damn thing managed to lose the rest of the company and used the cover of night and the camo to ease up on us unnoticed. Which…” He sent two still images to

each of their suits. “As you can see, that boulder wasn’t there on one of my rounds, but was on the next. You can see it behind that stack of rocks it threw me through. It definitely snuck up on us.”

“That’s comforting,” Baker deadpanned.

“They were sneaky and silent in the jungle. Safe to assume they’d be the same here.” Gunny stepped to the edge of the cave where the shadow was quickly receding with the setting sun. “But Hopkins makes a good point.”

“We need to prepare for all options. We’ve been hit once, safe to assume we’ll be hit again. It’ll be dark, soon.” He crossed his arms and set his jaw as the wheels turned behind his dark, flinty eyes. “Doc, was that camo tarp still intact?”

“Good enough to use, Gunny. Maybe a stitch or two here and there.”

Gunny nodded. “Good. Stitch it up then. Moretti, Hopkins, break down that relay and bring the parts into the cave. Double-time, everyone.”

Moretti stomped his feet in the sand, trying to get the blood flowing and warm his toes. His suit battery was at 57 percent, and he wanted to stretch the juice as far as he could, but if it got any colder he was going to have to kick the heat on. He’d never been one for colder temperatures. Thankfully, the sun would be rising in a few hours.

Back in the cave, Gunny, Hopkins, and Baker were getting some much-needed shut-eye. Gunny was going to be pissed when he found out that when Baker had come to rouse him for his shift, Moretti waved him off and took a double watch. He couldn’t sleep anyway and Gunny needed the rest, not that he’d ever admit it.

“You never have been one for following orders, Moretti.”

Moretti closed his eyes and winced at the rough voice. “Don’t suppose so, Gunny.”

“Might have something to do with still being a private.” Gunny sidled up to him and they stared out into the dark canyon. Overhead the stars shined bright in the moonless sky. “You think I’m so old and slow I need twice as much sleep as the rest of you?”

“Not at all, Gunny.” Moretti gave him a genuine smile. “You’re the toughest bastard I’ve ever known.”

“Don’t you forget it.”

“Heard. No, you just got clocked pretty hard earlier and I thought the extra recovery time would help. Doc agreed.”

“Appreciate the sentiment, Moretti, but you know better than anyone that I lead by example. And you ignoring my orders, even for my own benefit, sets a *bad* example. You know that. Baker and Hopkins know you, know me, so they don’t think about it. But new recruits? You’ve got a reputation, Moretti. New boots look up to you. Follow your example. If they saw you pull that sort of thing, they might get it in their heads that insubordination is no big deal and do whatever they want. Whatever they think is what’s best in their stupid little grunt brains. That’s not good for anyone. It gets Raiders killed. I’m not telling you anything you don’t already know. Try as you might to be a fuckup, you’re a natural leader and a damn fine Raider…when you want to be.”

“I always want to be a Raider, Gunny. A leader…not so much.”

“Taking a double shift so one of your own can recover is leader shit, Moretti.”

“That’s not why I did it.”

“*Natural* leader, Vince.”

Moretti turned to look Gunny Warwick in the eye. It was rare when he addressed him by his first name, on duty leastways, and when he did, Moretti listened.

“Leaders, *true* leaders, don’t lead by looking out for their own best interests. They lead by doing the shit that needs done. They lead by never leaving a man behind. They lead by taking the bullet so the man next to them can go home to their wife and kid. They lead by checking the feet of their soldiers before taking their own boots off. They lead by doing an extra patrol so the beat-up old Raider next to them has an extra two hours to recover.”

Moretti stood silent, afraid to speak, possibly for the first time in his life.

Gunny turned back to the desert. “Leaders lead for the sake of everyone else depending on them. I’m not going to be around forever, Vince. One day I’m gonna be too slow, too old, or too dead. When I go, I wanna know the Raiders are in competent hands. Someone who’s gonna keep ’em alive when shit hits the fan. Stand shoulder to shoulder and fight the fight.” He turned to look at Moretti out the corner of his eye. “You get me?”

“I get you, G.”

“Then quit self-sabotaging yourself. You knew what you were doing on that shore leave. Stop fucking around and stepping on your own dick. Quit being afraid of responsibility, earn your fucking stripes, and *keep* them this time. Stop chasing family traditions. Besides”—he elbowed Moretti—“I got too much time, effort, and patience dumped into you to let you off that easy. I want a return on my investment.”

A grin split Moretti’s face.

Nothing the gunny had said was untrue. Moretti knew he should at least be a sergeant at this point. He’d made it twice before, but immediately gotten the stripes pulled. Each time had been for something that could have easily been avoided. He’d just chosen the path of most resistance.

“Besides all that,” Gunny added, “you keep screwing around and your actions are going to start reflecting on mine and the lieutenant’s leadership. You and me both might get reassigned. It’s always a possibility, but that’s a fast-track way of getting it done. The LT has already had to go to bat for both of us more than once.”

Moretti’s brow furrowed. “I didn’t know that.” He also hadn’t thought about how his actions might reflect on the gunny and lieutenant.

“You aren’t supposed to. And I didn’t fucking tell you.”

“Understood.”

Gunny nodded. “Good.” They stood there in dark, cold silence for a long moment.

“I love our male-bonding moments.”

“Shut up, Moretti.”

The heat and sun beat down on Moretti as he made the third pass of his patrol route. Thankfully, he had a fresh battery pack and his suit’s cooling system was on full blast. He was about to head back to the cave for a quick drink of water when a cloud of dust caught his attention. It was high above the ridge of the canyon. First it was one thin cloud, then two, then three.

“We got incoming!”

“Friendly?” Gunny asked as he and the others came to the mouth of the cave.

“Unknown. But whoever it is, they’re throwing up one hell of a dust trail.”

“I don’t hear any engines,” Hopkins said. “Not a VTOL.”

“Could be a ground unit,” Baker said.

A large figure, running at high speed, appeared at the edge of the canyon and dove down. Instead of plummeting to its death, the figure found purchase and continued its pursuit—directly toward them.

“It’s a ground unit, alright,” Moretti said. “Bohemalo inbound!”

“Positions!” Gunny shouted. “Move, move, move!”

Instead of running back to the cave, Moretti hoisted his rifle and held his ground. He took careful aim as the charging monster got closer and closer with each passing second. Rocks and sand flew from its claws with each stride. With unfathomable balance and control, the beast descended the canyon wall and hit the sand running at full speed—right at Moretti.

Moretti squeezed off a round of plasma. The shot hit the ground close to the Bohemalo’s right front paw, forcing it to dodge left. He fired again at the other side and again over the alien’s head, hitting the thick armor of its back.

“Eat that, asshole!” Moretti shouted and fired three more times. Each shot forced the Bohemalo to either dodge or duck. A ferocious and angry roar filled the air as another shot landed just behind its horned head.

“Oh, shit,” Moretti said and turned around to run back to the cave. “I think I got it good and pissed, Gunny!” His legs burned as he ran as hard as he could. He could hear the impacts of the Bohemalo’s feet behind him. They were far too close for comfort.

“Move your ass, Moretti!” Gunny shouted from the mouth of the cave. He fired his rifle and plasma blasted past Moretti as he ran.

When he was a few meters from the mouth of the cave, Moretti used the added strength of his power armor to jump the rest of the way. When he landed, he spun and slid to a stop, his rifle up.

The Bohemalo came to a screeching halt where Moretti’s feet had left the sand and sniffed the ground. Tufts of dust and sand flew as its huge nostrils flared as it blew out heavy gusts of air.

“Come on, you bastard!” Moretti shouted. He let his rifle drop to hang on its sling and threw his hands in the air. “I’m right here! Come get me!”

“Let’s go, you son of a bitch!” Gunny yelled. “In here! What are you waiting for? You got lunch and dinner waiting right here!”

The Bohemalo stopped sniffing the ground and glared at them through dark, enraged eyes. With one hand, it grabbed a fistful of sand and snatched upward. The camo tarp, covered with a thin layer of sand, came with it.

“Ahh, shit,” Moretti groaned. “I guess being scrambled doesn’t make them stupid.”

“It would seem so,” Gunny replied. “Plan B!”

“But plan B has ‘get my face bitten off’ written all over it!” Moretti shouted as he grabbed a length of steel with a long cable running the length of it and looped into a noose at the end.

Gunny grabbed an identical one from his side of the cave. Each of them moved out into the sun on either side of the Bohemalo. Moretti fed slack into his noose to widen it.

“Here boy. Good boy. You want a belly scratch? Come on, we just wanna take you into space and let you meet a nice Bohemalette who’ll mess with your head. In a good way, though. We promise she won’t sleep with your best friend and post the video online. Unless you’re into that sort of thing.”

“Shut up, Moretti,” Gunny snapped. He was inching closer on his side.

Black claws slashed through the air as Moretti reached out with his noose and tried to slip it around the beast’s neck. He just managed to snatch it back before it was sliced in half. Gunny got a nice view of gnashing teeth when he got too close with his.

“Heads up!” Hopkins shouted.

A barrage of large stones came hurling down from the ledge above the cave as she and Baker bombed the Bohemalo. A particularly large rock about the size of a bowling ball landed squarely on the top of the alien’s head, dazing him for a moment. Moretti and Gunny both seized the opportunity to slip their nooses over his head.

As soon as they cinched the cables, the beast went berserk. Despite its smaller size compared to the larger, older Bohemalo from Velex-b, this guy was *strong*. Moretti’s feet left the ground as it stood up on its hind legs and jerked to the side. It was all Moretti could do to maintain his grip on the steel pole. He felt the cable slide in his palm and cinched it down tighter so he didn’t lose his hold on the alien. A jolt slammed through his body when his feet hit the ground again. Gunny shouted and Moretti looked up to see he was now airborne as well.

“Hang on, Gunny!”

“Pull him toward the cave!” Gunny shouted.

Moretti dug his heels into the ground and pulled as hard as he could as rocks continued to rain down pain on the raging Bohemalo. Servos whined

as his augmented strength miraculously forced the alien to take a staggering step in his direction. Gunny hit the deck again and roared as he added his strength and pulled. Together they managed to pull the monster another two feet.

Suddenly, the Bohemalo dropped back to all fours, halting all forward progress. It dug its front claws into the sand, reared its head back, and released a blood-curdling roar into the air that seemed to last forever. The cry was so loud, Moretti felt it in his bones.

As the roar died off, the Bohemalo shook his head side to side, trying to get the cables from around its neck. When that didn't work, it reared back up on its hind legs again, reached out and grabbed the pole Moretti was holding onto for dear life, and jerked it to the side. The action was so fast and abrupt, Moretti lost his grip and went flying through the air. He hit their water tank, crashing it to the ground, and him over the top.

"Ow," he groaned as he clambered to his feet. "Getting real tired of being thrown into shit."

Outside, Gunny shouted again as he was being jerked through the air while the Bohemalo spun in a circle. It was like watching the rodeo back home. Rocks still continued to rain down. Unfortunately, a few of them were misguided and also hit the Gunny.

"Not me, you morons!"

"Sorry, Gunny!" Baker shouted.

Moretti spotted the coiled-up remaining cable lying next to the supplies and snatched it up. One end had an eye on it, so he slipped the tail through and created a lasso.

"Yeehaw and shit, I guess."

He ran up behind the Bohemalo and tried to time its steps. He missed the foot he'd been aiming for, but luckily the other stepped into the loop. Moretti snatched it tight. The Bohemalo spun and tried to swat him like it had during their first encounter. This time Moretti was ready for it and ducked, running behind it again. Gunny sailed overhead, cursing up a storm, but still managing to hang onto his noose pole. Moretti was impressed at the old NCO's stamina.

As he ran he let out slack on the cable, wrapping it around the Bohemalo's waist. Once he reached the back of the Bohemalo again, he jumped up, grabbed one of the tubular growths, and pulled himself up. He

felt like he was climbing the rock wall in the PT room back on the ship. Only this one was mounted on the back of a bucking bull.

When Moretti reached the Bohemalo's shoulders, he looped the cable around the Bohemalo's throat and jumped back down to the sand. The alien roared and immediately dropped to all fours again. Moretti ran as hard as he could and baseball-slid under it, popped up, and pulled the cable tight.

When the Bohemalo felt the cable touch its vulnerable belly, it dropped to the sand and started rolling in an attempt to squash whatever was under it. Its armored back dug great gouges into the sand as it came back upright. The move had finally snatched the pole from Gunny's hand, and he was doing his best to stay upright as he watched the flailing Bohemalo.

The rolling and thrashing caused both abandoned nooses to wrap themselves around the Bohemalo's limbs. Each time it rolled it became even more entangled. Moretti used the panicked movements to his advantage and guided the rest of the cable around arms, legs, and finally around the neck again. By the time the Bohemalo realized its mistake, it was too late. Moretti looped the cable in half hitch knots around the long snout of the Bohemalo as it came to a stop on its belly. He looped the cable back and tied it off to one of the growths on the Bohemalo's back.

Gunny stumbled over to him and slapped him on the back. "Good work, Moretti. Never knew you were a cowboy."

Moretti snorted. "I'm not. Saw that shit on TV once. Couple guys were catching alligators in Florida. When the gator went into a deathroll it just caught itself for them. Seemed like a good idea."

Gunny looked from Moretti to the growling Bohemalo, then back to Moretti, and finally shrugged. "Reckon it's not a stupid idea if it works."

"Right?"

"No," Hopkins shouted from her spot next to the large boulder on the ledge above them. "He's still stupid."

Moretti gave her the one-finger salute. She returned the gesture with a laugh. He turned back to the Bohemalo, and his HUD instantly switched, cutting out half the color spectrums. He noticed the glow emitting from the hollow growths on the Bohemalo's back.

Moretti gently kicked the Bohemalo in the shoulder. "Hey, knock it off. Too late for that shit. Besides, it doesn't work on us." He turned to Gunny. "Too bad he has no clue what we're saying."

“LT will be here soon enough. Yeschqa can get ’em sorted.”

A roar filled the air—and not from the Bohemalo at their feet.

“Bohemalo coming in hot!” Hopkins shouted from her perch.

Moretti and Gunny turned to see another Bohemalo, slightly larger than the one they’d just caught, barreling toward them at a full gallop.

“Run!” Gunny shouted. “Hopkins, Doc! You two get ready!”

“Fuck, fuck, fuck!” Moretti shouted as he and Gunny hightailed it toward the cave mouth. Instead of jumping over the tarp they each ran around to the right side of it and into the cave. Both grabbed their rifles and aimed.

“Do we take it alive too?” Moretti asked, his heart pounding.

“If we can!” Gunny answered. “Hopefully this works.”

Unlike the previous Bohemalo, this one never broke eye contact with them and ran straight over the camo tarp. It only made it about two steps before the entire thing collapsed and the alien dropped down into a fifteen-foot-deep hole that was only about six feet wide, but shrank to about four feet at the bottom. Beneath the tarp had been the remnants of the aluminum relay tower. It had been laid out in a lattice formation over the hole so that when the Bohemalo fell, the metal would collapse around it, wrapping it in an aluminum net combined with the camo tarp. Between the fall, the metal net, the tarp, and the narrowing of the tunnel, the captive should have a hard time moving around, much less escaping. It worked perfectly. The beast, wrapped in its relay cocoon, roared and thrashed in the bottom of the hole.

“Bombs away!” Baker shouted.

Thunk!

The large boulder that had been at the edge of the ledge above the cave slammed down over the top of the hole, sealing the Bohemalo inside.

“Hole in one!” Hopkins shouted.

Moretti stepped close and examined the trap. He turned to Gunny and grinned. “Well, that was fun.”

Moretti stretched out on his side, one knee upright, his head rested in his palm, elbow on the ground. He grinned like a jackass and gave a thumbs-up with his free hand as the trussed-up Bohemalo behind him growled and thrashed, desperately trying to free itself of its bonds. Ten feet away sat Moretti’s helmet, perched on a rock. He was using the camera function in the faceplate to take photos of himself and his “catch.”

He rolled to his belly and slid back and over to lay nose to nose with the young male. His chin rested in his fists, and he bent his knees so that his boots stuck straight up in the air. The beast's breath was horrid and made him gag.

"Damn. Once your brain gets unscrambled, you really need a mint. That shit could melt paint."

A muffled roar erupted from beneath the boulder, accompanied by the sound of claws scratching against stone. Moretti met the enraged eyes of the Bohemalo before him. "That your brother? He sounds even more pissed than you are."

The only response he got was a curled upper lip, a display of sharp fangs, and a growl that would send an icy chill down any normal person's spine. But Moretti wasn't exactly normal. You had to be a little off to survive as a Raider in the first place.

"You gonna give him a kiss?" Hopkins asked as she stepped up.

Moretti eyed the dried-out, scaley lips of the Bohemalo. "No thanks. Not my type."

Before Hopkins could respond the air filled with the whine of engines. A second later, two VTOLs tore across the sky over the canyon. It had taken less time for command to respond to the comm blackout than they'd expected. He wasn't exactly sad about it. One continued on in a steady observation pattern while the other touched down. A lone figure moved through the dust to their position.

"Officer on deck!" Gunny shouted.

Moretti shoved himself to his feet and trotted over to fall in with his fellow Raiders. They all looked worse for wear. His suit sported the three gouges across the chest as well as several other dents, dings, and scratches. He didn't recognize the lieutenant standing before them. His nameplate read "Jackson." He'd been expecting Lieutenant Callahan and Yeschqa.

"Looks like you had some excitement around here, Gunny."

"Yes, sir."

The officer's eyes landed on the damage to Moretti's chest. "Close call, Private?"

Moretti fought the urge to run a hand over the slash marks but managed not to. "Nothing I couldn't shake off, sir."

"Dying can wait."

"We got shit to do right now, sir."

Lieutenant Jackson gave him a nod of approval. His gaze trailed over the Raiders to the large bolder stuck in the hole. “Bohemahole” had been spray-painted on the side. He pointed at it. “What’s that, Gunny?”

Gunny turned, looked at the boulder, then turned back to Jackson. “That, sir, is the second Bohemalo we encountered. We trapped it in the hole.”

That seemed to surprise him, though he hid it well. “*Second* Bohemalo?”

“Yes, sir. Turns out there were two here, not just one. Might even be more.”

“That would explain why the other sighting was so far from your position.” He marched over to Gunny and stood directly in front of him. “Gunny, I’m going to need a full after-action report. We might be here a little longer than we thought.”

“Yes, sir. Approximately—”

Moretti tried. He really did. In the end, he just couldn’t help himself. A huge grin split his face, and his hands shot up excitedly as he cut the gunny off.

“So, here’s the Bohemalowdown—”

“*Moretti!*”

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Hunter of Demons

A Quintus Fox story

Jason Cordova

“This is a bad place, boss. A real bad place.”

My engineer was right. This planet was pretty bad. But sometimes the job took one to the ends of the universe. When that happened, the best thing you could do was to buckle down, do the job, and get the hell out of there before things went sideways. Places like this were nasty and had a bad habit of sucking the very soul out of a man.

As planets went, Ortega VI was a particularly foul excuse for a habitable world. According to rumor, the denizens who dwelt here weren’t much better, either.

The first thing I noticed as I stepped off my ship was the lack of oxygen around me. Sure, there was some atmosphere, but it was thin, barely enough to breathe. Beside me, my engineer coughed and donned his helmet. I’d come prepared and already had mine on. Most people not from the planet wore aspirators to assist with breathing. Helmets, thanks to the fine-grit sand that got everywhere if the wind kicked up, were a better choice.

Fortunately, instead of my normal duds I was in military-grade combat armor, a breathing apparatus, and full helmet with visor. My old rank from my time in the service was still on my helmet, which caused no small amount of laughter from my crew when I’d put it on. Tara, my young pilot, had almost snorted water out of her nose when she saw that I’d been a lowly corporal back in the day. She’d decided quickly to remain on my ship, the *Sly Fox*, and coordinate from there after realizing I didn’t have a suit small enough to fit her. Which was for the better. Having a Coderunner wandering around unsupervised was just asking for trouble.

Mike Havoc, my engineer, had listened to my advice and wore a suit and helmet as well. He’d also brought two antipersonnel rifles, weapons I normally didn’t carry but might need on this venture. This job was, after all, outside of my normal wheelhouse.

Two men were standing at the base of the landing. They both wore similar getups, though they sported goggles and respirators instead of full

helmets. The duo were undoubtedly locals, born and raised here, so they were probably used to the grit in the pores and thin air. Let them show off. I was not about to get into a machismo contest with a couple of locals from a planet I wasn't even sure humanity should be inhabiting.

I stuck out my hand in greeting once we were close to the men. Both were skinny, tough-looking hombres whose skin was like old leather. They were probably far younger than they looked. The Striderlands had a habit of aging people before their time.

"Someone called about a dead Jaxian quantum wolf?"

My name is Quintus Fox. I'm the best bounty hunter in the universe.

"This ain't the first time this happened out here," the first local, a guy who went by the name Clovis, said in a gravelly voice as we arrived at the site. His companion must have been a man of few words because he didn't speak the entire ride. Clovis continued as we got out of the wheeled vehicle. "Me 'n Edi here patrol some, but we try to let the critters be and not get too close, you know? Ev'ry once in a while, though, some asshat slips in for some trophy huntin.' But ain't never seen a quantum wolf killed out here before."

A tale as old as time. Back in the ancient times before spaceflight, people were prohibited from hunting deer in the king's forest. Starving peasants did it anyway. Later, when animals began to go extinct due to overhunting, protective measures were put into place. People ignored them for reasons of their own.

Don't get me wrong. I wasn't against hunting, no. My pa and I had hunted for meat back when I was a kid, when food was hard to come by and crops didn't want to grow. Life on a farm was all about work, and when the farm wasn't producing, then food had to be gotten elsewhere. For us, it meant hunting deer, even when it was out of season. Keeping food on the table was more important to my pa than anything else.

Jaxian quantum wolves, on the other hand, had no meat worth eating. They were apex predators, top of the food chain, and they did not belong on this world. They're also rare and typically found on only one planet in the entire galaxy. Someone had somehow illegally smuggled one here for the sole purpose of trophy hunting.

But why here? My eyes looked through the filtered view the helmet provided. I didn't see the appeal.

Everything out here was red, thanks in part to the natural coloration of the rock and the dull red star the planet orbited. Very few planets featured environs as miserable as Ortega VI. I made a pointed effort to avoid them. Life might exist on planets like this, but humanity thrived on the massive space stations which populated the stars. We belonged out in the black, exploring, spreading throughout the galaxy…not trapped on the ground in places like this with our wings clipped, tethered, caged in an unwitting prison.

As I knelt and inspected the body, I had a plethora of random thoughts come through my head…most of which involved a certain game warden who'd tried to arrest me on charges of smuggling not too long before. With some help, I'd managed to clear my name. Being a bounty hunter of my stature and legacy lent me some leeway when it came to local law enforcement.

I'd also somehow managed to get deputized in the ensuing days after breaking up the real smuggling ring. It doesn't pay much, but the biggest and best benefit is in the badge. It can get me into places bounty hunters are sometimes…*frowned* upon.

Places like Redlands Valley Nature Preserve, for example. Which was the entire reason I was on this forsaken planet in the first place.

My two local guides who had led us here watched as I let Lazarus walk around the body. Laz sniffed and moved, whining softly every few steps before he would stop and sniff again. His posture was timid, almost nervous. It wasn't behavior I'd seen him exhibit before. He was bothered by the dead, and so far as I knew, quantum wolves usually weren't.

Lazarus traveled the stars with me and my crew. If you'd asked any of them, they would have said he was the longest-tenured crewmember as well. I wouldn't argue with them, either. Laz was probably my oldest and closest friend.

Lazarus was scary smart. All quantum wolves were, but Laz—who had inadvertently bonded with me after I'd rescued him as a pup—seemed to possess an intelligence almost on par with my own. Jaxian quantum wolves were also critically endangered and, until the body of one had shown up here, were believed to be found solely on the planet of Jaxia. The body of one way out here, on the very edge of civilization, had caused quite the uproar back on the planet. The game wardens had locked down the planet

on fears that someone might be using this as a distraction, and asked me to investigate instead.

“What caliber you think did this?” I asked Mike as I knelt down next to the body. Gently, I brushed back the silky smooth hair of the dead creature. It was definitely an adult male, since it no longer had the protective diamond coating which might have kept him alive. “Not a large round.”

“The wolf would have sensed the hunter if it were a close firing position, sir,” the big man said as he knelt down next to me. His eyes flickered across the body, taking in every minute detail. Like myself, Mike was augmented and enhanced with the latest bio-upgrades. However, Mike was built for brawling, not observation. Still, he had a sharp and capable mind. He kept the ship up in the air and running out in the deepest black. Not everyone could accomplish that feat. He coughed softly before continuing. “This was from a distance. Maybe something midsize but with a flat trajectory…no tumbling at that range. Two-seventy maybe?”

I nodded. “Looks that way. Non-propellant round, too. Railgun?”

“For a hunter?” Mike looked doubtful. “That’d require one hell of a power bank, sir.”

There were rifles out there which *could* accomplish the job. However, they were extremely rare and hard to find. In fact, in all my years as a bounty hunter, I’d only come across something that an individual could lug around and be able to accomplish something this heinous once before.

But that man was dead. I put him in the ground myself. Afterwards, I’d broken that damnable rifle down for scrap.

“Maybe,” I allowed. While I wasn’t a constable or detective of any kind, I could whistle the tune a bit. Years of tracking down and apprehending bounties taught me a thing or three. Glancing around at the environment, there was no obvious position that I could see which might have worked as a sniper’s nest. Far in the distance was a series of low-lying hills which led into a valley of sorts. It was the only elevated position for miles. “Somebody’s out here hunting a creature not of this world. And doing it where they could get caught, too. Either stupid or ballsy.”

“You thinking about those hills, sir?” Mike asked, following my gaze. I nodded.

“Good vantage point. As good a spot as any.”

“We were on patrol and found the body. Once we confirmed it, Clovis went and called it in,” the second local, Edi, said in a low, accented voice. It was the first time he’d spoken the entire time he’d been with us. My ears perked up at his words. Despite my previous assumption, this man wasn’t from here. Interesting that they would let an outsider work a nature preserve. Normally they were very stringent on these sort of things. My curiosity was piqued, but instead of pressing the man to sate it, I jerked my chin toward the distant hills.

“What’s over there?” I asked.

“Kill Devil Hills.”

Ominous name, given the circumstances.

“You think we’ll find more over there, sir?”

“Probably. Inspect the body first.”

“Goddamned poachers,” Mike muttered before blushing slightly. “Pardon my language, sir.”

There was nothing to apologize for. Mike had been working on his manners and politeness toward others since he’d come on board my crew. Neither Tara nor I knew why, precisely. Mike was a bit of an odd duck, but he was also an excellent engineer. I could deal with some weirdness in exchange for a smoothly running engine room.

“Tara, you getting all this?” I murmured to my pilot and Coderunner. Safely ensconced back on the *Sly Fox*, she had access to our comms and, thanks to a series of optical upgrades I’d had surgically implanted years before, I could transmit what I saw directly to the ship. Vice versa, she could transmit things I couldn’t see to me. It was convenient more often than not, and had saved my bacon a few times.

“Got it all, old man,” the teenager replied. I scowled and ignored the jibe. It was her way of showing that she cared. Or something. *“Want me to run a tox screen or anything?”*

“You can do that from the ship?”

“Maybe? Never actually tried it. You got your scanner on you?”

I patted my wrist. Attached to a leather bracer was a small relay transmitter, which was directly tied to the *Sly Fox*. During my solo days as a bounty hunter, having the ability to remote access the powerful shipboard computers had come in handy. When Tara had joined my crew, she’d seriously upgraded the systems and tweaked everything. Now, I could practically fly the ship across the star system remotely.

Coderunners were scary powerful humans who lived to hack into anything using their weird and not fully understood capabilities…even the annoying teenaged ones I happened to have in my employ.

Slowly, I brought my wrist to the site of the killing wound and waited. After a few moments I began to make a small, counterclockwise circle with the scanner. I wasn't sure precisely what Tara was searching for, or even how she wanted this done, but experience told me that unless she complained or told me to do something else, whatever I was doing was usually right.

"*Nothing on the tox screen,*" she reported in my ear. "*No residue of any kind. Sorry.*"

"It's fine, Tara. Thank you." I looked over at Mike. He, too, had linked comms with the *Sly Fox* and had heard everything. "I'm thinking…Moriz 270?"

"Or a Lenta 305," Mike countered as he knelt and started looking the body over as well. I shrugged.

"Either or. Someone is out here killing protected species with a railgun," I said. Mike was still new to the bounty-hunting game, and he had almost zero experience in dealing with alien life-forms after I'd rescued him off of a space station. So far as I knew, this was only the second time he'd ever set foot on a planet. It was time to see how much he'd learned while under my tutelage. "Tell me what you see."

Mike began a litany of what he noticed about the body of the quantum wolf. Every detail be pointed out caused my anger to grow slightly more each time. The fangs were gone. So were the claws. The meat had been left on the body. Mike's words were calm, dispassionate. However, while his voice remained carefully neutral, I could see the building rage in the tension of his shoulders and neck.

This wasn't the work of a desperate hunter but of a devil, one disguised as a man, using a noble creature for sport and cheap profit. It made my blood boil.

Quantum wolf fangs, in some cultures, were rumored to have mystical properties, able to cure everything from male-pattern baldness to erectile dysfunction. Out here in the Striderlands, on the very edge of humanity's reach, mysticism went hand in hand with science. The black market was booming as demand for such rarities skyrocketed, and the Royal Jaxian Game Wardens were on high alert for anyone who might try to slip down

onto Jaxia and try to poach one of the rarest and most exotic aliens in the known universe.

I'd been a deputized game warden for almost a year, ever since I'd helped break up an animal-smuggling ring on Jaxia with the help of my friend, Warden Orph Buffington. We hadn't heard a peep since and I'd assumed that the exotics smuggling ring had been well and truly busted.

I hated being wrong.

"What good's a man who doesn't care about these magnificent creatures?" Mike asked quietly. I looked at him for a moment before realizing he was right. Whoever had killed this quantum wolf was not someone who was concerned about consequences. This was not the work of a good man at all.

Lazarus whined piteously and sniffed the body. Unlike his dead brethren, his hair was stiff and reflective, the diamond-like skin beneath it providing him a level of protection not afforded to full-grown quantum wolves. Until they learned how to phase through objects, Jaxian quantum wolves were only protected by their impenetrable coats. The hairs were somehow shed when it learned to phase. Juveniles were still dangerous, though. I'd seen Laz in action enough to know that to underestimate a juvenile quantum wolf was begging for a quick and messy death.

"This the only one?" I asked as I glanced at the guides. They shared a look before the one I'd pegged as an off-worlder spoke up.

"There's two more near the hills. But…I need to warn you, *jefe*. One of them is going to make you mad."

Sighing, I gave the cold body of the quantum wolf a gentle pat on the head before standing up. While I knew he couldn't feel it here, I hoped the petting would find him somewhere in whatever afterlife there might be for such alien life. My pa had always believed that God could reach all creatures throughout the galaxy, no matter what manner of which they were birthed. I hoped he was right.

"Let's see the others."

"You sure?" Clovis asked in a slow, drawn-out breath, his drawl becoming more distinct the longer we were around him.

"I'm sure. I need to make certain."

"That they dead?"

"No," Edi said, looking at me with a curious expression on his face. He was no local yokel, no. His eyes had a familiar gaze of a man who'd

been out in the black for a long time, alone, with nobody but his own dark thoughts to keep him company on his journey. He shook his head. “He wants to see if they were killed by the same hunter.”

“How’ll you know?” Clovis asked.

“If it’s the same hunter, then the dead wolves will be missing the same things.”

As much as I hated being wrong, there were times when being right was so much worse.

The second body had been treated the same manner. The third, though, had been skinned as well as having claws and teeth removed. The third one had been the biggest we’d come across so far, nearly twice the size of Lazarus and easily three times as heavy.

It’d also been pregnant. Not far along, but enough to be noticeable. Female quantum wolves were larger than males by roughly one-third. Mike could barely contain his anger as he inspected the kill shot.

“Low-down, no good, worthless piece of shit…” he growled through gritted teeth. His jaw flexed and tensed as he worked his way through his anger. It was so palpable that he forgot to correct himself for his swearing. Which told me far more about Mike’s anger than anything else, really.

While Mike focused on the body, I was busy looking around at our surroundings. The hills we’d spotted earlier were much larger than I’d originally thought, and the crevasses within cast long shadows which could hide anything from a personal vehicle to a heavily armed squadron of mechanized infantry. They also weren’t exactly lined up as they should. I mentioned this to the local, but Clovis was of little help. However, Edi seemed to be a font of useful information.

“Maybe three thousand years ago, a comet hit somewhere in the north,” he explained as Clovis went over to assist Mike. Or maybe it was to give us space, since he knew very little about the local history in spite of it being his home world. “This planet used to be a ball of ice almost down to the equator. When the comet hit, it caused flash flooding so severe and abrupt that it carved out these ravines in weeks and months instead of decades. Then the water evaporated or, if you ever go up north, refroze.”

“Were you in the Gasparan Explorers?” I asked, curious. He nodded and suddenly a lot of little things I’d noticed about Edi fell into place.

“Retired.” Edi’s voice was quiet. I nodded respectfully.

The Gasparan Explorers were…well, the easiest way to describe them is that they're a dedicated bunch of psychotic space explorers with absolutely no fear. Men and women who willingly fling themselves out into space and land on any and all worlds which might be colonized or terraformed at a later time. When sensors and drones weren't enough to detect the microbic diseases which would only interact with humanity on the planet, the Explorers would be the ones who would go down to the planet and *see* if they died. If they didn't, congratulations. They'd found another hospitable planet. If they died, though?

Oh well, moving on.

Insane.

Every single one of them.

But a dedicated bunch.

That still didn't explain why an Explorer, even a retired one, was out here on Ortega VI, though.

"Can I ask why you're out here?"

"You can ask," he replied with a shrug. "Doesn't mean I'll answer."

There were dozens of other questions I wanted to ask, but there was no point in pressuring him for more. Every one of these explorers I'd come across in my many years as a bounty hunter had proven to be tight-lipped about everything. While not necessarily secretive, they were trained to not volunteer information. They were notoriously uncooperative with law enforcement, or pretty much any authoritative figure outside of their chain of command. This man seemed no different than the rest of them.

"How long have you worked for the preserve?" I asked him instead.

"None of us work for it," Edi said. "We're volunteers. Every one of us. Protecting this area isn't a job, but a calling."

A calling. I'd heard Warden Buffington call his job with the game wardens something similar. Hell, even bounty hunting is more than just a job. But unlike the people who try and protect the alien life which lived out here—or in the case of Warden Buffington, worked as a Jaxian Royal Game Warden—a bounty hunter got paid…and paid *well*.

Credits weren't the only thing to making a good life, but it sure as hell helped grease the skids when times were troubled. However, there was some truth to the idea that a calling was worth more than a life filled with credits. Uncomfortable truths.

Coughing, I looked back at a particularly large crevasse in the hillside. It was dark but something told me we were being watched. Tracked. The fine hairs on the back of my neck prickled. A breeze came through the area, kicking up fine red sand and creating a mist-like appearance. However, the sand did not enter the dark crevasse. A protected and sheltered spot, one where someone could watch us without being seen easily. I nudged Edi and nodded my head toward the narrow valley. His eyes scanned the darkness before turning back to mine.

"*Si*. We're being tracked." He kept his voice low, just in case.

"Any thoughts?"

"Not a human," he murmured. "Not the poacher."

"You sure?"

"Poacher would have shot us already. This is *hunting* us." My hand started to drop to my holstered pistol but stopped when Edi shook his head negatively. His voice, barely above a whisper, carried across to Mike and Clovis. "We're in a group. It's waiting for us to split up before it picks us off one by one."

"Another quantum wolf?" Mike asked, standing. He glanced down at the dead female wolf and his frown deepened. "Doesn't feel right, shooting one that's just defending its turf. Especially after seeing…this."

"Let's just return to the vehicle as a group," Clovis suggested.

It wasn't a bad idea. However, I hadn't become the most famous bounty hunter in the universe simply by not taking any risks. Instead of following the others to the off-road vehicle, I angled closer to the dark valley. I didn't take a direct path, though. That would have been obvious. Walking at an oblique approach, I tried to make it seem as though my path were going to take it past the shadowy corridor. Lazarus whined but followed, his bloodred eyes darting back to the crevasse frequently.

"Quintus! What the hells are you doing?" Tara hissed in my ear.

"Just checking something out," I told her. "It'll be okay."

"I'm picking up strange energy readings near you. Something big is __"

I never heard her next words as something solid struck Lazarus flush in the side. The juvenile quantum wolf yelped painfully and wobbled on his feet for a second before falling down.

"Laz!" I shouted as a loud ripping sound filled the air around us. My hindbrain screamed "gunshot," except it was flatter, louder, different

somehow. I'd experienced lots of gunfire throughout my life, and while similar, this wasn't quite right.

"Picked up an energy surge about twelve hundred yards to your south!" Tara screamed in my ear. *"That's an energy signature of a railgun! Who got hit?!"*

"Laz!" He'd clearly been hit. Holding him down, I quickly checked to see if there were any visible signs of injury. I couldn't see any sign of blood coming from him. He'd sure been walloped, though. Which was… unexpected. I knew the diamond coat of his was tough, but I didn't know it was railgun tough. My racing heart began to slow down as I realized he was probably going to be fine.

"Got a bead on the bastard that shot him! Preparing to lift and intercept—"

"No, Tara. Stay on the ground," I commanded. "The *Sly Fox* is tough but I don't want to fly into the black with a hole in the hull caused by a railgun."

"Oh. Right."

Bless the girl. She was motivated as hell, brilliantly smart, and capable of things that would give anyone nightmares if they dwelt on them long enough. But it was times like this that I was reminded just how young she really was.

Lazarus was already struggling to his feet. The diamond coating of a juvenile quantum wolf was *tough*, but even he had to be hurting. Nobody just shrugged off a railgun shot without repercussions, no matter how small the caliber. I pointed his way and yelled at Mike.

"Keep Laz down!"

Mike looked at me in confusion for a moment before understanding appeared on his face. He nodded once and gently pushed Lazarus back down. The quantum wolf wasn't happy about this and vocally let his opinion be known, but he didn't bite Mike or anything violent. In fact, he almost looked relieved. Not sure if I was getting better at reading his facial expressions or just imagining it. Either way, I'd take the win.

"Cover me!" I shouted to nobody in particular and *moved*.

During my wild and misspent youth, I'd traveled quite a bit and discovered things which would have made an Explorer jealous. On an almost forgotten colony world, I'd had certain upgrades put into my body.

These made my body more resilient, stronger, and most importantly, able to withstand speeds which would destroy muscles and bones on anyone else.

It'd taken years of practice to control it, but in times like now the enhancements were worth every single credit I'd put into them.

A second shot rang out but it didn't make the same ripping sound that the first one had. My ears tagged it as a shot from Mike's pistol, a heavily customized piece he'd been working on. This was the first time I'd ever heard him fire a shot in anger. A small part of me was curious to see what his reaction would be after. The instinctive side, the violent part of me I kept pushed down, was more interested in *what* he was shooting at.

"Target!" Mike cried out and continued firing. "One hundred yards! In the valley!"

I glanced and something *enormous* was in the shadowy chasm. The dust being kicked up by the hazy breeze obscured even the sensors in the helmet, making it difficult to get a good view of the thing. Whatever it was, though, it definitely was not human.

The figure standing on the ridge above the cut in the hill, however, was.

"Got him!" I shouted and sprinted toward the base of the hills, being certain to avoid whatever I might have seen in the chasm. The figure atop the crevasse turned and disappeared from view. The odds were that he had disappeared into the winding, narrow confines of the canyons which ran throughout the Kill Devil Hills. Escaping to higher elevation might have made sense to the normal person. For a hunter of this individual poacher's caliber, though? Hunting in dangerous grounds were their calling. They would want the thrill of the chase more than simple survival.

At least, I was hoping this was the case. Otherwise I was going to look like a damn fool.

Or die as one.

"Boss, wait!" Mike called out, but I was already in the darkened crevasse.

Visibility was limited in the narrow gap. I'd expected as much, especially with the twisting turns and odd angles within. The solid-stone valley walls on either side of me were cramped and tight, creating echoes with every step. However, I could make out someone else's footsteps ahead of me. I smiled grimly. He'd done precisely as I'd thought and jumped down into the narrow valleys.

Deeper into the ravines I went. Almost everything was in shadow save for thin beams of sunlight cutting through. Sometimes I could hear the poacher ahead of me. Other times, it was instinct that continued to drive me forward. But the poacher continued to remain just out of my reach, just ahead of me. But I was gaining. I knew it. Soon, I saw a shade of color. It was identical to the sands without. Then it became every corner. A flash of clothing, nothing more. No face, but I didn't care. It was enough to keep me moving forward in pursuit, focused like a laser on catching the poach—

"Oh. Oh *shit*."

My pa always said that while I didn't screw up often, when I did, it was usually of epic proportions.

Something hard cracked into the temple of my helmet. Staggering, I struggled to turn around and see what had hit me. A second blow followed, and I felt the telltale sign that my helmet had been well and truly broken. Falling to my knees, a third and final blow abruptly knocked me out cold.

It was a strange hissing noise that brought me back from the edge of dark dreams and to consciousness. For a moment I lay there, wondering what had happened and why my dreams were of looming darkness of late. Dreams aside, ending up on a hard, sandy floor was not how I envisioned my day going. Or night. I had no idea how long I'd been unconscious, or even *why*.

As I opened my eyes, I was well aware of two things.

First, someone had smacked me in the side of my head, hard enough to kill an unenhanced man. There was warm, sticky blood clinging to my face, evidence that I hadn't been unconscious for too long. Dirt and sand also stuck to my cheek where the blood had run. It probably looked like a macabre death mask or something.

Secondly, my helmet was gone, and yet I was breathing easily. It's a good thing I almost never panic. A situation like this, it would have been easy to lose my cool. Years of experience had taught me to panic later, but stay calm in the now.

The *now* was very dark. Each passing moment, though, brought my eyes more into focus and they adjusted rapidly. Still, light would have been welcome. Being knocked unconscious and dragged into a dark cave only to be eaten later was not how I wanted to die. Nor was it close to how I'd envisioned going out.

I’d been tied and bound but still alive. A small victory there.

Taking a moment to gather my wits, I closed my eyes and focused on my other senses. The air felt tangy and wet, which was an odd contrast to the arid desert wilderness that was Ortega VI. There were very few places one could describe on the world as “wet,” and none of them were anywhere near our location.

Assuming whoever knocked me out hadn’t dragged me off somewhere else.

Other than the strange, consistent hissing which I’d woken up to, I could hear nothing. No wind howling, no voices talking in hearing range. The settlements on Ortega VI tended to be on the smaller side anyway, so I hadn’t expected to hear the bustling sounds of a metropolis. However, the complete and utter lack of anything suggested I was either underground in the hills we’d been investigating, or somewhere very similar.

The sand beneath me still felt like what I’d been tromping around in outside, save for being finer. What the violent winds of Ortega VI kicked up was gritty, sharp, and could wear down an unprotected structure in months. In here it was delicate almost. The contrast was definitely noticeable.

“You’re famous, you know,” a voice said from somewhere out in the darkness. Not going to lie, my heart jumped into my throat a little at the sudden sound. Footsteps came closer, then a light flickered on. It was bright and cast deep shadows around the space I was in.

“I get that a lot,” I muttered as someone helped me sit up in the sand. My throat felt raw, as if I’d been screaming for a long period of time. Or breathing in fine-grit sand. The light wasn’t as bright as I’d initially thought once my eyes had adjusted to it, and didn’t offer much as I peered around the cavern. My cell was definitely a cave, which I’d suspected, but there was a clear, unguarded entrance behind my captor. Unsurprising, given the circumstances. Without assistance of the oxygen in the helmet or the protective screen on my face, traversing the labyrinth I’d been lured into would be next to impossible.

The worst part of it? I’d made a newbie mistake, something only bounty hunters who hadn’t earned their spurs yet would fall for.

“Quintus Fox…I didn’t know you worked as a preserve ranger in your spare time,” the stranger continued, apparently unconcerned about me seeing his face. The problem was, the longer I looked at him, the more plain

his features became. I was either suffering from a slight concussion or he was simply unmemorable.

I'd run across people like that before in my many years as a bounty hunter. It wasn't magical or technological, no. Some people just had faces you forgot the moment they were out of sight. Unless you were close friends with them, they were just forgettable people. The brain didn't print them into your memory, and when asked later to describe them, the best one can come up with was "I don't know…kind of boring?"

In the bounty-hunting business, we hated those types of bounties.

"I do a lot of things in my spare time, when I get the chance," I replied, not sure what else to say. He wasn't looking to beat me, or torture me. The man wasn't even gloating that he'd managed to ambush and detain the most famous bounty hunter in the universe. That in itself was more than a little terrifying.

"It's good to see that little knock to the head didn't dampen your legendary banter," the man said. I could see him clearly now, and my heart sank. His vest was adorned with random bits of past hunts, and solid tungsten rounds which would only work on a railgun were slid into a bandolier across his chest. His trousers had built-in kneepads, which made hunting more comfortable out in the rough environment. Around his throat was a scarf designed to filter out dust, but he had no visible breathing apparatus that I could see. He had the look of someone who squinted often, either from peering through a rifle scope or from staring at too many sunsets. Possibly both. Without a doubt, this was the poacher who'd killed the quantum wolves. The only thing that was missing was the rifle itself… which I figured he was keeping somewhere close by. He chuckled softly before continuing. "I'd introduce myself, but given your reputation, I'd rather you not have my name…just in case."

"That's unfair. You know me."

"True…but then, everyone knows Quintus Fox. Or at least, they've heard of you."

Ah, fame. Such a fickle mistress. Some heard the name Quintus Fox and felt fear. Others, a challenge.

And then there were assholes like this guy…

"Nice to meet a fan."

"Oh, I'm a *huge* fan, Quintus. One of your biggest, in fact. So you can imagine my surprise at seeing you out here in the middle of nowhere acting

as though you were some sort of park ranger."

"Well…when it comes to the galaxy's apex predator and poaching, I tend to get interested when asked."

"You think these *creatures* are apex predators?" The hunter scoffed at me. He was a hard man, one who'd spent many days and nights out in the wilderness alone, just him and the wild. "You tamed one, I hear. Royal Game Wardens practically keep them as pets. Apex predators? Please."

I'd seen men like him before, a long time ago. They were big-game hunters, oftentimes forgetting their own humanity while out in the wild. Men like him thought, acted, and behaved just like the prey they hunted. Hunting the largest and most dangerous predators known—and unknown—to man.

He was dangerous. But then, so was I.

"They are. I've seen them hunt. I'm seen them *kill*." I stressed the last word. The worry, the uncertainty of what was out there? I needed him to focus on that. It would give me more time to figure out how to get out of these bindings.

"Quantum wolves…do you know how they can phase? The way their blood works?" he asked, clearly ignoring what I was offering. Had to hand it to him. He was singularly focused on the task…whatever that may be.

"Something to do with quarks in their blood?" I shrugged. It was difficult to pull the gesture off but I managed a passable facsimile. "Or was it muons? I've heard lots of theories. None have been proven."

"Oh, I could care less about quarks and muons in their blood. No, I'm far more—"

"Couldn't," I corrected him.

"Huh?" He looked perturbed at the interruption. Oh well. When my only tool in the belt was pedantry, I would use it.

"You said you could care less. That means you have the capability to care less. The proper verbiage is *couldn't* care less."

He stared at me silently for many moments before he finally blew out a breath.

"How nobody has managed to kill your smart-ass yet…"

"I'm just trying to be helpful."

"…goddamned annoying little shit…"

"Look, I'm sorry. Please, what could you care less about?"

"…should just slit your throat now and get it over with…" he continued to grumble. I waited until he ran out of steam before speaking again.

"What is so important about quantum wolf blood?"

He sighed and rubbed his face with his hand. *Perfect*. He was growing frustrated. The poacher wasn't nearly as in control as he wished. This was a good thing…and potentially bad. If he lost his cool, he'd probably just shoot me before any rescue could come. However, if I could figure out his endgame, I might be able to walk away without so much as a bullet wound.

"The deaths of the creatures was regrettable."

"You took their fangs and claws. You also killed a female that was carrying pups. On Jaxia, that means you get the noose," I told him. "And not a quick jerk of the rope, either. Strangulation. Long, slow, and suffering. You're regretting nothing."

"True. I'll earn a pretty credit for those claws alone. And that coat? Some rich bastard is going to pay me a small fortune so they can make it into a hat. All that for credits?" He coughed and knelt down next to me. Pressing a thumb against my forehead, he grinned. "Think, Quintus. *Think*. Use that brain of yours. I don't care about the credits at all."

"You're not hunting the quantum wolves. Not really."

"Very good." He smiled patronizingly. "You're pretty quick. I've heard a lot about you, Quintus. Legendary bounty hunter. War hero. Other… rumors as well. Some even call you a myth. Others say it's a group of people using the same name, to sow fear across the Striderlands, existing in nothing but the black darkness of eternal vacuum. You, your kind, are nothing but opportunistic beasts. Like me and my kind. Living with the beasts, you either are the hunter, or become the hunted. This universe is a cruel place for anyone pretending otherwise. There is rot in the root, and people like you, deniers of what humanity is, are the seed of it. There is nothing out there but struggle, and death. Beasts, nothing more."

"You're wrong. Like a seed growing through soil, so does humanity as we struggle through darkness, reaching upwards for the light we know to be there but cannot yet see. We strive to be *more* than rutting beasts in the mud." I spat on the ground at the man's feet. There was nothing but disdain for him in my words. I couldn't help it. He was the very face of the argument that humanity should never have left the Sol system way back when. Everything he stood for was simply *wrong*. "What you're doing is

cruel. Cruel and unnecessary. Those wolves didn't belong here, and you brought and hunted…no, *killed* them here because nobody was around to protect them. Because you are a cruel, petty man who simply wanted to kill for sport."

"What I do is sporting, not cruelty." The poacher waggled his finger my way. He sounded disturbingly pleased by my acknowledgment somehow. "You really should read a book once in a while, Fox. If you did, you might know the difference between the words. But the accusation of pettiness? Guilty as charged, bounty hunter. What are you going to do about it? Cry to a judge? Pah. 'The bad man was petty and mean!' *Please*. Although you may have a case for illegal hunting. Hmm…well, thank you, Quintus. If you thought you had any chance of walking out of this valley alive, that just went right out the proverbial airlock. But that's my aforementioned petty side rearing its head once more."

The bonds were tight and painful on my wrists. He'd also tied a secondary strap on my biceps when he'd bound my hands behind my back, which made any sort of movement difficult. Whoever he was, this was not the man's first rodeo when it came to detaining prisoners. It made me wonder just what else he'd "hunted" over the years.

I did have one ace up the sleeve, though. The link to the *Sly Fox*. Unless these hills were shielded or lined with certain metals that would block or disrupt the link, Tara should have no issues whatsoever with tracking me down and rescuing me. Between her, Mike, and Lazarus—as well as my newfound friends in town—they should be able to deal with this poacher.

Of course, he had been able to take me down without anyone noticing…and she hadn't said anything to me yet.

My head was foggy but I knew he had taken me down without anyone else around. I'd run into the narrow confines of the crevasse because I was a damned fool who was angry that this bastard had shot Lazarus. My crew undoubtedly had no idea where I was, but I knew them. They wouldn't stop until they found me.

While I was trying to shake the cobwebs from my head, the mysterious big-game hunter knelt down beside me and prodded my shoulder. He whistled softly.

"I'd heard you had some upgrades, but damn." He prodded me again. "Musculature density increase? Why? There's only so much strength you

can augment before you break bones…unless it wasn't strength you were going for. Hmm. Aha! Speed. You wanted your muscles to be able to endure quicker movements without suffering from microtears. I bet you did the same to your ligaments as well. Makes sense. No point in having enhanced muscles for speed when your ligaments can't take the strain."

This man was far too intelligent. He needed to die.

"Why?" I asked him, putting my murderous impulses aside momentarily. "Why bring the wolves here, just to kill them? Hunting them on Jaxia would have been more of a challenge for some self-proclaimed big-game hunter. Here? There's no reason to hunt them here."

"Tell me, Quintus. When you're hunting big game, how do you lure them in close?"

"Bait…?" I didn't like where he was going with this.

"Very good!" His smile was even more patronizing now. I really wanted to smack the smug off of his face. Unfortunately, my bonds kept me in place. "Now, can you figure out where this is going?"

I did. As horrifying as the idea was, now that he'd drawn the outline for me, it was easy to see the picture the man was trying to paint. He was using the quantum wolves as bait for something bigger, more dangerous. An apex predator of the likes that makes Lazarus look completely harmless.

But what in the universe was more dangerous than a Jaxian quantum wolf?

"Ahhh…" He breathed out the word. It sounded more like a satisfied sigh than anything else. "There's the keen intelligence I've heard so much about. You've figured it out. I'm using the quantum wolves to lure something bigger, more dangerous to me. I've hunted the wolves. They're not very dangerous or difficult at all to deal with. They don't understand the range our weapons have. They think they are safe as long as something isn't close. But they have weaknesses, vulnerabilities. Not quite the apex predator everyone thinks they are. The alien creature I hunt now, on this shithole of a planet? I have seen it. You have too, Quintus. It's stained your very soul when it looked into your eyes."

The looming shadow I'd seen earlier came to mind. There'd been no definitive form to it, merely shapeless mass. But throughout the known universe, there was only one creature we'd discovered that could be more dangerous than a quantum wolf. A prize so great and worth the bragging rights for a trophy hunter to throw away their future freedom for. Out here

in the Striderlands, it was the everyman's walking nightmare—the star demon.

If there was an *aich'kandida* out here on this desolate world, then we were going to die.

I'd never seen one in person, but I had seen images purported to be star demons. Yes, they were admittedly not the greatest, but it was clear that the alien in the image was not digitally created or touched up in any way. Was it really a star demon, though, or someone in a suit? Nobody could say with absolute certainty, though scientists had their opinions.

According to them, star demons were purely solitary creatures, reportedly standing over fifteen feet tall and walking on two legs, like us. They were almost as smart as we are, according to the scientists. The aliens sported long claws and were heavily muscled. Eyewitnesses said they were bluish-green in color and had a strange, rising crest on their heads. They also had mouths straight out of a horror movie, with fangs to boot.

Star demons were the sort of alien monsters which drove settlers off of habitable worlds. Even worlds as hardscrabble as this one.

"You're insane!" I hissed angrily. "A star demon out here will slaughter anyone who comes near it!"

"Which is why I captured you," the poacher commented. "The *aich'kandida* was drawn to these hills by the blood of the quantum wolves. Now you will be the one to flush it out, and I will get my trophy."

Me? I scoffed. "You're not as clever as you think you are. There's no way a star demon is going to bypass you to come after me."

"*Au contraire*, Quintus. You haven't really thought all this through yet. You have the blood of the quantum wolf on you. Plus, you have the scent of a living one. A star demon will most assuredly pass me up to investigate why a human smells like its favorite prey."

Looking down, I saw with horrifying clarity just what the bastard had planned. There was sticky blood smeared all over my chest and arms, and he'd attached quantum wolf claws around my neck. With my eyes finally adjusted to the dim lighting, I could tell that the blood I'd felt on my head wasn't actually mine, either.

He grabbed me by the arm and hoisted me to my feet. Patting me gently on the arm, his voice almost sounded sincere for a moment.

"I wish I could do things differently, but…" He shrugged and half-dragged me to the entrance of the cave. The air here was definitely thinner

but was still breathable. The sand in the air wasn't too bad, either. It would grow worse, though. Without my helmet and breathing apparatus, I had no idea how long I'd make it before I started suffering from oxygen sickness. Survival was still possible, though. I just needed to be smart about this.

The poacher gave me another shove. "Be a good little bait now and run along. Try to stay awake long enough for the star demon to find you."

"Prick."

"Eh, been called worse," the man said with a shrug. "Now go on and *git*."

With another rough shove, I was forced out into a narrow chasm. The wind here was sharper, cutting into my exposed face and neck. Shielding my eyes, I turned to look back at the cave's entrance. I blinked, surprised. Where I'd expected to see a cave entrance was nothing but another part of the tall cavern wall. Looking around, I tried to find the cave's entrance. It was nowhere to be found. Frowning, I covered my mouth with my sleeve as another cut of wind whipped through the narrow confines, sand whirling about madly.

I had no idea where to go. Oxygen was at a premium since apoxia would become a threat in the not-too-distant future. That, and I needed to find a way out. I clicked for comms to the *Sly Fox* but there was no response. Glancing up, I saw that narrow bands of a silvery substance lined the steep walls. Since my comms to Tara and the ship were blocked, I had to assume they were some sort of heavy metal impeding the transmission.

There was no time to ruminate on this, though. Pa always said that a still target was a dead one. I needed to keep moving in case the poacher's threat was true and I was the bait to lure the star demon out. Unfortunately, the winding chasm was just as bad, if not worse, than my first attempt when I'd been in pursuit of Laz's would-be killer.

While it wasn't quite a walk, my pace wasn't precisely slow, either. The need to keep moving away from the poacher, to try and find a way out of the labyrinthian chasms before the supposed star demon caught up to me, burned in the back of my mind.

Laz.…I knew he was okay, but I was still worried about him. If the poacher was right and there really was an *aich'kandida* around, and his theory that it was drawn to a wounded quantum wolf, Lazarus would be an attractive target for it. Of the two of us, I would prefer that it came after me.

Which, in hindsight, was precisely what the poacher was hoping for. I had to give the bastard his due. He knew his quarry. He knew *me*.

The air was thin, but I made decent progress as I tried to find my way out of the labyrinthian canyons. When I'd first looked at the hills earlier, they hadn't seemed so run-through with narrow chasms and crevasses. The entire area was riddled with them, making any sort of progress painstakingly slow.

My footsteps were even, my heart rate low. If I pushed, hurried in any way, my heart would start pumping blood through my system, which would create a demand for more red blood cells. In the thin atmosphere of Ortega VI, this meant I would start to suffer from oxygen sickness soon enough. Back on Earth it'd been called "altitude sickness," but way out here in the Striderlands, apoxia was a better name for it.

Faintly I could hear something above me. However, every time I looked up, I could see nothing. After a few instances of this I chalked it up to the hunter following my steps from above, using the higher cliffs and level ground to track me as I wound my way through the chasms. It was a viable hunting trick, though it irritated me to no end that he was using it on me.

Focus. My anger could lead to apoxia. I had to remain calm and focus on my breathing. Slow and steady. Nothing exciting, nothing strenuous. Just an average walk through seemingly endless chasms and ravines while potentially being hunted by a star demon while bound and covered in quantum wolf blood.

No pressure.

Unfortunately, walking still can make the heart rate increase. Even a nominal rise caused my muscles to start to cramp up as the demand for oxygen grew. Slowing my pace, I kept my head down and stopped looking for telltale signs of where I was going. The only trick now was to keep moving, stay ahead of the star demon—if it even existed.

Apoxia does strange things to the mind. It can affect the mood, the personality of the individual. For me, it gave me a skull-splitting headache. Thanks to my enhanced upgrades, my body needed more oxygen than most. It didn't take long for me to be regretting a few of the more intrusive upgrades.

My vision doubled. Everything was blurry. Blanching, I slowed my pace. While I'd been lost in thought, my pace had increased. My body was

reminding me this was a foolish decision. I needed to rub my eyes but my bindings were too tight. Struggling, I managed to get my cheek with a shoulder. My eyes still burned and itched.

I heard another noise up ahead of me. The sand and double vision was affecting me, but even that couldn't stop me from making out a familiar sight. The telltale form of a quantum wolf stood in front of me, blocking my path. I smiled. *Lazarus*. He'd found me. I whistled softly and patted my hip for him to come.

He didn't budge. Instead, he lifted his nose into the air and let out a strange bark, one I'd never heard from him before. It was deep, guttural, and primal. The sound made the tiny hairs on the back of my neck to stand on end. This was not a friendly sound, no. My vision cleared a little and I saw the wolf up ahead, heavy, massive, with a head that came up to my shoulder. This was a full-grown Jaxian quantum wolf, not a juvenile.

Not Lazarus.

Well…*shit.*

This was probably not going to end well for me.

Like a fool, I began to back away quickly. The wolf growled again and started padding toward me. My heart leapt into my throat. With my arms still bound thanks to the hunter, I wouldn't even begin to protect myself should that large wolf attack.

Stumbling, I was barely able to keep my footing as I walked as fast as I could back the way I came. The only problem was, I didn't remember the path. I'd been so focused on putting one foot down in front of the other that I'd stupidly forgotten to mark the walls or leave some other sign indicating I'd passed by here already. Nearly in a blind panic, I barged forward, oxygen all but forgotten as a strong desire to not be eaten overwhelmed me.

My headache grew worse. As I mentioned before, it was one of the many symptoms associated with apoxia. Every spacer knew this. Headaches were often a sign that the air recyclers on your ship were failing. Usually, though, it was almost too late at that point. My heart was racing from both low oxygen and exertion. The blow to my head from earlier probably wasn't helping either.

Finally, after what felt like forever but was probably closer to five minutes, I sat down on a large stone in one of the many chasms within the labyrinth. Glancing back at my path, I could see that the quantum wolf had

followed, probably phasing through the stone walls easily while tracking me. It wasn't fair.

Then Lazarus was there. Now I knew I was losing my mind. Somehow the pup had tracked me down within the maze—to help? Maybe. He could also have been there to kill me, like the massive quantum wolf pursuing me was trying to. I assumed this, at least.

The bigger quantum wolf growled something at Laz, who whined in response. In my delusional state, I giggled as the varying growls and short, chuffing barks sounded like an actual conversation. My confused mind began to fill in the gaps as I leaned back against the large boulder.

"*My human is not a danger.*" That was Laz. He seemed to be trying to reason with the bigger, more dangerous wolf. His whines made it pretty easy to imagine what he was saying. After all, he'd begged enough treats from us on the ship without a word being spoken.

"*The fleshy one is covered in our blood. It has fangs and claws.*"

"*He is harmless. Clumsy. No more than a child himself. He has raised me since I was a pup. He is safe and not responsible for this.*" I would have been insulted had my mind been whole. Apoxia makes things funnier than they truly are. Or maybe it dulled the pain of words imagined? It was difficult to say. Nothing was making sense at the moment.

"*He wears our dead. He must be punished.*"

"*My human is not to blame*."

"*Says you*."

"*Yes. Say I. He did not do this.*"

"*He wears her blood*."

"*A trick. I swear it.*"

I closed my eyes and leaned my head back. It was a struggle not to laugh or cry at their conversation. Of course, the very real possibility of the big one eating my face lingered, but the low oxygen made me not care. Instead of worrying about death by fang, I focused instead on trying to control my breathing, allowing my body to process more oxygen in this thin atmosphere without causing any lasting damage to my brain.

Considering I was imagining conversation between two Jaxian quantum wolves, though, it was probable that some damage had already occurred.

Footsteps echoed loudly in the narrow chasm. I opened my eyes and tears began leaking as sand irritated them. The wind had kicked up as I

dozed, and a fine layer of sand covered me. I'd been unconscious for a few moments at least, possibly longer. There was no sign of either quantum wolf. Glancing down, I saw that the blood the poacher had smeared on me was dried and crusty. The teeth and claws that had adorned my vest and hung around my neck were missing. My hands and arms were still bound, though.

As the seconds passed, my vision grew better. The low-grade pressure in my head had retreated some. It was still there, but the pain lessened. I no longer felt as though I'd gone on a three-day bender. Thankfully, too. If the quantum wolf decided to ignore Lazarus—if any of what I'd seen and heard been real at all—then I was going to need my wits about me.

"Hello?" I croaked. Talking hurt. But if it was the poacher, I wanted to let him know that his plan to lure out the star demon, if it even existed, had failed.

It wasn't the poacher. Nor was it the alleged star demon. It was Lazarus, with Edi right behind him, the quantum wolf walking with a limp but otherwise looking no worse for wear. In Edi's hand was a spare mask and small oxygen rebreather.

"You came back. Good boy."

"Save your wind, *hombre*," Edi murmured as he knelt down and cut my bonds with a knife he produced from belt sheath. He was careful with my hands, for which I was grateful, then cut the one pinning my arms to my sides. I flexed my fingers and rolled my wrists as soon as they were free. They tingled and burned as blood began to flow back into them fully. He sheathed his knife and put the oxygen mask on my face. "Breathe deep but slow. Try not to talk until the headache is gone."

A small part of me wondered how he knew I had a headache before remembering precisely what his job sometimes entailed as a preserve ranger. He'd probably seen this before with tourists who paid to visit the wild wastelands of Ortega VI. Anyone who'd pay to come out to this place was an idiot.

As my mind cleared and the headache dissipated, I was able to get a better look at my surroundings. I'd somehow found my way into a box canyon, the only way out the way I'd stumbled in. It was a perfect ambush spot. However, there was no sign of either the poacher or the supposed star demon.

“How’d you know where to find me?” I asked, though I suspected I already knew.

“Your quantum wolf is very loyal. You chased that shooter, and then your girl back on your ship commed in and told everyone that she lost you,” Edi explained as he helped me to my feet. My head swam a little but I was able to keep upright. Wincing, I rubbed my chaffed wrists as he continued. “These hills are lined with metals. Not enough for a serious mining company to come and take a look at, but enough to make communications out here bad. You get me, *camarada*?”

I nodded. “Interference.”

“*Si*. Let’s get out of here before that *maluco* poacher comes back.”

Without Edi’s marks on the walls as we passed, I doubted I could have ever found my way out of the maze. The Kill Devil Hills sure seemed to want to live up to their name, though I wasn’t quite sure who the devil was.

Well, that wasn’t true. The man who’d slaughtered quantum wolves in the hope of drawing out a more dangerous predator was probably as close to a living devil as I’d ever meet, hopefully. Though the way my luck had been going lately…

Edi paused at one T-cross section and frowned. Glancing around, I couldn’t see any of the telltale markings we’d been following since he found me. Lazarus raised his nose into the air and sniffed once before he limped toward the end of the narrow ravine.

I watched him, concerned. The pup had taken a railgun round, after all. The fact that he was even walking was impressive as hell. As soon as we were safely on board the *Sly Fox* and out of this cursed system, we were headed to Jaxia to see if the Royal Game Wardens there were veterinarians of sorts. Surely someone on the planet had assisted a quantum wolf before.

“Going somewhere?” an all too familiar voice called out from my left. Sighing, I slowly turned to face the man who had become my personal devil in an inordinately short amount of time.

“Leaving,” I said as calmly as I could. Being able to breathe lent me a little more courage than I might have had previously. After all, the man was carrying his railgun and the barrel was pointed directly my way.

A small part of my mind thought that Mike would be pleased. The poacher was carrying the Lenta 305, as my engineer had suggested. Not that I was probably going to get to share this with him.

“Your star demon isn’t coming,” I told him. Edi looked sharply my way at that. I gave the diminutive retired Explorer an apologetic shrug. “Forgot to mention what our pal over there was hunting, and why he was using quantum wolves as bait.”

Edi let out a string of curses that were better left untranslated, though I caught a few about the poacher’s mother. Once he wound down from his expletives, the would-be hunter continued to speak.

“Got a mouth on you. Might want to get right with God. I told you, Quintus. You’re not walking out of this.”

“Should I crawl?” I asked rhetorically. What could I say? Apoxia brings out the snark in me.

The railgun was raised and the sleek, unusual barrel was pointed directly at my chest. Apparently the man was not too impressed with my sassiness. My humor was wasted on the young, it seemed. Death, however, loomed closer than it had in years. There was no way I could dodge the projectile from the railgun, not at this range. A cruel smile twisted the lips of the poacher.

“Any last words, bounty hunter?”

Neither Edi nor I dared twitch. Laz, thankfully, was around the corner and out of sight. Unfortunately, there was nowhere for us to go. Even if that railgun took a few seconds to recharge, the hydrostatic shockwave produced by the weapon, in such narrow confines, would kill whoever the projectile didn’t obliterate.

In the dark recess from where the poacher had been hiding, a large shadow moved. I blinked in shock and horror as my mind tried to absorb precisely what I was seeing. The shadow took form and suddenly I was staring at a dreaded star demon.

The creature was practically covered with corded muscle beneath its strange, reptilian-like blue skin. Its head, long tendrils hanging from the top of it, almost didn’t seem to fit its body as it sat atop a thick, slightly exaggerated neck. Claws, long, thick, and sharp, nearly dragged in the soft red sand as it silently approached the poacher from behind. It made not a sound until it was right behind him.

Click click-click click.

The poacher twitched at the sound, then muttered, “Aw, shit.”

What happened next was somewhat of a blur. The star demon moved faster than anything I’d ever seen, so quick that even my enhanced ocular

implants missed it. The poacher tried to turn and bring the railgun to bear, but he was hoisted ten feet off the ground with an ease that I might have found terrifying had I the chance to really think about it.

Click-click click.

It was one of the most frightening, soul-clenching sounds I'd ever heard in my life. Even the casual twisting of the poacher's neck and subsequent *crunch* couldn't hold a candle to the unworldly clicking sound. The star demon dropped the body. For a brief moment I wondered if it would come after us. It must not have viewed us as a threat. Or perhaps it'd killed the one it wanted and had no use for us—I'll never know. The *aich'kandida* slipped back into the dark crevasse, vanishing without another sound. It had happened so quickly that if not for the shattered body of the poacher lying before me, I wouldn't have believed what I'd just seen.

Breathing through the oxygen mask, I felt Edi's hand on my shoulder.

"I've seen one before. They're smarter than people think. It knew precisely who to kill."

That was for certain. They were also far more mysterious than I would have imagined.

The universe was an expansive place. Humanity had only begun to explore a small, tiny corner of it. To think that we were lords paramount in it was to suit the wants of our own egos. There was so much out there that we couldn't explain, dwarfing our feeble knowledge.

But still, like I'd told the poacher in the cave, humanity will struggle through the dark soil of the unknown, always reaching for the light…be it God, knowledge, or even a little bit of both.

Breathing through the mask, my head continued to clear. The star demon had been definitely real. Edi had seen it, too. But had I imagined the other quantum wolf? Hard to say. My mind had been…*off*.

"Don't be too upset for him." Edi made a clicking sound with his tongue. "Demons like that *hombre* aren't worth shedding tears for."

"You…going to leave him out here?" I asked, my eyes on the unmoving shape of the dead poacher.

"*Si*. I say let nature take its course."

I nodded. That was well said. Plus, it was already crowded in the vehicle with the four of us and Lazarus. Tossing in a body would just crowd things unnecessarily. Not to mention how big they were on recycling on the planet. Let nature take its course, indeed.

“Come. I marked the walls on the way in to help find our way out.”

The sun was low on the horizon by the time we made it back to the ranger vehicle. Comms were back in my ear and Tara had spent fifteen minutes reminding me of how stupid it was to go chasing off after the poacher, then another five making sure I was all right and hadn’t suffered any permanent brain damage from apoxia. Mike, who was listening in to the conversation, gave me a smile as I rolled my eyes at the ongoing tirade.

“That was pretty stupid, sir,” was all he said.

“*Et tu*, Brutus?”

Glancing inside the vehicle, I blinked. My gun belt was in the vehicle, as were the pistols they held. Surprised, I looked at Clovis and Mike. Both shook their heads and gave Edi a pointed look. The retired Explorer shrugged and went back to his inspection of Lazarus.

“Lazarus took me to the spot you got ambushed, then the cave you were being held in. That poacher had your guns still there. Also had some extra supplies and a few charges for that railgun of his. *Estupido* to leave all that behind. I figured if we found you alive, you’d want your *pistoleros* back.”

So I *hadn’t* imagined Laz being there. That was encouraging. But what about the other quantum wolf? I decided to not bring it up unless Edi did.

“Thanks.” The gratitude I felt was well and truly heartfelt. The semiautomatic was replaceable, true, but the revolver had belonged to my pa, and his before him. Along with the tasseled boots I wore, they were the only items I had left of anyone from my blood.

“He’ll be okay,” Edi said as he finished the examination with his small, portable scanner similar to the one Mike carried. Lazarus was up and wagging his tail, determined to show everyone around him that not only was he the best boy, he was fine and uninjured. However, I could see how gingerly he put his foreleg down when he walked. He might not be seriously injured, but that shot from the poacher had done a number on him. Considering he was the first being I’d ever seen to shrug off a shot from a railgun, though, I’d give him some leeway. And treats, I silently promised as his tongue lolled out while Edi scratched behind an ear. Plenty of treats. “His coat protected him from the worst of it. Scans show he has a cracked scapula from the shot, but…he shrugged off a round from a railgun. Impressive that this is all that’s wrong with him.”

“Thanks, Edi. I really appreciate all that you and Clovis have done.” For me and for Lazarus, I didn’t say. He understood, though. Sometimes out in the Striderlands, a simple “thanks” meant more than even the most effusive displays of gratitude. Men like Edi, like myself, are like that.

“*De nada*. Thank you for helping us track down that poacher.”

“My pleasure. I don’t think poachers are going to use Ortega VI as their own personal hunting ground anymore,” I said to the retired Explorer, chuckling darkly as the image of the star demon disappearing into the darkness came to mind. The poacher had gotten what he deserved. It was a damned shame I never got his name, though. The wardens would have loved to track down anyone working with him to smuggle Jaxian quantum wolves off-world. Edi glanced at me before shrugging his shoulders.

“Maybe. Poachers are kind of stupid like that. They’re the worst sort of *demonica* out here in the Striderlands.”

“Word’ll spread,” I assured them both. “Nobody wants to tangle with a star demon.”

“The *aich’kandida* is not a threat this far out in the brush,” Edi stated. “If the people don’t go out to those hills, it won’t bother them. Besides, it’s a nature preserve anyway. Only the very brave or very stupid would wander around out here.”

“Settlers might push out this way eventually,” I pointed out. Edi snorted and turned to stare at the dark tunnel where the star demon disappeared. He took his time responding to my warning.

“Maybe.” He didn’t sound at all convinced.

“What about you, Explorer? You have a place you call home around here?”

“Live out in the sticks. Not a lot going for a retired Explorer these days. Especially ’round these parts.”

“Looking for work?” I asked him, an idea bubbling up in the back of my mind. While I wasn’t exactly hurting for crew, having a retired Explorer on board might be useful in the future. They were trained to adapt to any and all situations, and even an older one had the potential to be an effective bounty hunter. “Real work, I mean. Off this planet. Bounty hunting can be an honest payday for someone who keeps it on the up and up.”

We did had plenty of room on board. Plus, Edi had something that both Tara and Mike severely lacked—experience. The Explorer had been there, seen it, and walked away in one piece to tell the tale later. Mike was earnest

and a brilliant engineer but young, only a few years older than Tara. And while my little Coderunner was one of the most dangerous entities in existence, she was still a kid, barely old enough to even pilot my ship, not even legal to live on her own yet. Having someone who I knew had as much experience as I did, and had probably been in more bizarre situations, would help both of my junior employees grow into their jobs.

Plus, Explorers could disappear into any crowd, adjust to about any situation. They were completely adaptable to their environments. This, more than anything, was what made the Explorers so good at their jobs. That, and their utter fearlessness.

“I could use a change of scenery…” Edi’s voice trailed off as he looked over at Clovis. The other preserve ranger shook his head.

“You done good work here, Edi. We enjoy havin’ you.” Clovis paused for a moment before continuing. “Ain’t good pay, though. And bounty huntin’ is good pay. Honest work, honest livin’.”

“I do miss traveling in the black,” Edi admitted quietly. “I miss the excitement. Danger has an allure of its own.”

I stuck out my hand. He looked at my bloodstained fingers for a moment before grasping it. We shook on it and, just like that, I had a new employee.

My eyes drifted back to the darkened crevasse. For a moment I thought I saw the formless shape of death incarnate. I blinked, and it was gone. Nothing remained but the darkness, and the last vestiges of a fading terror. I chuckled in spite of myself and scratched Laz’s head as he sidled up next to me. He whined and pressed up against my side.

Being a bounty hunter is more than just tracking down the bounties. It’s about the contacts you make along the way.

And all the weirdness you see out in the vastness of the black.

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About the Editor

National best-selling author **Jason Cordova** is both a John W. Campbell Award and Dragon Award finalist. He is the author of *Mountain of Fire*, *To Tread Obsidian Shores* (with Melissa Olthoff), and *Monster Hunter Memoirs: Fever* (with Larry Correia). He is also the editor of *Chicks in Tank Tops*, *Dancing with Destruction*, and *Chaos and Consequences*, all from Baen Books.

Along the way, he has had novels published in multiple languages around the world, been featured in over forty anthologies, and has penned thirty novels across many genres, including YA, horror, science fiction, and urban fantasy. A history nerd, Navy veteran, and former teacher, Jason is currently an Associate Editor at Baen Books.

He lives in North Carolina with his muse and one annoyingly vocal cat.

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About the Authors

Melissa Olthoff writes science fiction and fantasy adventure romance with plenty of banter and heart. She is a lifelong geek as well as a veteran of the United States Air Force, both of which are incredibly useful when writing. Her degrees in meteorology and accounting are slightly less applicable to writing, but absolutely useful when it comes to supporting her family.

She has written in both shared worlds and her own universes, and through the power of caffeine and friendship, manages to juggle chaos on and off the page. Published by Baen Books, she is best known for her Griffin Corps series and Bronze Legion novels. Find out more at www.melissaolthoff.com.

Sarah A. Hoyt was born (and raised) in Portugal and now lives in the western half of the United States with her husband, two sons, and a variable number of cats, depending on how many show up to beg on the door step.

In between lies the sort of résumé that used to be de rigueur for writers. She has never actually wrestled alligators, but she did at one point very briefly tie bows on bags of potpourri for a living. She has also washed dishes and ironed clothes for a living. Worst of all, she was, for a long time, a multilingual scientific translator.

At some point, though, she got tired of making an honest living and started writing. She has over forty—the number keeps changing—published novels, in science fiction, fantasy, mystery, historical mystery, historical fantasy, and historical biography. Her short stories have been published in *Analog*, *Asimov's*, *Amazing Stories* (under a previous management), *Weird Tales*, and a number of anthologies from DAW and Baen. Her space-opera novel *Darkship Thieves* was the 2011 Prometheus Award Winner and the third novel in the series, *A Few Good Men*, was a finalist for the honor.

Sarah also won the Dragon Award for *Uncharted* (with Kevin J. Anderson.)

She also writes under the names Sarah D'Almeida and Elise Hyat.

To learn more about Sarah A. Hoyt and read samples of her work, visit sarahahoyt.com.

Patrick Chiles began his writing career with the self-published novels *Perigee* and *Farside*, which were acquired by Baen Books in 2016. His subsequent novels with Baen, *Frozen Orbit*, *Frontier*, *Escape Orbit*, and the Interstellar Medic series have established him as a rising talent in adventurous, near-future science fiction. His short stories have been featured in *World Breakers*, *Worlds Long Lost*, and *The Ross 248 Project*.

After a career in managing flight operations, Patrick now works for an aviation safety consulting firm when he is not writing. He currently resides with his wife in central Ohio.

Kevin Ikenberry's head has been in the clouds since he was old enough to read. Ask him and he'll tell you that he still wants to be an astronaut. With over twenty-five years of experience in space science education, including managing the US Space Camp program and serving as an executive of two Challenger Learning Centers, Kevin continues to work with space every day. A retired Army armor and space operations officer, Kevin lives in Colorado with his family. His home is seldom a boring place.

Kevin is the international bestselling author of The Protocol War series featuring Colorado Book Award finalist *Sleeper Protocol*, which *Publishers Weekly* called "an emotionally powerful debut." Kevin is also the author or co-author of twelve bestselling Peacemaker novels in the Four Horsemen Universe and is the co-creator of The Guardian Covenant universe of mecha versus alien kaiju novels. His alternate history novel *The Crossing*, in Eric Flint's Assiti Shards universe, debuted in 2022. His short fiction has appeared internationally across various publications and anthologies. Kevin is a member of the International Association of Science Fiction and Fantasy Authors (IASFA), International Thriller Writers, and is a member of SIGMA, the science fiction think tank.

Kevin can be found online at www.kevinikenberry.com.

Marisa Wolf is a second-generation nerd who started writing genre stories at six. Over the years she taught middle school, was headbutted by an alligator, built a career in education, earned a black belt in Tae Kwon Do, and finally decided to finish all the half-started stories in her head.

She writes SFF that ends with hope, regardless of the circumstances, as shown through her co-authored novels in shared universes, solo novels in

her own worlds, and a plethora of short stories. All contain various levels of snark.

After several years living on the road in an RV, Marisa, her husband, and their high-maintenance rescue dog are currently based in the woods of New England, but it's anyone's guess where in the country she is at any given moment. You can find more about Marisa at www.marisawolf.net.

David Shadoin is a troublemaking, corn-fed Nebraska boy the United States Air Force managed to turn into a somewhat decent pilot of whirly birds. His novels, *Companion to Ghosts* and *Companions in Anguish*, are part of the multi-author Four Horsemen Universe.

An avid reader from a young age, he has always found inspiration listening to rock music while reading fantasy and sci-fi novels, and drinking single malt scotch. This love of written adventure set up Shady to moonlight as a new author trying to find a good outlet for creative ideas that start with nothing more than a misplaced pop culture reference and some D&D dungeons.

H.Y. Gregor was born in Portland, Oregon, but will always call the mountains of Colorado home. She holds a bachelor's degree in political science but put it down often enough to avoid law school. Now she spends as much free time as possible weaving fantasy tales and battling plot gremlins.

She's the author of the four-book urban fantasy series Vechnoye Saga, beginning with *Reka's Grasp*, and epic fantasy standalone *Stonewhisper*, along with numerous short stories. When not writing, she can often be found at writer's conferences and retreats, sporting an overstuffed messenger bag and too many pens (just don't ask to borrow one).

Jacob Holo has been a recreational geek since childhood, when he discovered *Star Wars* and *Star Trek*, and a professional geek since college, when he graduated from Youngstown State University with a degree in Electrical and Controls Engineering. He started writing when his parents bought that "new" IBM 286 desktop, and over the years, those powers combined to push him to the next level of nerddom: a sci-fi author who designs intricate worlds and tech systems…and promptly blows them up in a string of nonstop action.

He is the author of over fifteen books, including the bestselling Gordian Division series (with David Weber) and harem space opera adventure *Catgirls from Outer Space* (with Edie Skye).

Between novels, Jacob enjoys gaming of all sorts, whether video gaming, card gaming, miniature wargaming, or watching speed runs on YouTube. He is a former Ohioan, former Michigander who now lives in South Carolina with his wife/boss Edie, the ghost of his cat/boss Nova, and his new kitten/boss Dazzle, who is a very good boy even if he does try to lick light bulbs.

K.B. Carlisle is the author of *The Book of Rose*—winner of the Imadjinn Award for Best YA Novel in 2024—as well as *The Dreams of Gemini* (finalist for the Imadjinn Award for Best YA Novel 2025), and *A Melody in the Mist*, the final chapter of The Emergence trilogy.

He is also a father, gamer, painter, former time-traveler and a panda enthusiast. When he isn't writing, he enjoys spending time with his family next to a large body of water or hiking in the mountains (depending on what time of year it is). He is terrible at writing bios, so he asked his wife to write this for him. She said no and that he better not ever wake her up at three in the morning to ask her to write anything for him ever again.

He also laughs at his own jokes, whether they are funny or not.

Joelle Presby is a former US Navy officer who began her career writing about female Grayson Space Navy military officers in David Weber's Honorverse. Despite her glaring lack of experience with basic combat magic, she joined Weber as a co-writer in the multi-Earths magic-versus-steampunk-technology portal-war series the Multiverse with the novel *The Road to Hell*.

She writes alternate military history, science fiction, and fantasy in universes of her own creation and has contributed to Gannon's Terran Republic and Hoy's Hit Man story universes in addition to the Honorverse, Multiverse, and Norfessa's World.

Her debut solo novel, *The Dabare Snake Launcher* (Baen Books) draws on her childhood in West Africa and her experience as a corporate consultant, and might have been made possible through a quid pro quo arrangement with Mami-Wata.

She continues to work with David Weber on the next Multiverse novel, *Band of Angels*, and recently released *Ringer*, the first book in a new science fiction series for Baen Books set in the Rings of Saturn.

Florida Man and dedicated liquid courage distributor **Nick Steverson** has multiple publications from Chris Kennedy Publishing, Baen Books, Dingbat, and Three Ravens. The majority of his work can be found in the Salvage Title Universe. Others include the Four Horsemen Universe, Fallen World Universe, Starflight Universe, and the Ashes of Entecea Universe, and he is co-editor of the *Thirteen Stories of Horror* anthology (with Marisa Wolf).

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