

ZEUS



ALIEN WAR TRILOGY 2

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ZEUS

ALIEN WAR TRILOGY
BOOK TWO

Isaac Hooke



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Trapped in the steel-walled tomb of the berthing compartment, Rade didn't respond to the chief right away.

He was dumbfounded, and unsure he had heard right. Facehopper's voice had suffered from severe digital warping—the Li-Fi protocol of the emergency lights offered far less bandwidth than the standard HLEDs, and if it was true that the *Intrepid* was torn in half, the crisis would have choked the messaging system to near breaking as panicked crew members attempted to contact friends and commanding officers. That Rade had reached Facehopper at all was because his signals were given a higher priority than most of the crew: during a crisis, MOTHS were often called upon to handle emergency situations such as repelling enemy boarding parties, securing breached decks, and so forth. Only the captain and senior officers had higher priority in the system.

“Say again,” Rade transmitted. “I thought you said the *Intrepid* was cut clean in half.”

“That's exactly what I said,” Facehopper returned. “I'm transmitting a diagram of what's left of the ship on our side.”

Rade activated his overhead map and accepted the chief's incoming data request. He zoomed out on the map, and in moments half of the blueprints vanished longitudinally down the middle. A jagged line cut through the central compartments, testament to the impact of a mortar or other kinetic kill. Rade transmitted the data on to the rest of his platoon.

“Where are you, Chief?” Rade asked.

“On my way to the drop bay, actually.” Facehopper said. “I have the LC here on the line. He'd like to have a word.”

“Go ahead, Lieutenant Commander,” Rade said.

“Take a look at the route to drop bay five,” Lieutenant Commander Braggs asked over the comm.

Rade glanced at his overhead map. He saw a clear, unobstructed path to the bay. There were no hull breaches along the way, but several areas were marked in yellow, indicating regions of intense smoke.

“We can make it,” Rade said.

“The first few passageways between you and the hangar are clogged with smoke from an uncontrolled fire raging in hydroponics bay three,” Braggs said. “The containment systems haven’t kicked in. You’re going to have to wear your EABs... if you find yourselves overwhelmed at any time, there are three evac stations along the route. Looks like most of the lifepods haven’t fired yet.”

“We can make it,” Rade repeated.

“All right,” Braggs said. “I expected no less from you and your men. I’ll see you and Facehopper on the surface: I’m abandoning ship, taking down a Dragonfly laden with Marines. You probably won’t hear from me again until we’ve establish a forward operating base down there. Good luck.”

The chief spoke up a moment later. “I’m waiting for you blokes at the drop bay. Bravo Platoon is already here and suiting up. Don’t make me wait overly long. The remains of the ship are going to be entering the atmosphere real soon, now. Needless to say, none of us want to be aboard when that happens.”

“No, we don’t,” Rade said.

What the chief hadn’t mentioned was that Bravo resided in a proper troop barracks, much closer to the drop bay. When Team Seven had first arrived to find the *Intrepid* packed to the bulkheads with Marines, Braggs had the two platoons under his command draw straws for the prime berthing space. Unfortunately, Rade had picked the short straw, and their “berthing area” was actually a hastily converted, out-of-the-way storage compartment. It would take Alpha Platoon much longer to reach bay five.

“Well people, did you hear that?” Rade said. “Grab your EABs. We’re going to make a quick traipse to the drop bay.”

Rade launched himself from the bulkhead and hurtled across the compartment. He put out his hands in front of him and stopped his motion near the EAB locker. He pulled himself to the door and opened it.

He handed out the fifteen EAB—Emergency Air Breathing—apparatuses contained therein, along with the utility belts. The men rested the bulky equipment over their heads but didn’t slide the masks down over their faces quite yet. Harlequin didn’t bother to take one, of course—as the platoon’s only Artificial, he didn’t need one.

Rade held his own EAB between his elbow and ribcage for the moment, and shoved off toward the exit hatch. Not unsurprisingly, it didn’t

automatically move aside. He tried to access the wireless interface in the adjacent panel via his Implant. No connection ports overlaid his vision: the system was completely offline. He detected no other active interfaces from any of the nearby compartments in the passageway outside either, as he would have under normal operating conditions.

“With the mains down,” TJ said. “You’re going to have to open it manually.”

Rade beckoned Snakeoil and Mauler forward. “Open her up.”

Mauler took down the panel beside the hatch, wrapped his hands around the thick release grip, and heaved downward. The lever clicked into place. He grabbed the cylindrical “jack” handle nestled above the lever and passed it to Snakeoil.

Snakeoil inserted the handle into the provided slot in the hatch and then turned it. Round and round he wheeled that handle, manually actuating the six hatch dogs that secured the metal to the bulkhead.

Unbidden, the voices of Rade’s bootcamp instructors floated into his head.

Undog the hatches!

Abruptly the handle ceased turning. Snakeoil returned the cylindrical device to Mauler, braced himself against the frame in the zero gravity, and then pushed at the door. It didn’t yield.

The big man tried again, and the hatch abruptly slid forward into one of the two available “open” positions—a second groove along the inside of the hatch allowed one to open it in a similar manner from the outside.

Snakeoil slid his fingers into the crack that had appeared along the edge, reset himself in the door frame, and attempted to force the hatch to the right. It opened in slow, abrupt spurts. The muscles of Snakeoil’s forearms corded from the effort. Mauler attempted to help, but Snakeoil shrugged him off and continued alone. Smoke began to billow inside the berthing area from the crack. Snakeoil coughed but didn’t budge from his position, and valiantly continued to force open the hatch.

“How is this possible?” Manic said. “Fires in zero gravity expand outward, and burn in a sphere. The smoke does the same, forming a carbon dioxide shell around the fire that quickly smothers it. Sure, if it’s hot enough, it can draw in fresh oxygen from the surrounding areas, but it still burns in a sphere.”

“You’re forgetting about the ventilation shafts,” Lui said. “They’d continue to function, the convection currents drawing the smoke into the passageways, and feeding the fire fresh oxygen. When we get out there, because of the zero g, the smoke isn’t simply going to be gathered at the top of the passageway. It’s going to fill it entirely.”

“Still shouldn’t be possible,” Manic said. “Those ventilation shafts are supposed to seal up to contain the smoke and flames. And the SAFFiR are supposed to come in with their extinguisher grenades if the water mist system doesn’t cut it.” SAFFiR stood for Shipboard Autonomous Firefighting Robot.

“Obviously all of that malfunctioned,” Fret said. “That can happen, you know, when a ship is fricking split in half!”

“Looks like the compartment where the SAFFiR were kept on this side of the ship was ripped clean away,” Grappler said. His eyes were defocused, studying something via his Implant.

Rade had ignored the conversation, and his attention remained on Snakeoil.

“That’s good enough,” Rade told the man. The hatch was open halfway, more than enough to fit one man at a time. From the passageway beyond, the smoke swelled inside in black, spherical, floor-to-ceiling plumes. “EABs on. Buddy system, people! Pair up.”

Rade glanced at Tahoe, and his friend nodded.

Manic approached the entrance, then paused. “You should go first, boss. As our LPO.”

“No,” Rade said. “I’m going to bring up the rear. Trust me, it’s not a violation of protocol.”

Manic hesitated, then donned his EAB and moved through.

Rade watched as the remaining platoon members slid the masks of their EABs over their faces and hauled themselves through the hatch one by one into the thick smoke.

Rade waited until everyone was out except himself and Tahoe. By then the smoke nearly filled the berthing compartment entirely, and choked much of his vision. Coughing, Rade brought up the “visual overlays” menu of his Implant, and overlaid a see-through wireframe representation of the compartment and the passageway beyond onto his eyesight, allowing him, essentially, to “see.”

Rade lifted the EAB over his head. The apparatus had no internal air

supply in and of itself, but could be connected to manifolds distributed throughout the ship. Those manifolds tapped into a shared, emergency oxygen bank, and existed at key spots throughout the passageways; with his Implant, Rade highlighted the nearest locations so they appeared as green flashing circles beyond the translucent wireframes demarcating the passages.

Taking one last, smoke-filled breath, Rade yanked down his mask, confining his vision to two circular tunnels—not that it mattered, as the wireframes from his Implant were visible beyond the edges of those tunnels. Then he dragged himself, coughing, through the hatch.

He floated through the smoke, his momentum unchecked because of the zero gravity, and he collided with the far bulkhead of the passageway beyond.

The wireframe representation filled out the details of the metal at close range, allowing him to find handholds to draw himself along. Behind him, he heard Tahoe smash into the bulkhead and curse.

Rade's coughing fit had subsided, and he held his breath. He positioned one foot on the bulkhead, another on the deck, and pushed off, floating forward through the passageway. His aim was slightly off—he found himself quickly nearing the overhead. He reached up with both hands and gently corrected his motion by shoving off from the ceiling.

He made his way forward in that matter, approaching the nearest green flashing circle, still biting back his breath, glancing at the overhead map occasionally to confirm Tahoe's indicator was close behind. A siren sounded occasionally in the background.

Thanks to the smoke, the emergency Li-Fi no longer transmitted data, however the chief's indicator still remained visible upon the overhead map: while Implants were limited to a range of fifty meters—less with bulkheads in the way—an adhoc data network was formed via the Implants and aReal goggles of the crew members who yet remained aboard.

The manifold was farther away than Rade had hoped, and the oxygen coursing through his body quickly reached critically low levels, at least according to the warning flashed by his Implant. His lungs burned with the urge to inhale, but he fought it for all he was worth. Phosphenes dotted his vision.

Finally he arrived at the first manifold location. The others were crowded around it: though he couldn't see them, his Implant represented their

bodies as icons. Not that he noticed all that much in his current oxygen-deprived state.

Feeling like he was going to black out any second, Rade fumbled frantically for the buddy connection at the belt of the closest member, Keelhaul. When he found the connector he plugged in and attempted to inhale. The first breath contained smoke, which irritated his throat—he broke into a coughing fit that was interrupted only by his frantic gulps for air.

“You okay back there?” Keelhaul asked, his voice muted by the EAB.

“Fine.” The atmosphere was smoke-free by then, and Rade greedily inhaled the clean, dry air, though he still hacked.

He turned back when he felt Tahoe fumbling at his belt.

“You good?” Rade asked him between his bouts of coughing.

A moment later he heard Tahoe’s muted inhale. “Much... better.” Tahoe was coughing, too.

When Rade recovered, he performed a headcount via his overhead map. He could have summed the callsigns above the icons overlaying his vision just as well. Everyone was present, and their vitals were green. Most of them would be using the buddy connections to share oxygen, as the manifolds only had four tap in spots.

“Last time... I did this... was in bootcamp,” Manic said, panting. “Blindfolded. Moving from manifold to manifold. Feels almost like I’m cheating, what with the overlays our Implants provide.”

“Then turn them off,” Fret said.

“Have to pass on that,” Manic replied. His continued gasps of air were obvious, even muffled as they were by the EAB.

“All that underwater training worked wonders for your lung capacity, huh?” That was Bender. The black man wasn’t breathing hard at all.

“Shut it,” Manic said.

“There’s a sealed breach hatch up ahead,” Rade said. “Harlequin, open it up.”

“Aye boss.” The Artificial’s icon moved down the passageway.

“That’s one handy thing about the robos,” Lui said. “They’re useful at times like this.”

“They are indeed,” Rade replied.

“I could have done it just as well,” Bomb grumbled.

“Feels odd, not having to inform the Damage Control spaces of our

planned route,” Grappler said. “Like we’re supposed to during Condition Zebra.” That was the operating condition that sealed the hatches and scuttles ship-wide, subdividing a vessel into airtight compartments to prevent explosive decompression during combat.

“Many things feel odd when your ship has been split in half!” Trace said.

“Smoke has already flooded the compartment beyond,” Harlequin transmitted. He was using the internal comm system of the Implants to communicate from his forward position.

“Smoke here,” Fret said. “Smoke there. We can never win.”

“It’s open,” the Artificial transmitted.

The platoon members disconnected and shoved off in turn from the bulkhead, making their way toward the open hatch, and the next manifold beyond it. Buddy connections were transferred directly to freed up manifold valves as final breaths were taken.

Rade, as usual, waited for everyone else to move out. When Keelhaul departed, Rade plugged into the manifold. He glanced at Tahoe, but of course saw only his friend’s icon in the thick smoke.

“You ready?” he asked.

“Wooyah,” Tahoe replied.

Rade inhaled deeply and then held his breath. He disconnected from the manifold and removed Tahoe’s buddy connection, then pushed off from the bulkhead and floated down the passageway.

As more and more of the crew abandoned ship via the lifepods, the adhoc network formed by the Implants began to degrade. By the time Rade reached the open hatch, Chief Facehopper's indicator had stopped updating on the overhead map entirely, remaining stationary at its last known position in the drop bay.

On our own then. For now.

As he passed through the breach hatch, Harlequin's voice came over his Implant.

"Got two crew members at the manifold here," the Artificial said. "A Lieutenant Harley and Brown. Hydroponic engineers."

Rade didn't want to waste any of his precious air replying.

He reached the next manifold, hooked up to Keelhaul, and waited until Tahoe had connected behind him.

When he caught his breath, he addressed the crew members. "Why haven't you made your way to the lifepods?"

"There aren't any left," the one named Harley said. "Not at this station."

Rade checked his overhead map. Sure enough, the nearest evac station had zero lifepods available. The same thing was true of stations all the way to the drop bay. He checked the previous one near the berthing area he and his platoon had just abandoned.

"According to my map, there's still one lifepod remaining at the station behind us," Rade said.

"We know," Harley said.

"Then why don't you go there?" Rade said.

No answer.

Then Rade realized: they were too scared.

"You're really going to just sit here," Rade said. "And let the ship sink around you, when freedom is only a short walk away?"

"Easy for you to say," the one named Brown answered. "We can't hold our breaths as long you."

"You morons went through bootcamp," Rade said, wanting to sound

as harsh as possible. “You had to earn those bars on your sleeves just like every other engineer. They wouldn’t have let you serve aboard a starship otherwise. So tell me, do you want to live or die?”

Neither of them spoke.

Rade sighed. “All right. TJ, lead the rest of the platoon to the drop bay. It looks like Tahoe and I are going to have to risk our lives to help these two physically inept morons to a lifepod.” He turned toward the icons of the two men. “I’m going to mention you two when I file my report. I expect, if you’re ever recovered, that your time in the navy will be short-lived.” It was an empty threat. Rade doubted his report would ever reach the eyes of their superiors. They were officers, after all, and he was a lowly enlisted man.

“You should send me to escort them,” Harlequin said. “Your place is here, with the platoon.”

“We’re going to need you to open any breach seals we find along the way,” Rade said. “TJ can lead the rest of you just as well as I.”

“Rade...” Tahoe said. The accusation was clear in his tone.

Act like an LPO.

Rade sighed. “All right. Fine. Snakeoil and Mauler, I’ll give you the honor of holding the hands of these two bastards and leading them to the evac station. We’ll see you at the airlock to the drop bay.”

“Aye boss!” Snakeoil said. To the engineers: “Come on, you landlubbers! You heard the boss man!”

Rade watched their four icons vanish down the passageway, and he sincerely hoped nothing went wrong. Otherwise, he’d have to risk more men to rescue Snakeoil and Mauler. He wondered if he should have forced the Lieutenants to come with Alpha to the drop bay instead, but then decided that would be a bad idea. The last thing the platoon needed was to handhold two engineers all the way down to the surface. Best to put the pair in lifepods, eject them from the ship, and be done with it.

Harlequin proceeded forward on his own, and after opening the next breach hatch, the Artificial announced over the local comm: “No smoke in the next passageway.”

“Looks like the containment systems are finally doing their jobs,” Grappler said.

Chief Facehopper’s indicator momentarily updated on the overhead display, but then vanished again as expanding smoke choked out Harlequin’s

reception with the Li-Fi where he was.

“I want you to stay there, Harlequin,” Rade said. “And shut that hatch when me and Tahoe are through.”

As usual, Rade waited until he and Tahoe were the only ones left at the manifold. He glanced at his overhead map. The indicators for Snakeoil and Mauler had vanished from the display as they moved out of range of the Implants.

Rade left the manifold and arrived at the breach hatch some moments later. The smoke had already expanded into the new passageway and he could barely see the outline of Harlequin waiting just inside.

After Rade and Tahoe had passed through, Harlequin closed the hatch with a thud behind them.

The air began to clear of smoke thanks to the working ventilation system in that area, so that by the time he neared the next manifold, there was no need to plug in. The passageway was dimly lit by the emergency Li-Fi lights overhead, and Chief Facehopper’s signal had returned.

“Where the hell are you blokes?” Facehopper said over the comm. “This ship is going to break apart in a few minutes!”

“Coming,” Rade sent.

The other members of the platoon were waiting at the manifold, the masks of their EABs raised. Rade took off his own and gripped it in one hand. He deactivated the wireframe overlaying his vision.

“Harlequin,” Rade transmitted. “Wait for Snakeoil and Mauler at the hatch back there, and let them inside when they arrive.”

“You got it boss.” The Artificial hurried down the passageway eagerly. Harlequin wanted to earn a callsign for himself, no doubt. Rade would have to disappoint the machine on that front, because opening and closing a few hatches hardly qualified, even if done under a life-threatening situation. No, in Alpha Platoon, the only way to earn a callsign was in combat.

Without all that smoke, the going became much easier. Rade secured the EAB to his belt and used all four limbs to navigate the zero g passageways. He developed a rhythm. Shove off one bulkhead, correct his motion by touching the overhead or deck as he flew, land, and then push off again.

Harlequin remained in communication range during that time, thanks

to the functioning Li-Fi in the smokeless passageway. Even so, he reported no sign of Snakeoil or Mauler, which was troubling.

After surmounting two more breach seals, the platoon finally reached the airlock to drop bay five.

“We’re here, Chief,” Rade sent.

“About bloody time,” Facehopper replied. “Hurry up, goddamnit.”

“You’re sounding more and more like Master Chief Bourbonjack all the time,” Rade said.

“Now I know why he was always so grumpy,” Facehopper said. The chief authorized entry and the outer hatch of the wide airlock opened. The platoon members were able to squeeze inside eight at a time. The door shut.

As Rade waited outside to enter with the second batch, Harlequin sent him a message.

“Snakeoil and Mauler just popped back onto the grid,” Harlequin transmitted. “They should be showing up on your overhead map anytime now.”

Rade glanced at it. “I see them. You know what to do. Snakeoil, any problems with those morons?”

“Nothing we couldn’t handle,” Snakeoil said. “One of them blacked out on the way. Mauler had to give him mouth to mouth at the manifold.”

“Ooo Mauler,” Bender said. “I didn’t know you were that kind of man. You’re so big and strong. Such plump lips.”

“I’m going to kick your ass when I get there, Bender,” Mauler replied.

“But otherwise,” Snakeoil continued. “We successfully loaded the passengers into the lifepod.”

“Well done,” Rade said.

The outer hatch opened and Rade squeezed inside the airlock with the remaining members of the platoon. When the door shut behind them, the inner hatch opened immediately—the atmospheres on both sides were already equal.

Rade saw the silver war machines waiting for them on the deck. They looked like broad-shouldered, humanoid robots, roughly three and a half meters tall. They possessed thickly armored arms and legs, and the hull ornamentations underneath the head regions reminded Rade of sagely beards. Large leg clamps kept the mechs secured to the deck in the zero gravity.

“Bearded mechs...” Trace said, launching himself into the bay.

Keelhaul followed him. “Bearded mechs for bearded pilots.”

“None of our beards look so goofy,” TJ said.

Lui floated by. “You sure about that, TJ?”

Rade launched himself toward the jumpsuit closets, which were bolted to the deck. As he flew toward the farthest locker, he pulled up the specs on the war machines. His Implant identified them as the Zeus II class, a brand new type of mech untested on the actual field of battle. It was supposed to be based on alien technology the UC had acquired in a previous war, but Rade didn’t see any evidence of that.

Similar to the Hoplite class before it, the Zeus did away with projectile weapons entirely. Also absent were any grenade launchers—some would argue that grenades counted as projectiles, after all. Instead, these war machines employed a single “cobra” infrared laser mounted on the left arm, beneath the retractable shield. On the right hand resided a rechargeable “zodiac” electrolaser, which utilized a directed-energy, laser-induced plasma channel to deliver a concentrated bolt of electricity containing upwards of one billion volts. Essentially, a lightning thrower. The name Zeus was fitting.

But the armaments didn’t end there. Two shoulder-mounted missile launchers, one per side, contained five Hellfire H-7 minis each. On top of both fists were nozzles that acted as incendiary throwers: small conduits combined fuel from the jumpjets with an oxidant, allowing the mech to spout flames under void conditions if necessary. The incendiaries found on older model mechs had used their own combustive, but the new, streamlined design definitely saved on weight by siphoning fuel from the jumpjet system. Rade wasn’t sure that was the greatest idea, though he supposed it was good to have a flame option, given that he had to basically jury-rig an incendiary thrower during his last deployment.

The metallic skin utilized a new camouflage tech that was supposed to smear the thermal band, but Rade wasn’t sure how well it would work in practice. According to the specs, the Zeus also contained the usual Trench Coat anti-missile countermeasure system, packed into small conical releases scattered at strategic points three hundred and sixty degrees around the torso. The cockpit was situated directly above the main reactor on the chest area, with a lightning bolt painted onto the entry hatch.

“Nice touch,” Bender said, patting the lightning emblem of one of the Zeus’ as he floated past on his way to the jumpsuit closet.

There were only sixteen of the mechs: Bravo had already departed. Facehopper's callsign was displayed above one of the Zeus units: he was already suited up, loaded in, and revving to go.

"Hurry up, blokes!" Facehopper said. "Atmosphere entry is imminent! Get suited up, damn it!"

Rade undressed in the zero gravity as he floated toward the jumpsuit closets. By the time he reached a free locker, he was naked save for his skivvies. He unlatched and opened the door, then retrieved the leg portion of the cool vents—cooling and ventilation undergarments—inside.

He kept having to grab the locker door and haul himself back because he constantly floated away. He eventually managed to shrug on the cool vents, then began donning the actual jumpsuit assemblies. The components attached to various steel hardpoints protruding from his body: wrists, elbows, shoulders, knees, and so forth.

Those hardpoints were a recent innovation, and he had had them installed before the last mission to provide a seamless interface with his suit electronics, trimming several microseconds off the lag between mind and machine. It might not seem like much, but in the heat of battle, a small advantage could make all the difference, especially when one was fighting intelligent robots. The lag reduction carried over to any mechs he piloted, further boosting performance.

Shaw, his on again, off again girlfriend, hadn't been very happy with him when she had heard about that. He had known she wouldn't approve, of course, which was why he had the procedure done when she was on the far side of the galaxy. His choice to do that behind her back was part of the reason they were currently in an "off" phase of their relationship.

The individual jumpsuit assemblies all came in the same standard size, but shrank to fit the bodies of their wearers, using similar actuators found in the cocooning cockpits of the mechs. Even so, there was usually a small bit of padding left underneath the legs, which gave a feeling similar to walking on stilts, but that was something suit-wearers quickly got used to. The hardpoints helped with that, too.

When he was halfway through suiting up, the airlock opened and Snakeoil, Mauler and Harlequin rushed inside.

"There you blokes are," the chief said. "Move, you slow-footed fecal maggots. *Move!*"

Rade donned his helmet and the jumpsuit HUD—heads up display—

activated on his faceplate. He felt a prick in his right hand as the suit injected the usual adaption accelerant into the dorsal venous network. He clipped on the utility belt and jetpack, then sealed the locker, turned around and pushed off. He flew across the drop bay and fired a quick burst of dorsal thrust to navigate toward his designated Zeus.

The cockpit was already open and waiting for him.

He hauled himself inside and the inner actuators immediately folded around him, swallowing Rade in darkness. It took a moment before the external video feeds from the top of the mech were piped to his faceplate, but when they were, he found himself looking down on the hangar from a height of three point five meters.

“Welcome aboard, sir,” a deep male baritone said. “I am Sky, your AI.”

“Sky, huh?” Rade said while he waited for the others to load up. “That’s a reasonable name. Suppose I won’t change it.”

“Thank you, LPO.”

“At least you didn’t call me sir,” Rade said. “You AIs seem to have a predilection for that.”

“The programmers have learned noncoms don’t like that,” Sky said.

“We don’t,” Rade said. “We also don’t like to be called noncoms.”

“I know, Rage.”

He frowned. “Let me guess. You have a sarcasm setting, just like the Hoplites.”

“I do.”

“I want you to reduce it to zero right now,” he told Sky firmly.

“Done.”

He nodded. “Thank you. While I don’t mind lip from the fighting men of my platoon, there’s one thing I can’t stand, and that’s lip from my machines.”

“I should probably mention that the setting resets once a day,” Sky said.

“Wonderful.”

In moments everybody was loaded into their respective Zeus units, including the latecomers.

“Not a moment too soon,” Facehopper said. “Opening bay doors. We’re leaving this trash heap behind.”

“Warning,” a female voice intoned. “Depressurization commencing. Hangar atmosphere venting overboard. Warning.”

The hangar doors opened.

“Time to drop, people,” the chief said.

“Which direction is the planet?” Manic said.

There was no sign of it from inside the hangar bay.

“You’ll see it soon enough,” Facehopper said. “We’re falling into the outer extremities of its upper atmosphere already.”

Leg clamps began to retract; mechs floated into the air in turn and fired small bursts of aft thrust, accelerating through the hangar bay doors.

“Release clamps, Sky,” Rade said.

“Releasing clamps,” that deep voice responded.

The restraining devices opened up and the Zeus lifted from the deck.

“Take us outside,” Rade ordered, not trusting himself to fly the new unit safely through the tight confines of those doors, not while other mechs were airborne in the bay.

The Zeus jetted through the opening and out into space.

Below, the planet devoured the entire view. Facehopper hadn’t been kidding when he said they were falling into the atmosphere at that moment.

Almost immediately Rade heard what sounded like light rain striking the hull; while the cockpit wasn’t currently oxygenated, the mech was configured to transmit any external vibrations, such as those caused by impacts with foreign bodies, directly to his helmet speakers as sound waves.

He suspected the mech was being bombarded by tiny bits of debris.

“We’re passing through a partial debris field,” Sky said, confirming his hunch. “Sourced from the *Intrepid*.”

“Evade,” Rade said as larger chunks of metal and slag appeared ahead. “And put some distance between us and that ship.”

Sky zig-zagged the Zeus between the debris, and Rade felt the G forces pin him in alternating directions.

Rade bit his lip and said in a strained voice: “Get us out of this debris field as soon as you can, please.”

“Trying,” Sky returned.

The noise of the impacts against the hull ebbed and flowed, sometimes sounding like hail, and at other times becoming completely silent. Amid the torn metal the occasional dead bodies floated by. He knew that

could just as easily be him out there.

Sky nearly plowed right into one of the corpses.

“Hey!” Rade said. “Have some respect for the dead!”

“Sorry.”

Rade glanced at the tactical display overlaid on his HUD, and he realized Sky was flying the Zeus crosswise and away from the ship. It seemed the best route.

“We have cleared the debris field of the *Intrepid*,” Sky announced.

“‘Bout time,” Rade said.

He piped the rearview camera of the Zeus into the middle of his helmet faceplate and watched the wreckage of the *Intrepid* recede behind him. The damage was unbelievable. The overhead map hadn’t done justice to the severity of the attack. It was like looking at the cutaway of some giant model house. He could see the individual decks and the compartments stacked one atop the other, with pipes and conduits bending out into empty space. Sparks occasionally flashed from different portions of the exposed areas as severed power lines swung into portions of the deck. Along the entire length of the shorn side, the debris field formed a crescent of small, jagged shapes reaching at least a kilometer out from the vessel. Just beyond that field resided the other half of the *Intrepid*, which was enveloped in its own debris.

Shaking his head, Rade assumed direct command of the mech. He fired off a few bursts of thrust, if only to convince himself that the controls were the same as what he was used to.

Even though the steering was his, Sky continued to handle the autonomous aspects; for example, the AI fired the gyroscopic jets regularly, ensuring his descent was stable.

Rade glanced at the tactical display and counted the blue dots of his platoon mates; everyone else had successfully navigated the debris field, and they were plunging toward the planetary surface alongside the wreckage. He placed the vitals of his team mates in a stacked column on the left side of his vision. All green.

“Well that was one hell of a ride,” Grappler said over the comm.

“I’ll say,” Keelhaul returned.

“Hang on tight boys and girls, because the ride is only beginning,” Bomb said.

“Excuse me a moment,” Harlequin said. “Surely you meant only boys. There are no girls with us.” There was a triumphant note to the Artificial’s voice, as if it was very pleased with itself for catching Bomb’s mistake.

“I meant exactly what I said,” Bomb replied. “You’re the girl I was talking about.”

“You fell right into that one, Harlequin,” Manic said. “Gotta learn to keep your mouth shut.”

“You’re the other girl,” Bomb said.

Rade fired a burst of lateral thrust, bringing his Zeus closer to the main group. Better to close the distance while in the air, than on the ground.

“Are we on track for the original drop site?” Rade asked Sky.

“Surprisingly, yes,” the AI said. “Though I would recommend applying aft and lateral thrust at the following levels for one point six seconds.” Two indicators overlaid his vision, along with a fuel estimate.

Rade transmitted the data to the chief, who ordered the platoon members to make similar adjustments.

When it was done, the wreckage of the *Intrepid* resided a kilometer behind them, and continued to drift away. Rade glanced down, but the planet hadn’t appeared to grow any closer. A deception, he knew.

“Tell me again why the robo gets a mech?” Bender asked all of a sudden. He was referring to Harlequin, of course.

“The robo gets a mech,” Facehopper said. “Because we have more than enough to go around.”

“But an AI, piloting an AI,” Bender said. “Seems kind of redundant, don’t it?”

“Some would say that was a good thing,” Lui transmitted. “Dual level redundancy.”

“I’d have to agree,” Tahoe said. “Especially considering these damn models have never actually been field-tested.”

“Anyone picking up any booster rockets on their sensor scans?” Rade asked, wanting to steer the conversation toward something actually useful during the drop.

“Negative,” TJ said.

“Wonderful,” Fret said. “Though not entirely surprising, considering.”

Without booster rockets, there was no way for the mechs to achieve

escape velocity and return to orbit.

“We’ll just have to hitch a ride with the Marines on the way back,” Trace said.

“Assuming they have room...” Manic said.

“Oh they’ll have room,” Fret said. “Given the house-to-house fighting we expect down there? Probably a lot of room, actually. Especially if we encounter anything near as nasty as what we found on CF III.” That was what the platoon members had taken to calling 11-Aquarii III. It stood for Clusterfuck III.

“What about body bags?” Lui said. “Need room for those.”

“Somehow I doubt there will be any bodies left to bag,” Fret said.

“Nah, you’re wrong,” Manic said sarcastically. “It’s going to be a cakewalk down there.”

Rade felt a shudder, and glanced down. The aeroshell heat shield had deployed. Growing flames licked the edges until the video feed became entirely orange. Perspiration slicked his forehead, and he felt the sweat ooze down his ribcage. Air friction caused the mech to slow rapidly, and Rade felt the Gs intensely for a moment.

The orange saturation abruptly faded, along with the Gs. The aeroshell fell off so that the planetary surface was once more in view. He could see the brown-black bands that represented the scorched forests and grasslands. The former Franco-Italian settlement resided directly below, gray buildings marred by blast craters.

Above, white trails indicated the descent of his companions. Farther away he spotted the *Intrepid*, her two halves glowing a fierce orange, like large meteors. Pieces began to tear away from the wreckage, until one half broke apart entirely. The remainder followed shortly thereafter.

“And thar she blows!” Bomb said over the comm.

A sudden notice appeared on Rade’s HUD.

Warning. Incoming infrared laser detected. Warning.

Sky—" Rade began.

"Already initiating evasive maneuvers," the AI returned.

Rade pulled up the damage report. The Zeus had a small bore drilled into its leg. No systems were damaged, luckily.

"Do we know the source of that laser?" Rade asked.

"The settlement," Sky returned.

Rade's eye was drawn downward by motion from below: something had exploded underneath him, not far away. Another object detonated to his left.

"Getting hot out here," Trace said.

"Looks like they're using the base's defenses against us," Rade said. "Utilize your lateral thrusters, people. Descend in a classic three-dimensional zig-zag. Randomized."

Sky evaded a second laser, and almost steered the mech into another detonating projectile.

"Watch the flak," Rade said.

"Doing my best," Sky returned.

His missile alarm flashed.

Rade launched the Trench Coat countermeasure and fired a long burst of latitudinal thrust. A rocket with the yield of a Hellfire H-7 or H-9 detonated not far behind him, and the blast hurtled him forward. The world swung dizzyingly around him.

"Sky, stabilize..." Rade said as the G forces threatened to knock him out.

The world quickly returned to its proper place below him and the rough descent resumed. Sky continued to randomly fire the left, right, back, and front thrusters, occasionally boosting the output to avoid an infrared laser. Flak detonated around him. Once more he had to launch the Trench Coat countermeasure to avoid a missile lock, but thankfully the detonation occurred farther away that time.

The ground came up mercifully fast, and the incoming fire ceased as he apparently descended beyond the enemy sight lines. It looked like he

would touchdown roughly a kilometer from the staging area, which itself was three clicks from the town. He made some final course corrections based on the topography below to ensure he landed on level ground. A quick scan of the overhead map confirmed there were no other UC ground troops in the immediate vicinity that he had to worry about squashing.

Sky engaged the air brakes and fired the aerospike thrusters in the feet assemblies. When Rade hit, surprisingly his legs remained straight—he was used to his knees slamming into his chest upon impact. Apparently Zeus units could slow down enough to prevent that. A small puff of dirt expanded from the touchdown site. The outer skin of his Zeus became black and gray, imitating the landscape of soil and burnt trees around him.

Rade scanned his surroundings, looking for signs of ambush, as well as places he could use as hides. The sky of the terraformed world was blue-purple above. The sun was a subgiant, a little smaller than the size of his human fist when viewed from the surface. He thought the planet should have been closer to the star, given the temperate environments of the world and how much cooler subgiants were compared to main-sequence stars, but then he supposed other variables factored into the equation, such as the carbon dioxide content of the atmosphere.

When he looked directly at that sun, his photocromatic filters darkened the output considerably. The size of the sun might prove useful in the coming fighting, especially if the enemy didn't have a way to reduce the brightness. He made a mental note to "attack from the direction of the sun" as often as possible.

"Muster, mates!" Facehopper said over the comm.

Rade finished his *coup d'oeil* assessment of the immediate area and glanced at his overhead map, noting the flashing beacon Facehopper had marked. As this was Rade's first time actually walking in the new unit outside the simulators, he first took an experimental step. Then another. It required a few good moments to acclimate to the slightly odd balance of the Zeus—the center of gravity seemed lower down than he was used to—but the gyroscopes in the mech helped counter his mistakes, and soon he was marching steadily. He was just glad there were no other members of the platoon around to witness his teething pains, though he supposed his brothers were enduring a similar adjustment period.

Rade arrived at the muster point and waited with Facehopper for the

rest of the platoon to gather. When everyone had arrived, Facehopper stepped forward in his Zeus to address them. With that sagely beard decorating his mech, the chief looked like a wise man addressing a crowd of followers. Except the mouth of his Zeus never moved—didn't even have one, really.

“The Lieutenant Commander tells me he is well,” Facehopper said. “He’s joined the MARDIV HQBN.” Marine Division Headquarters Battalion, responsible for the command and control of the entire division. “I’ve marked Companies C and D of the 2nd Assault Battalion on your maps. Bravo has already agreed to join C. That leaves us D. I’ve had a talk with them, let them know we’ve arrived. Real cheery folk.”

“Who, Bravo or D?” Bender asked.

Apparently the sarcasm wasn't lost on Facehopper, because he said: “Both.” He pointed toward the staging area. “Assume marching formation, mates! Ten meter separation. Zig zag pattern. “

The platoon proceeded as requested, keeping a ten meter spacing between units. After marching for one klick, they reached the outskirts of the assault division. They moved between the various brigades, passing groups of Equestrian and Abrams tanks, troop carriers, combat robots, and mechs.

When they reached D Company, Facehopper called a halt. It appeared the company was composed of armored troop carriers.

“I’m sending the frequency and encryption keys for our shared comm band with D Company,” Facehopper sent.

Rade accepted. A moment later a female voice arose over the line. His Implant identified the speaker as one Major Maureen Walters.

“So there you slow-ass mofos are,” Major Walters said. “We were wondering when your damn high-and-mighty MOTHs would deign to join us, Face Chopper.”

“Facehopper,” the chief corrected. “And nice to see you, too, Major. As I mentioned earlier, we had a little trouble in orbit.”

“We all had a little trouble, but look around you, does it look like any of *us* were late to the party? Anyway, for the record, I just wanted to state that we have no need of your babysitting.”

“There appears to be some sort of misunderstanding,” Facehopper said over the common line. Rade was glad he wasn't chief in that moment; if he was the one interfacing with the Marines, he would have had a hard time keeping his outrage in check. “We’re not here to babysit. We’re here to

assist. We're essentially under your command."

"In that case," the major returned. "Sidle on up to the back of the company. You can overwatch from drag."

"Will do, Major," Facehopper said over the main. "Chief out."

At the head of the division, a battalion of artillery units bombarded the settlement from three kilometers out. Smoke billowed from several areas. B-9C Lancers occasionally roared past overhead: the AI-piloted bombers dropped two-thousand pounders in multiples, adding to those plumes. That they could make those bombing runs meant the settlement's air defenses had finally been taken out.

Rade zoomed in on the distant buildings; he couldn't see any signs of resistance. Near the outskirts of the city he spotted UC gunships unleashing barrages of missiles in concert. Rade zoomed out again and glanced skyward. Barely visible directly overhead, MQ-91 Raptors circled like vultures at fifteen thousand meters, another testament to the UC's air dominance.

Smaller, fist-sized HS3 units hovered in droves directly above the entire division, ready to provide their reconnaissance and scouting services, not to mention serve as network repeaters for communications and enemy tagging.

"Thought we weren't supposed to nuke the place," Fret commented when the ground rumbled after a particularly powerful bombing run. Fresh smoke plumes erupted from the settlement.

"We're not," the chief said.

"Well," Fret continued. "This is about as close to nuking a place as we can get, without actually nuking it. Wouldn't you say?"

"I would," Chief Facehopper agreed.

"Something tells me our Franco-Italian allies aren't going to be pleased about this," Lui said.

"I'm sure we have some of their officers in the ranks," Tahoe said.

"Oh I'm sure we do," Lui replied. "And they probably have no say in the matter. This is a UC military gig."

"Do we have any reports on what kind of enemy presence to expect yet?" Rade asked.

"We do," Facehopper said. "The LC finally released some footage taken from the initial invasion by the Franco-Italians. In it, scorpion robots similar to those we faced on CF III have been identified. As have a few

bioengineered weapons.”

“The hammerheads?” Lui asked.

“No,” Facehopper said. “Something new. Larger.”

“Something *larger*?” Manic said. “The hammerheads were already damn large. Details please, Chief. Pictures. Videos.”

“That’s all the information the LC has shared with me for now,” Facehopper said. “I get the feeling he and the other commanders are worried about spooking the troops.”

“Nothing spooks a MOTH,” Skullcracker said.

“I realize that,” Facehopper said. “But you know the lieutenant commander. When he tightens his lips on something, it’ll take a blowtorch to unlatch them.”

The barrage continued for another half hour, and then without warning the firing stopped and the bombers stopped making runs.

Several more minutes passed. Some of the smaller plumes of smoke above the settlement began to clear. No enemy artillery fired in return from the city.

“The lieutenant colonel tells me all enemy activity in the city has ceased,” Major Walters said over the comm. “Looks like the artillery has done its job. And now that they’ve softened the enemy up for you boys, we’ve got the order to proceed.”

The division rolled forward. Alpha Platoon took its place behind D Company.

The battered ruins of the settlement slowly approached. The closer he came, the greater the dread Rade felt growing in the pit of his stomach. There was something menacing about those toppled walls and broken buildings.

And then Rade realized what it was.

The ruins, at least from the current angle, looked like jagged teeth.

“Got a bad feeling about this,” Fret said.

We all do, Rade wanted to say. But he held his tongue.

The war machines of the Marine division slowly crunched into the city. Treads rolled over the debris of collapsed buildings and vehicles. Robot feet pulverized marble that had collapsed from blast-cratered walls, and snapped rotors that had fallen from the wreckage of passenger quadcopters.

D Company entered the settlement with the other armored companies that were part of the 2nd Assault Battalion; Alpha Platoon followed, while immediately behind them came the headquarters and service company responsible for command and control of the battalion, led by one Lieutenant Colonel Harry Kailua.

Base de Radiance was the official name of the settlement: Radiance Base. However, describing it as a “settlement” was a bit of a misnomer, because when Rade thought of that word he visualized a small frontier town of low-slung wooden or concrete houses, maybe geodesic domes, not the sprawling stylized city that lay before him.

First of all, according to the map data on his Implant, provided courtesy of the HS3s and aerial drones, the settlement was the size of a small metropolis.

Secondly, most of the intact buildings—at least in the current neighborhood—were made in the Franco-Italian “New Baroque” style. The intact blocky buildings rose as high as twelve stories, with outer facades of exquisitely carved marble or travertine. Bronze or gold outlined the arched doorways and windows. The entrances usually had a columned portico. Wooden shutters veiled the upper windows, allowing the occupants to gaze down upon the street in privacy without passersby seeing them, as was the Franco-Italian way—the FIs were known for their voyeur culture. Ahead of the division, HS3s darted in and out of buildings and ruins alike in an outwardly expanding pattern, like flies searching for meat to lay maggots in. On Rade’s overhead map, buildings turned green in turn as they were marked as clear by those scouts.

Jutting up behind the rooftops, the glass and steel skyscrapers of the downtown core with its multiple layers of stacked roads provided a jarring contrast to the nearby buildings. Those were the office towers of the financial

district, and they overlapped the yellow-brown mountains that dominated the lower half of the skyline beyond. From his current position, Rade saw that one of the towers had collapsed onto an adjacent building, and together they formed the shape of a precariously-balanced lowercase n.

As Rade continued his advance, he saw different varieties of the marble and travertine buildings thrusting from the ruins around him: stadiums, theaters, forums, homes. Cornices trimmed every wall, porticos every entryway, frontispieces every window. But even the standing buildings were damaged in some way: a blast hole here, a toppled wall there. Even so, Rade could understand why the Franco-Italians had wanted to preserve the place so badly. They definitely wouldn't be pleased when they learned the extent of the destruction. Then again it was very likely most of the damage Rade witnessed was caused by the invaders, with maybe ten percent attributable to the UC. That was what the politicians would tell the Franco-Italians, anyway, whether or not there was any truth to it.

He spotted graffiti marring the walls of a few buildings. French, it looked like. Because of his upbringing Rade could speak Spanish, and while French was a romance language that had the same basic form as Spanish, the vocabulary was completely different. Not that it mattered: Rade's Implant displayed the translation above every scribble. Some of the graffiti was political: "Death to the UC!" "Freedom for France!" "Separatists unite!" Other works were obviously written by hooligans: "Radiance, where the wine is cheap and the pussy loose."

Rade momentarily switched to the viewpoint of one of the overhead HS3s assigned to the company. From that bird's eye perspective, the buildings seemed to continue without end.

"Sheesh," Manic said. "This place is frickin' huge. I thought Braggs pegged the pre-invasion population at only fifty thousand?"

"He did," Facehopper said. "But apparently most of these buildings only housed one or two settlers at most. If there's one thing to be said about the FIs, they *do* like their space. Oh and, you do know that the fifty thousand count only referred to the human population, right? The AIs, on the other hand..."

"The AIs lived in the apartments," Harlequin said. "Judging from the records. And the poor."

"The joys of living on the minimum guaranteed income," Fret said.

The damage Rade witnessed alternated between moderate and extreme. In the former occurrences, the marble structures and parked rotorcraft bore some laser marks or missile cavities, with most of the buildings relatively intact. In the latter cases, the damage proved breathtaking: He would be walking his Zeus across a seemingly ordinary road when the buildings to his left or right would abruptly fall away in ruin, revealing homes and offices torn apart for as far as the eye could see, the street littered with blast craters and steeped in a layer of smashed travertine, rebar, clothes, vehicles, mattresses and other furniture. There would inevitably be a few severely charred forms barely recognizable as bodies in the rubble. And if you couldn't pick out the corpses at first glance, all you had to do was look for the black flies that usually swarmed in sickly clouds above the dead.

There's no radiance left here, not anymore, Rade thought after one particularly disturbing street. *Fret was right, we may as well have nuked the place.*

The brigades began to split apart, taking different sections of the city. The battalions within those brigades separated as well, so that there were only two others accompanying the 2nd Assault Battalion. The units paused occasionally to allow the HS3s to complete their scouting of a new area.

Rade felt exposed, even though the digital camouflage of the Zeus mechs changed coloration in realtime to match the surrounding terrain. He continuously scanned the New Baroque style buildings around him, and the rubble. He didn't entirely trust the results reported by the HS3s. While some of the specialized units possessed X-Ray payloads that allowed them to peer through walls at close range, that didn't mean a foe wasn't hiding in the rubble, buried just beyond detection range. And while the X-Rays could readily distinguish organics, machines were harder to discern, especially when powered down. Rade remembered well the giant, mech-like robots he had fought on 11-Aquarii III. If those things hid in the ruins of Radiance, the X-Ray units would be hard-pressed to find them.

"Does anyone else have the feeling we're being watched?" Fret said.

"All in your head," Mauler replied. Though judging from his tone, it sounded like he believed the same thing as Fret.

"In virtual reality games," Manic said. "Whenever someone is walking through a spooky area, and says 'man oh man, feels like we're being

watched,' or complains about it being 'too quiet out here,' that's when the enemies attack. So please, bro, keep the comments to yourself. Don't jinx us."

"Just saying," Fret replied.

"Look sharp people," Rade said. "Don't assume the HS3s have detected everything. Chief, can we get permission to manually clear a few of these buildings?"

The chief paused. "The Major says we can go right ahead. Just as long as we don't delay the HQ company behind us. Handle it."

"Thank you, Chief," Rade said. "TJ, Manic, Lui, Grappler, clear the home on the right. Cyclone, Mauler, Bomb, Keelhaul, do the same on the left. Be as thorough as you can, but make it quick. Everyone else, hold up."

The platoon paused while the designated fire teams moved into their respective buildings.

"Kind of polar opposites, aren't they?" TJ said at one point. "Make it quick, but be as thorough as you can..."

"I think the order is clear," Tahoe aka Cyclone replied.

Thank you, my friend.

Up ahead, the armored carriers continued to advance. Behind Alpha Platoon, the headquarters company slowly closed the distance, though it was still half a klick away.

"Clear!" TJ sent a moment later.

"Clear!" Tahoe echoed a few seconds after.

The fire teams jogged back into place.

"Advance!" Facehopper sent. "Full sprint."

When they closed with D Company once more, Facehopper had the platoon return to its previous marching pace.

Rade continued to randomly search buildings like that during the advance, but his teams never found anything.

Eventually the second battalion separated from the others and proceeded alone through the rubble. Shortly thereafter, C Company split off to search a side road, with plans to rendezvous with D Company—and Alpha Platoon—at the next avenue.

Ahead, D Company led the way, turning on to a roadway of blue-veined marble. Fluted columns lined the street; the capitals were carved with vines so lifelike Rade could have almost believed they were real. A drained

fountain resided in the center of the path. In the middle of the fountain was carved a white dove, its wings spread wide.

The fluted columns gave way to the rubble of the buildings that had collapsed on either side. The treads of the armored carriers ground loudly over the sharp stones.

“Company, halt!” Major Walters said over the comm.

The armored units ground to a stop.

Rade glanced at the overhead map. D Company was waiting for the HS3s to mark the street ahead as clear.

Rade used the opportunity to dispatch two more fire teams into intact homes nearby.

Switching to the point of view of the scope inside the cobra laser of his left arm, he scanned the rubble beside him from right to left. He narrowed his eyes, zooming in on a few of the gaps between toppled pieces of marble, searching for anything out of the ordinary. Nothing stood out.

When he reached the far end of the ruins, something made him repeat the scan. The whole area was marked green by the HS3s of course, but his subconscious told him there was something off about the place, something he couldn’t quite place. As he retread his sights across that rubble, he paused, then slid the scope back a few millimeters.

There. Was that what he thought it was?

He zoomed in.

The hairs at the nape of his neck stood up.

Buried there in the rubble was a glowing red light, hidden between the crevice formed by two fragments of travertine.

It might be nothing.

But then again, it might be what they were all dreading.

“Chief—!” Rade said.

“What is it?” Facehopper transmitted.

Rade kept the scope of his laser pointed at that red glow. “Found something the HS3s might have missed. Check my scope POV. Sky, highlight.” A bright green square abruptly overlaid his vision, centered around that glow; it would show up on Facehopper’s augmented reality display.

“I see it,” the chief responded. “Bender, Snakeoil, investigate.”

The Zeus units of Bender and Snakeoil moved into place. Bender took

up a position close to Rade, and aimed both his cobra and his lightning weapon at the target.

“Go ahead, Snakeoil,” Bender said. When Snakeoil didn’t move, Bender added. “What? You think *I’m* going to check that shit? You’re mistaken.”

Snakeoil hesitated a moment longer, then activated the shield on his left arm. He held it in front of him as he advanced, and kept the electrolaser weapon in his right hand firmly pointed at the rubble the whole time.

Snakeoil stumbled a few times on some of the loose debris, and nearly lost his balance once, but he always kept his weapon on target.

He arrived at the crevice and bent down. He retracted the electrolaser so that his hand was free, and he reached toward the opening...

He gripped the topmost piece of rubble and tossed it aside. He cleared away the adjacent debris. Then he picked up the glowing unit. A long cord trailed from it into the rubble.

Snakeoil turned his mech toward Rade. “It’s just the HLED brake light of some personal rotorcraft buried in the rubble. Still connected to the battery.” Snakeoil yanked the cord from the light and the red glow faded. “Piece of junk.” He tossed the unit aside and it landed with the sharp crack of breaking glass.

“For MOTHS, you boys sure spook easily,” someone in D Company sent.

“Company, resume!” Major Walters said over the comm.

Rade glanced at the overhead map. Once again, the HS3s had marked the next street as clear. Throughout the city, so far every explored area was similarly labelled. That didn’t ring quite right with Rade.

“Clear!” TJ reported in from the house he had been assigned to search.

“Clear!” Tahoe said a moment later from the other house.

Before Rade could give the recall order, the rubble exploded around him and all hell broke loose.

Debris struck Rade's mech, littering the ground around him as a giant robotic figure emerged from the ruins. It towered seven meters tall, twice the size of his own mech. Like the Zeus, the color of its metallic skin changed to match the terrain behind it in realtime; that blending was so perfect, so seamless, that Rade almost couldn't see the thing—if his HUD hadn't outlined the tango in red, he might not have noticed it at all. There were no obvious weapon mounts, but that could have been because of the camouflage.

And then its chest piece spiraled open.

Instinctively Rade dove to the side.

A red spectrum laser erupted from the focusing mirror situated inside the torso. It cut clean through a fluted column behind Rade: the structure toppled a moment later.

Rade clambered to his feet but before he could react something struck him in the chest and he was sent hurtling backward. He crashed into the fountain set into the middle of the path. He broke through its outer rim, colliding with the dove of peace, which finally arrested his momentum. The base cracked and the statue tumbled to the ground beside him. It crumbled upon impact.

On the diagnostics display, Rade noticed an obvious dent marring the chest region of his Zeus.

"What the hell hit us?" Rade said, starting to get up.

"The robot," Sky responded. "It's fist, more precisely."

"Taking fire!" Fret's urgent voice came over the line.

From his position several meters away, Rade watched as the robot attacked his brothers.

Rade started to get up, but thick tentacles abruptly enwrapped him from behind, pulling him tight against the cracked base of the fountain. He struggled, but was pinned.

Fortunately one of his arms was free. He lifted the fist toward the black tentacles and activated the incendiary nozzle above the knuckles.

Flames seared into that slimy skin, and the tentacles abruptly whipped free. A terrible squeal came from behind him.

Staying low so that he could use the base of the fountain as cover, he turned around.

Four meters away, lurking at the heart of those tentacles, was a maw possessing large, serrated teeth. Rade was reminded of an enormous squid, minus the body, because besides that mouth it was all tentacles. Like a kraken from the deep.

Green slime suddenly spewed from the maw, forming a large stream that struck Rade. His vision went dark.

The wipers and defoggers activated on the camera lenses and vision returned a moment later.

He aimed a Hellfire from his right shoulder mount directly into the heart of that tentacled nightmare and fired.

The kraken exploded in a surprisingly satisfying mess of gore: tentacles and teeth flew outward in all directions. Blue blood smeared the pavement of the nearby walkway.

One of the flying tentacles landed on Rade's Zeus, slinging over one shoulder. He swiped it off.

Weapons were going off all around him. His platoon members had taken cover behind whatever was available—columns, debris, buildings. They fended off more giant robots and krakens.

Rade glanced at his overhead map. Red dots representing enemy units had sprung up all over the city, next to the various companies. And more of those dots were appearing all the time. Alpha Platoon and D Company weren't the only ones under attack. No, it was a coordinated, citywide ambush, launched from those places the HS3s had previously marked as "clear." And it wasn't something the division could simply call in an airstrike for: the attackers were too close, the collateral damage far too easy to inflict. But while "precision" bombing might be out of the question, the Raptors were no doubt providing air support with their long range cobras as the opportunities presented themselves. Rade just hoped the drones wouldn't be shot down.

He returned his attention to the fighting at hand but before he could select his next target, the AI spoke.

"Rage?" Sky said. "Our external hull layer is melting."

"What?" Rade dropped to the very bottom of the fountain, taking cover behind the remnants of the rim. "A laser attack?" But if that was the

case, why hadn't the AI automatically moved him out of harm's way?

"No," Sky said. "It appears the slime coughed up by our tentacled friend is acidic. Some of it, anyway. Specifically, the slime that struck our torso region."

"Shit." Rade glanced at his body. Smoke was rising from the armor of his chest area. He tried wiping it off with his arms, but he succeeded only in smearing the acid.

"How long until the hull is breached?" Rade asked.

"Fifty seconds," Sky answered.

He checked his overhead map and spotted a potential out.

He clambered over the rim of the fountain and raced across the battlefield.

"Rade, where you going?" the chief sent.

"I'll be right back!" Rade said.

A kraken tried to intercept him.

He fired at it with his cobra, slicing off three of the tentacles. Ribbons of blue blood spurted from the stumps. As he passed the creature, he shot his fist outward and smashed the thing into one of the nearby columns.

Smoke continued to rise from his mech.

"Forty seconds."

He leaped onto the rooftop of a nearby house. His arm abruptly bent inward, and he knew Sky was maneuvering it away from a laser blast.

He hurried to the other side and leaped across to the next building. Three rooftops later he reached the adjacent street, where C Company was fully engaged—Bravo Platoon fought alongside them. Some of the troops had piled out of their armored carriers, taking cover in the rubble around them. Others fought from inside the vehicles, using the weapons turrets.

"Bravo, could use some covering fire," he sent their chief, one Scott Ryerson. "This is my intended path."

"Roger that," Ryerson returned when he received the data. "We're occupied here, but I'm getting Major Rao to redirect some of his robots."

The armored carrier closest to Rade was surrounded by a platoon of robot soldiers dug into the rubble: they were the Marine versions of Centurions. From their various hides they concentrated laser fire on targets within line of sight of Rade's route, forcing the enemy into cover.

Rade leaped down from the rooftop and hurried into the fray. He fired

his zodiac at a three-meter tall robot that was hidden behind a nearby concrete barrier. The resultant plasma channel caused a sonic boom that shook the air; the electrical bolts struck the robot and sent it hurtling backward.

Incredibly, it started to get up again. The impact should have disabled it entirely, but apparently the lightning had only sheared one of its arms clean off. An unlucky shot.

He fired a missile at it and kept running.

“Are you through?” the chief asked.

“Not yet.” Rade scaled the rubble of a nearby house, finally reaching the ornamental lake he sought. “I’m through.”

“Five seconds,” Sky said.

He dove into the water.

“Tell me that worked, Sky,” Rade said as he sunk to the bottom. He was ready to abandon the mech if he needed to.

“That worked,” the AI returned.

He exhaled in relief. He wouldn’t have to lose the Zeus after all.

“How brittle is our front armor?” he asked.

“I recommend deploying the shield until further notice,” Sky said. “Try not to take too many direct hits to the torso. None would be best.”

Rade trudged through the clinging branches of the plant life that lined the bottom of the lake. He kept expecting one of those kraken to attack, but eventually he pulled himself unmolested onto the beach.

Right at that moment a tentacle wrapped around his leg. The source: the water behind him. He fired his laser at the tentacle, and when the slimy limb tore free he swiveled around and launched a missile into the lake. The surface erupted in blue blood and black tentacles.

He activated the body-length shield on his left arm as he returned to the street where C Company and Bravo Platoon were pinned.

Staying ducked behind the ruins of a wall, he fired at a robot he spotted crouching inside the window of a house across the street. He terminated another he picked out on a nearby rooftop. As he downed a third robot, he began to grow antsy: while he wanted to help C Company and Bravo Platoon, he wished to return to his brothers as soon as possible. He could hear the terse communications exchanged by members of Alpha Platoon crystal clear over the private band, thanks to the multitude of

repeaters in the area. And while Chief Facehopper was doing a hell of a job leading the men, Rade felt his place was with his brothers at the moment.

“Ryerson,” he sent. “Could you ask the company to lay down some suppressive fire again?” He transmitted his new intended course.

“Roger that,” Bravo’s chief returned. “Major Rao says you’re a go!”

Rade hurried across the street as Centurions once more unleashed hell in all directions. It wasn’t good enough: he sensed movement from a nearby window, and dove to the asphalt as a laser tore into the air above him. He rolled, scrambled to his feet, and continued his run. He fired off two Hellfires at the window and didn’t wait to see if the rockets struck.

He heard the explosions behind him. The detonations sounded too near, and he knew the Hellfires had detonated prematurely—probably shot down by the hidden robot.

He quickly jetted atop the house that had brought him to that area in the first place. He immediately dropped to the roof tiles and sent Bravo’s chief: “I’m through.”

He crawled from the edge, eventually rising to a crouch. He paused to scan his surroundings; he spotted two of the giant robots positioned on the edges of different rooftops ahead, aiming down into the streets. Rade terminated the first with his laser, sending the beam clean through its chest region. He sent the second flying from the roof with a burst of lightning.

He crossed the five rooftops to the adjacent street, where Alpha Platoon was holed up. He dropped to the roof tiles and crawled to the edge, joining the two Zeus mechs prostrate there: Trace and Snakeoil. The latter was guarding the rear while Trace aimed out into the streets.

“There you are, boss,” Snakeoil said. “We were just about to send a couple of people to get you...”

“Sit-rep?” Rade sent.

Trace answered. The sniper kept both arms of his Zeus pointed over the edge, obviously sighting a target. “Tangos have pinned Cyclone’s fire team in one of the houses. The tangos are dug in deep. Haven’t been able to get a bead.”

Rade surveyed the battle below. Trace targeted a house with a columned portico. Rade didn’t see any of the enemies on the thermal band, but according to the dots on the overhead map, four of them resided behind those columns. Directly across from that house, to Rade’s right, was the

smaller home where Tahoe and the fire team were pinned.

“Why not shoot a laser clean through those columns?” Rade asked.

“We tried that,” Trace said. “You see the bodies of those creatures in front of the portico?”

Rade gazed at the tentacled beasts. “The krakens?”

“Sure. They were working with the robots. Spat up some kind of white liquid. It hardened instantly, coating the columns with a thin, crystalline substance. Our cobras and zodiacs can’t penetrate it. Definitely some kind of insulator, and its thermal dissipation properties must be through the roof.”

“They can spew two types of phlegm, then,” Rade said. “Because one of them attacked me with acid earlier.”

“We’ve seen that behavior, too,” Trace said. “Sometimes from the same creature.”

“Did the krakens coat any of the robots with those crystals?” Rade asked.

“No,” Trace said. “I think it would immobilize the machines if they did that. But it’s why the two fight in concert. When you find a robot, there’s usually a kraken nearby.”

“I hate to ask the obvious,” Rade said. “But did you try concentrating your cobra fire onto a single one of those crystallized columns?”

“Yup.”

“What about a missile?” Rade asked.

“They’ve got Trench Coats of some kind.”

Rade frowned. “No Trench Coat will protect against multiple missiles fired in rapid succession, not at this range.”

“Yeah well, take a look at this then.” Trace transmitted footage from an attack attempt.

In the video, the platoon launched ten Hellfires from different directions and at the same time toward the portico. From behind the columns emerged a blur of metal, and all ten missiles detonated in midair before reaching the target.

“Well that’s no good,” Rade commented. He understood then why the Hellfires he’d launched at robots in the adjacent street had proved ineffective.

“Kind of wish these mechs had grenade launchers,” Snakeoil said.

“Wouldn’t help,” Trace replied. “Not against countermeasures like

that.”

“If their Trench Coats are anything like our own,” Rade said. “Eventually they’re going to run out of homing charges.”

“It’s possible,” Trace said. “Feel free to waste your rockets to find out for us.”

Rade decided he didn’t particularly want to do that.

He switched to the point of view of Mauler, who was a member of Cyclone’s fire team. He was crouched beneath one of the windows, the arms of his Zeus positioned over the windowsill above him and ready to fire on any enemies that might present themselves.

Rade accessed Mauler’s rearview camera to study the interior of the house. He spotted the dismembered remains of a kraken that had erupted from the middle of the floor and attacked them, but otherwise saw nothing of interest. He did notice that the entire rear wall had collapsed inward, preventing any exit from that vector. They could probably dig their way out, or drill through with their cobras, but attempting either while the enemy had them in its sights across the street wasn’t the best idea.

Rade switched back to his own viewpoint and glanced at the overhead map. On the far side of the street, Facehopper and the remainder of the platoon were occupied by other tangos. Dead kraken littered the roads, and Rade could see the telltale signs of crystalline reinforcement on some of the buildings.

Every one of the brothers was taking cover: some Zeus mechs had burrowed into the rubble on the streets; others were crouched in alleyways; the rest were dispersed inside houses and on rooftops. Always they resided in pairs at a minimum. They didn’t have the luxury of impenetrable cover, like their opponents, and had to constantly watch for the tangos to reveal themselves, and pray that they were able to shoot them down before the enemy let off a shot first.

The new camouflage tech present in the Zeus II models seemed to help: it made the mechs hard to discern even on the thermal band, and in theory each unit only readily appeared when it fired.

Rade returned his attention to the portico where the tangos that pinned Tahoe and his team were hidden. His eyes drifted to the street below.

“What about that channel?” Rade said.

Rade was staring at a runnel that had been carved into the road beside the target building. It ran along the entire length of the street, and wound in behind the portico. It looked big enough for a man in a jumpsuit to crawl through inconspicuously; it was probably caused by some stray laser fire, perhaps from an orbital defense platform or something of similar firepower during the initial invasion.

“What channel?” Snakeoil said.

Via his HUD, Rade placed a green highlight over the runnel. “If we can send someone in there, we’d be able to take the tangos completely by surprise.”

“It’s possible,” Snakeoil said. “But whoever goes will have to leave their mech behind. Only a jumpsuit will fit in there.”

“I know.”

Snakeoil took a moment to respond. “I don’t like it. If the targets spot him, we’ll have another pinned brother. And the volunteer will be completely exposed to any other tangos that decide to join the fray on the nearby rooftops.”

“We’ll provide the necessary covering fire to distract the enemy,” Rade said. “And if any newcomers arrive on the rooftops, we’ll take them out.” With the HS3s hovering overhead, and other aerial surveillance units transmitting the positions of any enemies to them, it was highly unlikely Rade or anyone else would miss a new arrival.

“Still a risk...” Snakeoil said.

Rade glanced at the bearded, expressionless face of Snakeoil’s mech. “Everything is a risk in this life, Snakeoil.” He hesitated a moment longer and then made up his mind. He retracted his shield to free up his cobra. “Chief, I’d like to borrow Harlequin if you don’t mind.”

A few minutes later Harlequin was crawling through that long groove hewn into the street. The Artificial was clad only in a T-shirt and cargo pants. Rade had overestimated the depth of the runnel—the jumpsuit had proven too bulky, so Harlequin had removed it. The Artificial was completely vulnerable out there. But it *was* a robot, Rade reminded himself, and even without an

exoskeleton Harlequin possessed superhuman strength.

Rade and Trace had laid down a stream of covering fire with Tahoe's fire team, alternating between lasers and electrolaser bursts, allowing Harlequin to enter the runnel unnoticed. They kept up that suppressive fire, timing the blasts so that someone was always firing while the others recharged: Rade wanted to keep the tangos in the portico sufficiently distracted.

Over one shoulder Harlequin carried four rifles looped together into a thick bundle. The Artificial had taken the liberty of borrowing the weapons from the storage compartments of other mechs. Once in position, the plan was for Harlequin to switch between rifles in rapid succession, allowing the Artificial to surmount the weapon recharge interval and eliminate all four enemies hiding behind the portico at once.

The tense moments ticked past. No other tangos appeared on the rooftops around them. Rade kept an eye on the overhead map. So far, the various companies and platoons in the area had kept other enemies at bay.

Harlequin followed the groove around the portico, and advanced until he was crawling alongside the enemy—according to the overhead map.

"I'm in position," Harlequin said over the comm. "Tangos are in sight. They haven't noticed me."

"Proceed with takedown," Rade said. He and the others ramped up their covering fire, unleashing a few missiles to further distract the enemy.

The entrenched tangos launched countermeasures; the missiles detonated in the middle of the street.

Rade was about to tell the Artificial to hurry up when all four red dots vanished from the map.

"Targets terminated," Harlequin said.

Rade, Trace and Mauler remained in position, providing overwatch while Tahoe emerged from the building with his fire team.

"Escort Harlequin back to the chief," Rade instructed.

"You got it." Tahoe led Harlequin and the other members of his fire team at a crouch through the street.

Staying low, Rade, Trace and Mauler moved forward on the intact rooftops, mirroring the movements of the fire team. They had to leap down to circumvent a pile of rubble at one point, and then clamber back up onto an adjacent rooftop. When they neared the remainder of the platoon, they

dropped to the roof tiles and crawled to the edge of the current building.

At that precise instant, the chief was in the process of performing an outflanking maneuver against his own enemies, judging from the layout of the red and blue dots on the overhead map.

“Now!” the chief transmitted.

The red dots winked out at nearly the same time.

“That looks like the last of them,” the chief sent. “For now.”

Harlequin loaded into his waiting mech.

“Good job, Harlequin,” Facehopper said.

“Thank you, Chief,” Harlequin replied.

Facehopper turned toward the other Zeus units. “I believe it’s time we lent a hand to D Company.”

On cue the voice of Major Walters came over the comm.

“Alpha Platoon, help open up a path on our six,” she said. “We’ve got orders to pull back.”

“You got it,” the chief returned. The irony of her timing wasn’t lost on the chief, judging from the slight amusement in his tone. “Mates, prepare to clear a path to D Company. Rage, take us out.”

“Bounding overwatch, people!” Rade said. He divided the team into two squads, S1 and S2. Members of the latter provided overwatch while S1 advanced at a crouch behind their shields. S1 took cover after fifty meters, and its members in turn offered overwatch to S2 as the latter leapfrogged them.

On the overhead map, red dots indicated where enemy units blocked the retreat of D Company up ahead. There were about thirty tangos distributed across various homes and ruins. Rade hoped those tangos would prove incompetent, leaving their rear unguarded. But when incoming laser fire forced S2 to take cover, that hope was quickly dashed.

S1 joined them shortly, taking cover behind different collapsed structures along the outer perimeter.

“Snakeoil, Mauler, watch our rear,” the chief ordered. After a moment, he transmitted: “Major, they’re dug in pretty tight. But I think if we coordinate—”

“Never mind,” Major Walters interrupted. “Our airstrike finally got approved. Clear the casualty zone immediately!”

Rade glanced at his overhead map. A big red circle had appeared on

the map, centered on the enemy units. While none of the members of D Company were within the confines of that circle, the edges clearly overlapped Alpha Platoon by several meters.

“Bloody hell!” Facehopper said. “Move back, mates! Go go go!”

Rade launched two missiles at the enemy to provide some covering fire, then he spun around to flee. His Implant overlaid the casualty zone directly onto his vision, and colored the street below him a bright red. The boundary of that death circle terminated fifteen meters in front of him.

He could hear the craft roaring past far overhead.

He wasn’t going to make it.

Rade activated his jumpjets. He wasn’t the only one.

A high-pitched keening filled the air.

He thrust with everything he had.

He was right on the perimeter of that circle when the massive explosion sent his mech hurtling forward.

He crashed into the street and slid forward several meters along the asphalt, striking smaller, loose objects along the way. His vision turned black as a debris cloud filled the air.

When he finally ground to a halt, he lifted his head and switched to the thermal band. He spotted other members of the platoon distributed randomly around him. Like him, they were all prostrate.

He glanced at the left side of his HUD, where the vitals of his platoon members were arrayed. He was relieved to find every last one of the indicators colored green, with a ping time of one millisecond indicating that the updates were the latest.

He turned his torso around to scan the remains of the street for any surviving tangos, but he saw nothing on the thermal band. “Stay down, and keep your eyes on the target zone, people.”

After a moment Fred said: “And the pilots brag that their airstrikes are capable of *surgical precision*.”

“Surgical precision, my ass,” Bender said. “That strike had the precision of a poorly-aimed sledgehammer.”

“Well, on the bright side, at least the impact didn’t generate enough G forces to liquify us in our suits,” Manic said. “Hey, it’s happened.”

“If it struck a little closer to the left, we would have been liquefied all right,” Fret said. “Mechs and all. Though incinerated is probably the better

term.”

“Goddamn that Major,” Grappler said.

“Consider this,” Facehopper said. “When she called in the airstrike, we hadn’t yet moved into position. The bombers were using the coordinates she had relayed. When the Brass approved it, we likely still resided outside the casualty zone.”

“But the pilots would have seen our friendly dots move into the casualty zone before they dropped the bomb,” Grappler said.

“Maybe, maybe not,” Facehopper said. “Even so, the approval was already there. And the pilot might have thought the friendly dots were an enemy trick. I’ve heard reports of the same over the comm.”

“What, you mean enemy units are spoofing our signals?” Lui said.

“Some of them, apparently,” Facehopper said.

“That’s not good,” Bomb said.

“No,” Facehopper agreed. “It’s not good at all.”

Though the vitality indicators were all green, Rade performed a roll call anyway, as required by regulations. When he got to Keelhaul’s name, the MOTH didn’t answer.

“Keelhaul?” Rade repeated.

“I’m fine,” Keelhaul finally replied. “That blast just knocked the wind out of me, is all.”

“Alpha Platoon, sit-rep?” the voice of Major Walters came over the comm.

“Oh look at that,” Bomb said over the private line. “She finally remembers to check in on us.”

“We experienced a near-miss,” the chief replied over the main. “A bit shaken up, but otherwise we’re fine.”

“Good to hear it,” the major replied. “Looks like the enemy tangos on our six have been eliminated. We’ll meet you on the far side of the blast crater and then continue our retrograde. Headquarters company is waiting for us.”

“Rage, you know what to do,” the chief said.

“S1, proceed to the blast crater,” Rade said. “The rest of us will stay here and provide overwatch.”

The members of S1 began to carefully make their way through the murk. They soon reached the huge blaster crater—all that was left of the

street.

“What a mess,” Bomb said.

D Company arrived. Enemy units were harassing them from the rear, and Alpha Platoon helped provide covering fire, utilizing a bounding overwatch retreat pattern with the troop carriers.

When the dust cleared, or they moved beyond the perimeter of the cloud—Rade wasn’t sure which—he switched back to the visual band. Plumes of smoke billowed skyward everywhere around him. Above, the sun was hued a blood red.

That was when he spotted it, coming in from the northern horizon.

If doom had a corporeal form, Rade was looking at it.

Got some kind of incoming ship!” Rade said.

Other platoon members paused to follow the gaze of his mech.

“Where the hell did that come from?” TJ said.

“Did anyone else notice one of the mountains is missing from the northern landscape?” Manic said.

“Damn it,” Bomb said. “Damn enemy ships masquerading as damn ordinary mountains.”

The massive vessel possessed the same dodecahedron design as the other enemy ships Rade had seen, and it was colored a midnight black against the smoke-filled sky.

One of the armored carriers split in half down the middle beside him; a long groove melted into the solar-paneled asphalt in front and behind it.

Rade suddenly understood where the runnel Harlequin had used to get in behind the enemy had come from.

“Incoming laser fire!” Snakeoil said.

Rade rolled to the ground and dove inside a nearby alleyway.

He switched to the thermal band and studied the incoming vessel. He didn’t see any obvious turrets standing out on the heat signature.

“Sky,” Rade said. “Access the visual data recorded by the platoon the last time we encountered one of these things at close range. Based on that data, extrapolate the positions of the turrets on the current attacker, then track and zoom in.”

A moment later Sky said: “I believe I have found a match. These objects correlate to the turrets you encountered in your previous mission.”

The view zoomed in. He returned to the visual band. The turrets indeed matched what he had seen before.

“Do our lasers have enough power to take that structure out at this range?” Rade asked his AI.

“I believe so,” Sky replied. “If the platoon combines its firepower.”

“Sync your cobra targeting systems with mine, people!” Rade transmitted. He pointed his laser arm at the ship and told his AI: “Sky, keep that turret in my sights.”

He switched to the POV of his laser. Sky automatically moved his arm, keeping the turret in view. Rade waited until all of the indicators on his HUD turned green, meaning the lasers of his companions were synced to his own. Even though the platoon members were distributed at different positions throughout the rubble, their arms—and the lasers therein—would be pointing at exactly the same spot he targeted.

He fired. A tiny black spot appeared at the base of the turret.

“Good hit, Rage,” Facehopper said.

He waited for the weapon to recharge, and released two more such shots in turn.

“Let’s hope that put it out of action,” Rade said.

“I’m not detecting any further emanations from that particular set of turrets,” Sky replied.

Rade nodded. “Sky, target the next turret, if you will.”

“Scanning...” the AI returned.

Tank and heavy artillery battalions from the adjacent streets abruptly joined in. Missiles roared skyward. Large-caliber rounds whizzed through the air.

“Found one,” Sky said.

Rockets and other exploding ordnance struck the ship in rapid succession. More incoming fire came in from gunships that dove past in strafing runs.

Before Rade could fire again, the enemy craft jerked to the right precariously, then crash-landed hard several streets away, in the middle of the city. The impact sent up a large plume of debris.

Rade took to a nearby rooftop, and when the dust cloud settled, he realized that the outskirts of the vessel were only two streets away. It was a miracle none of the companies were struck.

Other members of the platoon had joined him on the roof tiles.

“That was a close one,” Snakeoil said.

Thick doors abruptly folded open along the outer perimeter of the ship. They were ramps, and slammed downward into adjacent structures, crushing them. Out poured swarms of large, black creatures. The high-pitched squeals they emitted sounded part battle-cry, part screams of elation, and they made Rade’s skin crawl.

“Uh, Chief,” Bender said. “Get the major to call in the Lancers?”

Rade zoomed in. The incoming creatures were reminiscent of the hammerheads from 11-Aquarii III with their thin T-Rex-like bodies and sidewise-elongated heads capped by horned crowns. The segmented tails on these variants had even more spikes, however, as did the rest of their bodies for that matter. The four-legged creatures all had those two extra gripping arms in the middle of their torsos, underneath the protruding probosces. But those arms seemed slightly longer, and the talons sharper.

“Looks like we got hammerheads, version two,” Skullcracker said.

“Our alien enemy is ever-refining its weaponry,” Lui said. “Like human beings would do. We got that in common.”

“The question is,” Tahoe said. “Is v2 truly better than v1? Or are they all bark and no bite?”

Rade and the others launched missiles as the hordes approached, and large swaths of the hammerheads were blown apart. They switched to lasers and electrolasers when the range became too short, and at that distance were able to take out two or three enemies at a time with either weapon.

But the enemy ranks kept coming. In moments their positions were overwhelmed, rendering their weapons mostly ineffective. The platoon members were reduced to pounding and bashing, and some of them were swept off the rooftop to the street below in the process, including Rade.

Spikes readily pierced Rade’s already damaged armor, and in only a few moments he had several holes in his cockpit. The inner actuators had prevented him from receiving any bodily damage thus far, but he knew it was only a matter of time...

Around him, the armored carriers of D Company were fighting back with their own defenses. Some of the infantry had emerged from the safety of the carriers, and were firing from behind said vehicles. When the enemy hordes swept over them, those men would be lost, Rade knew. Jumpsuits couldn’t protect a man from these creatures, and the smaller combat robots would fare little better.

“Get those infantry back inside the carriers, Major!” Facehopper transmitted.

It was too late. Centurions were easily sliced in half by those sharp talons. Marines were skewered by those sharp tails.

Rade rushed to the aid of as many Marines as he could, bashing aside hammerheads left and right, and firing his rechargeable weaponry at point

blank range.

“Get inside your armored carriers!” he shouted, using his external speakers—he felt he could get his point across much better that way, rather than over the crowded comm band.

Not that those who remained inside the carriers were doing much better. Several of the armored vehicles had been turned over, and the hammerheads were systematically tearing open the outer shells and pulling out Marines.

Rade beat away the hammerheads from one such carrier, and took up a guard position in front.

The Lancers finally came in on bombing runs. Thankfully the target areas were the crashed ship and its immediate vicinity: the nearby platoons were spared. The explosions tore wide swaths of destruction through the incoming ranks, and even temporarily halted the sally itself because the bombs that struck the dodecahedron unleashed an avalanche of destruction that completely sealed the vessel exits.

But while Rade and the others dealt with the surviving hammerheads, fresh members of the horde shoved aside the rubble from within; members of the swarm emerged in moments, grinding the long teeth of their proboscises, slashing the air with their talons, eager to fight.

“Damn it!” Facehopper said. “We could use some relief here, Major.”

“I’ve been in contact with headquarters,” the major returned. “Relief is coming.”

“Gather the carriers in the center of the street,” Rade sent his men. “We’ll form a defensive perimeter around them.”

Those members of Alpha who weren’t occupied went to the carriers and righted several of them. “Move to the center of the street!” Rade said.

Eventually, D Company caught on, and most of the carriers had grouped together as requested.

As the latest round of the hammerheads swept into their ranks, Rade and the others did their best to protect the carriers. Rade bashed and pounded away, unleashing cobra and zodiac when charge levels permitted it. Behind him, the armored vehicles repeatedly fired their laser turrets into the fray.

“Major,” Facehopper sent. “Now would be a good time for that relief...”

“It’s coming...” she replied.

Rade fought on like that for another two minutes, though it seemed an eternity. Teeth ripped holes in his cockpit. Spikes tore electrical conduits in his arms. Talons severed actuators in his legs. But he battled on.

He wasn't sure how much more of it he could take.

Finally incoming laser fire heralded the arrival of the relief. It came from the direction of Headquarters Company.

On the overhead map, Rade saw that fifty Centurions had joined the fray.

"You call that relief?" Bender said. "Oh that's good!" His voice oozed sarcasm.

Some of the hammerheads began breaking away to deal with the combat robots. The latter fell easily to the creatures.

But those Centurions were apparently a diversion, because as the combat units were terminated, behind them rapid-fire lasers began to eat into the swarms.

Rade saw that other robots had placed mobile M139B Minigun pulse platforms in the middle of the street. Basically the laser equivalents of heavy machine guns. The robots had placed seven in total. The weapons were designed to avoid friendly targets, while tracking and opening fire on any enemy tangos.

The M139Bs constantly adjusted their aim as they unleashed that deadly infrared barrage. The continual squeals the hammerheads made as they died were so grisly, and so loud, that Rade found himself turning down the external volume of his helmet and employing active noise canceling to block it out.

In thirty seconds the platforms began to overheat, despite the liquid cooling, and their individual firing rates were reduced to once every few seconds. By then the enemy dead had formed a thick half-circle ten meters from the platforms, about two meters deep.

The diversionary attack was enough to give Rade and the others a respite. The enemy front had receded enough that they could switch back to utilizing solely cobras and lightning weapons, pausing every few moments to let the devices recharge.

Rade glanced toward the crashed dodecahedron as he fought, wanting to get a bead on the remaining enemy. He noticed that some of the horde were using a side street to attempt a flanking maneuver, intending to come

upon the platforms from behind.

“S2, with me!” Rade sent. He broke away from the others and tore into the front rank. He bashed his way forward along the shoulder of the road. With other members of S2, he intercepted the flankers just as the hammerheads burst from the side street to attack. One platform fell, but the squad was able to protect the remainder.

Twenty-five more Centurions came up, and they placed five more pulse embattlements. When that was done, all of the Centurions dropped right there on the road, burrowing into the rubble, and added their firepower to that of the pulse weapons.

More enemy dead were added to the wall.

Artillery rounds from adjacent streets landed in the midst of the incoming enemy.

The Lancers flew past overhead, pounding the ship once more.

Eventually, the combined effort wiped out the incoming hordes, and the attack simply ceased. Rade found himself looking around, searching for something to kill. Beside him his platoon mates stood out from the rubble, the camouflage features negated by the black blood that coated their mechs.

A final bombing run came. As the dodecahedron collapsed in upon itself from the damage, more foes streamed out from other openings. Rade zoomed in on a few of the emerging combatants, intending to fire, but he lost sight of them as they either dove into the rubble or vanished in the rising dust cloud.

“Retreat, mates!” the chief said over the comm. “The mobile platforms will cover us!”

D Company rolled over the wall of bodies and around the platforms, and continued its retrograde. The Zeus mechs from Alpha Platoon provided escort.

They rendezvoused with C Company—whose members had been similarly waylaid—and soon reached the headquarters company. Centurions had raised rapid-fire pulse platforms on all sides. Those were removed, and the armored companies surrounded HQ Company as the battalion retreated. Alpha Platoon took point, joining several Centurions, while Bravo Platoon was delegated to the drag position. Other mechs from HQ Company joined both platoons. There were ATLAS 5s, Hoplites, and a few older models.

“The major sends word,” the chief sent. “We’re to rejoin the brigade

here.” A waypoint appeared on the overhead map, about two kilometers from the current position. “Two other battalions are expected to join up with us on the way.”

“Rejoin the brigade...” Manic sent. “Who’s bright idea was it for us to split up in the first place?”

“The division commander’s?” Trace said.

“Displaying the usual overconfidence,” Lui said. “And over-reliance on technology.”

“He’s probably never fought a real battle before,” Fret said.

“Neither have you,” Bender teased.

Alpha Platoon and the other battalion members fought their way back through the areas previously marked as clear. Whenever an attack came, no matter the form, the troops dug in and the Centurions raised the defense platforms anew. Laser-based targeting designators were employed against entrenched enemy units, and the coordinates were transmitted to the bombers. Unfortunately, sometimes the tangos carried missile launchers and anti-aircraft lasers with them, so that two of the bombers and several gunships were lost during the retreat.

Different types of enemy robots began to appear, of all makes and models. Either they had been deployed by that dodecahedron, which was obviously a troop ship of some kind, or they had been hidden in the rubble like the previous attackers. There were the roaches and scorpions Rade and his team had encountered on 11-Aquarii III, and other, newer four-legged variants that his platoon members called tigers and bears—the former resembled saber tooth tigers with their long teeth and size, and fired lasers from the ear regions, while the latter resembled bears with large plasma generators tied to their backs. One particularly nasty variant was the “mechanical egg layer,” which looked like a tracked troop carrier, but when its ramp went down it released a horde of small, face-sized spider robots that swarmed over targets and employed lasers to drill through armor at close range.

There were more humanoid robots, ranging from man-sized to three times the size of the Zeus mechs. Sometimes the Implants of the battalion members erroneously identified the tangos as friendlies, and Rade often found himself overriding that setting. Apparently Facehopper was correct about some of the enemy units having the ability to spoof UC signals. It didn't help matters that one particular enemy model employing that spoofing tech was nearly indistinguishable from a Centurion... the only differentiator was the hands, or lack thereof: the alien models had rifles and blasters soldered directly into the forearms.

There were also more kraken and the occasional hammerheads, along with two other bioweapon families: one could best be described as a giant,

dual-horned rhinoceros beetle, the other an ostrich with taloned forearms and a beak filled with razor-sharp teeth—basically a feathered velociraptor.

The tangos didn't always kill, either: the enemy dragged away kicking and screaming human prisoners when the opportunity presented itself. Sometimes the opponents even seemed to launch guerrilla missions whose sole purpose was the capture of prisoners: tangos would attack from the east and west of the battalion; then a group of velociraptors would sneak in from the north, tearing open one of the carriers while rhinoceros beetles with them rushed forward and attacked everything else in the immediate area. The velociraptors would retreat while the rhinoceros were dealt with, and when the dust settled the battalion would find the empty troop carrier sitting there abandoned on the sidelines.

“What do you think they're doing to the prisoners?” Manic asked one time.

“You remember what they tried to do to me?” Keelhaul said. “Or what they succeeded in doing with our chief scientist?”

Rade shuddered when he thought of Keelhaul lying there inside the enemy ship with those long needles drilled into his head. And then there was Lieutenant Rebecca Vicks, the chief scientist, her mind replaced by a neural network of nano-machines.

“They're converting them,” Tahoe said. “Every man that we lose, I swear, we'll probably have to face again on the field of battle.”

“We haven't fought against other human opponents yet...” Lui said. “Hell, we haven't even found any civilian survivors.”

“How do you know those tentacled creatures, or other bioweapons, weren't once human?” Tahoe replied.

As the battalion continued toward the rendezvous area, Rade dispatched Bomb and TJ on a mission to outflank an entrenched enemy sniper, as the bombers were tied up in another region of the city. In half an hour the pair reported the tango as down, and the battalion proceeded onward once again.

They finally arrived at the waypoint. None of the other battalions belonging to the brigade had yet arrived, so Rade and the others dug in and waited; they defended against constant enemy skirmish attacks.

Two hours later, when the brigade was whole again, a new waypoint appeared on the overhead map, and the troops continued their tactical

retrograde.

By the time they finally rejoined the majority of the division, six hours in total had passed since the fighting began. The combined brigades spent the next hour retreating to the outskirts of the city, with the support of the bombers—the UC still had air superiority, thankfully. The enemy did manage to down another bomber and gunship along the way, however.

Upon nearing the outskirts of the city, roughly half of the division was called away from the front lines, presumably to rest, and perhaps to help construct a forward operating base.

Centurions erected rapid-fire pulse platforms on the rooftops, behind damaged walls, and inside buildings. Rade and the others of Alpha Platoon found hides for themselves throughout the ruins as well, and they dug in and fought on for the next four hours, wearily eliminating any targets that decided to present themselves.

Someone had found a way to recognize spoofed UC signals, and a patch was issued division-wide. Rade was reluctant to accept a patch during the middle of combat operations, but it passed all external and local security checks so he accepted. Bender and TJ seemed pissed that they hadn't been the ones to develop the hack, and they grumbled about not being given the opportunity.

The pulse platforms were updated with the same patch, taking away the enemy's ability to stage surprise attacks inside the defensive perimeter. Rade watched as enemy Centurion clones were mowed down during one such breach attempt.

Rade had Sky take over during a quiet moment so that he could take a half hour nap. He fell asleep instantly, but was awakened ten minutes later when a troop of mechanical egg layers staged an attack. He helped fend them off, and resolved to take a nap again only when he was relieved. To that end, he had his suit inject the necessary stimulants in hourly doses.

Finally, at the twelve hour mark, a battalion arrived to relieve them.

“Defend the relief battalion!” Facehopper sent.

Once the relief battalion was in place, Rade and the others retreated through the damaged streets. The mechs were no longer shiny, their surfaces covered in dents and perforations, and coated in dust and blood. Several Zeus units limped. Manic's was missing the right forearm, while Bomb's had no left arm at all. The armored carriers fared little better, with hulls partially

caved in, and treads barely intact on some units.

They arrived at the newly minted forward operating base. 3D-printed walls surrounded the perimeter. The printing drones were still at work, adding layers to those walls to make them thicker and higher. In front of it, electrified razor wire had been laid in long, deadly coils that had to be moved aside to allow the battalion entry.

Inside, lining the inner perimeter, Rade saw rapid-fire pulse platforms positioned at strategically-placed embrasures in the wall. One of the platforms abruptly began to fire frantically at some unseen foe outside; Centurions swarmed to the top of the wall there to repel the intruders. Mechs joined in as well. Rade resisted the urge to assist them. Good thing, too, because in moments the attack was over and the defending Centurions and mechs dispersed.

“If you ask me,” Bender said. “We should have raised the goddamn FOB first, rather than charging in all gung-ho.”

“Hindsight is always richer than foresight,” Facehopper said. “Intel and tech pointed to a city clear of foes. Not much you can do when that intel proves wrong.”

“Yeah, well there’s also proper military doctrine and protocol,” Bender said. “I can’t believe you’re defending them.”

“Someone has to,” Bomb said. “If the chief don’t do it, who will?”

Alpha and Bravo made their way to the shared stowage hangar both platoons had been assigned. They dismounted their mechs, but continued to wear their jumpsuits despite the breathable atmosphere on the terraformed world, for fear of a biohazard type attack.

They traversed the small village of containerized housing units, pausing at the “head” or toilet container to take one last dump inside their suits before emptying the contents into the communal latrine.

“I’m kind of glad they’re making us keep our suits,” Bender said while waiting for the auto-sanitization robot to clean his waste release valve. “Definitely don’t need to smell this place.”

“Sure sure, you’re probably wishing you could crack open your helmet and take a big long whiff,” Manic said. “The smell of all that shit in one place is like a perfumed paradise for you.”

“If I wasn’t so exhausted, I’d beat the living crap out of you,” Bender told him.

“Go ahead and try,” Manic said. “You see that black, runny stuff in the latrine hole? You’re going to be covered in it shortly.”

Bender snarled behind his faceplate and seemed about ready to fight, but then he glanced at the latrine and apparently changed his mind—he marched from the unit without another word.

The two MOTH platoons departed the head and eventually found the eight rectangular containers assigned to them. Rade, Tahoe, Lui and Manic wordlessly marched over to their assigned unit. They entered the airlock in pairs, as it fit only two at a time.

Inside the airlock, Rade waited for the sonic decontamination system to wipe down the outside of his jumpsuit, and when the inner door opened he stamped across the linoleum floor, took a bunk and undressed. He inhaled the recycled air of the unit, sitting on his bunk for a long moment. He replenished the suit’s oxygen tank with the provided canister in case he needed to get up in a hurry, and then he shut his jumpsuit away in the storage locker.

He stood over the floor drain in the corner to swab his body with a wet sponge dipped in bottled water; it was too bad that showering in the hydro-recycle containers of the head wasn’t possible while the biohazard warning was in place.

He dried off, turned up the unit’s air conditioning, and then plopped down on his bunk. The others hadn’t bothered to sponge off and were already fast asleep.

He drank the rest of his water bottle and set the empty container down on the floor beside his bed in case he needed to piss in the middle of the night—getting up to relieve himself in the drain would be too much of a hassle in his current state.

Rade didn’t bother to inject a counter to the stimulant he had taken earlier. He simply closed his eyes, and in moments he joined the others in sweet repose.

As the first order of business the next day, Rade had a word with the technician in charge of repairs.

“We’re booked throughout the day,” the technician said over the comm. According to Rade’s Implant, his name was Owen Weasley. “Can’t guarantee we’ll get to your mechs before seventeen hundred.”

“We could be deployed by then,” Rade said. “We need those mechs fixed by eleven at the latest.”

“No can do.”

“Don’t you have any robot techs you can spare to do the job?” Rade asked.

“All my techs are robots,” Weasley returned. “And like I said, they’re already booked all day.”

“What if I could lend you some of my men to help out with repairs,” Rade said.

“Unless they’re the size of small children, they’ll be useless to me,” the technician replied.

He thought of something that might appeal to the man. “Did I mention they were Zeus units?”

“Zeus?” That piqued the technician’s interest. “Never seen Zeus units before.”

“They’re the new model IIs,” Rade said. “Helium-cooled servomotors. Electronic actuators. Thermal-smearing camouflage skin.” An engineer’s dream.

The technician hesitated, then said: “Sorry. Can’t bump you just like that. I’ve already made promises to the captains and majors of other companies. I can’t go back on my word to them. There’s this code the Marines follow, even us engineers. And you know what that code is? Honor.”

Rade sighed. He glanced at the bunks to ensure that Tahoe, Manic and Lui were still asleep. “All right. I’ll give you half a month’s pay.”

“I ain’t telling you how much I make,” the technician said.

“I was talking about my own pay,” Rade said.

“How much do you make?” Weasley asked.

Rade transmitted the amount.

“Sheesh,” Weasley said. “That much? I’m in the wrong business, apparently.”

“What we do is slightly more dangerous than what you do.”

“Except what I do requires far more knowledge,” the technician argued.

“Does it?” Rade said. “The knowledge of babysitting repair machines, maybe.”

Weasley didn’t answer right away. Then: “You’ll give me half?”

“That’s what I said.”

“Done. But I want it up front.”

“I’ll give you a quarter now,” Rade said. “And the rest if you’re done repairing all our mechs by eleven. If you miss the deadline, you’re not getting any more. I want them in factory shape, too, by the way.”

“Factory shape?” The technician whistled. “That’s going to take some extra time. I’m going to have to bump at least two other companies to have your mechs ready by eleven. I—”

“I’m not going to give you a microcoin more,” Rade said. “If that’s where you’re going...”

Weasley hesitated, and then: “How do I know you’ll keep your word?”

Rade was taken aback. “I’m a MOTH, you idiot.”

“And that’s supposed to mean something to me? As I said, I’m a *Marine* technician.”

Rade was about to chew him out but he supposed the man didn’t know any better. The elite units of every service always thought that their men were the best, and their training the hardest. Weasley would have no idea what MOTH honor really meant.

Rade clenched his teeth instead and said: “I’ll keep my word.” He transmitted the agreed-upon initial amount.

“All right, fine,” the technician said. “I’ll have your mechs repaired by eleven.”

Rade tapped out without saying anything more.

“Always sacrificing yourself for the sake of the platoon, huh?” It was Tahoe.

Rade turned toward him. “Thought you were still asleep.” He glanced

at Manic and Lui, both of whom were sitting up in their bunks, also wide awake.

Tahoe cracked a grin. “We’re good actors.”

“Liars, you mean,” Rade said.

“What’s the diff?” Manic leaped down from the top bunk. “So, what’s the plan for the day?”

“The usual. PT. Then breakfast. Then PT again. Lunch. Some more PT. Dinner. ‘You time.’ Then sleep. And at any point during all of that, we could be called into battle.”

“Sounds like fun,” Lui said. “Are you going to lead us in PT?”

“Of course,” Rade said. He originally intended to conduct the sessions virtually over Implant with the other members of Alpha Platoon distributed throughout the housing units, but there wasn’t enough room for proper physical training in the cramped containers. So instead he sent a message to the platoon instructing them to suit up and meet outside.

When the whole platoon had gathered outside, Rade led them in PT.

“Turn down your suit strength enhancements to zero, people,” Rade said. “I want you to lift your own body weight, plus the weight of your suit.”

“You’re a cruel taskmaster, boss,” Grappler said.

“Drop!” Rade said. He fell to the ground and assumed the plank position. “Pump ‘em out! Give me fifty! One! Two! Three!”

By the time Rade reached twenty, he was breathing hard. Those suits weren’t light. He was tempted to activate the exoskeleton to boost his strength, but that would be cheating. As LPO, he had access to the jumpsuit diagnostic information of all the men who served under him, but he didn’t have to check on any of them. He knew no one would cheat. It wasn’t in their nature. MOTHS liked things hard.

“You know, this seems like a waste of oxygen,” Manic complained, panting.

Most MOTHS, anyway.

“Any oxygen breathed by you is wasted,” Bender said. He sounded completely at ease, and not tired at all. It was probably an act, judging from the heart rate reading displayed for Bender on Rade’s HUD, which was about the same as everyone else in the platoon.

“No, think about it,” Manic said. “Our suits have limited oxygen supplies. We should be preserving it for those times when we really need it.

Like when we're sent out into the city."

"If we use up our oxygen tanks, we'll just pick up new ones, bitch," Bender said. "Have you seen the stockpiles? We got enough to last at least a week, if not more. Plus a fresh supply ship arrived just this morning. So I think we got enough."

Because they were talking so much, Bender and Manic were the last to finish their pushups, and the two barely pumped out their last five. Manic barely beat him to it.

"Whose the bitch now?" Manic gasped.

Bender merely grunted in reply.

Rade switched to abs exercises, lying on his back and executing scissor kicks. He stopped three minutes in, when his entire midsection felt like it was on fire. He alternated a few more times between push-ups and abs, and after fifteen minutes of that he had everyone stand up and shake out their muscles.

"Nothing like PT to work up an appetite," Bomb commented.

"We're not done yet," Rade said. "We're going to make a few laps around the base, first."

Bomb's face screwed up behind his faceplate, and he glanced around uncertainly.

Rade smiled, perhaps a little cruelly. "I know what you're going to say. There isn't enough room to jog around the base. But I had the chief architect send me a copy of the blueprints, along with a suggested route. I'm sending it to you now. There is definitely room. It's going to be a tight fit in places, but it's doable. We're going to jog close to the perimeter walls mostly, coming in a few times when the building units get in the way. Let's go. Manic, lead us in the cadence song."

Marines and technicians made way for the crazy MOTHs jogging around the base in jumpsuits. Except they weren't the only crazy people, it turned out. Rade saw one other troop of Marines jogging along a slightly different route in their exoskeletons, and the members of Bravo platoon soon joined in as well.

During the jog, Rade received a private tap in request from Harlequin, and he accepted.

"Hello boss." The Artificial wasn't breathing hard at all, of course. Jogging was nothing to a robot, and the act of respiration occurred mainly to

make the unit appear more lifelike.

“What is it?” Rade said, doing his best not to sound winded.

“Were you happy with my performance in the previous engagement?”

“Certainly...” Rade said.

“That is good news.”

Rade frowned. “Is there something you want to say, Harlequin? If so, please say it so I can get on with my jog. I’m having trouble listening to the cadence.” That was true, but he also had a graphical indicator syncing him to the rhythm of the platoon—not that the Artificial needed to know that.

“Yes.” Harlequin answered. “Well. I was hoping I would be eligible for a callsign now. Seeing as how I singlehandedly rescued Cyclone and his fire team from the robots that had pinned them down.”

“Ah.” Rade sighed. If Harlequin was human, Rade would have definitely granted him a callsign for his heroics. What Harlequin had been through, and what he had done, not just for the current engagement, but the last... well, he had definitely proven his worth. Yet Rade had the rest of the platoon to contend with. Most of them still resented the fact that a lowly machine had been allowed into the venerated ranks of the MOTH brotherhood. If Rade granted Harlequin a callsign, the very act would belittle all that specialized training he and his brothers had undergone, training that the robot had received instantly courtesy of algorithms stored in a microchip. There was a reason that applicants to the MOTH program were required to have existing Implants removed: the instructors wanted pure, raw humanity to put to the test. And once that humanity survived the test, showing that it had the mental fortitude to succeed, that it had *heart*, only then would the molding process begin. Harlequin had entered the program already molded. The Artificial had passed all the qualifications, but no one really knew if it truly had heart. Could an AI even possess that quality of the human spirit?

“I’ll talk to the chief about it,” Rade sent.

“Thank you,” Harlequin replied, then disconnected.

Rade decided to tap in the chief at that very moment. Better to get the uncomfortable conversation over with, rather than putting it off and worrying about it all day.

“LPO,” Facehopper said over the comm.

“Harlequin is asking for a callsign,” Rade said.

“You think he deserves one?”

“He does,” Rade said.

“Well go ahead and give him one,” the chief said. “The assignment of the callsign has always been the domain of the LPO.”

Rade was a little surprised that Facehopper hadn’t tried to talk him out of it. In fact, he was hoping for that very thing, for the sake of his conscience.

“Chief,” Rade said slowly. “If I give him one, it’s only going to stir resentment among the platoon. He’s an Artificial. A machine shoved down the collective throat of our brotherhood. His very presence goes against everything we stand for. I can’t see myself granting him the honor of a callsign.”

“It sounds like you’ve already made up your mind,” Facehopper replied. “As I said, it’s up to you what you want to do.”

“What would you do in my position?”

“I’d probably give him one,” the chief said. “Harlequin has earned our respect by now. He’s proven himself in the crucible of combat, risked his very existence to bring some of us out of harm’s way. He’s one of our brothers now, whether the others like it or not. It’s about time we started to show him respect, however grudgingly.”

“I think the platoon will certainly start to show him respect, Chief,” Rade said. “But by giving him a callsign now, when he’s only just earning that respect, I’ll only be doing Harlequin a disfavor. Ratcheting up the resentment, chipping away all the goodwill he’s gained. I’ll be sending him back to square one.”

“Rage, it’s up to you.” Facehopper sounded slightly exasperated.

“Thanks, Chief. Rage out.” He disconnected and continued the jog.

By the third lap around the base, Rade had made up his mind. He would hold off for the moment. Only when Harlequin did something truly stupendous, perhaps saving the lives of the entire platoon, would Rade give the robot a callsign. Until then, he would just have to manage. Besides, “Harlequin” in and of itself was a kind of callsign. The Artificial had originally shown up with a different name, and Rade had promptly changed it.

After the last lap, Rade led them in an all-out sprint to the mess hall airlock. Inside, Rade clipped his helmet to his utility belt, along with his unwieldy gloves, and after filling up his tray he picked out a table. He set the

helmet down beside him and began to eat.

Harlequin was the first to join him, seeing as how the Artificial didn't have to eat.

"I've made up my mind," Rade told him before anyone else could arrive.

Harlequin's face brightened. "And?"

"No callsign for now."

Harlequin forced a smile. "I see."

"Don't take it too hard," Rade said. "In this platoon, you basically have to move a mountain if you want to be eligible for a callsign."

"But I've checked the records," Harlequin complained. "Others in Team Seven have achieved callsigns for less."

"I know," Rade said. "But that was in the past. We've upped our standards since then."

Bomb arrived, followed by Bender; Rade quickly changed the subject.

"No chicken today?" Rade asked Bender.

Bender scowled. "No. All they got left is steak."

Tahoe sat beside him. "What's wrong with steak?"

"Nothing. But the steak the Marine mess halls serve is best described as rubber. Look at this shit." He sawed at his meat with a knife. "Impossible to cut."

"Hmm." Tahoe said loudly. He retrieved a personal laser fork from the utility belt of his suit and readily sliced himself a small piece. "Seems easy to cut to me."

"Up yours. Give me that." Bender snatched at the fork but Tahoe was the quicker and hid it behind his back.

Keelhaul took the last seat. "Did I miss anything?"

"Nope," Bomb said.

The others arrived, sitting at nearby tables around them.

"I'll show you how to eat steak." Bender angrily unclipped his right glove from his belt and put it on. Then he pointed the index finger at his steak and fired the surgical laser that all of their gloves possessed. He slid his finger across the meat, cutting clean through the steak and the plate underneath.

"How are you powering it without connecting the helmet?" Tahoe said.

“Ain’t telling you, bitch.”

Tahoe set down his fork and gave him a dangerous look. “I’m not a bitch.”

Bender deactivated his laser and looked Tahoe in the eyes. He seemed ready to throw a punch.

Rade was about to intervene when Bender abruptly flashed his gold teeth in a toothy smile.

“No,” Bender agreed. “You ain’t. My apologizes.” He glanced at Manic at the table nearby. “Manic’s a bitch, however,” he added loudly.

Without looking up from his plate, Manic flipped him the bird.

Bomb, Tahoe and Bender finished their first plates at nearly the same time, and went back for seconds. Harlequin got up, too, excusing himself by claiming the chief wanted to see him.

That left Keelhaul and Rade alone at the table. Rade always was a slow eater, but not Keelhaul, who usually finished his meals in time with the best of them. Apparently he wasn’t hungry that day—Rade hadn’t noticed earlier, but he was picking at his food.

“How are you holding up?” Rade asked him.

“Better than ever,” Keelhaul said enthusiastically. “Traveling the galaxy. Kicking the shit out of aliens. I’m living the dream, baby.”

“Try not to be *too* sarcastic,” Rade said.

The brave face abruptly dropped and Keelhaul’s features twisted in angst. He opened his mouth to speak, but closed it. He tried again: “I was just thinking...”

Rade waited, not wanting to say anything that would cause Keelhaul to change his mind and shut-in whatever was bothering him. Rade glanced at the other platoon members seated nearby, then activated the noise canceler built into the table, hoping that by blocking out other listeners he would make Keelhaul feel more comfortable about speaking his mind.

“I was thinking about what happened back on CF III,” Keelhaul continued. “When you and the others risked everything to retrieve me from that alien ship. I don’t want you to ever do something like that again.”

“Then don’t get captured again,” Rade said with a smile.

Keelhaul forced a grin. “I can’t tell you how embarrassed I am about that.”

“I know you are,” Rade said. “But listen, it could have happened to

any of us. Those of us who have been on Team Seven for a long time don't have some magic talisman protecting us from death and misfortune. The fact is, a lot of the time when we're fighting out there, and we win against overwhelming odds without suffering casualties of our own, it's not skill that sees us through, nor even our vaunted training. For the most part it boils down to luck. Nothing more. But don't you dare tell anyone I said that."

"I won't, boss."

Rade nodded. "Good. Fate chose you to be the unlucky one that day. I'm just glad we were able to rescue you in time. I'm sure you'll have a chance to return the favor at some point. In fact, you already have, as far as I'm concerned."

Keelhaul furrowed his brow. "Have I? How?"

"Simply by fighting alongside your brothers."

Rade repealed the noise canceler as the others sat down. Tahoe, apparently noticing the somber expression on his face, said: "Did I miss something important?"

"Nothing," Rade said. "Nothing at all."

Cocooned inside the cockpit of his Zeus mech, Rade lay flat on a rooftop, aiming his cobra over the short wall toward the street below. His point of view resided firmly in the scope of the laser weapon, and he slowly scanned the targeting reticle over the broken buildings.

“Seems like a waste,” Tahoe said from his guard position behind him. “Putting Zeus mechs on overwatch duty.”

“We’re meant for the front lines,” Rade agreed. Alpha Platoon had been completely split up, its constituent members placed under the command of various Marine infantry units. Weasley had finished the repairs and restocked Alpha’s Zeus mechs before eleven, as promised, but Rade suspected the technician had squealed on him to the other companies bumped from the queue, and this was the punishment.

Rade’s current commander, one Captain Philips, had ordered him and Tahoe to provide overwatch while his infantrymen cleared the houses in the neighborhood one by one. The men were digging up any rubble they found inside, and investigating anything even remotely suspicious. Basically, they were doing a far more thorough search than any of the HS3s had done, or could do for that matter. The scout robots were still sent ahead beforehand to give an initial all-clear, of course.

“I don’t think this Captain Philips knows how to integrate mechs with his unit,” Tahoe said. “Though I suppose on the bright side, at least he’s not making us dig up rubble.”

Rade ran his scope over the Centurions digging out a collapsed house nearby. Definitely not a job he envied.

He continued his survey. Other mechs patrolled between the ruined buildings, leading platoons of foot units. Rade felt a twinge of jealousy as he moved his aim onward.

“How’s Keelhaul doing by the way?” Tahoe asked. “He didn’t look too happy this morning during breakfast.”

“He’s fine, under the circumstances,” Rade said. “He still feels guilty about his capture on CF III.”

“Still?” Tahoe said. “After all these months? The man needs

counseling, bro.”

“Probably,” Rade said. “I’ll have him schedule a session with one of the AIs. He was fine up until we deployed again. Combat has triggered a repressed fear or something. He’s terrified of getting captured again. Doesn’t want us to risk our lives for him. I have a feeling he’s going to be ultra-cautious out there.”

“Well that’s probably a good thing,” Tahoe said.

“Maybe,” Rade said. “Unless it starts interfering with his performance.”

Tahoe chuckled to himself.

“What is it?” Rade asked.

“Nothing,” Tahoe said. “Just, well, guess I still don’t really think of you as LPO. And then every now and again you go and do something, or say something like you just did, that reminds me you’re my boss.”

“I might be your boss,” Rade said. “But I’m also your friend. And I hope you never forget that.”

“I won’t,” Tahoe said.

Growing slightly bored as he passed his scope across the landscape, he momentarily changed focus to a random background object. A stadium. Motion drew his eye to several enemy robots rushing up between the aisles to assume ambush positions in the upper tiers. Scorpion units, it looked like.

“Got a squad of tangos,” Rade said. “Stadium at my eight o’clock. Seven blocks north.”

“I see them,” Tahoe said a moment later.

“I’m switching to target designation mode,” Rade said. “Sky, activate the Laser Target Locator, please.”

“Activated,” the AI returned.

“What, not going to claim the tangos all for yourself?” Tahoe said sarcastically. “Boost up your kill count?”

“While it’s a nice thought,” Rade said. “I doubt I could get them all from here. Besides, shoot down one, the rest will dive for cover.” He pointed his targeting reticle at the stadium and squeezed off a nanosecond burst of controlled visual light. The coordinates appeared on his HUD. “Captain Philips, I’m sending over the coordinates of a squad of enemy robots. They’re cooped up in a stadium seven blocks north of my position. I’d recommend a thousand pounder.”

“Got it,” the captain returned. “Transmitting to air support. By the way, what were you doing scoping something eight blocks to the north, when you’re supposed to be covering my unit?”

“Movement drew the eye of my watchman,” Rade lied.

The minutes ticked past. Rade and Tahoe leaped across three adjacent rooftops to assume a new overwatch position when the infantry unit advanced.

A high keening drew his gaze to the north and he watched the laser-guided bomb drop on the stadium. The entire structure vanished in the resulting debris cloud, and a satisfying plume of smoke snaked skyward.

“Purty,” Tahoe said.

“Ugliest thing I’ve ever seen, you ask me,” Rade said.

“What, you going sentimental on me now? Don’t like images of war anymore? Boohoo.”

Rade smiled. “At least you didn’t call me boss.”

Without warning, the roof that Rade and Tahoe had chosen for themselves collapsed. Their mechs fell the two stories to the ground floor inside. Rade hit hard, and a large travertine fragment landed on his leg. He grabbed the jagged piece and shoved it aside, then scrambled to his feet as the dust cleared.

“You all right?” Rade asked.

“Fantastic.” Tahoe shoved a big shard of travertine from his torso and also stood.

Rade surveyed his surroundings. He had thought it was the ground floor, but it looked like he had descended into some sort of subterranean passageway.

HS3s already in the cavern spun toward him from positions farther inside, as did a platoon of nearby Marines.

“Carry on,” Rade said with a wave. He jetted up to the first floor, then smashed his way through the front door with Tahoe close behind.

“Didn’t know there were subterranean passageways,” Tahoe muttered as he stepped into the street.

“Check your overhead map,” Rade said. “Lowest level. A dedicated battalion is mapping the tunnels out with some HS3s. Looks like our alien friends built a few extensions into the sewage system. So far it’s nothing we need to worry about, with only minor pockets of resistance sprouting up.”

Rade jetted onto the building adjacent to the one that had collapsed, and resumed his overwatch of the Marines below.

The infantrymen entered a house two at a time, and in moments vanished from view. He still saw them, or their positional indicators anyway, via the overhead map. Rade scanned the windows and rooftop of the upper floors, and those of the nearby buildings, searching for potential hostiles. The Marines had placed motion sensors in those buildings that had already been cleared, so in theory he needn't scan them again. In Rade's opinion, that was something the robots should have done in the first place, but the division commander, in his infinite wisdom, had decided against it.

"Tango!" Tahoe said.

Rade glanced at his overhead map. A new red dot had appeared.

He quickly turned his scope in the direction. Leaning outside the window of a partially intact home, a robot was holding some sort of rocket or grenade launcher over its shoulder. Smoke billowed from its chest, and Rade knew that Tahoe had already struck the target.

Unfortunately, the missile launched before the unit went down. It was headed straight for the house containing the Marines.

"Incoming!" Rade sent. He launched his Trench Coat in a vain attempt to deflect the missile, but he was too late and the rocket struck the house. The entire lower level exploded outward and the top section caved inward.

"No, no no! Captain, do you read, over? Captain?" Rade glanced at his overhead map. Roughly half of the blue dots representing the Marines trapped there had winked out, indicating their demise.

Via his scope, he surveyed the home where the robot had launched the missile: despite his grief, he had enough presence of mind to search for other enemies. On the lower levels he spotted a group of Centurions rushing the entrance of said home. The first bashed in the door, while the others moved inside in pairs to clear the place. Satisfied that the building was being taken care of, he turned to Tahoe. "Stay here. Watch my back."

Rade leaped down to the street. "Praetor!" He sent to the command robot of a team digging through the rubble nearby. "Get your Centurions over here on the double! We have some buried Marines!"

"Already on the way," the Praetor replied.

Rade hurried to the destroyed house and, using the blue dots of the

trapped Marines as a guide, he began to dig out the rubble.

“Can I come down now?” Tahoe asked over the comm.

“Stay where you are for the time being,” Rade said. “Overwatch, Cyclone.” He used his friend’s callsign to remind him that Rade was LPO.

The Centurions he had summoned joined in shortly, along with a team of corpsmen and Weavers. The latter units were attached to autonomous gurneys on treads.

He uncovered his first Marine. A woman. “Over here!” Rade said. Two Centurions rushed over, along with a corpsman.

The latter knelt to check the woman. She was conscious.

“You’re going to be all right,” the corpsman told her.

Rade backed away carefully, not wanting to disturb the rubble around her, or step on any of the Centurions or other rescue personnel nearby.

“She’s moveable,” the corpsman said.

Upon hearing that, the two Centurions lifted the Marine from the rubble and carried her to one of the Weavers for further treatment.

“We’re going to need a troop carrier to bring them all back,” the corpsman told Rade.

“Chief, we’ve got a collapsed house over here,” Rade sent. “Can you arrange for a troop carrier or shuttle?”

“That area doesn’t have clearance for shuttles,” Facehopper returned. “But I’ll get a troop carrier dispatched on the double.”

“Thank you.” Rade stepped between two of the digging Centurions and hoisted aside a huge beam.

“Careful!” one of the Centurions sent. “You almost collapsed an alcove buried underneath. Dig over there.”

A red area became highlighted on his display and Rade obediently moved to it. While there weren’t any trapped Marines directly under the area, he would be helping to clear several larger beams that pinned down the rubble on the eastern side of the house.

“Rage, pull back!” Tahoe sent.

Wha—” Rade began.

Before he could finish, the body of a dead hammerhead slammed into the debris in front of him; a laser bore had penetrated clear through its smoldering head.

Two more of the creatures leaped down onto his mech an instant later, sending him crashing into the rubble. In moments the entire area was teeming with them. The Weavers and Centurions were smashed, and the corpsmen were dragged away screaming.

Spreadeagled and unable to move under the weight of all the hammerheads pinning him, Rade fired his cobra and zodiac, but because his arms were positioned out to either side, the weapons only struck creatures farther away. Claws and mandibles tore into his cockpit, and spiked tails ripped gashes into the armor of his arms and legs, but so far he himself remained unharmed.

“We have incurred several hull breaches,” Sky said.

“I know that!”

Rade didn’t dare launch a missile from his shoulder mounts, not at that close range: the explosion would melt his mech in the process. But as soon as he gained some distance...

He heard the sound of tearing metal: a harsh, strident noise that seemed to come from beside either ear. Glancing toward his left and right shoulders in turn, he realized the creatures had ripped his missile mounts clean off.

So much for that idea.

“Tahoe, could use some help here,” he said.

“I’m a bit occupied at the moment...” The strain was obvious in Tahoe’s voice.

A nearby Centurion managed to get in a shot before it went down, and the laser bored a hole through one of the hammerheads pinning Rade’s left arm. It collapsed, and he was able to move his elbow enough to fire at the other hammerhead restraining the upper portion of his arm. At that distance, the laser bored directly through three other creatures securing his mech, and

he was able to lift his entire upper body.

When he sat up he unleashed his zodiac electrolaser. Thunder boomed as lightning bolts cascaded between the hammerheads pinning down his legs. Rade scrambled to his feet as they fell, and he activated his jumpjets at the same time.

He had intended to launch toward Tahoe's rooftop, but before he was two meters off the ground more hammerheads leaped up and clamped onto his feet. He applied further thrust and kicked his legs, struggling to escape them, but still more of the creatures latched on and pulled him down.

Rade activated the incendiary throwers in his fists and swept the flames over the ranks. Creatures squealed in pain as the fire consumed those closest to him. He formed a defensive circle of flame around himself. The fire didn't spread beyond the burning bodies, though. The other beasts kept their distance, waiting for the flames to subside—he had hoped the remaining creatures would flee. No such luck.

He unleashed lightning bolts and laser fire into the waiting enemy, pausing only to allow each weapon to recharge. When the flames burned low, he unleashed the incendiaries anew, maintaining the fire shield. He was only able to reconstruct that shield three times before he had expended all of his jetpack fuel.

Rade glanced at the rooftop. No sign of Tahoe. He checked the overhead map. There: Tahoe had been swept into the adjacent street by the multitudes.

When his final fire shield subsided, the hammerheads attacked in full force. Neither his cobra nor zodiac could recharge fast enough, so he resorted to bashing and stomping once more. He enjoyed using the bodies of the creatures as weapons, and more often than not he had a severed hammerhead in hand to swing like a club.

A commotion to the south drew his attention, and he realized the platoon members from the nearby subterranean tunnel had fought their way to the surface; by then Rade was on the far side of the street.

"Stay inside!" Rade transmitted, knowing he wouldn't physically reach them in time. "Use that tunnel as a choke point!"

"Roger that," someone from the platoon returned. The group retreated, and the hammerheads charged the entrance, fighting amongst themselves to be the first to pursue.

The bodies piled up around Rade as he continued to fight. “That’s right, bitches. I can do this all day. Come on, is that all you got?”

A shadow blotted out the sun.

Rade glanced upward.

A giant variant of the hammerhead had appeared. Five times as tall as the others, it towered over him.

“Where the hell have you been hiding?” Rade said. And then he knew: the subterranean passageway. So much for those tunnels harboring nothing the division needed to worry about.

The gargantuan let out a terrible, stentorian roar, then swatted down with one of its forelimbs, sending Rade and the smaller hammerheads immediately around him hurtling into the air.

Rade smashed into the wall of a nearby building, forming a large crater in the travertine before he descended to the street.

He raised his arm, pointing it toward the giant’s last position, but the creature wasn’t there anymore.

Another shadow fell upon him.

He glanced skyward. Too late he realized the giant had leaped, and was fast bearing down on him.

Rade tried to roll aside, but those two feet caught him. His Zeus was crushed underneath like a rag doll. The world turned black.

“Warning, hull integrity weakening,” Sky said.

The world returned as the giant stepped off him.

Before he could react, huge fingers wrapped around him, squeezing his arms to his side, and he was hoisted into the air.

He fired his zodiac, but because of the position of his pinned arms the bolts plowed uselessly into the ground, the sonic boom thundering in frustration from the nearby buildings. The laser from his cobra likewise struck the asphalt in vain below. The giant was holding Rade far out to one side, treating him like some rodent: a deadly one, but a rodent none the same.

The large hammerhead turned away from the reinforcements that were coming, and moved ponderously between the buildings, retreating deeper into the city.

“It’s got one of mine up there, no bombs!” Facehopper’s voice came over the comm: one of the many voices speaking over the line. Confusion seemed to reign supreme.

Rade tried firing again. Once more his weapons drilled futilely into the ground.

In response to his latest attempt, the giant squeezed its fingers tighter around the mech. The metal cockpit moaned terribly as the hull yielded under the strain. Rade felt the actuators that formed the inner cocoon press into his suit, and he knew that even if he somehow escaped, his mech was likely done.

“Systems are failing across the board,” Sky said. “I’m afraid I won’t be of any use to you, going forward.”

Rade wasn’t all that happy to have his suspicions confirmed.

Sky spoke again. “I can perhaps provide a last service to you by self destructing. At some point.”

“It may come to that,” Rade said.

The giant swatted at the air with its free hand, apparently trying to stave off the laser attack of some nearby reinforcements. The hammerhead let out a ghastly howl so loud that the hull of the Zeus vibrated in unison, then the beast collapsed in mid-stride. Rade was thrown free.

When he landed, he couldn’t move. Or see. “Open her up, Sky. Looks like I’m going to have to switch to foot.”

The inner actuators released and the cockpit opened a crack. Rade grabbed the blaster from his belt. But before he could kick the hatch free, clawed fingers wrapped around the rim.

A voice came over the comm. “Rage, are you all right?” The chief. The digital-warping in his voice told Rade he was relatively far away, even with the repeaters that were supposed to be providing coverage overhead.

“Can’t talk now, Chief,” Rade replied.

He waited as those clawed fingers slowly opened the hatch; when the usual-sized hammerhead was completely visible outside, Rade fired at point blank range. The creature stumbled backward with a hole bored through its head.

The cockpit clattered shut.

Rade waited. No other creatures attempted to open it.

“Anything out there, Sky?” Rade asked.

“Unfortunately my external cameras are no longer functional.”

Carefully he raised the cockpit hatch and pulled himself out. He spun around to check his six, but in that moment an ordinary hammerhead struck

from behind, where it had been perched atop the Zeus. It hoisted Rade into the air by the wrist—the same hand that held the blaster. He tried to fire, but his beam shot directly skyward, hitting nothing.

Two more of the small hammerheads joined the fray, and in moments the creatures had disarmed him. He struggled, trying to break free, expecting to be ripped apart at any second. He attempted to engage his jumpsuit jetpack, but realized he had already siphoned all the fuel into his mech to help keep the incendiaries firing.

“Self destruct,” Rade told the AI over the comm.

“You’re too close,” Sky returned.

“Do it!” Rade said.

“It has been an honor serving with you, Rade Galaal.”

“And you as well. Now please—”

The mech detonated before he could finish.

The blast sent him and the hammerheads sprawling. The creatures had acted as a shield, sparing him from the brunt of the explosion, but even so the right side of his jumpsuit had turned completely black, the camouflage layer burned completely away. He was otherwise uninjured, and according to the status indicator the suit hadn’t been breached.

He scrambled to his feet.

“Rage, you all right?” the chief said over the comm, his voice warping slightly. “Rage?”

“Fine, I’m—”

Darkness filled his vision and he felt large arms wrap around his body. He realized a vision shield had been placed over his helmet. Some kind of blocking fabric, or sack. He attempted to move, but the arms gripping him were viselike.

Rade’s inner ear alerted him that he was being hoisted into the air and then carried forward.

He noticed it then: the background comm chatter had ceased. Its absence coincided with the darkness. He heard only the low, guttural grunts of the creatures that held him, and the crunch of debris underfoot, as transmitted by the external microphones on the helmet. His captors were probably hammerheads, judging from the occasional subdued squeals they released, and the answering calls nearby.

On his HUD the chief’s indicator had stopped flashing, and the

associated ping time underneath slowly increased, denoting a loss of connection. All of the other dots on the map had frozen as well, and their ping times similarly rose.

“Chief, do you read? Chief? Anyone?”

No answer. He was cut off from the rest of the division.

That sack served the dual purpose of blindfold and jamming device.

Well, at least now we know why we're not able to track any of the prisoners. Or rather, I know.

He struggled for some time against his captors but eventually decided to save his strength.

It looked like Keelhaul was going to have a chance to return the favor after all.

Albeit a lot sooner than Rade had originally intended.

Rade soon felt his body tilt downward, and then he leveled out again. His position wasn't updating on the overhead map, of course, so he had no idea where he was. From the external sounds his helmet transmitted to him, he thought he was inside one of those subterranean passages beneath the city. After some time, his body tilted upward; the timbre of those taloned feet changed, the echoes becoming muted—he guessed he had entered a building's stairwell.

Once more he leveled out; now it sounded like he was conveyed over a carpeted floor. Momentarily he heard a standard door opening and closing.

His body was abruptly forced backward, and downward. He hit something hard—a table of some kind, he thought. There seemed to be a depression in the center to handle the bulge of his jetpack.

He struggled as clamps were secured over his arm and leg assemblies. A wide strap was tightened over his waist. He fought for a few moments against the binds, but even with the enhanced strength of the jumpsuit he couldn't break free.

The blocking fabric was lifted from his helmet, and he realized he resided in an operating room of some kind. He was strapped to a table. Two unconscious soldiers in Marine jumpsuits lay upon adjacent tables. Their helmets were off, and the tops of their heads were shaved. Black surgical robots behind them had embedded a spiderish array of needles into the exposed portions of their scalps, needles that were connected to the robots by telescoping limbs.

He caught a glimpse of a spiked tail passing beyond the entrance. A moment later he heard a door open and close in an adjacent room. If hammerheads had truly conveyed him there, they must have belonged to a smaller stock to fit the confines of the place. Either that, or they had somehow scrunched up their bodies to fit.

Though his helmet was no longer covered, Rade realized that his position hadn't yet updated on the overhead map; the blue dots of friendlies remained frozen and unresponsive.

“Chief, do you read?” Rade tried.

Nothing.

A man stepped forward. He was dressed in civilian clothing, something a Franco-Italian might wear: a fashionable black dress shirt with red lining the inside collar and buttons, paired with the black pants known as ribbernackers because of the way the fabric formed corrugated ribs along the sides.

He regarded Rade with a bland, almost tasteless expression. “Don’t be afraid.”

“Whoever said I was afraid?” Rade said in the most casual tone he could manage.

The civilian smiled; the expression did not reach his eyes, which seemed completely lifeless. “You’ll be free soon.”

“What if I don’t want to be free?”

The smile became a smirk. “You have no choice.”

An all-black Weaver rolled up. Or at least, Rade thought it was a surgical robot—despite the color, and the dodecahedral shape of the top portion, it looked very much the same as a UC model, complete with disturbing, spiderish limbs. It was the spitting image of those robots that had jabbed needles into the heads of the nearby Marines.

The black Weaver maneuvered in behind Rade and vanished from view. He fought his binds, trying to see what it was doing, but he was strapped down tight.

The man approached, halting beside Rade’s head. He reached across to a worktable beside him and applied some instrument to the helmet. Rade heard a scraping sound all along the outer rim as the man ran his hands around the circumference; then the civilian set the instrument aside, grabbed the helmet and twisted. It came off.

Rade’s face felt suddenly cold, and he was assailed by two smells: the cloying odor of antiseptic, and the faint stench of sweat and urine.

The decontamination folks aren’t going to be very happy.

The overhead map had vanished with the helmet HUD, so Rade reactivated the overlay with his Implant. There was no change in his position on that map. Not surprising, given that the signal strength of the Implant was even weaker.

The man handed the helmet to the out-of-sight robot; Rade heard a crunching racket come from the direction of the Weaver, and he realized the

robot was destroying the helmet.

The civilian slid a vise over Rade's forehead, further pinning him. He removed what looked like a sonic injector from the worktable and brought it toward the exposed flesh of Rade's neck.

"Wait! What are you doing?" Rade struggled against his binds with renewed effort.

The injector touched his skin and he felt a sudden sharp prick in his neck. He flinched.

"Just taking a sample for our records," the man said. As he removed the injector, Rade saw a previously unnoticed vial joined to the device was filled with fresh blood; the man had indeed withdrawn, rather than injected.

The civilian disconnected the vial from the device and placed it somewhere out of sight, then he grabbed another tool from the worktable and leaned in close to Rade's head.

Rade heard a gentle buzzing and felt the pressure of a sonic razor against his scalp. His hair began to fall away. He had only just gotten used to the cooler temperature of his face—now it was the exposed sections of his scalp that felt cold.

"What are you doing to me?" Rade said above the noise.

"I already told you," the man replied. "Setting you free."

"My platoon will find me," Rade said. "They can track me."

"Can they?" the man said. "That's interesting. Because you know, we recently developed localized jamming capabilities. We gleaned the knowledge from that grotesque mass of convoluted tissue you call a brain."

The man finished with the sonic razor and set it aside. He stepped back.

The entire top of Rade's head felt shaved. The civilian had left the sides and back untouched, as well as his beard.

Rade heard a loud click emanate from the Weaver behind him.

"What was that?" Rade said.

The man flashed that lifeless smile of his. "We've learned that we have to destroy any Implants first, before we can begin the main procedure."

The time display his Implant always overlaid upon his eyesight had vanished. As had the overhead map.

Suppressing a rising panic, Rade tried to access the main interface of the Implant. It refused to appear. He tried a hard reset by blinking slowly

three times in a row. Nothing.

“It’s amusing how you soldiers always blink your eyes like that,” the man said. “Trying to reset those devices in your heads. It reminds me of a frog, futilely pumping its legs as it struggles to escape the bottom of a boiling pot.” He leaned in close to Rade’s ear. “The curious thing about frogs, if the pot is brought to a boil slow enough, they won’t even notice the temperature difference. They’re biologically incapable. It’s only when it’s too late, and their muscles begin to grow limp as the involved tissues are irreparably cooked, that they realize their doom.”

“Sort of like what’s going to happen to you?” Rade said.

“No,” the man grinned evilly. “I was referring to you.”

“Well actually,” Rade said. “Scientists discredited that story centuries ago. No matter how slowly you increase the temperature, the frog is going to jump out.”

“Assuming the frog is actually capable of jumping out,” the man countered.

Rade heard the whirring of servomotors behind him as the limbs of the Weaver telescoped. He could imagine the needles emerging from the tips, preparing to penetrate his skull.

“Wait,” the man told the machine. The whirring stopped. “I haven’t rubbed the preparatory solution into his scalp.”

He retrieved a small bottle, placed a cotton swab over the tip, and upturned it. “Hmm.”

Rade swerved his eyes as far to the right as he could, and realized the bottle the man held was empty.

“I’ll be right back,” the man said. He waltzed through the entrance, vanishing into the adjacent room, where he began to hum a happy tune.

Rade smiled malevolently.

Never leave a spec-ops soldier alone.

Rade slid his right limb backward within the arm assembly; he managed to pull his hand out of the glove, so that the knuckles aligned with the external wrist area, where the clamps were secured. He rotated his arm to the right, so that the arm assembly revolved while the glove remained stationary—the clamp secured it in place. He completed a half circle, partially unscrewing the glove, but he could turn his arm no more.

He shoved his hand forward into the glove again and rotated his forearm back into place; the arm assembly retightened slightly, but not enough to negate the work he had done. He retracted his arm again and repeated the process. He became better at it each time, and managed to complete five complete revolutions in ten seconds.

He heard a soft click. The glove assembly had opened. He slid his arm further back, freeing that hand. He kept expecting the Weaver behind him to attack, or intervene in some way, but it did nothing.

He fumbled with the clamp that pinned his other hand, but there didn't seem an obvious way to open it. So he repeated the process with the left arm, and managed to free that hand in another ten seconds.

Aware that he was likely under observation, he surreptitiously reached up and discovered that the vise securing his head to the table was held in place by a simple latch mechanism on one side. He opened that latch, and lifted the vise away only slightly, not wanting to make it obvious that he was no longer secured by it.

He slowly reached across his chest to the strap at his waist. It wasn't a metal clamp, like those that had pinned his arms, and continued to bind his legs.

He felt along the surface until he found what he thought was a locking mechanism. Good. He played with it for a few seconds, but it wouldn't budge. Not so good.

The man was still humming in the adjacent room.

Still lying there, Rade returned his right hand to the clamp that yet constrained his glove. He pulled firmly on the fingers, and wrenched the glove free.

He reattached it to his suit and flipped open the cap on the surgical laser in the index finger. After Rade had seen Bender showing off the surgical laser in the mess hall, he had taken the drone operator aside for a little talk, and Bender had promptly flashed the control chip with a patch that overrode the safety, enabling Rade to power his own surgical laser without a helmet.

He had two options: try to destroy the innards of the locking mechanism, or attempt to cut through the strap. He had to factor in that without his Implant or the helmet, he couldn't adjust the firing rate or the depth of the laser. The preset was one centimeter, with a burst time of one thousand trillionths of a second.

He pressed the tip of the laser against the locking mechanism.

He pushed upward slightly against the fabric of the glove with his index finger, which manually fired the laser. There was no indication the beam had actually activated. No plume of smoke. No sound. He tried to open the locking mechanism. No good. He had tested the laser after Bender had applied the patch, and it was working fine then. Had it been damaged somehow since then?

The civilian continued to hum nearby. His tone seemed to become more eager by the moment. Rade thought the man must be nearly done refilling the bottle.

Have to hurry.

He fired the surgical laser again, and again. Finally, after his fifth attempt, the lock opened.

Rade immediately removed the metallic strap, slid the vise away from his head, and sat up on the operating table.

Rade touched the clamp that pinned down his left boot, but there was no obvious way to remove it. So instead he opened the latches that secured his boots to the jumpsuit, and he slid his feet out of the footwear.

He slipped off the table, leaving his boots and the lone glove still clamped to the surface. He was right about a depression residing in the center of the table to account for the jetpack; there was a small sliding panel just above it, and he guessed it sealed closed for those prisoners without jetpacks.

An alert tone abruptly pulsed from the Weaver behind him. So it was paying attention after all.

In the other room, the man stopped humming.

Rade glanced at the robot, which still lurked behind the operating table, long needles extended in front of it in a claw pattern. It continued to emit that alert tone, with a red light flashing on and off. The vial lay on the counter beside it, connected to a small machine. Rade's blood had been drained.

He looked at the Marines strapped into the tables beside him. One male, one female. The woman still had a blaster strapped to her utility belt.

"Sorry, miss," Rade told the unconscious woman as he removed the weapon. The contours fit his gloved hand perfectly.

Some blasters were "smart" weapons, designed to be operated only by their owners, or members of the same platoon. Most Marines—and MOTHs—deactivated that feature, as it made interchanging weapons during a firefight difficult. He hoped that feature was similarly disabled here.

He pointed at the Weaver and squeezed the trigger.

The beam drilled a two millimeter-wide hole clean through the dodecahedron forming its head. The alert continued.

Rade aimed at the flashing light and fired again. That did it: the light burned out, and the warning tone ceased.

He shot a quick glance toward the doorway to confirm the civilian was nowhere in sight, then he fired at the robot again, aiming for the spot where the power source resided in UC models. Those telescoping limbs drooped.

He gave the Weaver a good kick, toppling it. He unleashed another beam at the device beside the robot that had processed his blood sample.

Next he shot the blaster at the two Weavers that still had needles inserted into the scalps of the Marines. Both robots immediately retracted the long slivers of metal and retreated to the corner of the room. Keeping his eye on the doorway, Rade released a few more shots at either unit until he was certain the robots were disabled.

Rade glanced at the Marines. Though free of the machines, they remained unconscious.

He felt it was partially his fault that the pair had been captured. Those Marines could have been members of the infantry platoon buried in the rubble of the house after the rocket attack. In fact, he thought the woman was the very same Marine he had uncovered from the wreckage. If that was true then he definitely couldn't leave them: it had been his duty to protect every

member of that platoon.

He focused on the doorway.

Before he could rescue them, first he had to deal with the civilian out there.

Keeping the blaster extended in front of him, he approached the doorway. He “pied” both sides of the entrance, moving in a left to right then right to left sweeping motion to scan the room beyond, ensuring that no one was hiding against the wall on either side.

The adjacent room looked like the living area of an apartment of some kind. Two brown leather accent chairs squatted in front of a glass coffee table that had a stylized hookah as its only fixture. There was another empty table nearby, along with a cabinet containing some china. But otherwise, like most homes these days, there weren’t any other curios or knickknacks... most personal items and decorations would be virtual, existing in Implants and aReals only. If he actually had a working Implant, and the local network remained online, he would be able to activate the overlays and see paintings and tapestries on the walls, statues in non-existent alcoves, and so forth, as per the designs of the owners.

To the left, behind the coffee table, a polished counter separated the living room from what he guessed was the kitchen. On that counter was a box of cotton swabs, along with several glass bottles filled with different translucent liquids beside a four-liter polycarbonate container. Beyond it was a window—the automatic blinds were closed. To the right he could see a side hallway. Likely led to the foyer.

He glanced over his shoulder once more to make sure none of the machines—or anything else—were sneaking up on him. The occupants hadn’t moved. He noticed an outline on the back wall, then, and he realized those were bricked-up windows—the operating theater had probably been a large bedroom at one point. He wondered vaguely how many other makeshift operating rooms were scattered throughout the city, ready to inject the minds of the captured with nano-machines.

Blaster raised and at the ready, he turned back to the living room, took a deep breath, and stepped inside at a crouch.

Staying close to the wall, he approached the counter. Still no sign of the civilian.

A blur of motion warned him of an attack.

Rade narrowly sidestepped and grabbed a hand that was attempting to touch a sonic injector to his neck. The hand was sourced from the wall itself.

Rade pulled on the wrist and dragged the civilian from the illusory wall. He shoved the injector underneath the man's chin, hard. The device clicked loudly as the sound waves transferred the drug into his body, and the man became rubber in his arms. He let him drop.

Rade passed his head through the illusory wall and peered into the alcove beyond. Various holographic emitters lined the inner surface. He had heard about these... it was the type of technology that worked well in confined spaces, with emitters specifically designed for the shape and layout of the close surroundings, but it wasn't something easily transferable to the battlefield. But imagine how different the galaxy would be if soldiers, mechs, and even starships could be disguised as innocuous objects?

We'd rule the galaxy.

Then again, he supposed the camouflage skin of the jumpsuits and mechs worked nearly as well. Too bad the skin wouldn't function without a helmet or Implant; as it was, the left half of his jumpsuit was permanently colored to match the background of the operating table, and the entire right side remained black due to damage from the earlier explosion.

He wondered if he could use the holographic emitters in that alcove to ease his return to the forward operating base... somehow he doubted a lone wall sneaking its way across the rubble of the city would prove very convincing to the enemy.

He stepped back into the living room.

Rade considered killing the civilian, but decided that would serve no real purpose. Besides, the man had probably filled that injector with something that would have kept Rade out for hours. By the time he awoke, Rade would be long gone.

Just to be on the safe side, Rade retrieved the spare cord from his utility belt and quickly bound the civilian's hands and feet, well aware as he worked that it was possible the man had gotten a message out.

Rade made his way toward the counter, blaster at the ready, intending to clear the rest of the apartment.

His mind registered more motion, this time coming from the side hall that led to the foyer. He dove to the floor and rolled behind the counter.

A thick green tentacle smashed into the floor behind him. Cracks

spidered away from the impact zone.

Rade leaned past his cover and fired, pitching the blaster down as he did so, and he sliced the limb in half.

An angry scream arose from the hallway.

More tentacles thrust into the room, slithering across the walls and floor, dragging the body of a small kraken with them. Rade fired again, aiming at the open maw. The beast howled and launched another set of tentacles at him.

Rade ducked behind the counter. Slimy appendages skirted around to grab him, but he unleashed the blaster once more; even though the weapon had only recovered half its charge, because of the range the beam easily sliced off the tentacles, causing fresh shrieks to erupt from the kraken.

To its credit, the beast didn't back down. It kept coming at Rade, even when he had sliced off the last of its tentacles; its bulbous body crawled along the floor like a madly hissing, amoebic blob, filled with hate for humanity and all it represented. After a few more well-placed shots, Rade finally put the thing out of its misery.

Staring down at the corpse, he was just thankful that his captors hadn't placed the equivalent of a Centurion at the door. He doubted he would have been able to best a robot, even with the jumpsuit he wore. Not in his current state. He was also glad his captors had neglected to disarm the female Marine.

Once again saved by luck.

Rade wondered what he would do when that luck finally expired.

He hurriedly cleared the rest of the apartment, then paused by the window on the way back. He gestured, and the automatic blinds opened.

He saw that he resided in a more industrial section of the city. The block-light structures of warehouses and factories filled the street, interspersed with apartments like his own. They were made of concrete, not travertine.

His own building was half-buried in the rubble of an adjacent building, which had collapsed into the street. The debris reached almost up to his window.

There's my escape route. More luck.

He was obviously deep behind enemy lines—there was no sign of the UC out there. He glanced upward, searching for air support. Without an

Implant, he had no way of letting anyone know where he was. His image might be caught on camera at some point by UC remote surveillance, but without an Implant to identify him, he could just as easily be mistaken for an enemy by the air support.

He decided the best course of action was to stealthily make his way back to the forward operating base until he encountered a Marine platoon, and hope he could convince them he was a friendly before they decided to take him out.

He just had half an alien-infested city to walk through, that was all.

Stepping delicately over the mangled body of the kraken, he barred the front door with the table and one of the leather accent chairs, then he returned to the operating area and retrieved his boots and remaining glove. The latter he retrieved easily, but the boots took quite a bit of elbow grease, not to mention much levering back and forth, before he freed them from the clamps.

He walked over to the remains of his helmet, hoping he could perhaps salvage the comm node, but the Weaver had destroyed it completely. Too bad.

He went to the Marines, removed their binds with the help of the blaster, and stripped off their jumpsuits, leaving only the cooling undergarments. Unfortunately, their jumpsuits didn't employ jetpacks, so there was no fuel for him to siphon for his own.

He hauled the male over his left shoulder, the female over his right shoulder, and made his way from the room, crossing to the window. By the time he reached it, he was winded. He lowered the pair to the floor.

Even with the strength-enhancement of the jumpsuit, he knew he wouldn't be able to carry both of them for any extended period of time out there. He decided he could only take one of them: he elected to go with the woman.

Looking at her, he hesitated. What if she ended up like Lieutenant Vicks, with her mind replaced by nano-machines? He cast his doubts aside: he had to try.

He opened the window, broke away the safety screen, and surveyed the landscape below. The jump to the rubble was about two meters. His jumpsuit would easily break the fall, even with the added weight of the woman, but he was doubtful about how sturdy the rubble would prove

underneath him. And once he got down there, then what?

With the window open, he heard the soft din of distant fighting: shouts, the firecracker-like explosion of projectiles, the thunder of electrolasers and detonating bombs... but because of all the buildings, which echoed and reflected the sound, he had no idea where it was coming from.

“Which way?” he asked himself.

A plume of smoke blossomed above the buildings several streets away.

Rade smiled to himself.

He gazed at the rubble below him one last time, still unsure how stable it was. It wouldn't do, not at all, to leap down there and find himself trapped by debris a moment later.

He glanced at the foyer, toward the door he had barred. The other option was to take the building's stairwell and attempt to retrace the route the hammerheads had used to bring him there, but he decided that wasn't the wisest course—the route was probably infested with bioengineered beasts. Not that the street below would be any less dangerous...

He scanned the surrounding buildings, and the street below, searching for signs of alien activity, but the area seemed completely dead. He made up his mind.

He lifted the woman's unconscious body in his arms, slid his leg assemblies over the windowsill, and then took the two-meter leap to the rubble below.

When he struck, bricks and pieces of concrete slid away around him, but otherwise the debris held.

He carefully picked his way down the pile, carrying the woman in his arms.

Rade reached the bottom of the debris and continued through the street. He hugged the walls of the surrounding buildings. The alleyways and open doorways were his havens, and he weaved into and out of the shadows, tediously making his way forward, constantly pausing to survey the route through the rather terrible zoom provided by the blaster. He headed south, or the direction he *thought* was south. The roads didn't help with his navigation whatsoever, as the city didn't follow the "grid system"—the byways were randomly named after famous people from Italy's past. *Viale Leonardo Da Vinci* here. *Via Michelangelo Buonarroti* there. Roads turned in upon themselves without rhyme or reason. Streets ended in cul-de-sacs. Cities like these were designed for Implants and self-driving vehicles.

The sporadic sounds of battle arose occasionally around him, but he could never tell the direction. He clambered to the rooftops on occasion to keep sight of that clearing smoke plume, his one guiding beacon in that labyrinth, and when the smoke faded, he found another landmark visible from the rooftops to reorient himself—sometimes a building with a special feature, such as a statue or spire, other times another plume of smoke, when the bombers were so kind.

He spotted what he thought was a robot sniper in a window one time, and he took a shot at the tango from cover. When pottery shards scattered the windowsill beneath the target, he realized he'd just attacked a plant.

He continued forward that way, carrying the woman, pausing every half hour to rest his arms. He touched her forehead to check the fever he had noticed shortly after reaching the streets. It seemed to be getting worse: her head was just burning up. She was certainly sweating profusely, as if her body was fighting off some terrible disease. Rade began to worry more and more about the potential biohazards he was exposing himself to out there.

About an hour and a half after leaving the apartment, the sun set, and he continued on into the night. The stars shone brightly overhead, the constellations strange and unfamiliar.

He wasn't sure if he was headed in the right direction, because soon he began to encounter patrols of alien robots. Sometimes they gave ample

warning, servomotors buzzing loudly before rounding a bend, and at other times he came upon them completely by surprise, and it was sheer luck that he was near suitable cover.

The patrols appeared with increasing frequency, and soon he became certain he was moving farther and farther away from the UC forward operating base, and perhaps toward some alien camp. So he doubled-back and attempted to stay on his new course by navigating via the foreign constellations. It was a task that proved fruitless, because he found himself crossing the same square three times—he knew because of the distinct obelisk at its center that was missing a chunk from the lower half.

It would have been near midnight, standard time, by then. As he was trying to decide whether to proceed or call it a night, the subtle hum of servomotors forced him to take cover in a nearby abandoned house. He carried the woman upstairs and set her down to observe the intruders from a second floor window.

A group of three scorpion robots passed by below, barely visible in the starlight. As they passed out of view at the far end of the street, flashes of light drew his gaze to an outbreak of fighting taking place several streets away. He guessed the skirmishers were about five kilometers distant.

He finally had a destination again.

At that point he heard a soft moan behind him.

The woman had awakened.

He turned around and touched her forehead in the starlight. Her fever had broken.

“Where—” she tried, but then coughed horribly.

“Shhh.” Rade covered her mouth with one hand and said, in hushed tones: “You’ll wake the dead with that cough.” He reached inside the protruding collar of his chest piece and extended the life straw coiled there, offering her a sip of recycled water. “Here.”

She took a tentative taste, then spluttered, finally spitting it out. “Tastes like piss.”

“That’s because it is,” Rade said. “Recycled, anyway. Now drink it. I don’t have any meal replacement fluid left. This is all you’re going to get. A human being can survive for three weeks without food. But only three days without water.”

In the dim illumination of the starlight, she eyed the straw uncertainly,

and then finally wrapped her cracked lips around it.

She struggled to get the fluid down at first, but soon became accustomed to the flavor, and drank greedily. Rade cut off the feed supply when his reserves were down to a quarter, and he retracted the straw, letting it coil up inside the suit just underneath his chin.

She touched the top of her head hesitantly, exploring the areas of her scalp where the hair was shaven. “What did they do to me?”

“I don’t know,” Rade said, which was the truth.

She glanced down at her body. “My suit?”

“I had to strip it off. You were too heavy.”

“Least you had the decency to leave my cooling undergarments,” she said.

“What’s your name?” Rade asked.

“Corporal Anne Adara.”

“Petty Officer First Class Rade Galaal.” He removed his glove and extended a hand.

She shook it. The grip was firm, though not overly so, not like the over-compensating steel vise some female soldiers felt they had to inflict upon men. Confident in herself and her abilities, then.

“Rade?” Her voice assumed a skeptical tone. “Sounds like a bug spray.”

Rade chuckled softly. “Someone I once knew told me that. You remind me of her.”

“I’m not sure that’s good or bad,” she said.

“Probably bad,” Rade replied.

She looked him up and down in the dim light. “Petty officer first class, you say?”

“That’s right.”

“I outrank you,” she said.

“No,” Rade said slowly. “I outrank *you*.”

“Don’t think so,” she said.

“You know nothing about navy ranks whatsoever, do you?”

“Why would I? I’m a Marine.” She said it in a slightly amused, self-deprecatory tone that made him believe she knew very well he outranked her.

“I don’t suppose you have a working Implant?” he asked.

“No. Curiously, mine seems to be offline. Yours, too, I’m assuming?”

“That’s right,” Rade said.

“I was captured, I think,” she said. “I remember being dragged away, and then...nothing. You rescued me?”

“I did. They took me, too. I managed to get away. There was another Marine with you. I’m not sure if he was in the same platoon as you. But I couldn’t carry you both, so I left him. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. I’m glad you bothered to take me along at all. A lesser man wouldn’t have done it. I *am* a stranger from a different platoon, after all.”

“We’re all brothers out here,” Rade said. “And sisters,” he amended quickly.

Her eyes narrowed in the starlight. Or at least he thought they did. “You’re no ordinary soldier, are you?” She reached out, touched his beard with her fingers. “You’re a Snake Eater.” That was navy slang for a special forces operator. He wasn’t surprised the term had migrated over to the Marines, given how often the two services worked together. They had their own slang term for them he was sure, but she was obviously using the navy variant so he would understand.

“Maybe I am.” He wondered how he must look with his head shaved down to the skin on top, with hair still clinging to the sides and back, and a thick beard lining his face. Probably comical.

“I heard the MOTHs were joining us...” Adara continued.

“I can neither confirm nor deny that rumor,” Rade said.

“Yup. You just confirmed it. You’re a MOTH. No one else talks like that. You think you’re a badass, I bet. You know, my company interprets the special in special forces differently than everyone else. As in, special needs.”

“Listen, let’s drop the inter-services competition, at least for a while,” Rade said. “We’re merely two soldiers stranded together deep behind enemy lines, with a common goal: to get the hell out. We have to work together. Artificial divisions along service lines don’t mean anything at this point, especially without Implants. So tell me, are you well enough to walk?”

“I think so.”

“Try it,” Rade said.

She scrambled to her feet and took a few barefoot steps in those undergarments.

“Good,” Rade said. “I was getting sick of carrying you.”

“Would have been nice if you had kept my boots, at least,” she said.

“Extra weight.”

“Doesn’t matter,” she said. “I prefer it this way. I’m stealthier. Like a cat.”

“Good. Let’s get moving then. We’ve already wasted enough time up here.” He started toward the stairs.

“Where are we going?” she asked.

He paused to point toward the window, at the flashes in the distance. “There’s some fighting to the south. With luck, we should be able to make it there in an hour or two, depending on how congested the streets are. We stick to the shadows.”

“I’m a Marine,” Adara said. “Sticking To The Shadows is my middle name.”

“Your middle name...” Rade said. “Please, don’t make a habit of talking like that. It gets to be annoying.”

“Not Making Habits is my middle name,” she teased.

Rade sighed.

Together they made their way down the stairs. Rade was relieved he didn’t have to carry her. He felt far less vulnerable when he had his blaster in hand and at the ready. Plus, his biceps were grateful.

They proceeded in the direction of the fighting. Rade paused to climb the rubble or a rooftop every so often, to confirm that they were traveling in the correct direction, as the flashes weren’t always visible from the street.

Rade turned on to one particular street and quickly backtracked.

“What—” Adara began.

Rade lifted a finger to her lips and made a hasty retreat. He led her to an adjacent street, and when he reached the building that bordered the roadway, he slowly peered past the edge. Once again he forced her back.

He led her to an apartment overlooking the neighborhood, and he climbed the stairs to the top floor. He found an unlocked door, cleared the foyer and other rooms, then brought Adara to a window.

“Look,” he said.

The streets and rooftops below were packed to the brim with dark forms sleeping under the starlight. Large chests rose and fell, almost in unison. There seemed to be all kinds of enemy creatures down there, judging from the dark silhouettes. Hammerheads. Kraken. Rhinos. Velociraptors. And

at least one other family of beast whose vague outline he couldn't identify.

"Why aren't the bombers pounding them?" Adara asked.

"I don't know," Rade said.

"These creatures are visible on the thermal band," Adara said. "I detected them earlier on that spectrum."

Rade frowned. "Like I said, I don't have an answer for you."

"Maybe they're poikilothermic," Adara said.

"Poik what?"

"Cold-blooded. And at night, they generate little body heat."

"That's certainly possible," Rade said. "Though even cold-blooded creatures are visible on the thermal band at night. Even after their bodies have dissipated most of the heat into the environment, they still don't blend in completely, especially larger creatures. Their blood continues to flow, after all, and that in itself will generate heat, however minute."

"But isn't it possible that certain key parts of their bodies might emit most or all of that heat?" Adara argued. "Take an alligator. At night, thanks to brain activity, you can see the head region under the thermal band and that's it. What if these creatures are similar, but instead of their heads being visible, only their undersides are? Maybe when they curl up to sleep at night, they shield the exposed areas with their frigid upper portions. Hiding them from the bombers."

"LIDAR would pick them up, then," Rade argued.

"Would it?" Adara said. "At the range those bombers operate, rubble would be indiscernible from sleeping bodies."

Rade smiled in the dark. "What the hell, are you a Marine or are you a scientist?"

"Both. Sorry to prove your stereotypes wrong." She said that a little too condescendingly for his tastes.

Rade left her at the window. He retreated to the foyer, where he shoved a nightstand up against the door. He grabbed another piece of furniture—a portable closet—intending to increase the barricade, but cringed when the closet loudly scraped the linoleum. He used the strength of his exoskeleton to hoist it completely off the floor before finally setting it into place. Because it was so dark, he didn't notice how close it was to the nightstand, and the two objects collided with a loud thud.

He held his breath, listening, worried that he had alerted some nearby

creature or robot to his presence.

Rade waited, continuing to listen. He heard nothing for several seconds, and finally relaxed enough to breathe again.

“Cocooning already?” Adara said from just behind, startling him.

“That’s the plan, yes,” Rade snapped. “We rest here for a few hours, or until the streets are clear.”

He edged past her, barely making out her silhouette against the dim light from outside—because of the tight fitting undergarments, he could almost imagine she was naked. He had a sudden yearning to wrap his arms around her, but he quickly dismissed it and hurried back to the window instead. Once there he sat down against the wall.

She joined him. Someone had launched several flares a few streets away, so that her features were visible, hued green by the gentle glow. Distant flashes occasionally further brightened her face.

“You know,” she said. “We can try sneaking past them.”

Rade regarded her in disbelief. “You really think we can cross that street without waking a single one of them?”

“Why not? The nearby fighting hasn’t awakened them. And if they’re cold-blooded, I bet they *can’t* fight at night.”

Rade paused. “Actually, that makes some sense. Similar creatures my platoon fought on another world never attacked at night. Hammerheads, we called them.”

“I know exactly which ones you’re talking about,” she said. “Then there are the rhinos.”

“Yep, I’ve met those,” Rade said.

“What about the kraken?”

“Yep,” Rade said. “I’m the one who came up with that name.”

“B Company, 3rd Assault Battalion, came up with it.”

“Whatever.”

“The giraffes?” she asked.

“Haven’t met them.”

Adara shifted slightly and her leg momentarily touched his thigh assembly. He felt the suit fabric press against his skin, and even though there

was no direct skin contact, that brush stirred something inside of him.

He quickly slid his leg away.

“So anyway, as I was saying...” Adara told him. “If they’re cold-blooded, it makes sneaking through their ranks all that much easier.”

“Get that idea out of your head,” Rade said. “We’re *not* sneaking across.”

“Can’t we take the rooftops at least?”

“They’re sleeping on the roofs, too. You saw.” He shook his head. “Look, there must be thousands of them down there. I’m willing to bet they have at least a few sentries among them: if not the creatures, then robots. They work in tandem, you know. All it takes is one robot to sound the alarm. If the beasts won’t attack in the dark, their robot friends certainly will.”

She apparently had nothing more to say, so Rade lay his head against the wall and closed his eyes. It was only taking a momentary rest, he told himself.

One of us is going to have to keep a watch.

Adara broke her silence. “You really think they’re aliens? My sergeant told me they were bioengineered weapons of some kind. Based on human stock.”

“You like to talk, don’t you?” Rade said.

She didn’t answer.

“Okay,” he said, lifting his head. “I’ve heard the same. They’re bioengineered, but not just from human stock; apparently, their genes incorporate base pairs from all kinds of Terran species. But I do think aliens are behind it all. Aliens, using our own genes against us.”

“Why?”

Rade smiled sadly. “You got me there, girl. Who can say what their motives are? They *are* alien, after all.”

“But isn’t it at least possible the SKs are doing this? And don’t call me *girl*.”

“Sure it’s possible,” Rade said. “But unlikely. What would the SKs gain by destroying a Franco-Italian colony? And with bioweapons? Why not use conventional weapons?”

“They’re using robots, too...”

“Again,” Rade said. “Why not use conventional weapons? And why capture people?” And why inject nano-machines into their minds, he wanted

to add, but decided it was best not to alarm her.

“Maybe it’s all one big diversion,” Adara said. “We send our ships here. Meanwhile the Sino-Koreans attack our weakened fleet back home.”

“It’s possible,” Rade said. “But then again, Big Navy only sent one battle group here. The Brass have to be thinking along the same lines. Which might be a mistake, especially considering it’s not actually the SKs behind all of this.”

“Even if the SKs weren’t involved,” Adara said. “The Brass wouldn’t risk too many vessels. We can’t leave our flanks unguarded like that. Not when the Sino-Koreans could attack without provocation.”

Rade shook his head. “Why does everyone think so poorly of the SKs? Oh wait, it’s because of the indoctrination our militaries feed us. I’ve interrogated them. Fought against them. Fought alongside them. They’re not the big bogeymen that everyone makes them out to be. Think about it for a second. Why would the SKs attack their biggest trading partner? Given all the money we feed to their economy? Why would they risk a long, drawn-out war that could beggar their nation, and weaken them to a follow-up attack by these alien invaders? It’s in their best interests to ally with us against our common enemy.”

“I don’t know,” Adara said. “What you’re saying is reasonable, but a lot of the times, the actions of the SKs don’t make any sense. Their government continues to sponsor privateers, for instance, sending them to harry our merchant and cruise ships, even though we’re technically at peace. And then they deny it, claiming that the evidence from our intelligence services is a fabrication. I tell you, SK thinking sometimes seems just as foreign to me as the thought-processes of a bona fide alien.”

Rade couldn’t disagree there.

“Anyway, I guess I’ll allow us to stay here,” she continued. “For a little while, at least. Because you’re right, it’s safer to wait here until the area clears up.”

“You make it sound like you’re in charge,” Rade said.

“That’s because I am.”

“Ha.” He took a sip from his straw. “Here, have some water.” He extended the straw from the suit, offering it to her.

“Drink your piss again?” she asked.

Rade shrugged. “It’s that or dehydrate.”

She drank.

“Who’s in charge now?” he mocked.

“Bastard.”

She drank again and then returned the straw. Rade reattached it inside the collar of his torso assembly.

Quietude, sweet quietude, at last descended.

Until she blurted out: “What happened to her?”

Rade had only just leaned back against the wall. He turned his head lazily. “Her?”

She wiped her glistening lips in the dim light. “You mentioned earlier that I reminded you of someone.”

“Oh. Her.” He hesitated. “Nothing. Only that, we grew apart. It’s not easy holding onto a relationship when the two of you are in the service. Not unless someone wants to quit.”

“I hear you,” the woman said. “Between my first and second deployments, I took some time off. Wanted to explore the world, you know? I ended up meeting a man on a tour craft in Saint Petersburg.”

“Saint Petersburg. As in Russia?”

“Exactly. As fate would have it, he was a fellow Marine on leave. UC. A different company, of course. Anyways, after a few adventures, which included being detained by the Russians and accused of spying, we became a couple. But then my second deployment began, as did his. We tried to keep in touch remotely, even had sex via teledildonics, but it just didn’t work out, you know?”

“I never tried teledildonics,” Rade said. “How did that work out for you?”

“It’s surprisingly realistic,” she said. “Basically, you turn off logging in your Implant, install the device, and then switch your Implant to virtual mode. You can be anywhere you want. A candlelit bedroom. A sunny beach.”

“I know how VR works...” Rade said. “I was more curious about the sensations.”

“They’ve certainly made a lot of advances with the tech. I swear, with that teledildo strapped on, it felt exactly like having him inside me. Without the other sensations, of course, like his arms wrapped around me— I was always afraid of upgrading my Implant to support full sensory stimulation.

Guess I was worried about what would happen if some enemy cyberwarfare specialist happened to break our encryption and transmit sensory inputs in the middle of battle. Guess I should have been more worried about capture.”

Rade had nothing more to add, so he rested his head against the wall once more.

After a moment he said: “It’s too bad we don’t have any motion sensors. We’re going to have to alternate watches tonight.”

“You really think we’ll be attacked in here?” Adara asked.

“Do you want to take the chance that we won’t? That door barricade won’t hold for long.”

“Good point,” she said. “I’ll take first watch.”

“No, I will.”

She shook her head. “You’ve been awake all day. I, on the other hand, only just woke up. It makes sense that it should be me.”

Suddenly suspicious, Rade was reluctant to agree. He studied her features in the dim light. She seemed sincere. But then again, he was never the best at ferreting out liars.

“All right. Take the first watch.” He settled into the corner, closed his eyes, and pretended to go to sleep. He counted down roughly a minute in his head, and then purposely changed his breathing, slowing it way down. He was well-acquainted with the telltale pattern of breathing that came with sleep—when you boarded with a platoon of men aboard a starship for months at a time, how could you not be?

The floorboards nearby creaked, and he sensed motion. He opened his eyes a crack. Adara had stood up.

She walked to the window and held out her hand, touching the glass. The action seemed yearning somehow, as if she wished to return to the forward operating base more than anything. Or perhaps she merely wanted to rejoin her brethren on the infested street below.

She’s not one of them, Rade told himself. He wasn’t sure he believed it.

She stayed there for what he guessed were ten minutes, then she sat down across from him, lifted her knees to her chest, wrapped her arms around her legs, and rested her head in her lap. Then she wept.

Rade had seen enough. He allowed his respiration to return to normal and made a loud yawn, pretending that he had only just awakened.

Her crying instantly stopped.

Tough woman.

“You sleep lightly,” she said, sounding cheerfully. Good liar, too.

“Yeah,” Rade said. “What did you do to wake me?”

“Nothing. Just got up and moved to the other side of the room.”

“Well, don’t do it again,” Rade said.

“Yes, boss,” she replied.

“Now you understand our hierarchy.” Rade decided to lie down. He closed his eyes, intending to sleep for real.

But then she spoke again.

“The man you left behind, what did he look like?”

“You mean the Marine back there?” Rade said. “I don’t know. Like a typical soldier. Not too old. Maybe twenty. Grimy face. Bumpy nose, like it’s been broken a few times and he never bothered to have it reset. Why do you ask?”

“No reason. I just wanted to know a little bit more about the man who died so that I could live.” Adara sighed. “I’ve seen so many people die during my term. First during the Tau Ceti invasion a year back. And now this.”

Rade sat up. “You were at Tau Ceti?”

“I was.”

“No kidding. Small world.”

“Which company were you with?” she asked. “Or were you MOTHs on some secret mission?”

“We were with the Marines for a while, yes. A Company, 1st Assault Battalion.”

“Ah. Well, the fighting got so messy and disorganized back there, we probably fought side by side at some point. Our platoons, anyway.”

“Probably,” Rade agreed.

She paused, then: “How do you deal with all the death and destruction you’ve seen? How do you handle the loss of your brothers?”

Rade wasn’t sure how to answer. He considered his words carefully, and then said: “I once lost a brother I grew up with. His name was Alejandro. We had been through everything together. And I mean *everything*. The ghetto. Hopping the border. Bootcamp. Deployments. To lose someone like that, it’s like having your world ripped away from you.” Rade shook his head. “I couldn’t deal with it. I was in tatters. But a good friend helped me

through it. Tahoe, that's his name. He told me that we have to fight on. And that we have to continue fighting for the rest of our lives. Otherwise, the death of our brother was for nothing. And that's what I did. I'm still fighting, even today."

"Thank you," Adara said.

"Now then, since you're on watch..."

He lay back down and closed his eyes. He listened to her nearby breathing, finding the sound relaxing, if somewhat erotic. Several moments passed; he had nearly fallen asleep when her voice pulled him back from the brink.

"Do you find me attractive?" she said.

He sighed loudly. "You're never going to let me sleep, are you?"

"Do you?"

Rade sat up once more. "Is this a trick question?"

"Not at all."

"Yes you're attractive," he said. "Somewhat."

"Somewhat..."

"The dim light helps," he joked.

"Well, thank you very much." She sounded irked. Not surprising.

"All right, look," he said. "You're the first woman I've interacted with since my deployment began. So of course I'm going to find you attractive."

"I'm not sure whether to take that as a compliment, or an insult."

"Probably a bit of both," Rade said.

"Ever the ladies man," she said bitterly. Then: "You said I reminded you of her."

"Okay, I know what you're getting at," Rade said. "But I can't."

"You can't, or you won't?"

Rade didn't answer.

"I know you want me," she said. "I can tell by the way you look at me. Hungrily."

"Really. You can tell that, when it's so dark." It wasn't a question, but a statement of Rade's own disbelief.

"A woman notices many things in a man," she said. "And it's not so dark."

A momentary flash lit up her face, and he could see the desire written

all over it.

Rade realized he was going to have to make a choice.

"It's because of her, isn't it?" Adara pressed. "That's why you won't do it."

Rade still refused to speak. He didn't trust himself.

"You know that we could die at any time, right?" she continued. "Or be captured again. This could be the last chance either of us has to know intimacy. You said it yourself, she's not your girlfriend anymore. The two of you are star systems apart. You've moved on."

"I never said I've moved on," Rade replied, a little meekly. His resolve was weakening by the second.

"But you should," Adara said. "And that's the whole point, isn't it? *She* has moved on. I guarantee it. I know a few things about women, you see. She's probably with someone right now, at this very moment."

Rade didn't want to believe it.

She crawled across the floor toward him, and then reached out, tentatively, but withdrew her hand when Rade moved away.

"You're not her," Rade said, though he wanted Adara more than anything in that moment.

"I can be," she said.

In the dim light, he could almost believe it was her. Almost.

"Close your eyes," she said. "Pretend I'm her. Say her name when you touch me." When he made no move to comply, she added: "Please. Do this for me. I want to remember what it feels like, one last time. Before it's too late."

Rade closed his eyes. She was right: in his mind's eyes, the warm body he sensed beside him was indeed Shaw.

At last he couldn't help himself.

He reached out, pulled her close, and kissed her passionately.

"Shaw, I've missed you," he said.

"And I you."

He could have sworn that voice belonged to her, and he kissed her even more ardently.

The logical side of him knew it wasn't true. That side wanted him to stop immediately, and it recoiled in outrage at his behavior: that he could betray Shaw so readily, and so quickly, after meeting a new woman. Yet that

part was seared away by the sheer fire of lust raging inside of him, an unquenchable blaze that threatened to devour everything that made him who he was. A fire that had little regard for the contrivances of the logical mind such as moral code and the consequences of one's actions.

The simple fact was, he hadn't been with a woman in over a year, not since the breakup. And he couldn't quench those flames even if he wanted to.

Overcome with lust, he stripped off his jumpsuit frantically, and pulled down the upper hem of his lower undergarments so that his throbbing manhood was in her hands.

"I want you." In the passion of the moment, he wasn't sure if it was he, or she, who said that.

She had hauled down her own undergarments and guided him inside her.

One word repeated in his mind again and again as he thrust thirstily.

Shaw. Shaw.

Rade lay on the floor, spent, unable to find repose. Adara apparently had no such difficulty, because she was fast asleep. She was lying on top of him, naked—they'd completely torn off their undergarments before the second session. Her face cuddled against his broad chest, her breasts pressed into his ribs, her fingers curled into the tufts of hair that decorated his abdominals. He wasn't sure, but in the dim light he thought she wore a wide, satisfied grin on her face.

He resolved in that moment not to feel any guilt.

He and Shaw had agreed to go their separate ways. He had held out for a year, hoping that they would get back together. But it was a futile hope, he realized. He had to live his life. And if that meant having sex with random women on equally random battlefields, then so be it.

It was probably a good thing he couldn't sleep, because one of them needed to keep watch anyway. After about half an hour, he gently shoved Adara to the floor. She'd cut off the circulation in one leg quite badly, so he got up and walked out the numbness in the adjacent room. The skin surrounding the metallic hardpoint embedded in his right shoulder was tender—those protrusions had turned on Adara, and she had suckled the shoulder area like a babe nursing from a teat.

He returned to the main room to quietly pull on his cool vent undergarments, and then he attached the various jumpsuit assemblies. Adara didn't wake up the whole time. It was just as well.

He found a chair for himself, pulled it up to the window, and sat down to wait out the rest of the night.

Morning came.

When the first rays of light touched her forehead, Adara stirred.

"Did I sleep the whole night?" she asked, sitting up to rub her eyes.

"You did." Rade watched the way her breasts bobbed pleasantly from side to side while she did that, and he felt himself getting aroused all over again.

She scowled. "You should have woken me."

Rade smiled in return. "Probably. But you looked so adorable, I

couldn't bring myself to."

The scowl deepened and she retrieved her undergarments in a huff, turning her back to him.

He watched the muscles of her toned arms and tight buttocks ripple as she dressed. Few women had such lean musculature, and it was somewhat of a novelty for him.

"You could at least look away," she said over one shoulder. "As any decent man would."

"I never said I was a decent man," Rade replied. "Besides, I'm enjoying the view."

"Humph!" she finished shrugging on the tight undergarments, then paused beside a mirror to examine herself. "You know, in bootcamp, I cried when they shaved my hair."

"Aww," he said, unable to resist the mocking tone.

"But at least back then, they shaved it all off. Not a partial shave like this. I look like a monk or something."

"It's called a 'tonsure,'" Rade said.

"I don't care what it's called," she said. "As soon as I get my hands on a sonic shaver, I'm taking it all off."

"All right. The streets are empty, by the way."

She turned around to face him. "Good. But before we proceed, I just want to make something crystal clear. What happened last night between us, it was just lust. The sex between two lost souls, trapped behind enemy lines, seeking the comfort of one another's bodies. It doesn't mean anything."

Rade felt a little disappointed, but he said: "I agree completely. In fact, I was just about to say the same."

She searched his face. "Good. Now let's go."

"No," Rade said. "We stay here until I say so."

She frowned. "I'm in charge—"

"No, you're not," he said forcibly. He went to the window frame, peered past the edge, and surveyed the street.

She came to his side, keeping away from the glass, obviously not wanting to be spotted by anyone—or *anything*—below. "I thought you said it was clear?"

"It is," he said. "But I want to wait an hour to make absolutely certain there's nothing waiting for us out there. You're going to be a good girl and

take up a station on the opposite side of the window, and you're going to look at every rooftop, every window, every nook and cranny in the rubble, and then you're going to look again, and again, until that hour is up. Now get over there."

She bit her lower lip, holding back some acidic remark no doubt, then folded her arms and moved deeper into the living room. She crouched behind a couch, crossed to the other side, then made her way to the far end of the window frame. She gave him one last defiant scowl, then began studying the streets below.

Rade found himself regretting what had happened between them: she had seemed far more manageable before the sex.

The time passed uneventfully. Other than a few smoke plumes in the distance, nothing otherwise transpired. They saw neither friends nor foes.

"All right," Rade said. He wasn't sure how much time had passed—without his Implant, he couldn't know. But it felt like an hour. Long enough, anyway. "We're going to move out."

"We follow the smoke plumes?" she asked.

"I always knew you were a quick learner," he quipped.

They picked their way through the rubble-strewn streets, keeping close to the walls.

"I don't suppose we could visit the shoe store?" Adara asked along the way. She nodded to an intact shop across the street that bore a sign in Italian that Rade couldn't read: *Nanda Calzature*. He supposed it meant footwear of some kind.

He glanced at her lower extremities and found himself surprised by the number of cuts and contusions on her feet. He hadn't noticed until that moment, as she hadn't said a word of complaint. Some of the wounds were scabbed over, likely received while traveling the streets the night before.

She was definitely a Marine.

Inside the shop they discovered that the 3D printer had already been looted. That was unfortunate, because the store, like most such shops, didn't have any inventory—all shoes were printed on demand.

They continued through the streets. Blaster in hand, Rade made his way to the rooftops occasionally by climbing stairs or rubble. Those vantage points allowed him to get a feel for a given area, and to scan for enemies. He also did it to reorient himself, and ensure that he and Adara were proceeding

toward the smoke plumes of the latest battle. On the way out of each building, he paused to look for shoes. There were never any.

“What are we going to do when we actually reach the fighting?” Adara asked when they made it to the edge of one such roof.

“Go around it of course,” Rade said. “And join with the defenders.”

A sharp keening cut through the air. Rade heard an explosion, and a large plume of smoke crested the rooftops several streets away.

“And if they drop a two thousand pounder on our heads before we get there?” Adara asked.

“I don’t know,” Rade said. “Have a party?”

“You claim to be a leader, yet you don’t even know how to reassure those who follow you,” she said.

“Trust me, that would have reassured the men that follow me.”

Rade led her forward once more. They gave the billowing smoke a wide berth, not wanting to be the victims of another bomb drop.

Rade heard the engines of a gunship overheard.

We’re definitely getting close, now.

Adara glanced up, then ran out into the middle of the street. “Over here! Over here!”

The gunship spun about. For a second Rade thought the hovering aircraft was going to fire at her. And then a rocket plowed into the craft from the side, and it went down, exploding as it slammed into a nearby building.

Adara sprinted back to Rade and he quickly led her away, hurrying through side streets and alleys: he was worried that she had drawn the attention of the enemy.

Finally, they arrived at what appeared to be the outskirts of a nearby battle. Dead bioengineered creatures littered the street, some of them piled so high that they reached the rooftops of the nearby houses. Rade realized any defenders on those rooftops would have been overrun—the dead formed ramps.

“Looks like we found the friends who blocked our path last night,” Rade said.

On some buildings, the crystalline ejecta characteristic of the kraken coated the outer surfaces. Destroyed robots littered the openings of the structures, their metallic limbs hanging over windowsills and out doorways, body parts glinting in the sun.

He could hear explosions and shouts coming from somewhere ahead. At least, he thought it was ahead—it was hard to tell with the echo. A small plume marked where a smoke grenade had just detonated. Rade guessed it was two streets away.

“So, time to cross enemy lines?” Adara asked.

Rade nodded. “We’ll take a side street. Try to come at the Marines from the rear flank.”

“Someone will be watching their six,” Adara said.

“I’m counting on it. Just wish I had something white I could wave.”

They retreated, ducking into a house as four mixed-platoons of robots and kraken made their way forward over the debris. Reinforcements. The incoming units kept close to the walls of the nearby buildings, much like Rade and Adara were doing.

After the patrol had gone, he waited fifteen minutes to ensure no more enemies were coming, then he led Adara from cover.

He moved perpendicular to the direction the reinforcements had taken, hoping to cut crosswise along the rear perimeter of the battle. When the sounds of combat grew dim, he moved inward once more.

The particular street he chose quickly became a mess of ruined buildings, the structures mostly empty husks holding crumbled walls. He and Adara had to pick their way across sharp fragments of travertine and glass that had spilled onto the roadway. It was so easy to traverse such terrain in a mech, but in the boots of a jumpsuit, not so much. As for Adara, she quickly amassed a fresh collection of nasty cuts and bruises on her bare feet.

“Take my boots,” Rade said quietly.

“No,” she said.

“Take them!” Rade started to remove his right boot.

“You give me that boot, I’m going to kick your ass with it until you put it back on.”

Rade sighed, then continued through the debris. “Damn Marines.”

He spotted a first aid kit in one of the abandoned houses, and he took her inside to bandage her feet.

“There,” he said when it was done. “Those should serve as makeshift shoes.”

She made a detour toward what used to be the foyer of the home, and paused beside a closet. “What do you think the odds are?”

She slid open the closet and her eyes widened. “Finally!” She produced a pair of running shoes. Over-sized, but that was perfect, because when she tried them they fit her bandaged feet almost exactly.

“Things are looking up.” She glanced at him. “Why the dour expression? You’re sad that you don’t get to see me suffer anymore?”

“Not at all,” Rade said. “I’ll cheer up when we actually rejoin the division.”

They continued south, and neared what looked to be a main intersection. Fighting was obviously taking place around the bend, judging from the noises.

“Stay here.” Rade approached the edge of the building adjacent to the street, and peered past slowly.

About a block away, a large horde of bioengineered creatures were attacking an infantry company in relentless waves. The men launched rockets from rooftops and fired lasers into the enemy. The bodies piled up between the wreckage of various street vehicles. Sometimes a beast got through. When that happened, what was once a man became a bloody ribbon.

Guess they’re not taking prisoners anymore.

“We can’t get through *that*,” Adara said from the ground underneath him. Against his orders, she had crawled to the corner and was gazing at the fighting. “It would have been better if we had tried to cross last night, like I wanted.”

“We’ll just go out a little farther then, that’s all,” Rade said. “Come on.”

He retreated, then took the first side street, putting more distance between himself and the battle. He soon turned south once more.

They reached the main street. Rade once more approached the corner of a building and peered past. The combatants looked thumbnail-sized from where he stood.

“So, are we far enough away?” Adara asked.

“I think so. We’ll have to hurry across though.”

“Okay, I’ll go first, you cover me,” Adara said.

“And who’s going to cover me when you get to the other side? It’s too far for me to toss you the blaster. We go at the same time.”

“Fine.”

“Wait for my signal.” He looked both ways down the street, and

scanned the windows and rooftops of the nearby buildings.

“Go.” Blaster in hand, Rade followed Adara into the street. The duo swerved between the wreckage of various vehicles. He expected an incoming missile to strike any second. Or perhaps a laser. Thankfully the pair soon reached the cover of the buildings on the other side, and they stopped to catch their breath.

“That wasn’t so bad,” Adara said.

She inhaled suddenly and fell forward.

Rade caught her. He dragged her across the rubble with one arm while he scanned the street beside them with the blaster in his other hand. He pulled her into what looked like an abandoned pastry shop, and rested her on the floor, propping her upper body against a wall.

“What is it?” he said. “Are you hit?”

Though her eyes were open, they were defocused. She didn’t seem to be breathing.

“Adara,” he tried again. “Adara!”

He searched her body for entry wounds but couldn’t find anything. Still, that didn’t mean she wasn’t hit. A laser with a spot size of one millimeter might not leave any trace at all, cauterizing the surface of the skin as it penetrated.

She inhaled once again, more frantically—as if starved of oxygen—and then slumped forward.

He caught her. She was breathing hard in his arms.

“What happened?” he said. “Are you all right?”

“I don’t know,” she said after a moment. “One moment, I was on the street outside. And then the next, I’m here, sitting on the floor, feeling like I’m drowning.”

He held her there while she inhaled and exhaled. He glanced at her scalp, and saw the small indentations the needles had left, and he wondered if that momentary cessation in breathing was a sign that the nano-machines had replaced the respiratory center of her brain.

After a moment she caught her breath. “Okay. I’m ready to go again.”

Rade helped her to her feet. “Can you walk?”

“I think so.”

He released her. Sure enough, she could. He tore down one of the white curtains and draped it over the back of his jumpsuit. He gave another

one to Adara, too, so that she had something else to cover her body with other than cooling undergarments.

He scanned the street outside with his blaster, then led her out, continuing southward. After five blocks, he turned westward, intending to come in behind the infantry company.

He soon saw an artillery company, camped there in the middle of the road. They were firing over the buildings, toward the combat zone that Rade and Adara had passed earlier.

Rade glanced over his shoulder at Adara. "Let me go first. If shit goes all to hell, see that they deliver my body to Alpha Platoon, MOTH Team Seven. Tell my chief... ah, hell with it."

He wrapped the white curtain around his arm assembly and then advanced into the street, waving the fabric in the air above his head.

He heard a shout and then froze, knowing that he was in the sights of at least a few hidden snipers, both human and robot.

"Don't shoot," Rade said. "I'm on your side. Don't shoot!"

"On your knees. Now!"

Not sure where the voice came from, Rade fell to his knees and lifted his hands behind his head.

As two robots collected him, he realized Adara wasn't with him. He glanced behind, searching the street.

"Adara! Adara!" He looked at one of the robots: "There was a woman with me. A Marine, with the crown of her head shaved."

The Centurion gripping his right-side intoned: "There was no one with you."

"I swear there was. You must have spooked her. You have to go back."

"We'll send a few units to look," the robot said.

A small squad of Centurions quickly loped through the street on lithe, metallic legs.

The two robots loaded Rade into an armored carrier. Another Marine dressed in a full jumpsuit joined him.

"What the hell happened to you?" the Marine said. Behind his faceplate, his features were set in a confused grimace. "I don't read a thing from you."

"No Implant," Rade replied. "Long story."

The Marine had Rade extend his left arm assembly, then he held a reader over the area and scanned the embedded ID buried inside Rade's wrist.

"PO1 Rade Galaal?" the man said.

"That's right."

The Marine proceeded to examine him. A corpsman, then.

The carrier began crunching over the rubble, retreating.

"Wait, what about the woman?" Rade glanced back uncertainly.

"If they find her, they'll bring her back."

"And if they don't find her?" Rade asked.

The Marine shrugged inside his jumpsuit.

When he reached the forward operating base, the Marines immediately transferred him to the decontamination ward, a specialized housing unit on the base. There he was confined to a translucent chamber whose walls were composed of an impenetrable composite of glass, polycarbonate, and PVB. A hydro-recycle container dominated one corner of his cell—he was advised to shower twice a day, once in the morning, and once at night. There was a small head with a toilet and sink. And there was a bunk. Basically a prison cell with a shower.

Since he didn't have an Implant, a robot gave him aReal goggles to use in the interim, so that he wasn't completely bored. Apparently he couldn't wear the contact lens version of the aReal because of his bioprinted eyes.

The whole platoon visited the first day of his confinement, though they had to alternate because only five could enter the small housing unit at any given time. He could hear them clearly through the glass barrier because of the aReal goggles.

"You look like a professor or something with those glasses," Mauler said. No one was allowed to bring any weapons into the decon ward, but with those robotic arms of his, utilized in conjunction with the exoskeleton he wore, Mauler could probably smash Rade out of there if he wanted to. And Mauler would, if Rade asked.

"A professor of degeneracy, maybe." Rade activated tint mode so that the outer portion of the lenses mimicked a pair of mirror sunglasses.

Mauler's eyes drifted to the top of his head. "But maybe you should shave off the rest of your hair. And your beard."

"Not going to happen," Rade said. "You know how long I worked for this beard?"

"Well, the hair at least," Mauler said.

Rade had in fact intended to shave his scalp entirely, but decided he wouldn't anymore, not after that comment.

"Careful," Tahoe said with a twinkle in his eye. "He rebels when told what to do."

“He actually *does* look like a professor, though,” Fret said. “The hair works in a perverse sort of way.”

Bender was giggling. “Sorry, I can’t keep a straight face, looking at you with those shades and that messed up mop. You definitely look like a degenerate of some kind.”

“You know,” Tahoe said. “In physics, degenerate refers to matter at such high density and pressure that gravitational contraction is nullified by the Pauli exclusion principle.”

“The boss might look like a professor,” Fret said. “But Cyclone here is the actual prof.”

“The Pauli what, bro?” Mauler said.

“Two fermions can’t have the same quantum number,” TJ said casually. He had left his arm assemblies at the airlock alongside his helmet so that his jumpsuit was sleeveless—it gave him the appearance of wearing a bulky tank top.

“Fermion...”

“A subatomic particle with a half-integral spin,” TJ continued. He flexed his left bicep so that the rivet tattoos on the arm seemed to move. “Named after Enrico Fermi. One of my ancestors, of course. Helped develop the nuke.”

“And that’s something to be proud of?” Fret said. “Creating a weapon that’s wiped out countless of lives since it’s development?”

“And what are you proud of, Fret?” TJ said. “That you’re somehow better than my ancestor, because you wipe out lives with a laser instead of atomic fission?”

“The lives I end deserve their fate,” Fret said.

“That’s right, keep telling yourself that,” TJ countered.

“Ah, it’s good to see you guys again,” Rade said.

Keelhaul was part of the last group that had come to visit him, which also included Harlequin, Manic, Bender, and Grappler.

“We went out looking for you,” Keelhaul said. “But...” He lips twitched, and for a moment Rade thought he was going to choke up.

“I know, Keelhaul,” Rade said. “Don’t worry about it.”

“We fought for as long as we could,” Keelhaul said, trying again. “But the enemy was too concentrated. They came at us in endless waves. We had to retreat. When we got back to base, I pleaded with the chief to gather

up a bigger search team. I made him tap in the LC. Braggs arranged two battalions for us. We went back out there. We scoured the area where you disappeared. And though we searched and searched, we couldn't find you. When another attack came, we were forced to flee." He stared at his boots. "I tried to organize another search party, but they said it was too late. They said you would have been one of them by now. So we gave up." He swallowed loudly. "I'm sorry for letting you down, boss."

"You didn't let me down," Rade said. "You did the right thing by turning back. The last thing I wanted was to come back and find out that some of you died for me. That would tear me apart."

"But you would have died for me," Keelhaul said. "You would have kept going."

Rade hesitated. He was going to have to lie, he realized. "No, Keelhaul. I would have turned back."

Keelhaul looked up and searched his face. "If you say so, boss."

After everybody had gone, Rade deactivated the internal logging on his aReal goggles so that there would be no record of what he was about to do, then he tapped in Tahoe.

"Hey," Tahoe said.

"Got a favor to ask," Rade said. He activated the noise canceler built into the aReal, and covered his mouth so that any watching AI wouldn't be able to lip read. Just in case.

"Anything," Tahoe replied.

"I'm having trouble getting into the Marine roster list," Rade said.

"I'm locked out, too. Want me to ask the chief?"

"No," Rade said. "I don't want the chief involved."

Rade had already debriefed the chief, of course. He'd told him everything. Well, almost everything: he'd left out the part about sleeping with Adara.

Tahoe was quiet for a moment. Likely considering the ramifications of what Rade was asking. Plus, he would be taking time to deactivate his own local logging. "I'll have a talk with TJ and Bender. Is there anything in particular you want them to look for?"

"There was a woman I met while I was out there," Rade said. "Another prisoner. She disappeared before the Marines could rescue us. She told me her name was Corporal Anne Adara. Find out if she's still missing."

“And if she’s not in the Marine database?”

Rade hadn’t considered that she might have given him a fake name.

“Then put together a list of all the Marines who disappeared on the same day I did,” Rade instructed. “And whether any of them made it back.”

“I’ll get on it.”

“Thank you.” Rade was glad Tahoe hadn’t asked the reason for all the secrecy. In truth, Rade didn’t know himself. He supposed it was because he was embarrassed he had slept with the woman.

A few hours later Tahoe got back to him.

“That was quick,” Rade said as he disabled the logging on his aReal.

“TJ and Bender know their stuff,” Tahoe returned. “That, and they love hacking into Marine databases.”

“So what do you got?”

“There’s no Corporal Anne Adara on the roster,” Tahoe said.

Rade pursed his lips. “Well that’s a bit... unexpected.”

“But I do have a list of all the people missing in action from that day. Sending now.”

A series of mug shots overlaid Rade’s vision, courtesy of the aReal.

He spotted her face immediately. Underneath her picture was the caption: Corporal Juliette McPherson.

“Do we know if all of these soldiers are still missing?” Rade asked.

“TJ tells me their status would have been appended if they weren’t.”

There were no appended notices beside any of the names.

“Thanks Tahoe, I have everything I need to know,” Rade said.

“Is there anything you want to tell me?” Tahoe asked.

“No.” Rade dismissed the call.

The woman had thoroughly deceived him. He started to wonder if she had ever *been* human. Rade couldn’t believe he had sex with her.

He froze, a terrible thought coming to the forefront of his mind.

What if she had sexually transmitted some of those nano-machines to him?

He was suddenly very glad he was under 24/7 observation.



AFTER FORTY-EIGHT hours the decon warden told Rade he was cleared

for duty once again.

“Great,” Rade replied, waiting for the man in the lab coat to open the glass container.

The warden didn’t move. “Before I allow you to check out, there is one little thing that has been bothering me.”

“Oh?”

“You activated the noise canceler in your aReal twice over a six hour period on your first day. You also covered your mouth to prevent any lip reading by the AI. Why is that?”

“I’m an LPO,” Rade said. “Of a navy special forces team. I deal in classified subjects. Stuff way beyond the clearance level of you and your Marine AI. Feel free to take up the issue with my lieutenant commander.”

The warden regarded him suspiciously, then shrugged. A small panel in the glass container clicked inward, then slid aside.

Rade walked through.

The decon warden handed him a box containing a fresh cooling undergarment and jumpsuit combination. “Your friends dropped this off earlier.”

“Kind of them,” Rade said. “What happened to the old one?”

“Everything previously on your person has been burned,” the warden said.

When Rade finished donning the jumpsuit he entered the airlock and proceeded out onto the base proper.

Chief Facehopper tapped in a moment later.

“I see you’re on the move,” Facehopper said. “They’ve let you out of the dollhouse then.”

“They certainly have,” Rade replied.

“Good, come see me.”

As mentioned, Rade had already debriefed the chief fully, so he guessed Facehopper wanted to personally update him on the changed battle space.

Rade reached the chief’s containerized housing unit shortly thereafter.

After passing through the airlock, Rade removed his helmet respectfully. The chief sat in front of a tiny worktable, where he was preparing tea of some kind. He was partially suited—his helmet rested on the counter right beside the heating element.

Other than the table, the only other furniture were the four bunks and their associated lockers—Facehopper shared the unit with Chief Ryerson of Bravo platoon, and two sergeants, none of whom were present at the moment. Like Rade’s own housing unit, a drain in the linoleum floor provided a spot to take a sponge and water bottle shower—or emergency piss.

“So you made it out of the dollhouse,” Facehopper said after Rade removed his helmet. “How does it feel?”

“At least I’ll have more space for PT,” Rade said.

The chief smiled. “That’s the spirit.” His expression grew serious. “So, I was reviewing your written report of your capture. I think we’ve found the woman you mentioned.”

The mugshot of Corporal Juliette McPherson appeared on Rade’s vision. Her name was highlighted in bold underneath the photo.

“That’s her,” Rade said. “Though she told me her name was Anne Adara.”

“Yes, I saw that in your report,” Facehopper said. “It’s her middle name.”

“Oh.” So she wasn’t lying after all.

“She’s still MIA.”

“That’s too bad.” Rade said it as casually as he could, not wanting to betray any interest. He felt bad for having TJ and Bender break into the system; if he had waited a few days, the chief would have told him everything he wanted to know anyway.

“Hm,” the chief said. “You’d think, given all the time the two of you have spent together, you’d at least show a modicum of concern for her well-being.”

Rade shrugged. “It’s war, Chief. Soldiers die everyday. Best not to get too attached to people outside your own platoon.”

Facehopper scrutinized him for several seconds, as if he wasn’t sure he believed him. “All right. So. The reason I called you here is that the Marine cybersecurity division has reported a minor hack of their systems. Someone accessed their roster database. Specifically, the MIA list corresponding to the day you disappeared.”

“That’s odd,” Rade said.

“It is, mate. What’s even odder is that the specialists traced the hack to G Quadrant in the base,” Facehopper continued. “The housing units of

Alpha Platoon belong to that quadrant, along with Bravo Platoon and two other marine companies. You wouldn't happen to know anything about that?"

TJ, Bender, you're losing your touch.

"No, Chief," Rade said. "It must have been one of the others."

"I know certain members of Alpha like to hack into the starships we find ourselves stationed aboard. I've tolerated their behavior in the past. Even encouraged it as a way to hone their skills, and to prod the fleet into patching their systems. That may have been a mistake on my part. Because while it might seem like fun and games to you and them, cyberespionage carries severe charges. Hacking into the databases of the navy is one thing, but hacking into a different military service entirely? Something like that can get the involved parties a dishonorable discharge, Rage. Not to mention prison time. If members of Alpha were involved, and the Marine cybersecurity division ever tracks them down, there's nothing I or the lieutenant commander can do to protect you. Despite everything you've done for us. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Chief."

Faechopper regarded him with those hard eyes for several moments.

Rade felt himself wilting under that gaze. The chief knew he had instigated the hack. Rade was certain of it.

"Dismissed," Faechopper said.

The days passed.

Like the rest of Alpha and Bravo platoons, Rade was randomly assigned to a different Marine company each time he went out. He was granted a new Zeus unit, and he renamed its AI “Sky” in honor of the fallen mech. He managed to tweak the voice and personality settings so that the new AI sounded identical to the old Sky.

Sometimes he left the mech at the base for repairs, and he joined the other infantry in the house-to-house fighting, or acted as a sniper on overwatch. Other times, when he had his mech, he would lead Marine platoons on exploratory operations, opening up new neighborhoods.

He didn’t encounter any further swarms of bioengineered creatures, at least not on any of the patrols he went on. That said, the enemy robots were still dug in fairly well in several neighborhoods, and the seemingly few bioengineered beasts that remained acted as support units for them.

The UC had liberated three-quarters of the city, leaving the enemy with only a fourth. But the foe refused to give up that fourth, no matter how much the artillery and air support softened them up beforehand. The bombs couldn’t be dropped indiscriminately, either—targeting designators were required, and the brass had the final say on whether a drop could proceed. Apparently the senior command was still concerned about civilians that might be trapped in the area.

While there might have been some validity to that concern, for all the times Rade went out, only once did he recover any civilians—a husband and wife hiding with their two boys in the cellar of a ruined building. They had survived on the wine, apparently. Given how bone-thin they were, wine wasn’t the most life-sustaining drink around.

The front line moved daily along the enemy quarter; the UC would gain a hundred meters one day, only to lose a hundred and fifty the next. Still, it seemed only a matter of time until the city was completely liberated: the UC had landed troops on the shoulders of the mountains north of the city, and sent more into the tunnels underneath, so that the foe was outflanked on all sides. Even if the enemy had reinforcements hidden somewhere in the

countryside, they had no way of deploying them—barring the appearance of another dodecahedron troop transport, of course. But apparently all the nearby mountains had been vetted, and there were no more hidden vessels lurking within those rugged ranges. And the fleet supposedly had a lockdown on all orbital approaches, preventing a surprise attack from that vector.

Yes, it seemed only a matter of time.

Once, after a long day of sporadic fighting, Rade returned to base in his mech to find three members of Alpha gathered in the Zeus hangar bay. Wearing their jumpsuits, they were crowded around something in the corner.

Rade parked his Zeus and dismounted.

When he approached, he saw that Bomb was using a stun rod to torture what could best be described as a baby kraken while Bender and Fret egged him on.

“Boss, boss, look what wandered into our hangar!” Bomb said, stabbing at the kraken with the rod. The beast squealed when the high-voltage tip struck its body, and its tentacles flung upward in a starfish pattern. When Bomb finally pulled the rod away, the tentacles collapsed and the creature cowered in the corner once more. “Aww, does it hurt little one?” He stabbed at it again, snarling.

Rade was reminded of a scene from his childhood, when he had lived in the cruel barrio. A scrawny little dog had approached a group of adults eating weevil-infested bread at a picnic table. The dog begged for crumbs. The adults finished the bread, giving the animal nothing. Then they stood up and quickly surrounding the dog. They took turns kicking it, laughing the whole while. Rade watched helplessly from the sidelines, until they were done with the dog.

Rade had lied down on the grass beside the poor animal and petted it. He was careful not to touch the fresh wounds. The dog struggled to breathe—blood trickled from its nose and mouth. In later years he realized its lungs had probably collapsed.

Rade talked to it, tried to comfort the animal. He promised to take it to his hovel and nurse it back to health. “I’m going to make you my pet,” he told it. “You’re never going to want again.”

The dog died right there beside him.

Bomb prodded the kraken again.

“Give me that,” Rade snatched the rod from Bomb. “What the hell’s

wrong with you?”

Bomb stepped back, seeming suddenly scared. He stuttered some unintelligible response.

“How did it get in here?” Rade asked, unable to keep the anger from his tone.

“We think it hitched a ride on one of our units,” Fret answered nervously. “Who knows how long it hid here, wandering around unnoticed? We found it stowing away in a cabinet near the refueling station.”

“All right, well, it’s obviously a baby,” Rade said. “Don’t any of you have any decency? Back away, give it some breathing room. Fret, call in a containment unit.”

They started to move back, but then a plume of smoke erupted from the beast’s side—the sign of a laser impact. The beast leaped straight up into the air, like a cat spooked by a snake. It hit the ground running, using its tentacles to limp past them at a furious pace.

“Hey!” Fret tried to catch it, but missed.

The baby moved impossibly fast toward the hangar door.

Bomb drew a blaster.

Rade grabbed his wrist and shook his head.

Bomb lowered the weapon.

Another plume of smoke appeared as another laser struck the baby. The creature collapsed.

“Who’s firing, damn it?” Rade scanned the hangar.

Facehopper stepped into view from where he had been standing behind one of the mechs.

“You asked if we have decency?” the chief said. “I’ll tell you something about decency. Bomb and I were on patrol today. We’d found our first civilians. Or rather, their bodies. A mother and her baby. Their bodies were crushed. The baby’s head was cracked open, the brain tissue eaten by one of these things, or its ilk. Seems to be a delicacy among our enemy. So don’t lecture the platoon on decency. Because our enemy has none.” Facehopper sighed audibly over the comm. “I know what you’re thinking. We’re better than them. We’re above the evil acts that they do. And while that may be true, we can’t afford to show the enemy mercy. Not any of them. If we had let this thing go, baby or not, someday when it matured it would have killed someone. Hell, it could have killed someone right out there while

it fled the base. It's either us or them, Rage. We're not going to coexist, not in this galaxy."

With a heavy heart Rade journeyed to the mess hall later that evening. Roughly half the platoon was missing at supper, with men still out on patrol with various Marine companies. For those present, morale seemed at an all-time low, despite the fact that their side was apparently winning. The normal banter was replaced with weary numbness. Sure, the usual suspects exchanged a few barbs, and the occasional crass joke was made, but for the most part they ate mechanically.

The Marine platoons fared just as poorly, judging from the relatively subdued atmosphere overall in the mess hall. Most of the soldiers ate quietly at their tables, not saying a word to anyone else. They were obviously exhausted.

"It's times like these," Manic said. "Where it really sucks to be a MOTH."

"But it always sucks to be you," Bender said, in an admirable attempt to bait him.

Manic didn't bother to respond.

They finished their meals, returned to their housing units, and dropped into their bunks.

The coming days proved little better. The funny thing was, Rade was actually becoming accustomed to the grueling schedule. Get up. Perform perfunctory PT. Eat. Fight all day. Return to the FOB late. Eat. Sleep. Repeat.

Upon reflection, accustomed probably wasn't the right word. Resigned was more how he felt.

He thought of Adara on occasion, wondering what had happened to her out there. Had she turned into one of those bioengineered creatures, like some members of his platoon suspected happened to the MIAs? Or had she become more like Lieutenant Vicks, someone who was only half human. Or perhaps he had rescued her in time, before the strange Weavers could inject nano-machines into her brain. If so, maybe she was surviving out there in the buried ruins of some hydroponics factory or other food store. It was a pleasant thought, but altogether false, he was sure. The likeliest answer was that she was dead, in one way or another.

And then he received a message.

It was the fifth night since he had returned to duty. He had just

finished supper, and was lying on his bunk in the housing unit, transcribing his report for the day.

His messenger flashed.

“Hey.”

The sender showed up on his aReal as one Corporal McPherson. Adara.

“Very funny,” Rade sent back, letting his aReal transcribe his words. “Is that you, Tahoe?” Manic lay on another bunk nearby, apparently sleeping, while Lui and Tahoe were still out in the city.

“No, it’s me,” came the response. “Adara. I was finally picked up a few days ago.”

Rade sat up so fast he nearly hit his head on the overhead bunk. He activated his noise canceler and disabled aReal logging.

“What the hell happened back there?” Rade asked. “Why didn’t you surrender with me?”

“After you’d gone, I got spooked. So I hid in a nearby house. Let’s just say, my psychological state was a bit delicate at the time.”

“Where are you now?” he sent. “In decon?”

“No. I finished serving my time yesterday morning. I’m on my way back from my first mission since returning.”

“I see,” he replied. “So you’re completely fine then?”

“Completely. The warden gave me a clean bill of health.”

Rade found that somewhat surprising. *Guess I was wrong about her.* “Oh. Okay. Well, welcome back. Corporal Juliette McPherson.” He hoped the aReal transcribed the emphasis he’d placed on her enlistment name. Probably not.

“Yes, well, I prefer Adara. It’s my middle name.”

“So I’ve heard,” Rade replied.

“Been checking up on me, have you? That’s sweet.”

“Try not to be too sarcastic or anything,” Rade sent.

“Sorry, it’s my nature.” There was a pause, then the next message read: “I’d like to see you tonight. I want to tell you something.”

“That’s probably not a good idea,” Rade messaged. “Just tell me now.”

“It’s not really something I can talk about over the air.”

Rade sighed. “I don’t know,” he sent. “I’m kind of busy.”

“All right,” came the reply.

“I was expecting a little bit more fight from you,” Rade sent.

She didn’t answer.

Do I really want to see her?

“What time were you thinking?” Rade sent.

“Zero two hours.”

It seemed obvious she wanted to have a sexual rendezvous. Why else would she want to meet at two in the morning standard time? Wait, the planet had a twenty-eight hour day. It might not actually be dark at that time. He checked the day-night schedule on his aReal. Yep, definitely dark.

“You want to meet in the middle of the night?” Rade sent.

“Yes.”

He should have said no. But the thought of holding that tight little body in his arms again...

No. I’m not going to sleep with her.

“All right,” he found himself saying. “Did you have a place in mind? Or do you want me to ferret one out?”

She sent the coordinates. It was some storage unit out near the perimeter. It had an airlock.

She definitely wanted to have sex.

“See you at oh two hundred,” he replied. His voice had suddenly developed a rasp, and he had to manually correct a few of the words the aReal incorrectly transcribed.

After she disconnected, he lay back on his bunk, thinking about what he would do to her that night.

Well, at least I have something to look forward to each day. Like when Shaw and I used to meet aboard the Royal Fortune way back when. Good times.

Shaw. He felt a surge of guilt when he thought about her. He tried to convince himself what they had was over, that she was banging out the brains of some commander or captain at that very moment, but he failed miserably. He almost sent Adara a message canceling their late-night rendezvous, but at the last moment deleted the message.

I’ll listen to what she has to say, then I’ll leave.

And he nearly believed it.

He still had some lingering doubts and unanswered questions about

her. The biggest being: how did she survive out there on her own for three days? The obvious answer was that, well, she was a Marine, just as resourceful as she was dangerous.

He considered having TJ or Bender hack into the Marine database once more so he could corroborate her story, but he decided against it. The chief only needed to warn him once about hacking the roster. He supposed he could've asked the chief directly about it, or had Tahoe or someone make the inquiry for him, but he didn't want to draw Facehopper's attention. If the chief suspected anything, he could very easily place a few Centurions on watch in front of Rade's shared housing unit, making any comings and goings at night difficult, if not impossible.

Do I really need to corroborate her story? She's obviously back. I'm being too suspicious.

And yes, he was probably going to have sex with her that night.

At two hundred hours standard time, Rade loitered outside the designated storage unit near the outskirts of the base.

The three-meter tall perimeter wall towered above him, blocking out most of the orange-hued sky. A fire raged in the wooded parks of the northern quarter of the city, giving the night an unnatural glow. The slight increase in brightness didn't bother Rade in the least, as he was far more concerned with showing up on the thermal band utilized by the Centurions patrolling the walkways above.

He had left his aReal goggles at the housing unit and disabled the comm node in his helmet so he wouldn't show up on any of the mapping software both the humans and robots used. He had kept strictly to the shadows, using his stealth training to elude the night patrols. It was no more difficult than avoiding the patrols of the enemy. Sneaking away from his men had been relatively easy as well: he'd placed a vocoder unit in his bunk to imitate his nightly breathing, and set up a few noise cancelers around the inner hatch of the airlock to mute the sound of it opening and closing. Worked like a charm.

When he finally reached the agreed-upon storage unit, the entry hatch had proven locked. He just hoped Adara had some way of opening it.

That was when he saw her.

She had stepped from the shadows and into the cone of light cast by an overhead HLED connected to the perimeter wall. She had shaven her head completely, as she had promised she would do. She wore the tight-fitting MARPAT digital camos of a Marine.

That was when it hit him.

She wasn't wearing a jumpsuit.

He started toward her.

She pulled herself onto a conduit that ran along the inside of the perimeter wall, and began to climb.

Rade hurried to her and, checking that the volume of his external speakers was way down, he said in a hushed voice: "Adara. Adara! What the hell are you doing? Where's your jumpsuit?"

She continued to climb.

“Damn it.” He glanced along the walkway, looking for signs of sentry robots. It seemed clear. There was no one to stop her. “Shit.”

He started up after her. He didn’t want to fire his jetpack—too noisy. It would draw every robot sentry within a five hundred meter radius.

In theory, he should have been able to climb faster than her because he had the extra strength of the jumpsuit, but she vanished over the upper rim before he was even halfway.

He reached the top and pulled himself onto the walkway. Keeping crouched, he crossed to the outer boundary and spotted her—she was already waiting on the street below.

Rade was about to begin climbing down after her when a voice made him freeze.

“You there! Halt!”

Metal feet clanged along the walkway.

Rade raised his hands.

A Centurion emerged from the shadows, rifle in hand.

“Extend your left forearm immediately!” the robot said.

Rade obeyed.

It scanned his embedded ID, then said: “I’m sorry, Mr. Galaal, you don’t have authorization—”

Rade glanced over the edge. “Why didn’t you stop her?”

“Stop who?”

He could no longer see her. She must have hidden herself in the shadows.

“A Marine just climbed over your well-guarded perimeter,” Rade said.

“I will alert a retrieval team,” the robot said. “Please return to your housing unit.”

Then he heard her voice. “Rade, help me!” Because of the echo effect, he couldn’t quite make out where it had come from. But she sounded maybe a block away, max.

The aliens have her.

“There isn’t time for a retrieval team.” Rade took a step toward the edge.

The robot grabbed him by the jumpsuit and attempted to shove his

arm behind his back to restrain him.

But Rade was expecting that. He yielded, allowing his body to momentarily give before his opponent; then he combined the strength of his exoskeleton with the robot's own momentum to pull the machine in behind him. He reversed his grip, chopped his hand down to sever its jetpack fuel line, and then shoved: the robot toppled backward over the wall and into the base.

Rade leaped down to the street below, landing just beyond the coils of electrified razor wire that surrounded the outer perimeter of the base. The suit absorbed the impact; performing jumps from such heights a couple of times was fine, but any more than that and one risked permanent damage to the electromechanics.

Behind him, an alarm sounded.

"I'm going to get in so much shit for this."

"Rade!" came Adara's voice.

He saw a shadow duck behind an alleyway up ahead.

Rade drew his blaster and raced after her, half-expecting the Centurion to scale the wall and give chase behind him. But when he glanced over his shoulder, he saw that while it had returned to the walkway, the robot remained standing there, watching. Waiting for the retrieval team, probably.

Rade sprinted into the alleyway where the shadow had gone. A silhouette was waiting at the far end, and as soon as he entered, it dodged into the next street.

He paused. There had been only one silhouette. She seemed to be alone.

The aliens don't have her. What the hell kind of game is she playing?

He considered turning back, but it was too late for that now. She had drawn him out, and he was already going to get hell.

Might as well finish this.

Leery that she was leading him into an ambush, he warily pursued her through four alleys and side streets. Each time she waited just out of reach, only to dash around the next bend when he caught sight of her.

Finally, after she vanished into a fifth alleyway like that, he'd had enough.

"I'm done playing your game," he said via the external speakers on his helmet. By that point, he was positive it was a trap of some kind. "Show

yourself and tell me what you want. Or I'm leaving."

She didn't comply.

"Fine." He turned to go.

Something heavy struck him from above and he plowed hard into the ground.

The blaster was torn from his grasp with incredible force.

The weight left his back.

He blinked a few times, clearing the stars that dotted his vision, and then he scrambled to his feet.

A figure stood before him in the darkness of the alley.

He activated his helmet lamp to illuminate the attacker.

It was Adara, still dressed only in her MARPATs. She held the purloined blaster in her hands. It was pointed directly at his head.

"Hello, Rade," she said warmly.

That was when he realized her eyes were dead.

Rade slowly raised his hands in surrender. The blaster she held was designed for a glove grip, but she could fire it just as easily with those two bare hands wrapped around the stock.

“What do you want?” he said. He knew the external speakers were active because his helmet vibrated slightly when he spoke.

One side of her mouth curved up so that she wore a lopsided smirk. “Why, we want you. We already have your body. Now we want your mind.” She beckoned with the blaster. “Lead the way.”

He moved in the direction she indicated.

“Keep close to the buildings,” she said.

He obeyed.

“And turn off your helmet lamp,” she ordered.

He deactivated the lamp. “What do you mean, you have my body?”

She didn’t answer.

“Just what the hell are you?” he said.

“You’ll learn everything soon enough, dear,” she told him.

Shouting abruptly came from behind, though it was far in the distance.

“Pick up the pace,” she said.

He did so.

She made him penetrate deeper into the city, through those portions the UC had claimed, toward the fires that raged in the north. They were headed toward the latest front lines, he guessed. The UC presence should have begun to manifest as they grew near, even at that time of night, but she seemed to know where the patrols were because the streets and byways she chose were always empty. He suspected she was relying on robot scouts secreted in the rubble throughout the city, either that or micro-cameras that had so far evaded UC notice.

He remembered the flies he had seen buzzing around the bodies the day he had first arrived. Originally believed to be indigenous insects, someone had determined those were actually tiny solar-powered camera drones; they transmitted their data by means of the adhoc mesh network the

drones formed throughout the city. The UC was familiar with the tech—it seemed stolen from their own designs—and the Marines had launched exterminator units, basically micro-robots that attached themselves to the camera drones and pulled them to the ground. Despite the countermeasures, Rade had no doubt the enemy still had many such micro scouts hidden throughout the city.

He thought of what awaited him, and shuddered. He wasn't going to let them stab those needles into his head. He had to try to get away.

"I should have abandoned you that first day," Rade said. "Everything you told me... the stories about your deployments, the Marine you met while in Russia, it was all a lie, wasn't it? Meant to lower my defenses."

"It wasn't me," she said simply.

"You replaced her brain with nano-machines," Rade said. "Those machines copy over the memories, the personality of the host, don't they? If so, don't you feel any sense of debt toward me? For the help I gave you?"

"Not really," she said.

"And we made love," Rade said. "Bonded. That's got to mean something."

"Again, not really," she said. "There are many ways to satisfy the sensual delights of this body. Do you truly believe a random sexual encounter means anything in the greater scheme of things?"

Rade shut his eyes for a moment. Talking wasn't going to get him out of this. He was going to have to watch for a chance to get that blaster away from her.

"I have to piss," Rade said.

"Then go in your suit," she replied.

"My suit's clogged up," Rade lied.

"Then let it run down your leg."

He pretended to step on a nail, something that wasn't really possible with his thick boots, of course. "Ah!" He leaned one hand against the building wall beside him.

"Stop that," she said.

"I'm injured," he said, feigning a gasp of pain.

"How?" She sounded skeptical.

"I don't know," he said. "I was just walking along, and then, *bam*... I think I stepped on a nail or something." He lifted up the underside of his boot

and pretended to examine it.

She maneuvered to the right slightly, perhaps to get a better look under the orange glow of the night sky, though she kept her distance.

“Can you help me take my boot off?” he asked.

“No,” she said. “Continue walking.”

“All right,” Rade said. “I’ll try.”

He acted like he could put very little weight on the foot, and moved with an exaggerated limp. He stopped after about ten steps, putting on a show of breathing hard. “I can’t. I’m sorry. It hurts too much.”

“Take off your boot then,” she said.

“I don’t think I can do it myself.” He panted loudly.

She sat down on a travertine beam protruding from some nearby rubble and kept the blaster pointed at him. “Go ahead. I’ll wait as long as it takes.”

Damn.

He didn’t really want to take the boot off, as he would likely injure his foot for real, then, given all the sharp fragments of debris around. He remembered what Adara’s feet had looked like when she had moved barefoot through the streets, after all. He wondered vaguely where she had acquired those boots, and that camouflage outfit. Probably found some clothing store with an intact 3D textile printer, and then programmed it to produce Marine gear.

“You know, I think it’s getting better.” He pretended to test his weight on the foot. “Yes. I think I can walk.”

She smiled derisively. “I thought so. Continue, then.”

She stood up, flicking the blaster to the right, indicating he should proceed.

A dark form leaped down from the top of the debris behind her, caught her in the back, and toppled her.

The attacker wrestled with her, and the two rolled around in the debris. Because of the orange glow of the sky, he knew the attacker was human. Tahoe?

He activated his helmet lamp and was stunned by who he saw.

Adara was fighting her mirror image. The two were identical, their facial features indistinguishable. Adding to the confusion, they wore the same clothes, and had the same fully shaven heads.

Adara tried to bring her blaster toward the opponent, but the attacker slammed her hand into a debris fragment and the weapon dropped away. The opponent tried to grab the blaster, but the pinned Adara rolled her body, flinging the intertwined pair several paces from the weapon. They continued to wrestle about like that, so that Rade soon lost track of who was who.

He crept toward them, and when he judged the fighting twins far enough away from the blaster, he dashed forward and picked it up. Then he retreated, keeping the weapon trained on the two of them.

He considered telling them to stop, but decided to hang back for the moment. He wanted to see what they were capable of. He would intervene if one of them was obviously about to kill the other.

In a sudden incredible show of strength, Adara 1 picked up Adara 2 by one leg and swung the twin into a nearby wall. Upon impact, cracks spidered across the travertine, and when Adara 2 fell, a large crater was left in the strike zone.

Rade decided it was time to intervene. Because that was definitely a mortal blow Adara 2 had received. She had struck that wall without a jumpsuit: if she wasn't dead, then most of her bones were broken.

But before he could say anything, Adara 2 abruptly stood, apparently unharmed.

Stunned, Rade decided to keep his mouth shut for a moment longer.

Adara 2 plowed into Adara 1, slamming her into the rubble. A piece of rebar from the debris burst through her belly. Adara 2 grabbed the rebar, and it seemed like she intended to bend it and trap Adara 1, when the latter thrust forward, sliding off the rebar and wrapping her hand around Adara 2's throat, lifting her from the ground.

As Adara 2 struggled, Adara 1 stepped toward a nearby wall and proceeded to slam her head repeatedly against it. A large blood stain reddened Adara 1's camos in the region where the rebar had penetrated. It was difficult to tell in the dim orange light, but he thought the stain wasn't growing: it was as if the wound had already clotted.

Adara 2 wrapped her arms around Adara 1's grip, then kicked her in the torso, at last breaking free. Despite all the bashing her head had taken, only a trickle of blood descended from her temple, and she seemed otherwise unharmed.

Rade was beginning to wonder if these were Artificials. Or strength-

enhanced clones of some sort. Or perhaps a combination of the two: clones with nano-machines that had spread to the muscles and bones of the body, replacing all of the bodily tissues.

Is that the alien end game? To turn us all into Artificials?

While he watched, Adara 1 managed to impale Adara 2 on the very same rebar that had stabbed her. And this time she succeeded in bending the bar afterward, pinning her opponent.

Adara 2 struggled to straighten the rebar, but she was obviously gravely injured—the bar had penetrated close to her heart region. It didn't help that her hands were slippery with blood, and she seemed unable to find a grip.

Adara 1 lifted a large broken piece of travertine over her head. She obviously intended to bring the sharpened tip down upon the skull of her opponent.

“All right that's enough,” Rade said.

Adara 1 paused, glanced askance slightly, but then raised the fragment higher, preparing to drop it.

“I said that's enough!” Rade commanded. “I *will* shoot you.”

She hesitated once more, then at last tossed the fragment aside. “It doesn't matter. She's done anyway.”

“Move away from her,” Rade said.

When she had done so, Rade approached the injured twin.

The Adara pinned to the rubble was panting, as if in severe pain. She yet struggled with the rebar, but still couldn't get a grip. She glanced up when Rade approached, and he involuntarily retreated when he saw the dead look to those eyes.

“Rade, it's me,” the standing Adara said from beside him, drawing his attention away from the other.

Her eyes were dead, too.

“I came back for you,” the standing Adara continued. “I couldn't let her take you to them.”

“How do I know it's you?” he said, training the blaster on her.

She approached, palms up. “We talked about being on Tau Ceti together, remember? About how we fought against the invaders in separate companies.”

“Stay back,” Rade said.

She continued to advance. “I’ve been thinking of you every day since we made love. I told you to say the name of your ex, but I really wanted you to say my name. I told you that it was only lust, that there was no meaning behind what we did, but I did so only because I wanted to protect you. I’ve been wanting to hold you in my arms ever since.”

“Lying...” the Adara on the ground said.

The standing Adara glanced over her shoulder, down the darkened street. “We don’t have much time. They’re coming. Put away the blaster and follow me, PO1. Put it away!”

“You never called me PO1 before,” Rade said.

She tilted her head slightly. “I know. I was hoping it would remind you of who you were.”

“All it did was remind me of who you aren’t,” Rade said.

“Rade—” the pinned Adara said from the ground.

Rade turned his head toward her. That was a mistake.

Before he could react, the standing Adara was on him. She squeezed her arms around the torso of his jumpsuit and pulled him to the debris. He tried to reorient his arm and point the blaster at her back, but she rolled to the side, crushing the arm.

She reached down, wrapped her hands around the weapon, and wrenched it free.

Rade shoved her off of him with his other arm, kned her in the face as he clambered to his feet, and kicked the blaster from her hands.

She responded by dishing out a solid punch to the solar plexus area. The suit absorbed the blow, but he was sent flying backwards and slammed into a nearby pillar. He slid to the ground, but was still on his feet as she came at him again.

She punched, but he deflected the blow. She jabbed at his body with her other hand, and he parried with his opposite hand. She twirled her hands outward, grabbed him by the wrists, then spun, lifting him from the ground. He moved in an arc through the air—she released him halfway through the swing, and he was flung backward toward the debris.

He landed on his back—at an angle because of the jetpack.

He started to get up, but she landed on him an instant later. She pinned him with her knees.

She punched his helmet in the faceplate, and the ballistic-resistant

glass spidered.

Rade slammed the palms of his gloves into her body. He stabbed his thumbs into her belly wound, and she grimaced in pain. She punched him again, further smashing his faceplate, causing so many cracks he could barely see in the dim light.

He withdrew his gloves and grabbed both of her wrists before she could strike again. He swung her arms outward, then hoisted her into the air.

She planted both feet into his torso and pushed backward, struggling to break free. Rade held on tight.

He walked forward that way as she writhed in his arms. Bit by bit, he approached a small blast crater he had spotted near the edge of the rubble. When he reached it, he threw her down into the pit.

He turned to the side to grab the blaster he thought he had spotted, but it proved to be an errant piece of debris.

She smashed into him from behind, toppling him and pinning him to the ground.

He could hear her working back there, ripping away feed lines from his jumpsuit. According to the cracked HUD on his faceplate, his oxygen levels were dropping rapidly. She had tampered with the O2 intake, then.

He spun, elbowing her off of him.

He aimed a kick at her torso, but she caught it and once more swung him into the air.

He landed several meters away, crashing into the asphalt.

Oxygen levels were critical: he ripped off his helmet. The air stank of burnt flesh and wood, but at least he could breathe. Plus his vision was no longer marred by a chipped faceplate.

She was on him again, pinning him to the ground with her knees. He swung his helmet like a cudgel, hitting her in the head. Again. Again.

“I wanted to set you free, Rade Galaal,” she said with a hiss as she blocked his fourth blow. “Wanted to show you the truth, as required by our rules. But it is obvious to me that you are not worthy. So instead I am going to end your existence.”

She wrenched the helmet from him and raised it; she was poised to bring it crashing down into his skull. His forehead would very likely cave from blow. Rade had finally met his doom.

In a last act of desperation, Rade unflicked the cap of the surgical

laser at the tip of his finger and stabbed it into her eye. He fired the laser at the same time.

The helmet dropped from her hands, landing harmlessly on the street beside him. She slid off of his finger, stood up, and took several groggy steps backward, her eye a gory mess. Then she collapsed in a lifeless heap.

Rade exhaled deeply, then struggled to his feet.

“Rade,” a weak voice said.

It came from the Adara who was yet pinned by the rebar.

Rade went to her.

She looked at him and smiled wanly. “I’m sorry I deceived you earlier.”

“I’m not going to fall for it,” Rade said, glancing at the curved rebar that protruded from her chest. “You think I’m going to set you free so you can attack me like the other one? You’re wrong.”

“I’m not... going to attack you.” She rested a bloody hand on his arm assembly. “Never... attack you.”

Rade slid his arm out from under her; a bloody handprint remained on the assembly. “You wanted to meet me so you could convert me into a machine. You planned to infiltrate our ranks through me, didn’t you?”

“No Rade, no...” She closed her eyes for a moment, then looked at him with those dead orbs. “I never meant to cause you harm. I was trying to save you. Why do you think I fought her? The message I sent you... I didn’t know it was intercepted. I really wanted to see you again, to tell you everything. About me. About them. But they tried to detain me. They sent her in my place. I got here as soon as I could. Others are on the way. You can’t stay long.”

“What are you?” he said.

“We are infiltration units,” she said.

“No, I mean, you’re species.”

She shook her head. “Too late... now. You must go. The others will be coming soon. She called home. They know where we are. Run, Rade Galaal.”

“What about you?” He considered taking her prisoner, but then his eyes drifted to her wound. Even if he freed her, his corpsman training told her she was done. A wound like that was mortal. Blood continued to drip from the fabric of her clothing, too—the bleeding hadn’t stopped like it had for the other Adara.

“Go,” she said. “I’m damaged beyond repair. No one... can help me now. Nor... punish me.”

He stood, and turned to leave.

“Rade,” she said. “I—”

He paused, waiting.

No more words were forthcoming.

He realized that her breathing had stopped. The rest of her body finally matched those eyes.

Rade bit his lower lip.

He stooped, closed her eyes, and departed.

His boots crunched softly over the debris of the abandoned street. He moved into the shadows and called upon all of his stealth training to assist him.

Gotta make it back to the base.

Unfortunately, the moment he rounded the bend, bright lights shone into his eyes and blinded him.

“Freeze!”

Rade lifted his hands in surrender.

It turned out that Rade had wandered into the Marine retrieval team dispatched to get him from the forward operating base. Luckily for him.

Or perhaps unluckily, depending on your point of view.

Because a few hours later he found himself standing in an office in the base's command and control unit, where he was about to receive the chewing out of his life.

Lieutenant Commander Braggs sat behind a desk, while Chief Facehopper leaned on the far edge of it with his arms crossed. Rade often wondered why offices still came with desks, especially temporary ones like the current; nobody used paper, tablets, or displays anymore, not when Implants and aReals handled any required visual overlays. He supposed the presence of the desk was half tradition, and half psychological—to maintain the illusion of a barricade between the occupant and visitors. That, and it provided a convenient place for one to put his or her feet up. Though Braggs rarely did that, at least not in the presence of the platoon members.

“You know, Mr. Galaal,” Lieutenant Commander Braggs said. “Disappointed doesn't even come close to the way I feel about you right now. In fact, no word does justice to the incredible depths of my displeasure.”

“I have no excuse,” Rade said. “I—.”

Braggs raised an eyebrow. “Don't say a word. Unless I tell you.”

Rade swallowed.

“Drop,” the Lieutenant Commander said. “Start pumping out push-ups. I suggest you pace yourself. Because we're going to start with five hundred.”

Rade assumed the plank posture and began the requested push-ups.

“Apparently you told the Marines who brought you back that you were going for a walk,” Braggs continued. “You spotted a woman while on your little traipse. And chased her outside the perimeter.” He paused. “I can't wait to read your official report. *Going for a walk.*” He spat the words. “Odd, that you would leave the housing unit without wearing your aReal goggles. And that you would disable the comm node in your helmet. Without those, we had no means of tracking you, given your current lack of Implant. It was

almost like, you wanted us to lose you.”

A message log appeared on Rade’s vision while he did the push-ups, courtesy of his aReal goggles. It contained the last exchange between himself and Adara, from the time when they had planned their meet up.

“Look familiar?” Braggs said. “You might be wondering how we got our hands on this, seeing as you momentarily disabled logging on your unit.” He smiled contemptuously. “Let’s just say your aReal goggles were running a special version of the navy’s proprietary software, one whose ‘disable logging’ command points to an empty subroutine. A few IS-3924s from NAVCENT recommended it as a precaution after the little hacking incident we detected.” IS-3924s were intelligence specialists.

Rade faltered slightly in his pace.

“It’s too bad we didn’t pull the logs earlier,” the LC continued. “We could have stopped you before any of this stupidity took place. But in a way, I’m kind of glad we didn’t. I like to test my men on occasion. Needless to say, you failed the test.

“So you went to meet this Corporal McPherson Adara. Probably imagining the great fucking session that awaited you. Thinking exclusively with your dick, rather than your mind. Despite all your training, and your conditioning, to the contrary.” Braggs shook his head. “Such a waste. The navy poured so much money into you. For what? So you could betray your unit, and nearly give yourself over to the enemy? You call yourself a MOTH?”

He remained silent for some time.

Rade glanced up from his push-ups, and saw that Braggs was merely staring at him, eyes full of disappointment. Rade felt like the lowest of the low in that moment, and wished he could just crawl into a hole and never come out. He lowered his gaze and concentrated on the burn in his muscles, glad for something to distract him.

“Should we tell him about the bodies?” the chief asked.

“Go ahead,” Braggs answered. “I don’t care anymore.”

“I’m sure you’ve heard the rumors,” Facehopper said. “About men being captured, and then coming back only to turn against us. Well they’re true. The enemy replaces the human minds with machines. Nano-machines, specifically. But you know that already, don’t you? That’s right, we know all about that little covert operation you conducted on the *Rhodes*, involving the

infected Chief Scientist Rebecca Vicks. You thought we wouldn't find out?

"In any case, it turns out both of those women you led the Marines to out there had similar machines replacing their neural tissue. Just like Vicks. There was one difference, however: those machines had spread to the bone and muscle tissue.

"But the most disturbing part is, their brains emitted a signature that matched up with our own Implants. Before their neural networks degraded entirely, the Marines were able to read the profiles returned by those false signatures. Guess what? We received valid public IDs, both matching up with Corporal McPherson."

He paused for a moment, as if to allow Rade to absorb the ramifications.

"Neither would have been able to sneak far into the base unnoticed, of course," Facehopper said. "Because McPherson is still listed as MIA, they would have triggered an alert if they tried to join our adhoc Implant network. Masters-at-arms would have seized them. The woman who had acted as the lure must have had her Implant equivalent turned off when she was waiting for you at the base perimeter.

"What the enemy has done here is slightly more advanced than what we were seeing earlier, when enemy robots spoofed our friendly signatures. We had to patch our Implants to account for those false readings, and it looks like we're going to have to patch them again. The cybersecurity specialists tell me they have a solution, but how long will it last?

"The enemy is getting better at mimicking our brains, and the technology we embed within them. One day there might come a time when no patching we do will prevent the enemy from lurking undetected among us, hidden, forming sleeper cells waiting to strike. Already the Marines have imprisoned three individuals who've returned after being marked as MIA. Two of them are obviously infiltration units. The other seems human, but we're keeping him under observation for the moment. Just as we're doing with you."

Rade knew precisely why the chief was telling him all that. The message was clear: be on the lookout for infiltration units among the Marines, and perhaps among the members of Alpha Platoon itself.

Even so, when Rade looked up he saw that Braggs was frowning, as if he wasn't entirely certain Rade should have heard any of it.

And as if Rade wasn't worthy of the title of MOTH anymore, nor the security clearance.

"Enough of that," the LC said. "I want to talk about Mr. Galaal's punishment." He cleared his throat. "Unfortunately, simple push-ups won't cut it. I almost want to see you delegated to the sidelines for the next few missions, for what you've done. And in fact, it's well within my rights to have you transferred to an entirely different team. Or have you discharged entirely."

As he continued pumping himself up and down, Rade found himself tearing up.

I've lost everything, because of one moment I let my guard down.

Ashamed, he kept his gaze glued to the floor.

The lieutenant commander didn't speak for several moments, apparently wanting to draw out the tension.

"But I hate to see a good man fall," the LC finally said. "A man who has otherwise served impeccably. Which is why I want to give you a second chance."

Rade perked up slightly.

"NAVCENT has chosen Alpha Platoon to take part in a classified operation two days from now," Braggs said. "I'm not going to go into details now, for obvious reasons. But the timeline coincides with the end of your mandatory decontamination watch, so I'm going to authorize your involvement. It's your chance to redeem yourself. But you mess this up, Mr. Galaal, I'm going to send you packing. I guarantee it." He paused, then: "Go ahead, speak. Tell me what's on your mind."

"Thank you, sir!" Rade said, not stopping the push-ups. "I won't let you down. I'll lead Alpha through this mission without a hitch. Under the chief's esteemed guidance, of course."

"Oh, I never said you'd be *leading* the mission in any capacity," the lieutenant commander told him. "Effective immediately, TJ is the new LPO of Alpha Platoon."

Rade froze. His body wanted to keep pumping out those push-ups, but his mind simply couldn't facilitate the muscle-brain connection. It felt like he had been physically struck.

"That's all for now, Mr. Galaal. You'll be briefed on the mission in forty-eight hours with the rest of the platoon when you emerge from the

dollhouse. In the meantime, I expect another five hundred reps. Lieutenant Commander out.”

The office winked out as the virtual conferencing session ended. Rade was back inside the glass walls of the decontamination ward, where he would remain until the specialist cleared him for duty.

He began pumping out the push-ups once more, grateful for the burn the exercise provided. Maybe if he exhausted himself, he would forget what had just happened.

Somehow, he doubted it.

Ramifications. Rade knew there were consequences for every action he made, in battle and in life. Sometimes those consequences were good, sometimes bad. He had been lucky so far, avoiding the bad. But live life on the edge for long enough, and eventually you'll lose your balance and fall.

Even so, Rade took his demotion in stride. It could have been worse. Reduced to petty officer second or third class, for example. Or reassigned to a different Team or discharged as Braggs had threatened. But Rade had been spared all of that. For the moment.

In some ways he was glad he was no longer LPO. He was free from the burden of command, that gambling den where the stakes were the lives of his men. He could relax slightly in the coming mission, and focus on whatever assignment he was given rather than the tasks of the entire platoon. It wouldn't be all that different from the missions he had been undertaking lately anyway, where he acted as an adjunct to the various Marine platoons and companies.

I'm free. Right back where I wanted to be.

But if that was the case, why was he so miserable?

"Don't worry," Tahoe said during a visit to the decon ward. "TJ is going to mess up soon, and you'll be LPO again."

"You misjudge him," Rade replied. "TJ will do a very good job, Tahoe. Just as good as I could. But here's the thing... I'm not sure I even *want* to be LPO anymore. I've had a lot of time to think since my demotion, and you know, I'm finally beginning to understand my behavior. Why I did such stupid, dangerous things. And I'm not just talking about recent events, but certain lone wolf behavior I exhibited in the past after becoming LPO. It's like I wanted the lieutenant commander to strip me of command. Like I didn't feel worthy of it, or just didn't want the burden. I'll tell you something, from one brother to another, sometimes when I'm out there with the platoon and I roll the dice, I'm terrified it's going to come up snake eyes."

"If that's true," Tahoe said. "And you really wanted to lose your position, then why aren't you smiling?"

"That's a good question, isn't it?" But Rade already knew the answer.

This isn't who I am.



RADE CHECKED OUT of the decon ward on schedule, and a few hours later found himself seated with the rest of Alpha Platoon inside a cramped conference room in the command and control center.

Lieutenant Commander Braggs stood at the forefront, behind a podium. Another psychological illusion, Rade thought, since of course podiums served no purpose these days other than to provide a barrier between the speaker and his audience.

“The survivors of the enemy fleet looped back toward the planet and staged an orbital attack a few days ago,” the lieutenant commander was saying. “The UC vessels in orbit repelled the attackers, reducing the number of enemy vessels in the system to only three. The UC fleet expects to hunt down the survivors shortly. Victory seems almost assured. Despite all that, none of the enemy have surrendered, not on the surface of this planet, nor in space. They’re going to fight to the death, it seems. And the UC is more than happy to help them along that illogical path.

“Here’s where things get interesting. One of the enemy craft from the latest attack crash-landed on the surface forty clicks from the city, on the northeast side of the mountain range. Unlike other vessels facing similar capture scenarios, they haven’t self-destructed yet. Our guess is, they’ve lost that ability.”

“That,” Fret said. “Or they’re waiting until we send inside an exploratory force so they can take down a few of us with them.”

The LC nodded. “There is that chance, yes. When you signed up for this line of work, no one ever said it was going to be easy. In any case, we’ve already got several Artillery and Tank Battalions surrounding it, and the perimeter is considered secure. HS3’s sent inside have reported pockets of resistance, though nothing like the numbers we saw from the troop transport you dealt with previously.

“Here’s the deal: we’re sending in several small teams to secure the vessel. Since Alpha Platoon has prior experience aboard such a ship, you have been selected as one of the teams. And while you’ll operate independently, you’ll still coordinate with platoons from the 2nd and 3rd

Battalion 2nd Marines.”

“I have a question,” Lui said. “What happens here? Last I checked, we only owned eighty percent of the city. Feels like we’re leaving while our work is unfinished.”

“The majority of the division is remaining behind of course. The Marines are planning a big push this Friday. With luck, we should have the rest of the city liberated in two or three days. We’ll be ramping down major combat operations after that, and once your team secures the crashed alien vessel, we’ll be pulling out.”

“Good,” Grappler said. “I’m looking forward to getting the hell off this bungle.”

The lieutenant commander nodded. “We all are, Grappler.” He ran his gaze across the men. “As some of you may have already heard, TJ is the new acting LPO. He will be joining Chief Facehopper in leading the mission.”

Rade felt the gazes of some of his brothers upon him; he was careful to stare straight ahead, avoiding every eye.

“I know that you will all follow his orders dutifully,” the LC continued.

“Welcome aboard, boss,” Bender told TJ.

“Thank you,” TJ said. While he sounded mostly indifferent, Rade thought he sensed a subtle hint of gloating in the former drone operator’s tone.

Rade had probably imagined it.

“Good luck, people,” Braggs said. “When this is done, we’re going to have the biggest beer day you’ve ever seen, I guarantee you. Now go kick some ass.”

Inside his Zeus mech, Rade stood within the security perimeter of artillery and tank platoons that ringed the crash site. He and the rest of Alpha Platoon were nestled between two M7A12 Abram multi-turreted tanks, bad boys that could fire large caliber rounds, lasers, and electrolasers at multiple targets at the same time. Wearing only jumpsuits, infantry platoons from the 2nd and 3rd Battalion 2nd Marines lingered between similar units around the perimeter.

In front of him, roughly five hundred meters away, resided the crashed alien starship. Like the previous vessel he had boarded, this one looked like a dodecahedron on the outside, though he could only see three facets of the towering object from his current position. Those pentagonal planes jutted at steep angles toward him. On the overhead map, the upper portions joined with other five-sided faces, and when he changed the view to isometric rather than topdown, he discerned the twelve-faceted structure almost in its entirety. He utilized the aReal built into the helmet faceplate to provide the HUD, keeping his actual aReal goggles tucked away unused in a small storage compartment underneath the collar of his torso assembly, near the life straw.

Behind the craft, the perimeter platoons stood on either side of the deep runnel that had been slashed into the plains from the impact. In front, meanwhile, a large dirt berm formed a half circle around the bottom of the vessel, due to the displaced earth. A thick ramp—part of the hull of the dodecahedron—led from the berm to a wide inner recess within the ship. UC combat robots guarded either side, along with two mechs—ATLAS models, manned by Marines.

“Can’t say I really miss those ATLAS 5s,” Fret said. “I mean, look at those things. So damn bulky. Gotta lug around all that ammunition for the Gatling guns all day, and look at the size of those canisters for the incendiaries. Those mechs can’t even fit inside the hull opening they’re guarding.”

“You know we’re not taking our mechs inside either, right?” TJ said.

“Yeah I know,” Fret said. “I still don’t agree with that, by the way.”

We should be bringing them.”

“Some of those corridors get pretty tight,” Manic said.

“You talking from your own experiences of playing with yourself?” Bender said.

“Funny,” Manic replied.

Earlier, other members had expressed doubts about bringing the mechs at all, especially if the plan called for the platoon to ditch the war machines at the entrance, but Facehopper wanted the units there in reserve in case things turned ugly on the inside and they had to retreat in a hurry. Because if they *did* have to initiate a tactical retrograde, it was far better to do so from within the thick hull of a Zeus than a jumpsuit.

Rade’s gaze drifted to the tall, blunt peaks of the north-south trending ridge that loomed in the background. The crash site was close to the shoulder of one particularly large mountain, *Roma Secondo*. Centuries ago, before the terraforming had begun, the Franco-Italians had built their very first base on the planet atop that mountain, at least according to the “points of interest” overlay on the map.

“We’re receiving our orders to move in, mates,” Facehopper said. “Hang tight.”

Rade watched as the waiting infantry platoons dashed forward in turn, led by combat robots. On the overhead map, their blue dots dispersed throughout the various mapped corridors of the ship.

“All right, we’re up,” Facehopper said. “Take us in, TJ.”

“Bender, send in the Centurions,” TJ ordered.

“You got it, boss,” Bender said.

Boss. Rade still wasn’t quite used to hearing someone else called that. And he hated it.

The squad of eight combat robots assigned to Alpha Platoon moved forward at a lope. In moments they scrambled up the berm, over the ramp, and vanished inside the ship. On the overhead map, Rade saw their dots lingering just inside the entrance.

“Centurions have reached the staging area and are waiting,” Bender said.

“Let’s move, my beautiful hellions,” TJ said. “Left to right. Zig zag formation. Five meter separation. Assume that those point defense turrets could fire at any time. Bender, have the HS3s follow on drag.”

Starting on the left side, the Zeus units dashed forward in turn and took up a position five meters behind, and to the left or right of the mech in front.

“Speaking of the point defense turrets,” Keelhaul said over the comm. “This brings up the question: why haven’t we destroyed them?”

“We want to capture the alien ship intact, I suppose,” Tahoe said. “With as much working tech as possible.”

“If I wanted to capture an alien ship,” Harlequin said. “I would destroy all of the point defenses on the side facing my point of penetration, while leaving the rest intact. Only then would I proceed.”

“Who asked you, *machine*?” Bomb said.

“Hey, you missed an opportunity to make fun of him for using the word penetration, bro,” Bender said.

“I don’t care.”

“No wait, Harlequin is right,” Grappler said. “Why the hell would we leave the point defenses on this side operational?”

Facehopper didn’t say anything, but Rade suspected he agreed. Whatever the case, there was nothing they could do about it, as the Brass had already made the decision.

Rade’s turn to join the formation came and he sprinted out onto the plain.

“All right, let’s focus here, people,” TJ said. “Remember, the overall mission is winding down. The enemy is on the run. We’ve nearly liberated Radiance. Things are looking way, way up. We’re just doing a little clean-up. Stay sharp, let’s get this done, let’s shoot some bad guys, and well, I have plans to make it home in time for supper, so try not to mess that up, you hear?”

“I don’t know about the rest of you, but I’m going to be eating goddamn aliens for supper!” Grappler said.

“You know,” Lui began. “That any creatures we find in there are probably going to be bioengineered from Terran stock? So technically, they’re not really aliens.”

“You’re ruining my moment,” Grappler said.

Up ahead, the Zeus on point, operated by Skullcracker, climbed the berm.

“Vacate your mechs at the edge of the ramp,” TJ said. “Muster inside

the opening. Nested cigar formation.”

Skullcracker reached the ramp and promptly disembarked. He sprinted forward between the Marine Centurions and ATLAS units guarding the ramp; meanwhile his mech stood in place, guarding his rear.

When Rade reached the top of the berm he ordered the new Sky to kneel.

“Release,” Rade told the AI next.

The inner actuators relaxed, and the cockpit hatch opened.

Rade leaped outside. “Sky, guard.”

“Good hunting, Rage.” The mech assumed a guard position behind him.

“Bet you wish you were coming with me, don’t you?” Rade told the AI over the comm.

“Not in the least.”

Enveloped in his strength-enhancing jumpsuit, Rade weaved between the other abandoned mechs and crossed the ramp. Below on either side, scattered across the berm, were the wreckages of enemy robots, mostly scorpion units with their laser-firing stingers. No doubt dumped there by UC scavenger units who had carried them out from inside.

“Sure are a lot of them,” Manic said.

“Hope the robos left some for us,” Skullcracker said.

“Check your map,” Fret said. “Lots of red dots.”

Rade drew his blaster and took up a position inside the ship within the entry bay staging area. He formed part of the nested “cigar” formation; when everyone was in place, the chief and TJ crouched in the middle, while the remaining fourteen platoon members formed two ellipses of four and ten men respectively around them. The waiting Centurions composed a third outer ellipse around them all.

No light fixtures lit the bay—it was illuminated entirely by sunlight from outside, combined with the helmet lamps of the platoon members and combat robots. The bulkheads were made of the familiar black pentagonal tiles that coated the outside of the hull.

Tall passageways led away in three directions.

“Uh, our mechs can fit here,” Bomb said. “Easily.”

“Might be loose now,” Manic said. “But it’ll quickly grow tight, trust me.”

“That what your girlfriend promised you?” Trace said.

“No, his boyfriend,” Bender said.

“Check the topography on your overhead maps,” Fret said. “Manic is right. Mechs won’t fit. Not where we’re going.”

“Which way, Chief?” TJ said.

“We’re assigned the forward passageway,” Facehopper replied. “I’m marking the waypoints on the map. Take us in, TJ.”

“Wait,” Snakeoil said over the comm. “Chief, they’re telling us not to position our mechs so close to the entrance.”

“Well where the bloody hell do they want us to position them, then?”

Snakeoil paused. “No closer than fifty meters.”

“Fine,” Facehopper said. “Relay the order to your Zeus units, mates.”

Rade and the others did so, and he watched on his overhead map as the dots representing the mechs fanned outward by fifty meters, forming a wide half circle in front of the berm.

“We good, Snakeoil?” the chief asked.

“The lieutenant colonel says we are,” Snakeoil replied.

“And next time,” Facehopper said. “Tell this lieutenant colonel I’d appreciate it if he contacted me directly. Now TJ, if you will?”

“All right,” TJ said. “Bender, send a couple of our HS3s in first, followed by Centurions. We’ll follow thirty meters behind. Rage, you’re on point.” He proceeded to call out the marching order. “The remaining HS3s are to trail on drag, Bender. String them out as we go along. Ensure we maintain a comm link with the other platoons at all times. I want us ready to render assistance to the Marines at a moment’s notice. Now let’s go.”

Rade assumed his designated point man position.

One of the pluses of not being LPO anymore was that he could once more take point. Then again, he wasn’t sure if that was really a positive in the current situation.

He advanced cautiously into the black passageway, his headlamp illuminating the drag unit of the Centurion squad up ahead. Two HS3s led the way at the very front of the combat robots, separated by five meters each. The first was expendable. The second was there to record the updated positions of any hostiles, at which point it would quickly retreat.

Rade glanced at his HUD. Much of the ship was already mapped, courtesy of the original advance parties of HS3s and Centurions that were

still exploring the inner recesses. Red dots accompanied some regions of the dark, unmapped portions, marking where the HS3s had encountered enemy units, and represented the last known positions of said tangos. The combat robots escorting the HS3s had specific orders not to engage unless absolutely necessary. But, judging from the wreckages Rade had seen piled outside the entrance, those advance Centurions had been forced to defend more than a few times.

Rade could select any of those dots and get a full description of the unit. Most of the tangos proved to be the scorpion model he was already familiar with, as well as a few humanoid robot types similar to their own Centurions.

The waypoints placed by the chief led away from the scouts, terminating on a currently unmapped portion where the advance HS3s had encountered overwhelming resistance from scorpion units. According to the logs, the enemy units had not pursued when the scouts retreated, indicating the tangos potentially guarded something of value. Other platoons approached similar resistance-heavy locations in different parts of the ship.

Once Alpha Platoon neared the final waypoint, the plan was to let the Centurion squad handle the initial engagement. If the combat robots encountered difficulties, the MOTHs would either attack or retreat. The chief would make the call.

“What do you think those scorpions are trying to protect up ahead?” Trace asked during the march. “The alien queen?”

“Ha,” Bomb said. “Don’t try to make them sound so grand. Like they’re royalty. *Queen*. You want the best description? I’ll give it to you. Dung beetle guarding its dung.”

“I think you’re on to something, Bomb,” Manic said. “In fact, you seem to know so much about the aliens, or rather about guarding dung, it’s like you’re talking from firsthand experience.”

“Trust me, Manic,” Bomb cooed. “If you saw my dung, you would guard it too, baby.”

Manic chuckled over the comm. “The only queen in here, my friends, is Bomb.”

The passage soon tightened, and it became obvious why the platoon had left behind the mechs. They could barely fit even in their jumpsuits. The passageway also began to curve, spiraling downward with the advance,

though locally keeping its rectangular shape. Bulkhead became deck and vice versa. Since there was no active artificial gravity aboard the ship, the group leaped between the changing decks as it became necessary.

Rade reached an airlock whose inner and outer hatches had been laser drilled. He passed into the tight passageway beyond, and a short while later arrived at a similarly breached hatch.

As he continued, other passageways occasionally led off to the left and right. According to the overhead map, all of those regions had been mapped already, and no enemy tangos awaited within. Like in the city, he had his doubts about how thorough the search had been, so it was somewhat reassuring that many of the advance HS3s remained behind in those areas, their blue dots patrolling the passageways incessantly to ensure the routes remained clear. Even so, he always swept any side corridors with his blaster as he passed.

“HS3s and Centurions are nearing final waypoint,” Bender announced.

“All right,” the chief said. “Full stop. We hold here while the combat robots engage.”

Watching the overhead map, Rade saw the blue dots of the advance HS3s approach the red dots marking the previous enemy positions. As the HS3s approached, those red dots vanished—the enemy was no longer there.

The HS3s entered an adjacent compartment, and the map filled out. On cue, five red dots appeared.

One of the HS3s vanished; the second retreated. The Centurions hurried forward.

“Centurions are engaged,” Bender said.

Rade switched to the point of view of the lead Centurion. The thing dashed forward, laser rifle in hand, but abruptly its video feed went blank. Frustrated, Rade tried the next Centurion, but it too disconnected him a moment later.

He glanced at the overhead map. Only six blue dots remained out of the original eight.

“Should I recall the Centurions, Chief?” Bender asked.

“Not yet,” Facehopper said. “Let them fight.”

Rade tried another Centurion, this one farther back. He saw that the combat robots had taken a position around a bend, and were firing at a

scorpion unit beyond. The tango went down.

Another scorpion quickly plowed forward from behind.

One of the Centurions threw a grenade. It detonated a moment later.
Another grenade.

Rade's feed went blank.

He glanced at his display.

They were down to four.

"Chief?"

"Not yet."

The four blue dots abruptly charged into the compartment.

Odd strategy, Rade thought. If he didn't know better, he would almost believe that Bender, the drone operator, was purposely trying to put them into harm's way so that the MOTHs could have their turn sooner.

The final three red dots abruptly winked out.

"All tangos down," Bender announced.

Only two of the blue dots remained.

"Six combat robots lost," Trace said. "The lieutenant commander is going to be pissed."

"He'd rather we lost the robots than men," the chief said.

"Maybe," Lui said. "Though I suspect Bender's strategy could have been a bit more conservative."

"I was slightly aggressive, I admit it," Bender said. "But everything I did was well within the guidelines specified by the drone rule book. And it's not like I purposely threw away the robots. You'll see when you review the footage later. The attack was fairly intense. I lost the Praetor unit in the first few seconds and had to take full command. I might have misjudged a few of the lines of sight available to the enemy, but I did what I had to do to secure the compartment."

"It's fine, Bender," Facehopper said. "Send the remaining HS3 forward, with the Centurions after it. Let's move up, people."

As they neared the compartment, they had to climb over the wreckage of three Centurions and two enemy scorpions.

"So long sons of bitches," Snakeoil said.

Inside, they found four lifeless scorpions, and the remainder of the downed Centurions.

"Well that's handy," Fret said, sounding pleased. "This is great. We

get paid the big bucks, and we don't even have to do a thing."

"You like that? You think it's *handy*?" Bomb abruptly kicked one of the Centurions. "Goddamn robos stealing our kills. I thought the enemy resistance here was supposed to be, and I quote, 'overwhelming.' I wouldn't call five scorpion units *overwhelming*."

"That could be you lying there on the floor, Bomb," Fret said.

"Not a chance," Bomb said. "I fight better than a metallic piece of shit any day."

"I for one am happy to let robos fight one another," Trace said. "Where's the sport in killing robots anyway?"

"I take issue with both comments," Harlequin said.

"Ooo, you take issue, do you?" Bomb said. "I'll show you an issue."

Bomb started toward Harlequin.

"Not during the mission, Bomb..." TJ said.

Bomb seethed behind his faceplate, but he halted. "We'll talk about this later, Artificial."

"We've got a hatch," Bender announced.

Rade glanced at the overhead map. The HS3 scout had continued forward and discovered a hatch embedded within a bulkhead on the left side of the passageway. The corridor itself continued onward into unmapped territory.

"Have the Centurions open it up," Facehopper said.

Rade waited for several moments until, on the map, the inner compartment abruptly filled out. The two combat robots had moved inside it at the same time.

"Centurions are reporting the compartment beyond as clear," Bender said. "It's completely empty. No crates. No furniture. Nothing but those black bulkheads."

"All right," TJ said. "Have them return to the passageway and continue forward."

The party resumed its advance.

Rade, still on point, reached the compartment shortly. He shone his headlamp inside.

"Chief," Rade said. "Looks like the Centurions were mistaken. I'm seeing an open passageway on the far side."

"Bender, recall the Centurions," Facehopper said. "Let's get that

compartment properly secured.”

But before the Centurions could obey, previously hidden hatches activated in the passageway, instantly sealing the way forward and back, cutting off Rade from the rest of his platoon.

“Rage?” the chief’s voice came over the comm. The digital warping was severe.

“I’m still here, Chief,” Rade said.

“Can’t.... video signal from you,” the chief said. “Nothing at all.”

“There must be some kind of shielding in these bulkheads,” Rade transmitted. “Lowering the bandwidth. Because I’m still transmitting video.”

The compartment remained open beside him, as did the passageway beyond it. The enemy was trying to herd him.

Rade refused to take the bait.

“Going... cut you out of there,” Facehopper said. “Keep... from the bulkheads.”

Rade suddenly heard footsteps echoing from the passageway on the far side of the compartment, as transmitted to him by the internal speakers of his helmet. The tread was slow. Calm.

“Someone’s coming!” Rade said.

He glanced at his overhead map. There was nothing.

He assumed an attack position, crouching down on one knee and aiming his blaster into the compartment.

“Hang...” the chief said.

The footsteps grew louder.

A red dot appeared on the overhead map as a humanoid silhouette took form in the shadows, just beyond the range of his light cone. The visitor appeared to be unarmed. Then again, that didn’t mean a thing—if Rade faced an enemy robot, it could fire a laser at him directly from its chest piece.

But if it was a robot, I would already be dead.

Maybe it was a lost Marine? But then why the red dot on the overhead map? Red didn’t necessarily mean an enemy, of course—it was used to represent any unidentified individuals or machines. Even so, a Marine would definitely appear as blue.

“Freeze!” Rade said.

The newcomer paused, but then the footsteps started up anew.

Rade prepared to fire, but when the individual stepped into the light

he nearly dropped his blaster in disbelief.

“Hello, Rade.”

Rade stared blankly at the figure before him.

“What is it?” Facehopper said over the comm. “What... you see?”

“I—” But Rade couldn’t form the words.

The man wore a UC-issue jumpsuit, along with a jetpack. He wore no helmet, so that his head was plainly visible. He had the thick beard of a special forces soldier. The crown of his head was shaved. He had a broad-angled, tanned face, with eyes that possessed an oddly glassy quality to them, as if bioprinted. They also had another quality: that dead look common to those who had lost their humanity.

At first Rade thought he was mistaken. It had to be a member of Bravo platoon. But then the man stepped forward another pace, his features becoming even more distinct under the glow from Rade’s headlamp. Yes, the resemblance was unmistakable.

He was Rade’s spitting image.

“Surprised to see me?” his twin said.

Sparks came from the hatch beside him. The others were cutting through.

Rade switched to the external speaker system of his helmet. “What the hell are you?”

The impostor cocked his head slightly, and smirked.

Keeping his blaster aimed at the man, Rade stepped into the compartment.

A metallic blur struck him from the side.

In seconds Rade found himself lying on the deck, disarmed; a humanoid robot stood above him, pointing his own blaster down on him.

Rade raised his hands and slowly clambered to his feet. When he got up, he saw that a panel in the far bulkhead had opened up, revealing the alcove where the robot had been hiding.

The impostor held out a gloved palm toward the robot, and the machine backed away from Rade and transferred the blaster to the man.

“Thank you,” the twin said, and promptly shot the robot. It clattered lifelessly to the ground.

The impostor turned the blaster on Rade.

“Take off your helmet,” the man said.

“Chief, there’s—” Rade began.

“No contacting your chief.” The impostor waved the blaster menacingly. “The helmet. Now.”

Rade reluctantly removed his helmet.

“Toss it over to me,” the impostor ordered.

Rade complied. “What do you want?”

“I should kill you,” the impostor said. “But we have a rule. When we get a body, we get the mind, too.”

The latter was nearly identical to what Adara had told him earlier. Seeing the twin in front of him, he thought he understood what it meant.

“My blood,” Rade said. “You used it to sample my DNA.”

“Very good,” the impostor said.

Human red blood cells had no nucleus, of course. But there were probably over a hundred million leukocytes—white blood cells—in the sample obtained from Rade’s body, more than enough DNA to clone him.

“So, while I may be reluctant to kill you,” the man continued. “I have no qualms in regards to killing your brothers. In fact, that is exactly what I plan to do. I’m going to infiltrate your unit. And then I’m going to terminate them one by one when they least expect it. And there will be nothing that you can do about it.”

“Why are you attacking our colony?” Rade tried. “What do you want?”

“I want you to stand over here.” The impostor beckoned with the blaster toward the far side of the room.

Rade sighed, then obeyed.

The impostor gave Rade a wide berth, and approached the entry passage, where sparks were still shooting forth.

“Now move in front of the other exit,” the twin said. “But remain facing me.”

Rade began walking toward the indicated opening.

The impostor donned the helmet. “There.” His voice sounded tinny coming from the external speakers. “Now my disguise is complete.”

“They’re never going to believe you,” Rade said.

“Oh, but they are,” the man said. “I can already hear your chief.” He

paused. His mouth moved, but Rade heard only muted, unintelligible words—the impostor had disabled the external speakers.

Rade took his place in front of the exit passageway. “What are you telling him?”

“Nothing important,” the impostor replied. “Only that, I have dealt with the threat.” He nodded toward the wreckage of the robot on the deck.

Incredibly strong arms abruptly grabbed Rade from behind, and began dragging him into the second passageway, away from the impostor.

Rade struggled as the darkness of that corridor began to envelop him, but he couldn’t break the grip, despite the strength bestowed him by the jumpsuit. He glanced down: the arms wrapped around his chest assembly were made of metal. Another robot.

“Farewell, Rade Galaal,” the man said. “Soon you will be one of us. And you will understand everything.”

“You’ll never get away with this,” Rade said. “They’ll never believe you’re me.”

“Oh, but they already do,” the impostor said.

The exit slowly shrank. Rade knew that if he allowed the robot to take him any farther, he would never see his platoon again. He concentrated all of his hatred on the receding impostor.

Threaten to kill my brothers, will you? With plans to wear my face while doing it, so they think I’m the one killing them?

The thought filled Rade with immense anger.

In a fit of outrage he twisted his body to the side, curled in his legs, and struck out against the bulkhead. His legs contacted the hard surface and his upper body propelled backward, slamming his captor against the opposite bulkhead.

Rade twisted once again, using his weight to drag down his opponent; he aimed his body so that he fell with his head facing the distant opening. When he struck the deck on his side, he activated his jetpack via the manual switch inside his gloves. Full power.

He and the robot were dragged through the passageway. The left side of his jumpsuit scraped along the deck, producing a loud screech.

Ahead, the hatch to the compartment had begun to seal. Fast. Already there was only a small portion still open.

He fired a quick dorsal burst to move his body toward that clear

section. The robot, clinging to him behind the jetpack, struck the hatch and was torn from his body, while Rade passed clean through.

He emerged, scraping along the deck, and cut power to the jetpack. One of the robotic arms, severed from its main chassis, still hung from his chest assembly. He cast it aside as the hatch sealed with a resounding thud behind him.

He began to stand, but then he saw three of his brothers pointing their blasters down at him. Tahoe, Grappler, and TJ. They stood beside the impostor, who yet wore Rade's helmet.

Rade lifted both hands in tentative surrender.

Two more members of the platoon crowded inside—Mauler and Keelhaul.

Rade heard the muted voices as they talked behind their faceplates, exchanging words with the impostor. Rade couldn't understand a word.

"Don't listen to him," Rade said. "He's an impostor." He lifted a hand toward his collar, but paused when he realized his brothers might believe he was reaching for a weapon. "I have my aReal glasses here. Just inside my collar. May I put them on?"

There was a pause as the platoon members once more exchanged words he could not hear.

"You may," TJ said, using external speakers.

Rade retrieved the goggles from where he had stowed them under the collar of his torso assembly. He put them on.

Immediately the overhead map overlaid the right side of his vision, along with the blue dots of his platoon mates. He also saw a duplicate of his own dot, thanks to the digital copy of his public profile stored in the helmet the Imposter wore. That nano-machine brain could have probably transmitted the profile, too, but the imposter was pretending not to have an Implant, like Rade.

"There, see?" Rade said over the comm. "I'm already on the same encrypted communication band as all of you. If I was with them, would that be possible?"

"There are a hundred possible reasons why that's the case," the impostor said. "The most obvious being that the enemy has cracked our comms."

"Tahoe. It's me." Rade focused on his friend. "Your one-rep-max on the bench press is four hundred pounds. You have a wife and two kids. We border-hopped from Mexico together. Trained in bootcamp together. Went to MOTH school together."

Tahoe shook his head. "All of that could have been gleaned from public databases."

"I don't know," Manic said. "The bench press one, he'd have to have spied on our workouts."

“There are cameras all over the gym,” Tahoe said. “Maybe the enemy tapped in somehow.” He turned toward Rade. “If you really want to convince me, you’ll have to tell me something only the real Rage would know. Something I only ever told him.”

Rade considered. There were many things Tahoe had confided in him. What could he pick that wouldn’t be too embarrassing to his friend...

“Your wife thinks all we do is spend our days in strip clubs,” Rade said. “She thinks the navy has installed strippers aboard its ships.”

Tahoe pressed his lips together behind the faceplate, and then glanced at Rade. “That’s definitely something only you would know.”

“They must have performed some sort of brain scan on me when they had me in custody,” the impostor said.

“Ask *him* to tell you something only I would know.” Rade nodded toward his twin. “Go on.”

“This is ridiculous,” the impostor said. “I’m the one wearing the helmet. This alien creation suddenly shows up, bursting through the bulkhead, and you’re going to take its word over mine? I refuse to play this game. Tahoe, you know me.”

“Humor me,” Tahoe said. “Tell me something.”

The impostor hesitated. Then: “Do you remember when Alejandro died, what you told me? That we have to fight on. For him. And that we’d have to continue fighting for the rest of our lives. Otherwise, his death would be for nothing.”

Rade stared at the impostor in disbelief, and then said to his friends: “I told that to a woman I met when I escaped enemy custody... she turned out to be one of them. That’s the only reason why he knows it.”

Tahoe glanced at his platoon mates. “I don’t know what to think. As far as I’m concerned, they’re *both* Rage.”

“Get him to tell you something else,” Rade said.

“I think we’ve heard enough from the both of you,” TJ said.

“Wait, look through his faceplate closely,” Rade said. “Can’t you tell? His eyes, they have that dead look in them.”

Grappler glanced between Rade and the impostor. “Both their eyes look the same, far as I’m concerned. I can’t tell them apart. Then again, bio-printed eyes all look dead to me.”

“Snakeoil?” Facehopper said over the comm. He had obviously been

observing the proceedings remotely from the passageway outside.

Snakeoil squeezed into the compartment, then approached Rade. He produced a small scanning device.

“Exhale.” He told Rade.

Rade complied.

Snakeoil turned toward the impostor. “Open up your faceplate.”

“If I do that, I’ll be stuck in the dollhouse again when I get back,” the false Rade complained.

Snakeoil grimaced. “I said open up your faceplate.”

The impostor glanced at the others; he seemed to be assessing the situation. For a moment Rade was almost certain he would attack.

But then, abruptly, the impostor opened his faceplate. Snakeoil had him exhale into the device as well.

Snakeoil shook his head. “Their DNA is an exact match, Chief. Technically, they’re both Rage.”

“We’re going to have to bring them back to base,” the chief said. “Bind them both.”

“Chief, you can’t do this.” The clone shut his faceplate; his mouth moved as he communicated privately.

“I’ve made up my mind,” the chief said over the main band, which Rade heard over his aReal goggles. “Bind them. We’re going back.”

“Wait, what?” Bomb said over the comm. “We don’t all have to go back, do we? TJ can still lead us, here. We haven’t even had a chance to kick alien ass yet.”

“I’ve spoken to the LC,” the chief said. “The mission is a scrub. All members of Alpha Platoon are to return to the forward operating base immediately. The other platoons have the situation well in hand. They won’t miss us.”

“Just when I was starting to have some fun,” Bomb grumbled. “Why’d you have to go and ruin it, Rage? Whichever one of you is the real Rage, that is. What a drag. What a frickin’ buzzkill.”

Snakeoil removed a pair of flexicuffs from his utility belt and bound Rade’s arm assemblies behind his back. Those electromechanical cuffs were designed to resist pressures up to ten times what traditional arm assemblies could put out: enough to bind Centurions and even certain mech models. Rade couldn’t simply slide his arms upward out of his gloves, either, like he

had done when secured to the operating table as a captive—because of the positioning of the binds on his forearms, and their tightness, he had no wiggle room whatsoever.

Trace approached the impostor and beckoned toward the weapon. “Sorry Rage. I hate to do this, but I’m going to have to ask you to give me that.”

The clone smiled briefly behind his faceplate, then turned the blaster around and offered the grip.

Trace accepted it and produced a similar pair of cuffs. “Turn around. Hands behind your back.”

The impostor complied and Trace secured him. “Both prisoners are bound.”

“All right mates,” the chief said. “Time to go back. TJ, take us out.”

The platoon began the return trek to the entrance of the crashed ship. Rade didn't speak much, nor did the impostor. What could they say?

Bomb of course grumbled the whole time. Rade definitely felt for him. Rade didn't want to abandon the mission either. But the presence of the clone made it impossible to keep going. Rade knew that returning to the base to let the scientists examine both himself and the impostor was the best option. It was far better for any interrogations to occur in a controlled environment managed by the UC rather than aboard an alien ship—especially with potential enemy reinforcements only a few bulkheads away. Indeed, Rade half expected an enemy rescue party to attempt a retrieval during their flight, or at the very least for the impostor to attempt an escape.

Neither event transpired, and the platoon reached the entrance to the ship without issue. Rade was beginning to think that the enemy truly were on their last legs.

When the platoon members crossed the ramp and descended the berm to their Zeus units, there came the question of who would ride with whom.

“Tahoe, you'll take Rage number one,” Facehopper instructed.

Rade watched Tahoe load the imposter into the passenger seat on the upper back of his mech, above the jetpack.

“Harlequin, you get Rage number two,” the chief said.

“Come on,” Harlequin led Rade to his mech. The Zeus knelt.

It was tricky for Rade to board the unit with his hands tied behind his back, but he finally managed it. Harlequin jumped into the passenger seat beside him and secured Rade.

“Should I take away his aReal glasses?” Harlequin asked.

“Negative,” the chief replied. “We're letting the other Rage keep his helmet. May as well let this one keep his aReal. If only to facilitate comms and tracking.”

Harlequin leaped down and boarded the mech.

“Sky,” the chief instructed the unoccupied Zeus that belonged to Rade. “Follow.”

Rade attempted to communicate with the AI shortly thereafter. “Sky,

you know my voiceprint. My natural inflections and tonalities. That's not something easily duplicated, even among clones. Can't you prove to the chief that it's me?"

The AI didn't respond. Obviously Facehopper had instructed it to completely ignore both Rades.

TJ split the platoon into two squads, S1 and S2, and instituted traveling overwatch, just to be on the safe side: there were plenty of hiding places to launch an ambush from those mountains, despite that the HS3s had given the all clear, and that Raptors roamed overhead, providing realtime threat assessments.

Members of S2 led the way in a zig zag pattern, separated by five meters each. S1 followed thirty meters behind them, in a similar formation. The mechs traveled along the shoulder of the mountains, heading toward the southern edge—the fastest route to the city.

As the north-south trending ridge passed by, Rade warily eyed the steep precipices with their plateaued peaks, and searched for any enemies. Several tiny pebbles trickled down from an upper ledge at one point, and Rade was about to warn the platoon, but when he zoomed in he saw a Centurion crouched there, providing further overwatch of the two squads. The combat robot appeared blue on his overhead map, but he double-checked its unique signature anyway. Seemed authentic. His aReal had the latest software patches, so in theory the enemy couldn't spoof the signals of their robots. Then again, there hadn't been a patch issued for the infiltration units yet as far as he knew, and those nano-machine infested humans could readily spoof Implants...

He watched the Centurion, distrustful the whole time, but it never made a move against them, and it was soon lost to a bend in the mountain. He exhaled in relief, but only slightly. There was still a lot of mountain range to go yet.

Rade couldn't see his impostor from where he was located in the formation, since Tahoe's Zeus walked some ways in front of Harlequin's unit, and Rade had little ability to swivel his body while strapped down like that. Still, he worried that the clone was up to some mischief.

Watch him well, Tahoe.

He tried tapping in his friend a few times, but the signal was refused. Rade always received the message:

Private calls are not allowed from your ID.

More orders from the chief, no doubt.

After an hour the platoon finally rounded the far southern edge of the range and headed west toward the city, which was located four kilometers away. As those mountains receded, Rade definitely felt the tension lift somewhat. At least for him.

They were headed toward the forward operating base located on the southern tip of the city. A smaller base had been raised near the center of the city, in the downtown core where the high-rises and multi-level roadways resided, but given that victory was imminent, little actual construction had taken place there, nor was any more likely planned.

“I don’t know about the rest of you,” Bomb said. “But this deployment ranks down there with Mongolia in terms of sheer—”

He was cut off by a stentorian crack ten times louder than a thunderclap.

“Look up!” Fret said.

Rade glanced skyward.

Streams of smoke ripped up the sky, arcing down from where various objects reentered from orbit. That smoke expanded, writhing outward like a living beast, blotting out the sun.

“What in tarnation is going on in orbit?” Grappler said.

More earsplitting claps rent the air as the shockwaves from the other reentry objects reached them. Rade yearned for a helmet in that moment, since the noise cancelers built into his aReal goggles weren’t powerful enough to reduce the sound by more than several decibels.

A siren sounded from the distant base. It slowly rose and fell in pitch, reminding Rade of the tornado warnings he used to hear back on Earth. Loud, whiny, spine-tingly things.

“And here we all thought victory was imminent!” Manic said.

“Maybe it is,” Fret said. “But the Brass forgot to mention, they actually meant *the aliens’ victory*.”

“I just finished talking with the LC,” Facehopper said. “Those aren’t simple meteors. The entire division is evacuating. We’re to rendezvous with the fleet in orbit. What’s left of it, anyway.”

“What do you mean, what’s left of it?” Trace asked.

“Exactly that,” Facehopper said. “It seems the enemy struck back a

wee bit stronger than expected. But enough talking... let's go, mates. Pick up the pace. Double time! I want to make the base before those objects strike!"

As the Zeus units broke into a sprint, Rade calculated the impact time of the incoming objects based upon their current velocities, accelerations, and trajectories. The base was still two kilometers distant, and at the current top speeds of the mechs, the platoon would only attain the one kilometer mark by the time of impact.

Not going to make it.

Overhead, he spotted Dragonflies and other shuttle craft soaring past, evacuating the base in droves. That siren continued to sound.

"Wait for us, you mofos," Bender said.

"I don't think they can hear you," Manic said.

"Shut up and run, bitch," Bender said.

Near the one point five kilometer mark, Snakeoil said: "Uh, Chief? Have you checked the latest trajectory updates?"

According to the calculations on Rade's aReal, while several of the meteors would strike the base, the remainder would fall short—if the platoon proceeded on its current vector, those objects would crater directly into them.

"Looks like we're going to have make a little detour," the chief said. "I'm sending an updated route now."

A path appeared on the overhead map. It swung to the right, giving the predicted impact zone a wide berth.

The platoon followed the new route immediately. When they reached the one point three kilometer mark from the city, the meteors struck in rapid succession.

The ground shook from the impacts—Rade easily felt the vibrations pass through Harlequin's mech to the passenger seat. Dirt and debris hurtled into the air. The shockwave passed over them, and some of the mechs almost toppled. Rade's ears were blasted anew.

His nostrils filled with the smell of dust and grit. He tried to switch to Harlequin's point of view to observe the impact site from the Artificial's perspective, but had no access. A quick glance at his overhead map told him everything he needed to know.

The land immediately to the west of the platoon, and all the way to the southern edge of the city was pocked with large craters. As for the forward operating base, there was nothing left but a riddled mass of rubble

and collapsed housing units amid more craters. The wind had picked up, and the scent of burned industrial chemicals reached him, mixed with charred flesh.

The siren had stopped, he noticed, replaced instead by a faint yet persistent tone that could only be described as the beeping of hundreds of out-of-sync PASS devices—the Personal Alert Safety Systems connected to the utility belts of those who were now trapped in the rubble, dead or alive.

Suddenly, in full view of Rade's backward-facing vision, from beyond the mountain range arose a large black dodecahedron. It could only be the crashed alien ship.

For a moment he feared it might attempt some sort of strafing run, but then the ship rose upward, receding, making its way into orbit.

“Anyone else glad we're not aboard that?” Trace asked.

“I take back everything I said earlier about abandoning the mission,” Bomb transmitted.

“Uh,” Keelhaul said. “It looks like we have a problem. Check out the craters to the west.”

“Oh shit,” Manic said. “Shit shit shit.”

Rade fought against the passenger seat straps, but couldn't turn himself in the direction Keelhaul had indicated. He glanced at the overhead map instead: red dots were appearing by the dozen from the blast craters to the west, south of the city.

"Drop, people!" Facehopper said.

Harlequin's Zeus dropped. Thanks to the slightly new angle of the mech, Rade was finally able to see some of the impact craters to the west.

From the nearest emerged enemy tank units: imposing, hexagonal things equipped with multiple turrets, their black treads grinding coldly into the soil. They were escorted by four-legged, centaur-like robots: in place of a human torso, the centaurs had a single large cannon at the front, either a laser or plasma—Rade couldn't tell which from the design.

The tanks advanced quickly, as did the galloping centaurs, toward the ruins of the forward operating base. Apparently the enemy hadn't noticed the platoon, because the machines were set to pass right by.

From another crater a horde of bioengineered creatures streamed forth. These new beasts looked like a cross between hammerheads and krakens, because their bodies possessed the thin T-Rex-like qualities of the former, complete with segmented tails and two gripping arms at the centers of their torsos, but were topped by the squid-like heads of the latter, which exhibited long, thick tentacles and sported maws of glistening, serrated teeth.

"Krakhammers," Bender said over the comm, christening the beasts.

"Don't call them that," Bomb said. "Worst name ever. What am I going to tell my friends: 'I got me some krakhammers on that there Radiance colony?' Sheesh."

"I eat krakhammers for breakfast?" Manic quipped.

"I'm calling them kraks," Fret said. "Too many syllables in Bender's version."

"What about 'spider-faces?'" Mauler said.

"Cuddle-kins," Trace said.

"Cuddle-kins?" Bomb said. "What the eff...?"

"Come on, look at them," Trace insisted. "They're kind of cuddly."

It always filled Rade with pride to serve with these brothers who, no matter how grim the situation, always kept their sense of humor. It spoke volumes about their character.

“I got a name for them,” Skullcracker said.

“Let’s hear it,” Tahoe said.

“Fresh meat,” Skullcracker replied.

The bioengineered creatures raced toward the southern extents of the city, intermixing with the robot ranks.

That is, until one of the creatures paused. It turned toward the nearby platoon, its tentacles seeming to feel out the air just in front of it. Then those appendages suddenly grew stiff and it let out a terrible shriek.

Other creatures began to halt nearby; some tanks and centaurs turned around from their main advance.

“Looks like the gig is up, mates,” Facehopper said. “At this range, our lasers will cause maximum damage. No need to combine weapons. Fire at will.”

Nearly half the beasts from the crater had turned back by then, and were swarming toward the dug-in platoon.

Harlequin activated the shield in his left arm, splaying it out at an angle in front of him so that it formed a ramp between the ground and the exposed portion of his mech. Then the Artificial fired several Hellfires into the swarm. Meanwhile other Zeus units launched rockets toward the incoming tanks and centaurs.

Dozens of kraks—for lack of a better name—exploded near the front lines as the missiles struck. Two of the struck centaurs hurtled into the air, their constituent parts spreading out across the plains.

Several enemy tanks launched a blur of defensive metal—apparently the equivalent of the Trench Coats, because the remaining Hellfires exploded in midair.

Three tanks unleashed return fire. Their shells tore across the plains toward the platoon. Several Zeus mechs launched their own Trench Coat countermeasures, and the shells exploded early. As the air around Rade thundered with booms louder than fireworks, and gunpowder and other chemicals assailed his nostrils, he found himself wishing more and more that he had his helmet. The noise canceler of the aReal goggles helped, but not much.

Two centaurs fired their lasers. Large holes appeared in the shields of the struck Zeus units.

The Alpha Platoon mechs fired lasers over their shields in reply, twelve in total, easily taking out the two centaurs and those around them.

“My shield can’t take another blow like that,” Manic said.

“Neither can mine,” Fret added.

A tank rolled toward the platoon. A krak abruptly leaped in front of it and spewed a thick liquid that quickly solidified into a wall of crystal.

Zeus mechs fired cobras, zodiacs and missiles toward the pair. The crystal deflected the lasers and lightning bolts, while the Trench Coat countermeasure equivalents of the tank and those nearby detonated the incoming missiles well short of the target.

The krak made the mistake of emerging from behind the cover of its wall and the platoon members quickly hewed it down.

Creatures from the swarm began to reach them. Those in the front ranks spewed that quick-hardening substance from their maws, encasing TJ and Manic in impenetrable crystal. Their Zeus units couldn’t break free on their own, and they toppled.

“Uh, could use a little help here,” TJ said.

The other mechs kept the incoming kraks away from the disabled pair, and themselves. Grappler fired lightning bolts into the enemy, rending three of them apart. Keelhaul fired his laser at close range, tearing through another three.

But the swarm kept coming and soon overran the platoon, so that soon the individual members were reduced to bashing and kicking. They formed a defensive circle around the disabled mechs of TJ and Manic.

The fourteen remaining Zeus units used their shields to deflect any of the immobilizing liquid that gushed their way, and soon all of them were lugging around heavy, crystal-encased shields. The platoon members found that they could break off the crystals when enough had accumulated on the surface by slamming the shields hard into the ground.

It seemed the krak could spew two types of phlegm, similar to the kraken. One that would dissolve metal. The other encase it in crystals. The attacking hordes began to concentrate on using the former type of spit when they realized the latter was having no effect. Shields were beginning to dissolve across the platoon, starting from the edges, which were thinnest.

Some of the Zeus units fired incendiaries. The affected creatures lit up, but fought on while the flames burned their bodies. The fire spread to a few others in the horde, but they too continued to fight. Some of that jellied gasoline rubbed onto the Zeus units themselves, where it burned harmlessly upon the hulls.

“Save your jet fuel,” Facehopper said. “It’s a waste if the flames don’t stop them.”

“Seems to blind them, though,” Bomb said.

“Even so,” Facehopper said. “It doesn’t bring them down. Save your fuel.”

Through it all, Rade merely observed from the passenger seat of Harlequin’s mech. A helpless bystander. He faced the inside of the circle formed by the units, with the encased mechs of TJ and Manic at his feet. The impostor resided opposite him; behind that faceplate, the mouth of his clone was set in a snarl of victory.

Rade realized the enemy tanks and centaurs had stopped firing. Didn’t want to harm their brethren, it seemed. Looking toward the southern extents of the city, Rade saw that the enemy robots had in fact lost interest, and were continuing toward the ruins of the base as if it was a forgone conclusion that Alpha Platoon would meet its demise.

The platoon members began snatching up the bodies of dead kraks and draping them over their shields to shore up the weakening protection. It actually worked, because the krak seemed just as resistant to their own acid as the metal, and when struck by the liquid it took quite some time to dissolve through to their bones, at which point the bodies would be replaced, with the respective Zeus mech snatching up a new one.

An aircraft roared past overhead and crashed into the ground nearby, cutting a large runnel into the dirt before exploding.

“The hell was that?” Fret said.

“I think it was one of our bombers,” Skullcracker said. “Shot down.”

Without warning Tahoe’s Zeus was pulled from the defensive circle. The kraks concentrated on his mech, spewing acid all over it. Well, almost all over it: they left the impostor, who was still strapped into the passenger seat, conspicuously alone.

“Can’t... hold... them!” Tahoe said.

“Cyclone, eject!” TJ said. “Your cockpit is compromised!”

The melting cockpit of the Zeus burst open a moment later and Tahoe jetted skyward in his jumpsuit. Apparently he still believed that the impostor was Rade, because he turned back to render aid; a krak snagged him by wrapping a tentacle around his boot, and began reeling him in.

“Tahoe!” Rade said. “Harlequin, let me down! Harlequin!”

Harlequin ignored him.

Tahoe drew the blaster from his utility belt and fired, slicing the tentacle in two. He broke free but another tentacle struck him before he could reach the impostor, and he crashed to the ground not far from the defensive circle of mechs, vanishing from Rade’s view behind a writhing knot of beasts.

The other kraks continued to whale upon Tahoe’s Zeus unit. They spewed acid, and slammed their glistening appendages repeatedly into its weakening hull. One of the mech’s arms was pulled clean off. The impostor remained unscathed through it all. It seemed obvious to Rade that the creatures were trying to free him.

“Sky!” Rade said. “Do something!”

Sky didn’t answer, nor did it move from its position in the circle. Like the others, it was too occupied by the close fighting.

A krak melted through the straps securing the impostor to the passenger seat of Tahoe’s mech, and the clone leaped down, untouched by the creatures. In fact, they cleared a path for him. He paused beside one of them and, like an obsequious pet, the krak promptly melted through the cuffs pinning his wrists behind his back.

“Are you guys seeing this?” Rade said. “These things are helping him!”

“Helping who?” Grappler said.

“The impostor!”

Tahoe came into view once more. He was in the air, firing into the kraks underneath him, but he wasn’t letting the blaster charge long enough and so inflicted only minor wounds. In moments another krak caught him. It drew him in and completely enveloped him with its tentacles.

The impostor jetted toward Tahoe. Landing beside the krak, the clone picked up the blaster Tahoe had dropped and then fired at the beast, killing it. The dead creature toppled, still gripping Tahoe in its slimy appendages.

Tahoe struggled to break free as the impostor approached. For a

moment Rade entertained the faint hope that the clone might actually help his friend. Why kill the krak, otherwise?

But then the impostor rested a heavy boot on Tahoe's helmet and pointed the blaster directly at the faceplate.

He looked up to make certain Rade was watching.

"Told you I'd kill your friends," the impostor transmitted.

Rade struggled futilely against his binds. He was going to watch his friend die and there was nothing he could do about it.

Tahoe's Zeus abruptly broke free of the kraks restraining it. The hull was a mess, with wires and servomotors exposed all over the place, and the cockpit was torn open in several places. The Zeus bashed aside the kraks between it and Tahoe, using the one arm remaining to it.

The impostor noticed the commotion and hastily raised the blaster to defend himself. He fired, striking the incoming Zeus, but the mech took no notice—it plowed right into the impostor, sending him hurtling to one side.

The mech knelt to rip Tahoe from the tentacles of the dead creature, but then more kraks quickly enveloped it, pulling the Zeus down. Rade lost sight of both the mech and his friend once more.

Tahoe abruptly jetted into the air; he managed to clear the tentacles reaching up for him and finally landed in the middle of the defensive circle, on top of TJ's immobilized mech.

Tahoe's Zeus didn't emerge from the fray. Rade felt a pang of pity for the valiant AI that had sacrificed itself for its master.

"TJ, open up your stowage door," Tahoe said. "I need your spare blaster."

TJ obeyed. A compartment opened in the upper thigh of the mech—the only part of TJ's Zeus that wasn't encased in crystals.

"Hold still for a second," Tahoe said.

"I'm not going anywhere anytime soon," TJ said.

Tahoe retrieved the blaster and held it to a portion of the crystal.

"Wait, I thought the crystal reflects laser fire?" TJ said.

"It does," Tahoe said. "But I have a theory. If I can send the beam inside at the perfect angle, it should reflect right back into the crystal. And then reflect again. And again. Back and forth that beam will go, constantly rattling the surrounding atoms in an ever increasing cascade effect, eventually melting right through. That's my hope, anyway. Now, let's see if my local AI can help me with the aiming..."

Tahoe took several moments to properly position his blaster against

the surface, checking and rechecking the angle, and then he finally fired. He slouched in visible relief when the beam drilled a small hole through the translucent substance. He adjusted the position of the blaster and fired again. In that way he proceeded to drill several more holes through the immobilizing crystal.

Rade returned his attention to the fighting. He searched for the impostor, who still lurked somewhere out there. Rade saw him then, through the swarm. The clone's eyes were directed toward the ground: he appeared to be searching for his blaster, which must have fallen away when the mech struck him.

"Harlequin," Rade said. "If it isn't obvious I'm on your side by now, then you're the stupidest Artificial I know. *Let me down.*"

The straps tying him to the passenger seat abruptly opened.

"Thank you," Rade said.

He leaped down and landed beside Tahoe on TJ's encased mech.

Tahoe started, then turned the blaster on him.

Rade lifted his hands in surrender. "Tahoe. It's me."

The Zeus units continued to fight in a ring around them. For a moment, Rade thought Tahoe was going to squeeze the trigger.

"Remember how Lieutenant Vicks looked?" Rade said. "Remember her eyes? Well look into my own, Tahoe. Truly look. Are these the eyes of the enemy? You *know* me."

Tahoe stared at him for long moments as the battle raged around them.

And then he lowered the blaster.

"Thank you." Rade swiveled his arms, still tied behind his back, toward his friend. "Would you mind?"

Tahoe removed the cuffs.

"Good to see you finally believe me," Rade told him.

"I still have my doubts."

"And yet you freed me," Rade said.

"I know." Tahoe returned his attention to TJ's Zeus. "That's because you haven't tried to kill me yet."

Rade glanced at the circle of defenders. "Harlequin, can you open your stowage?"

"I'm not allowed to arm you," Harlequin said.

“Can I borrow that for a second?” Rade asked Tahoe.

Tahoe hesitated. “Why?”

“The impostor is still out there.”

Conveniently, the clone showed up on the overhead map as a blue dot several meters beyond the defensive perimeter, amid the swarm.

Tahoe, obviously using that information, aimed through the fray toward the clone. Rade followed his aim. He caught glimpses of the impostor through the fighting; the man still seemed to be searching for the lost weapon.

Tahoe abruptly lowered the blaster. “Can’t do it. Feels like I’m shooting you. Go ahead.” He reluctantly handed over the weapon.

Rade aimed between the legs of a Zeus mech, in the direction of the clone. Kraks continually slid into and out of his vision, blocking his view of the target.

“Not going to work,” Rade said. “Be right back.”

Rade jetted into the passenger seat of the Zeus in front of him, then aimed down into the fray.

“Get out of my seat,” Mauler told him.

“One second.” Rade aimed at the impostor, but there were still too many kraks ebbing and flowing below to get a solid shot. He fired anyway. The beam took down an intervening krak, but another came forward to take its place.

“Chief, one of the Rage’s is loose,” Mauler sent.

“*Both* are loose,” Manic said from where he lay encased in crystals at the center of the circle.

“I’m terminating the impostor out there on the plains,” Rade said. “I don’t know how many of you saw it, but he tried to kill Cyclone.”

“I can confirm,” Tahoe said.

“But we still don’t know if you’re the real Rage for sure,” Manic said.

“Manic, I’m the real Rage.” He kept the impostor in his sights, waiting for the kraks to clear up. “Take a look out there. None of the creatures are bothering him in the least.”

Rade caught a final glimpse of the clone: the man had found the blaster. He was aiming toward the defensive circle.

At Rade.

“Just saying,” Manic continued. “You might *both* be impostors.”

An opening appeared in the fray. Rade had a clear shot.

He fired.

The laser struck the impostor's faceplate and drilled straight through into the man's forehead.

The target toppled.

"Impostor eliminated." Rade leaped back into the middle of the circle. "Thank you." He returned the blaster to Tahoe.

"Are we going to leave him loose back there, Chief?" Mauler sent.

"Cyclone, watch him," Facehopper said.

"Will do." Tahoe continued drilling through the crystalline substance that coated TJ's mech.

"Bastards keep coming," Keelhaul said. "Don't think we can keep this up much longer, Chief. Too many of them."

Facehopper didn't answer.

Tahoe retracted the blaster. "That should do. Rage. Help me."

Tahoe began pounding his gloves into the crystalized chest area of TJ's Zeus. Rade joined in.

"TJ, try to bend your torso, or move your arms," Tahoe said.

Cracks formed in the crystalline surface, and then large portions broke away as the mech sat up. Rade and Tahoe were thrown onto Manic's Zeus beside it.

TJ's arms erupted from the translucent chrysalis a moment later. "Do my legs, next," TJ said.

"Fret's right, we can't stay here," Grappler said. "Our shields are melting away."

"Drape their dead over your shield, fool!" Bender said.

"How can I?" Grappler said. "When soon I'll have no shield to drape them over!"

"He's right, mates," Facehopper said. "We're going to have to retreat. Snakeoil, help Tahoe and Rage free TJ, then work on Manic. Let me know when you've cut them loose."

"Roger that," Snakeoil said.

He left his place in the circle, and the other platoon members closed the gap.

"Snakeoil, you have to hold your laser right up to the surface," Tahoe said. "And initiate a cascading reflection in the atoms. I'm transmitting

guidelines to your AI now.”

Snakeoil’s mech stood on top of Manic’s Zeus. He held his cobra to the encasing crystals and fired in controlled bursts to conserve charge. The sheer weight of the mech caused the damaged crystals to shift underneath him, and they sloughed away. Snakeoil lost his balance on the moving surface and slammed into Manic’s mech.

“Get off of me!” Manic said. His arms were partially mobile at that point, and he shoved at Snakeoil, but couldn’t get the mech off of him.

Snakeoil scrambled upright. “Hold yer horses.”

Manic struggled against the last remnants of crystal clinging to his servomotors, and then broke free of it entirely. He stood up.

“Move aside, gentlemen,” Manic said.

Tahoe and Rade had been working on TJ, but then they activated their jetpacks to clear the way for Manic.

Rade landed in the passenger seat of Sky, while Tahoe took Snakeoil’s seat.

Manic leaped onto TJ’s legs; he placed his cobra up against the crystals and fired in bursts, letting his weight shift the damaged crystals aside. In moments TJ was free.

“Chief,” Snakeoil said. “TJ and Manic are operational.”

“All right, mates,” Facehopper said. “We’ll break through the horde by using our incendiaries to blind them, then we’ll jet over them, heading northeast. When we land, we’ll continue along that vector, following the eastern perimeter of the city, and then proceed toward the second FOB downtown. It’s our only chance.”

Rade knew it was a long shot. When they got to the base, it was unlikely any booster rockets would be available to allow the Zeus units a direct launch into orbit. The platoon members would have to abandon the mechs and search for a shuttle. Whether or not they would actually find such a craft at the current point in the evacuation was another story.

“Here’s the initial landing zone,” Facehopper continued. On the HUD, a flashing waypoint appeared about fifty meters to the northeast. “The enemy ranks are relatively thin there, and won’t offer much resistance. Touching down any farther is a waste of fuel—you’ll already be at half a tank by that point. Once you land, make your way to the muster point.” One kilometer to the northeast another waypoint appeared, marked M1. “Got it?”

All right. On my mark fire incendiaries. Let's blind these bastards." Facehopper paused. "Mark!"

The mechs unleashed flames outward, coating the closest enemies in jellied gasoline. The kraks continued to attack, ignoring the fire. Though it was obvious they were blinded from the way their tentacles haphazardly struck out, not to mention the random streams of acid their maws spewed.

"Damn things sure have a high pain threshold," Manic said.

"Ignite jumpjets!" Facehopper said.

Sky bent its knees, leaped upward, and thrust. Rade felt his suit vibrate as those large nozzles fired continually underneath the passenger seat.

Some of the kraks beyond the burning ranks leaped upward and attempted to grab the fleeing mechs, but their tentacles missed. Rade switched his overhead map to an isometric perspective to make sure none of his brothers were yanked into the fray.

Everyone made it.

Below, kraks continually jumped upward, unfurling their tentacles in a desperate attempt to grab them.

Sky jetted slightly higher, while maintaining a consistent aft outflow. In the distance, Rade could see the half-buried dodecahedrons protruding from the craters that produced the swarm. Definitely troop carriers of some kind: the beasts emerged without end from the open ramps. It was probably a good thing the platoon had fled.

In the distance above the city, he saw what looked like four evac shuttles launch from the downtown area. Those shuttles hugged the rooftops as they sped eastward toward the mountains, and when they cleared the city, the craft angled upward sharply to complete the escape. Unfortunately one shuttle burst into flames as Rade watched; the remainder made it, however. That was a good sign.

Sky began to descend toward the waypoint, as did the other Zeus mechs. Below, as Facehopper predicted the krak ranks were relatively thin, and contained maybe a quarter of the creatures the party had faced only moments before.

Sky and the others launched their remaining Hellfires to clear a path and then the Zeus mechs landed at a run. Electrolasers thundered and tentacles rained down around Rade.

"To the muster point, mates!" Facehopper said.

After punching through the enemy outskirts, Facehopper had TJ organize the platoon into two squads while on the run. Traveling overwatch formation.

Behind, the swarm of four-legged creatures pursued at a fairly good clip, but the platoon members slowly outran them—the kraks definitely moved slower than generic hammerheads. Rade supposed those tentacled heads weighed the enemy down. A few of the creatures even occasionally tripped over their own tentacles, which they dragged on the ground as they ran.

Several Zeus mechs in both squads ran with torsos swiveled partly backward, so that while the autopilots continued forward, the operators could fire zodiacs and cobras into the receding enemy.

Rade stood up in his passenger seat and clambered around to the front of the mech. It was tricky maintaining his hold while the Zeus was in full sprint like that.

“Let me in,” Rade ordered.

Sky refused to respond.

“Sky, whatever Facehopper told you, the current crisis overrides it. I’ve proven myself by now.”

Nothing.

He decided to try a different tack. “Sky, The Machine Constitution demands that you protect human life! I could fall at any time. I don’t think I can hang on to your hull for much longer. Let me inside!”

Nothing.

There was one last thing he could try.

“Chief, can you instruct Sky to let me in?” Rade sent.

“Go ahead, Sky,” Facehopper sent.

The cockpit finally opened and Rade eased inside with the help of his jetpack.

The hatch sealed and the inner cocoon wrapped him tightly. He tried to move, but the actuators didn’t yield. He was pinned. He should have been able to pilot the mech without a helmet—all he needed were the aReal goggles he wore. But the AI simply wasn’t allowing him.

“Just because I’ve allowed you inside doesn’t mean I’m going to let you control the Zeus,” Sky said.

“Are you going to make me talk to the chief again? You know it’s me.

You're familiar with my voiceprint. The hidden tics and micro-expressions on my face. I'm sure you scanned the impostor and compared these against my expected biometrics."

Nothing.

"Facehopper," Rade sent over the comm. "Sky hasn't given me control."

"I think for the moment it's better that your AI remains in command of the Zeus," Facehopper said.

"But I've neutralized the impostor," Rade said. "Helped Cyclone free TJ. What more do you want from me?" He paused. "I'm going to get Sky to send over a biometric analysis comparing my current measurements to those made over the past several days. The AI is also going to transmit a similar comparison performed against the impostor. This will verify without question that I am who I say I am. Do it, Sky."

"Do you wish me to comply, Chief Facehopper?" the AI sent.

"Go ahead," Facehopper said.

Rade couldn't see the comparisons for himself, since Sky wouldn't grant him access, and for a moment he was worried that the impostor's measurements would be closer to his own biometrics than he had thought. Had the clone studied his natural inflections and tonalities enough to mimic him down to the voiceprint level? It seemed absurd, but he couldn't be sure, not with these aliens...

But then Facehopper said: "I'm satisfied you are who you say you are, Rage. Cancel previous standing order, Sky. You may allow the real Rage to pilot the Zeus."

And then, just like that, Rade had control again.

“Thank you, Sky,” Rade said. “It’s good to be back.”

“It’s good to have you.”

Rade smiled. “You say that now, but a moment ago you wanted nothing to do with me.”

“We AIs are a fickle bunch.”

The only issue Rade experienced while piloting the mech without a helmet was that those inner actuators pressed right up against his face and painfully caught the hairs of his beard, making him reluctant to turn his head too far left or right. A minor problem.

The platoon reached the muster point and the mechs continued putting distance between themselves and their pursuers, so that soon the foremost kraks were a kilometer behind. So far, no enemy robot units had been dispatched from the city to deal with them. The eastern edge remained one and a half clicks to their left.

“Just talked with the LC,” Facehopper said. “He made it out. The situation in orbit is uncertain at the moment, but he thinks the fleet will be able to hold out long enough to retrieve any stragglers. He agrees with me that the downtown FOB is our best option at the moment, since he can’t spare any craft to retrieve us at the moment. Once we reach it, if there are no available shuttles, we’re to radio him and he’ll advise us of the next steps. Comm coverage is going to grow real scarce down here momentarily: he gave me the coordinates of a geosynchronous repeater drone in orbit. I’m forwarding it to you, Snakeoil.”

“You know,” Lui said. “We should really head to the mountains and wait there for a pickup at some future date. Because does anyone really think any shuttles will be left downtown?”

“I agree,” Bomb said. “We go to the city, we enter the hornet’s nest.”

“We have to try,” Facehopper said. “If we retreat to the mountains, and the LC can’t get approval for a shuttle, we could be fending off the enemy for days out there.”

Behind them, the kraks began to abandon the pursuit, turning instead

toward the city and the promise of the easy mayhem that awaited them there.

“Looks like they’re not even pursuing anymore, Chief,” Lui said. “What was that you said about fending off the enemy for days?”

“I’ve made up my mind,” Facehopper said. “Besides, the lieutenant commander wants us to look out for any stragglers needing assistance along the way. We still have a few vacant passenger seats, in case you hadn’t noticed.”

Two kilometers passed without incident. The chief had the platoon turn westward, toward the outskirts of Radiance. They passed into the hydroponic farmsteads that bordered the eastern side; all of the farms had been cut down by the enemy during the initial invasion. The ruins of long central towers plowed through the dirt alongside the platoon; large glass domes lay shattered and burned on all sides, their sharp pieces stabbing into the ground. If Rade had visited the city only a month before, those structures would have towered into the sky, the greenhouse domes spreading outward like the branches of giant oaks blooming with life. But that day, there was only death upon those farmsteads.

As the platoon members advanced, they surveyed the ruins carefully, leery of ambush.

“Wish we had some HS3s to scope out the place,” Bomb complained.

“Oh sure,” Fret said. “We saw how reliable those HS3s were the last time...”

The mechs soon reached the city. Facehopper had them keep strictly to the streets, wanting to conserve jet fuel.

“So, if I recall, we’d only liberated about eighty percent of the city before the latest turn of events,” Bomb said. “And the last enemy holdouts resided in the northern parts. With the Marine division evacuated, those holdouts have free rein of the city.”

“Good point,” TJ said. “We’re going to have to be vigilant for tangos making their way south.”

They maintained their traveling overwatch formation and hugged the travertine buildings. Bounding overwatch was used in particularly sensitive areas, such as crossing major streets. The mechs could no longer rely upon their built-in camouflage because of the alien blood that smeared their hulls and effectively disabled the feature. Not that it was all that helpful in the first place.

Far to the south, smoke plumes arose where the invaders wreaked destruction near the old base.

The downtown core remained oddly quiet. There were no other blue dots on the overhead map, other than those belonging to the platoon members. The last stragglers had already been evacuated, it seemed. Either that, or no comm nodes existed in the immediate area to repeat the signals. Glancing overhead, Rade realized not a single HS3 hovered up there, nor any Raptors or other units. The enemy had either eliminated all of the air support, or attacked with such ferocity that the UC was forced to withdraw them. It was a good thing the LC had sent the coordinates of that repeater drone in orbit, because on its own, the comm node Snakeoil carried in his Zeus probably wouldn't be powerful enough to reach the fleet. But by sending a focused, precision beam to that drone, Snakeoil could maintain communication with the lieutenant commander.

At one intersection, the group was forced to retreat into the rubble of an office building as a squad of Zeus-sized robots journeyed south. They were accompanied by a platoon of scorpions.

When the enemy had passed, Grappler gave the all-clear, and the platoon crossed the intersection in bounding overwatch formation.

The skyscrapers of the downtown core soon thrust into the air before them, structures of steel and glass at odds with the low-slung travertine homes the party had passed thus far. Roughly a quarter of the high-rises had collapsed. Another quarter remained standing, though appeared badly damaged, with twisted metal randomly protruding, windows shattered in large swaths, and entire floors burned out. The last half of the buildings were relatively intact, with only minor mars on their surfaces.

The multilevel roadways that stretched between the skyscrapers had collapsed in several places; the damage to those streets was consistently random, and didn't depend on whether the buildings beside them were still standing.

That n-shaped structure formed by the toppling of one building against another had remained since the beginning of the operation, and in latter days had served as a landmark pointing to the second forward operating base: the base was situated inside a diminutive office building three blocks to the east of the n shape.

As they neared that building, the blue dots of friendlies appeared on

the overhead map, approaching from a side street.

“Snakeoil, identify friendly units,” Facehopper said.

Snakeoil replied a moment later. “They appear to be an infantry platoon from A Company, 1st Battalion 2nd Marines. They were separated from their unit, and claim they’re trying to reach the secondary FOB.”

“Tell them to join us,” Facehopper said.

The Marines met up with them moments later and loped alongside the mechs in their jumpsuits.

The two platoons reached the forward operating base, and jetted their way to the three-story rooftop.

“There, happy?” Lui said when they attained the rooftop. “Nothing left. Every last evac-capable craft has been taken. And, unsurprisingly, there are no booster rockets to launch our mechs into orbit.”

He was right. All that remained on the rooftop landing zone were a few M139B pulse platforms set up around the perimeter.

“Snakeoil,” Facehopper said. “Advise the lieutenant commander that there are no shuttles to bring us home. Ask him if he can drum up an exfil for us and a Marine platoon.”

“The lieutenant commander tells me the LZ is too hot for an extract,” Snakeoil replied a moment later, referring to the landing zone. “He’s dispatching booster rockets to a plateau on the outskirts of the north-south trending ridge outside the city instead. They should drop within a five kilometer radius of this area.” Snakeoil highlighted the region on the map. “As for the Marines, he says load them into the passenger seats of our Zeus mechs, and take them up into orbit with us.”

“I seem to recall saying something about the mountains being the safer bet,” Lui said. “But did anyone listen to me? Noooo.”

“Feels good to be proven right in the end, don’t it?” Bomb said.

“Hell ya.”

“Wait, why can’t the lieutenant commander have the booster rockets dropped closer?” Fret said. “Like in our current neighborhood, for example? Save us the trip...”

“Do you want the boosters to be shot out of the sky on the way down?” Tahoe said.

“Good point.”

“Chief,” one of the Marines said. The aReal labeled him Corporal

Powell. "My platoon just got clearances for two shuttles."

"What? How?" Facehopper said. "My lieutenant commander just told me the LZ is too hot."

"Not according to our lieutenant colonel," Powell said. "It's up to you, though. If you want to leave, go ahead. But we plan to wait for the shuttles."

Facehopper hesitated. "What's the ETA."

"Five minutes."

"We can afford to wait five minutes," the chief said.

"Do you want me to tell Braggs to cancel the drop?" Snakeoil asked.

"Negative," Facehopper replied. "A little tidbit I learned from previous deployments: never close the back door."

Rade surveyed the street and buildings below from a prostrate overwatch position at the edge of the rooftop. He had changed his point of view to the sights in the cobra.

"Should we check inside the base for any stragglers?" Trace asked.

"They'd be showing up on our overhead map by now," TJ said. "If there are any stragglers, they ain't here. But I agree we should send some men down to clear the building, to prevent an ambush from that vector."

"We'll handle it," Corporal Powell said. He assigned two fire teams to secure the building, and the involved Marines promptly vanished through the rooftop door.

On the overhead map, Rade watched their blue dots descend through the stairwell for a few moments, and then he returned his attention to the street.

"Building is clear!" Corporal Powell announced at the five minute mark.

"Quick son of a bitches," Bender commented.

"Where are those shuttles?" Tahoe said.

"They're coming," the corporal replied. "Two minutes."

The fire teams returned to the rooftop and resumed their places along the perimeter.

"There they are," Manic said.

Two shuttles came into view, heading in from the northeast, hugging the ground as they swept over the city.

"I'll bet anyone a quarter of their monthly pay that those craft will be

shot down before they reach us,” Bomb said.

No one took him up on the bet.

“Well I’ll be,” Bomb said when the shuttles arrived at the building without incident.

The two craft landed on the rooftop in succession and their ramps lowered.

A Marine clad in a full jumpsuit emerged from either one and waved them forward.

“Dismount, mates!” Facehopper said. “Let’s load up!”

“Good luck down here, Sky,” Rade said.

“It has been a pleasure serving with you,” the AI replied.

Still prostrate, Rade rolled the mech onto its back to open the cockpit hatch and then he disembarked. He had Sky open up the storage compartment, and he retrieved the blaster stowed there.

After Rade cleared the Zeus, Sky flipped the mech onto its chest and resumed scanning the streets.

Blaster in hand, Rade hurried across the rooftop toward the closest craft; he noticed that the Marines illogically weren’t breaking from their perimeter positions.

“Someone tell the Marines we’re going!” Bender said.

Rade noticed something else odd, then. While the two Marines beckoning from the ramps of either shuttle appeared on the overhead map in blue, the shuttles themselves didn’t show up at all.

“Chief,” Rade said, coming to a halt. “Why don’t the shuttles show up on our HUDs?”

When the words left Rade’s mouth, Facehopper also came to a stop. At a minimum, an unidentified shuttle would appear in red. Never would it be completely absent.

Not unless some major signal spoofing was going on.

“Everybody freeze!” Facehopper said.

The Marines on the ramps abruptly swung the rifles down from their shoulders. They aimed at random members of Alpha Platoon.

“Take cover!” Facehopper said.

Most of Alpha was near the center of the rooftop, and they either dropped or leaped behind nearby superstructures.

Rade dove to the deck as the Marines unleashed their weapons. As he

rolled behind a small air outlet for cover, he realized other Marines were turning on them from along the entire perimeter of the building.

“They’re all infiltration units!” Rade said.

He aimed his blaster toward the closest targets—two Marines who had taken cover behind an intake vent and heat pipe. He aimed squarely at the intake vent and fired. Unsurprisingly, at that range the laser bored right through the thin metal and struck the target. The man collapsed dead onto the rooftop.

Rade realized the futility of the cover in that moment: every last one of the combatants, even the members of Alpha Platoon, may as well have been hiding behind pieces of paper.

The Zeus units abruptly intervened, firing lightning bolts and lasers at Marines scattered along the perimeter. The mechs seemed to be using the blue positional indicators of the enemy to their advantage, extrapolating where the Marines were hidden behind the different superstructures and then firing right through the obstacles.

The surviving Marines concentrated their fire on the Zeus units, which they apparently deemed the greater threat. This allowed Rade and the others to readily fight back.

The mechs received minor damage, but the blue dots of the Marines were quickly winking out.

Before victory could be attained, the roof collapsed in several places along the perimeter. Some of the Zeus mechs were swallowed, along with the Marines. Both shuttles crashed inside.

From the gaping holes, ATLAS mechs scrambled onto the rooftop.

And then all hell broke loose.

Rade dropped lower behind his cover as one of those mechs unleashed its Gatling in his direction. The air outlet above him was sawed entirely in half.

Taking cover behind paper.

The incoming threads of gunfire let up, and he leaned past to aim his blaster at the ATLAS: a blocky, humanoidal shape three times the height of a man and ten times wider. Steel rungs climbed the legs to the thick torso, where the cockpit was situated above the main fusion reactor. The head was relatively small and pinched in comparison to its wide body, and a red visor with two yellow glows composed the eye area.

Rade unleashed a shot directly at the red visor of the visual center, and took cover once more, dropping to the roof. He glanced in the rearview camera provided by his HUD, and what he saw there caused him to immediately roll to the side and point the blaster between his legs.

He aimed at another ATLAS there; it was occupied by incoming laser fire to the right and had unfurled its shield to protect itself.

A Marine crouching on the ground beside it abruptly leaped up; the cockpit hatch opened and swallowed the soldier. When the ATLAS moved again, Rade assumed the soldier was in control. He noticed that the Marine's indicator immediately vanished from the overhead map once the soldier was inside the mech; Rade realized that none of the new mechs showed up on the HUD, either.

He carefully aimed his weapon at the eye region of the piloted ATLAS and fired.

Incoming fire once more ate into his cover and he ducked. The bullets slowly bit downward, heading straight toward him. He swiveled his body to the right and fired his jetpack, the chest piece of his jumpsuit screeching across the rooftop. He fired a ventral burst, pushing off from the surface, and cut thrust to land in the passenger seat of one of the attacking ATLAS units.

The mech reached up, trying to grab him, but Rade dropped out of the passenger area and slid down onto the jumpjets of the ATLAS. The exposed fuel lines of these older mechs were particularly vulnerable to external tampering: he tore out said lines and fuel dripped onto the roof. Rade kicked

away from the mech and activated his jetpack. In midair, he aimed his blaster at the source of the leaking fuel and fired. The resultant explosion sent the ATLAS flying off the rooftop.

Rade landed rolling on the rooftop and took cover as jellied gasoline sprayed the area around him. The small superstructure that shielded him began to collapse as projectiles tore into it.

“Sky!” He said over the comm. “Where are you?”

And then the Zeus was standing in front of him, protecting him with its tall shield. The metal of that shield was partially eaten away by acid from the previous encounter, and parts of it didn’t hold up very well to the projectile onslaught.

“Hurry,” the AI sent.

The torso swung toward him and the cockpit hatch dropped open. Rade jetted inside and the inner actuators snugly cocooned him.

A missile alert sounded. Sky reacted before he did, leaping to one side and launching its Trench Coat.

The world became orange outside, and Rade felt the cockpit crumple slightly, the metal pushing into the fabric of his jumpsuit.

The orange faded away but the world was spinning rapidly around him. He struck something—it took him a moment before he realized it was a skyscraper across the street. He plummeted toward the street.

Rade fired air brakes and stabilized the mech, though he still struck relatively hard: the solar panels in the asphalt spidered around him.

“Sky, are we all right?” he said.

“Fine,” the AI returned. “That missile caught me off guard, that’s all.”

A shadow blotted out the sun. Rade glanced up: one of the ATLAS units was leaping down toward him.

He raised his shield to deflect the incoming projectile barrage and unleashed his electrolaser in return. The thunderous bolt slammed into the right shoulder of the descending mech, and the war machine spun uncontrollably the rest of the way down, smashing into the pavement.

Rade leaped onto the ATLAS and fired his cobra into the cockpit at pointblank range, aiming it so that the beam would travel down through any Marine occupant, as well as into the core of the AI. At that distance, the weapon easily sliced through the layers of steel and flesh, cutting through the mech entirely and into the street beyond.

The ATLAS slumped underneath him, terminated.

Rade glanced at his overhead map.

Other members of the platoon had loaded into their Zeus mechs and were similarly engaged, fighting against the ATLAS units at different locations upon and around the building; Lui, Tahoe and Skullcracker seemed to be pinned down on the rooftop behind their various covers. Tahoe had forfeited his Zeus earlier against the kraks, of course, and it seemed that Lui and Skullcracker had lost their own mechs in the recent engagement.

Rade jetted upward, landing on the next surface of the multilevel roadway that connected the skyscrapers to one another. He thrust upward yet again, moving to the next layer. That particular street had collapsed at its midpoint, leaving a jagged edge jutting out into space above the city. That suited his purposes just fine.

Rade made his way toward the uneven edge, aware that the unsupported roadway could yield beneath the weight of his mech at any time. About two meters from the brink he paused—his target, the base rooftop, was in sight below.

He wished he still had some missiles left. No matter. From his current vantage point, he could take out the enemies one by one.

He aimed his cobra down at the rooftop and fired the laser sniper-like, downing two of the ATLAS mechs that pinned his friends.

A missile alarm flashed on his display.

Rade immediately deployed the Trench Coat.

But it seemed the missile wasn't aimed at him, per se.

The roadway twenty meters behind him exploded from underneath and the entire section came toppling down.

Rade jetted away from the debris.

An ATLAS mech came up from nowhere below, pummeling into him. It held its Gatling to his left forearm and fired. The arm was sawed clean off at the elbow.

Rade flung the electrolaser of his right arm toward the ATLAS, but before he could fire, the two of them plowed into a nearby office building.

Rade smashed through the glass and was sent flying between desks and cubicle separators, finally grinding to a halt about twenty meters inside. He couldn't stand up, not in those tight confines—the space was designed for a human being, and for a mech his size it was like being thrown into the

equivalent of a cramped air duct, if a wide one. He would have to worm his way back to the opening his impact had caused. That, or shoot himself some more space.

He glanced from side to side. There was no sign of the ATLAS.

“Where did it go, Sky?” Rade asked. “And why the hell aren’t these things showing up on our overhead displays?”

In answer, threads of Gatling fire ate through the floor and ceiling directly in front of him, fired from below.

Rade fired his jumpjets in reverse, sliding backward across the floor, deeper into the building.

He struck the glass on the opposite side of the building and burst clean through.

Aware of his ever dwindling jumpjet fuel supply, he countered his motion with aft thrust and angled himself so that he plowed into the building on the floor immediately below the one he had left.

Lying flat in the tight confines, he fired his electrolaser at the surprised ATLAS lurking inside, striking it in the jumpjet area. The lightning bolt tore through the tanks and ignited the fuel; the jetpack remained intact, but all of its fuel nozzles lit up at once, momentarily floating the mech helplessly off the floor and into the ragged half-sphere it had cut into the surrounding area with its Gatling.

Rade waited for his weapon to recharge.

The enemy’s jet fuel completely burned away and the mech dropped to the floor.

Come on, recharge, damn it!

The ATLAS spun around, and pointed the Gatling guns in both of its hands directly at Rade.

On his HUD, the red light of the charge indicator turned green.

Rade squeezed the trigger. A lightning bolt forked from his hand.

The super-heated plasma tore into the enemy torso. Direct hit to the reactor core. The auto shutdown mechanism of a pierced reactor prevented a runaway explosion from occurring, of course; the key word being shutdown.

The ATLAS collapsed like an oversized rag doll. Radioactive material oozed from the rent in its torso.

The cockpit cracked open and a Marine emerged in a frantic rush, blaster in hand. He jetted toward Rade’s Zeus, firing.

Rade crabbed to the side, but in the relatively tight confines he couldn't move fast enough; the blaster carved a hole into his right shoulder.

The attacker continued to jet toward him, apparently intending to mount his mech. Rade swatted the soldier aside with a well-timed swing of his left arm—or rather, the stump that remained of it. The Marine skidded across the floor and his motion arrested when he slammed into a heavy metal desk.

Rade pivoted toward his opponent; he noticed he could no longer raise the upper part of his right arm due to the damage to his mech's shoulder area. He was restricted to forearm movements only—basically the range of motion produced by curling his bicep.

That was good enough.

As the enemy stood up, the charging indicator turned green and Rade unleashed another bolt.

The soldier's body ripped in half, splattering the desk in a ribbon of blood.

Rade swiveled about and wormed his way back toward the ragged entry hole he had carved into the side of the building. He reached the edge and paused to survey the cityscape below. The rooftop of the forward operating base was still in view.

Tahoe, Lui and Skullcracker remained crouched behind one of the thicker central superstructures on the roof. Around them resided the wreckages of several ATLAS mechs, and the dead bodies of Marines. Most of the Zeus mechs had returned, and they had assumed sniping positions along the outer edges of the rooftop, crouched behind the remnants of their shields, scanning the streets and buildings around them.

The pulse platforms along the perimeter had turned inward; their turrets moved in rectangular seeking patterns. Those platforms had likely contributed to the victory—Bender or TJ must have hacked the units to track the unidentified mechs.

Up until that moment Rade had been ignoring the comm chatter, but he listened intently in that moment.

“Still two of them out there,” Facehopper was saying. “Anything, Manic?”

“Nothing over here,” Manic said. His was one of the two mechs, other than Rade's, that had not yet returned to the rooftop.

“Nor here,” Mauler added. He was the other.

Rade glanced at his overhead map and saw both Zeus units resided a street away.

He continued to survey the landscape below. From his vantage point he saw enemy reinforcements swarming through the streets to the south. He thought he saw a glint of metal among them. He zoomed in. Sure enough, amid the hordes of kraks, he spotted centaur units, hundreds of them, the lasers mounted to their four-legged bodies itching to fire.

“Be advised,” Rade transmitted. “We have enemy reinforcements to the south. Kraks and centaurs. Hundreds of them. One klick and closing.”

The guest connection area activated on his HUD and Facehopper’s name appeared. The chief was accessing his video feed to evaluate the situation.

“Roger that,” Facehopper said. “Get your ass down here as quickly, and as inconspicuously, as you can.”

Rade could have climbed out right there and jetted down, but there was a good chance the enemy reinforcements would spot him, especially with the bright sun glinting off the metal of his mech. No, if he wanted to climb down inconspicuously, the best place to do that would be on the side facing away from the enemy.

Rade swiveled his body toward the north-facing side of the building, and crawled through the cramped office area using his right arm and the stump of his left. Without full shoulder control, his right arm was almost as useless as his left, and his legs did most of the work.

“Feel like a damn turtle,” he said.

“Would you like me to take over?” Sky asked.

“No. I got this.”

He broke the floor-to-ceiling window on the far side and hauled himself through, plunging downward. During the freefall, chatter came over the comm.

“There he is!” Mauler said.

For a moment Rade thought Mauler was targeting him, and he was about to issue a warning, but then the heavy gunner spoke again.

“Gotcha!” Mauler said. “Scratch one tango.”

Rade landed and proceeded toward the main building.

“That leaves only one more,” Facehopper said. “Unless someone

hasn't reported a kill."

"Probably me," Rade said. He relayed his count.

Facehopper double-checked the kill count and then confirmed: "That's all of them. Rage, stay where you are."

Rade had reached the edge of the forward operating base and had been about to jet up, but belayed and took up a guard position instead.

"Tahoe, Lui, Skullcracker, load up into the passenger seats of Snakeoil, Manic and Trace, respectively," Facehopper said. "TJ, take us out. It's time to proceed to our booster rocket hook-up. I want us moving out at an angle to those reinforcements: first due north, then due east."

"Everyone, head to the north-facing side of the building," TJ said. "Two squads. Same assignments as before, minus the missing mechs. Traveling overwatch formation. Rage, you're on point in S1."

"Roger that," Rade said. He waited for the first member of S1 to jet down—Mauler—and then took the lead.

The retreat toward the outskirts of the city proved little different than the incoming journey, though they encountered no further patrols from the north. Probably a good thing. They hugged the outer walls of the buildings and kept to the shadows as much as possible. They utilized bounding overwatch once more for major intersections.

The first time he paused to provide overwatch, Rade noticed that other Zeus units were just as badly damaged as his own. Mauler's mech had no foot below the ankle, and he sprinted with an exaggerated limp. Bomb's Zeus had lost both arms, and looked like a running ostrich. Others were missing hands and forelimbs, with pieces torn from shoulders and knees, and in Fret's case, a large chunk missing from the cockpit. Many of them still had some remnants of their shields intact, while others had lost them to the acid from the kraks or the Gatlings of the ATLAS units.

In about twenty-five minutes they reached the perimeter of the city. There, the two squads made their way through the collapsed towers and domes of the farmsteads beyond, heading toward the distant mountains. They spent a few moments to discuss various contingency plans, and then proceeded in silence.

Rade eyed the ruins around him with extra caution, and whenever he reached the edge of a particularly suspicious structure, he extended his weapon in front of him—or as much in front of him as his curling his bicep would allow—and “pied” the edge with his electrolaser. The outward swerving motion was so-named because when viewed from above the shape formed by his motion was reminiscent of a pie.

“Got pursuers!” Snakeoil said from his drag position on S2. “Centaur’s!”

“Confirmed,” Facehopper said. “S1, dig in and cover our retreat. We’re on bounding overwatch permanent from now on, mates.”

Rade dove behind the remains of a dome and tracked the enemy. Centaur’s were pouring from between the distant buildings that lined the city perimeter, emerging onto the farmland.

He aimed at those units in the forefront. He didn’t have a shield or a

laser because of the loss of his left arm, but he still had a lightning bolt-dispensing electrolaser. The enemy was at the far ranges of said weapon, but he zoomed in on the scope and fired anyway. The sonic boom resounded across the farmsteads.

Got one.

He waited for the recharge period, and unleashed another discharge. A second enemy down.

“S1, go!” TJ said.

Led by Rade on point, the members of S1 used the farm ruins for cover, weaving in and out of the thick cylinders of the fallen towers and shattered domes while S2 covered them.

They reached S2’s position and leapfrogged them. At that point, Rade steered his aim to the left and right while he passed the bigger ruins, checking that no one waited there to fire a rocket or M7 energy weapon at them.

S1 took cover fifty meters beyond S2 and once more provided covering fire.

“Snakeoil, inform the lieutenant commander of our situation,” Facehopper sent. “See if he can get a couple of mortars or missiles lobbed our way from orbit, or some viper shots.” Vipers were the heavy lasers of starships. They could be employed to devastating effect from orbit.

“The LC says he’ll see what he can do,” Snakeoil replied a moment later.

The request was probably highly unusual, but Rade suspected the Brass would approve the strike, given that the projected damage zone was beyond the outskirts of their precious city. Assuming the senior command didn’t mind razing a few destroyed Franco-Italian farms.

The platoon continued to proceed forward, each squad alternately leapfrogging and overwatching the other. After five minutes of that they finally reached the outer perimeter of the last farmstead and its ruins. Beyond awaited a wide plain, roughly a kilometer long, which ended in a scorched pine forest on the shoulders of the mountains.

Both squads dug in behind the various shattered domes available there and fired into the incoming enemy.

“Uh, they keep coming,” Fret said.

“Snakeoil,” Facehopper said. “Tell the LC that *now* would be a good time for that orbital strike.”

“He says it’s coming,” Snakeoil replied.

The platoon members continued firing upon the enemy for another full minute. For every target that fell, another replaced it. The enemy line was slowly moving toward them.

“We can’t stay here,” Manic said. “They’ll overwhelm us. Look to the north and south. They’re already trying to outflank us.”

“Manic is right, mates,” Facehopper said. “Looks like our orbital strike isn’t coming. We’re going to have to move out onto the open plains and make a run for that burned-out forest. TJ?”

“I want traveling overwatch,” TJ said. “Those of you with intact shields are going to be in S2.” He called out the new squad assignments. “Use your autopilot to advance in a random zig-zag synchronized by the AIs. S1, head out. S2, provide cover.”

Rade took point once more, leading S1 out onto the open plain while S2 provided cover. He switched control over to Sky, and his mech immediately began zigging and zagging. He synchronized the randomness setting with the other mechs, ensuring that none of them would ever align—it wouldn’t do to allow the enemy to get a ‘two birds with one stone’ kill. Though at the current range, it was highly questionable whether the enemy lasers would penetrate the armor of more than one mech at a time.

While Sky handled the forward motion, he swiveled his torso to the rear and switched to the point of view of his electrolaser to provide support fire. He zoomed in and tracked the tangos emerging from the outskirts of the farmstead to the north, where some of the enemy were attempting that outflanking maneuver. With aiming help from Sky to compensate for the random motion of the mech, he fired. His target went down. He released another lightning bolt. Another target fell.

The enemy were firing in turn, but so far the random zig-zagging prevented any of them from landing a strike. Rade wondered when the enemy would copy their tactic—so far, the enemy robots continued only in straight lines. He suspected they were willing to sacrifice a few units in the name of speed, because a direct path was always faster than a randomly deviating one.

“S2, move out!” TJ said.

S2 moved onto the plains behind them. Rade and Trace continued to force back the flankers to the north, while others concentrated on the southernmost flankers.

Soon the front ranks of the main enemy force emerged from the farmstead directly to the west. Rade focused his attacks on them while Sky continued to randomize his advance. It was probably a good thing TJ had assigned most of those with intact shields to S2, because they were bearing the brunt of the attacks. Even with their random motion, several of them reported hits.

While Rade tracked targets, he noticed charred runnels appearing in the landscape around him, denoting near misses from lasers—not all of the enemies were firing upon the closest targets.

“Getting fried back here,” Snakeoil said on the comm. “My shield is almost gone.”

“Keelhaul, swap out with him,” TJ said. “Snakeoil, use your jumpjets... abet your forward motion. Move to point. But stay low, damn it.”

As Rade continued firing at the distant enemy, he glanced occasionally at his overhead map, and saw Snakeoil’s randomly zig-zagging blue dot making its way toward the point position of S2.

“Gah, I’m hit!” Snakeoil said.

His blue dot froze on the map. Another dot appeared—he had ejected.

“Gotcha,” Grappler said. “Snakeoil is secured in my passenger seat.”

“Thank you, Grappler,” TJ responded. He sounded utterly relieved.

“You got it, boss,” Grappler replied.

Rade noticed Mauler was falling behind because of his missing foot. He was level with Keelhaul, but in a few more moments he assumed the drag position in S2.

“Mauler, use your jetpack to shore up your advance,” TJ said.

“I already am,” Mauler said. “I’m almost out of fuel. I think I’m going to have to eject.”

“Do it,” TJ said. “Keelhaul, prepare to receive him.”

Mauler’s mech continued to zig-zag away, serving as a diversion, while Mauler’s blue dot jetted from the mech.

Abruptly the dot representing Mauler’s ejected jumpsuit stopped moving.

“Mauler,” TJ said. “What happened? Do you read, Mauler?”

No answer.

“Keelhaul—” TJ began.

“Already going back for him,” Keelhaul replied.

“Cover Keelhaul, people!” TJ said. “Bomb, Fret, turn back to shield him.”

The blue dots representing Bomb and Fret in S2 retreated, clustering behind Keelhaul.

Keelhaul’s blue dot reached Mauler, then both dots moved forward in their zig-zag pattern once more. Bomb and Fret followed on drag behind them.

“He’s hit badly,” Keelhaul said. “Took a hit to his torso. Losing blood fast. I’m having my AI take over while I climb to the passenger seat and perform first aid.”

“Keep me updated,” TJ said.

Rade finally reached the burned-out pine forest on the shoulder of the mountain. Blackened, branchless trunks protruded from a ground of cinders.

“Keep going, Rage,” Facehopper said.

Rade obeyed, zig-zagging as he led S1 into the destroyed pines. The blackened boles would help shield them from the enemy lasers. Then again, the charred wood composing the trunks around him was probably so flimsy, the beams would pass right through. And unfortunately the dead pines weren’t all that helpful when it came to targeting the enemy either—his sights were constantly blocked. The predictive learning built into the weapon helped with that, but only somewhat.

The remainder of S1 piled inside. S2 reached the cover of the forest a moment later, and soon the entire platoon was hurrying through the trees.

Sky and the other AIs piloting the mechs were careful to avoid burned out logs and other natural protrusions and depressions underfoot. Even so, mechs occasionally tripped, including Rade’s own Zeus. He tried to catch himself with his left arm, but too late remembered the Zeus only had a stump on that side and he nearly wrecked his shoulder when the actuators transferred the resultant motion of the external limb to his own arm.

A deafening crack rent the air, far louder than any of the electrolaser discharges. As he clambered to his feet the forest floor shook terribly, and a shockwave passed through the trees, knocking his mech to the ground once more. His vision turned black.

“What happened to the cameras, Sky?” Raid said.

“The external cameras are fully functional,” the AI replied. “We have been enveloped by a gigantic cloud of dust.”

“Looks like the LC finally came through for us,” Trace said.

Rade arose. He switched to the thermal band provided by the Zeus, and he saw the outlines of the dead pines once again through the murk. Many of the burnt trees had toppled.

He glanced over his shoulder. In place of the plains there now lay a huge blast crater, roughly half a kilometer wide, glowing with heat.

“That had to be a warhead,” Manic said. “There’s no way a simple kinetic kill would have caused damage like that.”

“Maybe, but you’d be surprised what unpowered rocks lobbed through an atmosphere can do,” Tahoe said.

“Let’s move, mates,” Facechopper said. “On your feet. Already more tingos are coming.”

Rade could see them then, beyond the blast crater. Dozens of tiny, glowing dots.

“Maybe they don’t have thermal vision,” Trace said as the two squads moved out. A tree collapsed beside him, apparently hit by an incoming laser. “Guess they do.”

“Continue the zig-zag!” Facechopper said. “Head toward the plateau.”

The mechs tripped more often in the gloom, but the cloud began to thin as they neared its outer boundary, and in a few moments it lifted entirely.

Rade switched back to the visual band.

The plateau lay just ahead, five hundred meters away. It thrust up from the shoulder, forming a steep incline. He activated local-beam LIDAR and his image sensors computed a path up that face, one that required minimal use of jetpacks.

“Got a path, Chief.” Rade transmitted it to Facechopper. “Only problem is, we’ll be directly in the line of sight of the enemy while we climb. Those ledges are far too narrow to zig-zag our way up. I suggest we maneuver around to the left side of the plateau first, and then find a new path.”

“Go ahead and swing us around to the left side of the plateau, point man,” the chief replied.

“Sky, you heard the man,” Rade said.

The AI zig-zagged up the sloping shoulder, weaving in and out of the comb-like remains of burnt pines. Runnels occasionally appeared in the ground around him and trees sometimes fell nearby as the enemy lasers

continued to harry them.

Rade reached the left portion of the plateau and continued alongside it. The steep wall towered above him, blotting out the sun. Another cliff slowly took shape across from it, forming the base of an adjacent mountain, so that soon he found himself trekking through a defile between them. The others were forced to follow in single file after him.

Rade assumed control of the mech and kept moving until the enemy was well out of sight behind them. During that time he had his LIDAR continually calculating paths up the cliff to his right.

“This looks like the best place to ascend,” he told the chief, transmitting the coordinates.

“Lead the way,” Facehopper said.

Rade alternately walked, alternately climbed the path before him. He sharpened the stump of his mech’s left forearm on the rocks, and used it as a pick during the steeper areas. Some of the damaged mechs behind him had to utilize their jumpjets to scale the more technically challenging areas. During the climb, the platoon members spent a few moments discussing various means of fending off the pursuers.

When they were a quarter of the way to the top, the enemy laser attack resumed. The two trailing mechs were struck. Lucky shots—only a few servomotors and pieces of armor were melted, and no one suffered any debilitating damage.

Yet.

“Initiate defense protocol *Adiós Muchachos*,” Facehopper said, using the name Rade had suggested for that plan.

To guard against vertigo, Rade switched control to the mech before he glanced downward. Surprisingly, he felt no dizziness. He aimed at the rocks several meters below the lowest member of the platoon. Since the rock arced outward slightly at his current height, he had an unobstructed view of his target, so he released the lightning bolt.

The other Zeus units with him likewise concentrated their fire on the cliff face. Chunks broke away from the wall, and soon a veritable avalanche had formed. A simple strategy from their playbook, admittedly, albeit an extremely useful one.

In moments the gorge below was buried in a dust cloud formed by the crushing rocks. The attack abated.

Rade swiveled his torso upward, resumed control of the Zeus, and continued the climb. He reached the top without further incident.

As the others clambered onto the expansive plateau behind him, he scanned the landscape before him. Expanses of coarse grass alternated with bare rock and the stunted, knotted shrubs that clung to them. Granite outcrops occasionally sprung from the surface, which sloped in places but was otherwise relatively flat.

The booster rockets were spread out along the five kilometer radius that formed the top of plateau. On his overhead map, the locations appeared as flashing beacons.

There were only enough for eight mechs.

“Uh, I think the LC forgot a few boosters,” Trace said.

“We’re going to have to double up, mates. Makes more sense this way anyway: we’ll have AIs watching our backs the whole way.” Facehopper named off those members of the platoon who didn’t have passengers, and he paired them up with other pilots. His modus operandi seemed to be: transfer those operating the most damaged mechs to the passenger seats of the least damaged mechs.

When he got to Rade, he said: “Rage, shack up with TJ.”

“Roger that,” Rade said. To Sky: “Open her up.”

“It has been a pleasure serving with you, LPO,” the AI said as the

cockpit hatch opened.

Rade smiled at the title. *LPO*. It was as if the mech was trying to tell him: “Even if you’re not LPO in name, you’ll always be *my* LPO.”

“The pleasure was mine. Fight well.” He leaped down.

Behind him, Sky and the other abandoned mechs assumed guard positions at the edge of the plateau. They would have their work cut out for them when the robots arrived.

TJ knelt to allow Rade into the passenger seat.

“I should probably put on a helmet,” Rade said.

“Now’s as good a time as any,” TJ agreed. “I got one in stowage, I believe.”

The stowage compartment popped open in TJ’s leg. Sure enough, a helmet resided therein. The platoon members usually carried the parts for two complete jumpsuits spread out among their storage compartments.

Rade grabbed the helmet and attached it. One of the nice things about MOTH helmets: they were all the same size, and thus interchangeable.

Rade shut the compartment and pulled himself into the passenger seat. Once he was buckled in, TJ proceeded toward the northern side of the plateau.

“I’m allocating the boosters,” TJ said. “Purple means its yours.”

Rade noticed that TJ chose the farthest booster rocket for himself, located four kilometers away, close to the northern edge of the plateau.

“Looks like you want to go for a little strength-enhanced jog today,” Rade told him.

No answer.

“You know, as LPO, in theory you should be taking a closer rocket,” Rade said. “That whole not-supposed-to-put-yourself-in-danger thing.”

“The chief seemed happy enough with my allotment,” TJ said. “Besides, I prefer it this way. I’ve already put my men in enough danger.”

“All right.” Rade said. After a few moments of silence he asked: “So you’re enjoying life as an LPO, then? Is it everything you dreamed of?”

“Don’t want to talk about it,” TJ said.

The others began to take off around them. Those Zeus mechs that were airborne fired lateral thrusters randomly, zig-zagging in midair to guard against enemy laser attacks from below. Rade wasn’t looking forward to the G forces *that* would involve.

TJ was still sprinting toward the last remaining booster rocket by the time everyone else had taken off.

“I hope to hell the final booster isn’t a dud,” TJ said when they were a kilometer out.

“But Big Navy extensively QAs every component before placing it into the field,” Rade said sarcastically. QAs stood for quality assures.

“Yeah,” TJ said. “Tell that to the guy in Bravo platoon who tried to fire his electrolaser and blew off his own arm.”

“I heard that rumor,” Rade said. “Thought it wasn’t true.”

“Oh it was true,” TJ said. “I saw the guy in the infirmary unit. Pyro. You know him, right? His whole arm was bandaged up. They probably had to bioprint him a new one.”

“Sheesh,” Rade said.

“Then there’s the other guy in Bravo whose heat shield failed to deploy during atmospheric entry,” TJ said. “His Zeus burned right up.”

“You serious?”

“No, I’m just messing with you on that one,” TJ said.

Fighting erupted behind them when they were about half a klick to the booster rocket.

“Be aware, it appears they have jumpers,” Sky sent.

Because of his position in the passenger seat of TJ’s mech, Rade was facing the far edge that Sky and the other abandoned mechs guarded. He zoomed in and spotted scorpion units equipped with jumpjets; they thrust through the air in wide arcs, raining down death from above.

The Zeus units put up quite a fight, their AIs bringing down wave after wave of enemies, but the scorpions kept coming, and in under a minute all of the Zeus mechs had fallen. Sky was the last one standing, and when the Zeus finally toppled, its body was riddled with so many laser bores that Rade had no idea how the AI had kept fighting for so long.

Valiant to the end. I chose its name wisely.

Rade only hoped that when his time came, he would battle with half the courage and fury.

TJ had the mech begin evasive maneuvers so that the Zeus advanced in a randomized zig-zag.

Rade withdrew the blaster from his belt and linked it to the AI of the mech—after TJ approved the request. He pointed the blaster at the distant

units; the AI basically aimed for him, compensating for the haphazard, jerky motions of the Zeus chassis.

“Don’t fire yet, Rage,” TJ said. “I don’t think they’ve noticed us.”

“All right,” Rade replied. He didn’t want to draw the attention of those scorpions any more than TJ did.

He saw a flash to his right—a small shrub had been incinerated, and a fresh runnel had been carved into the rocky terrain beside it.

So we’ve been spotted.

Rade fired.

Because of the small focusing mirror, the weapon wasn’t powerful enough to do any real damage at that range. Not unexpectedly, his opponent didn’t fall. But he had to try.

He fired again. And again.

The world turned black.

Rade opened his eyes. Strangely, he was slumped forward in the passenger seat. The rocky terrain below streamed past as the Zeus continued to weave to and fro in its random advance. Text flashed on the HUD of his faceplate, accompanied by a strident tone.

Suit perforated. Warning. Suit perforated.

He sat up and flinched at the sudden pain in his side.

He activated the suit diagnostic display and a front-view silhouette of the jumpsuit overlaid his vision. A red dot flashed near his midsection, where the pain had come from. He was bleeding externally from both entrance and exit wounds, as well as internally, according to his vitals. Sometimes laser strikes could be self-cauterizing, depending on the spot size, and the intent of the weapon. Apparently, the laser that had struck him had been designed to kill, not injure.

TJ reached the bulky fuel tanks of the booster and strapped himself in to the payload area on the far side. He ignited the tanks directly, skipping the preignition sequence. The Zeus roared skyward.

The noise canceler in Rade’s helmet kicked in, muting most of the sound.

Nozzles fired randomly from the boosters in the three hundred sixty degrees of the horizontal plane, changing the direction of the overall ascent every few seconds. Whether that would be enough to prevent them from being shot down, Rade couldn’t say.

He wondered if TJ still had any charges left in his Trench Coat—he vaguely expected a missile to come in from somewhere closer to the city, but apparently the enemy wasn't paying that much attention to a few fleeing mechs.

"I think a laser hit one of the tanks," TJ shouted over the comm, above the noise. "We'll have enough fuel to attain escape velocity, but not much else."

So much for the enemy not paying attention. Then again, the strike might have occurred before takeoff.

Rade retrieved the suit repair kit from the left-hand cargo pocket of the jumpsuit leg assembly, but with the G forces assailing him, he had difficulty opening it up. It didn't help that he was shivering constantly from the sudden cold, nor that the pain flared every time the mech changed horizontal directions.

He finally managed to pry the lid aside and grabbed one of the patches. He slapped it onto his midsection, sealing the entry perforation. He was wondering how he was going to seal the exit hole at the rear of the suit, given how much pain twisting his torso caused him—there was no analgesic in the kit, not like in a complete medbag, which he didn't have.

I'll just have to grin and bear it...

He reached for the second patch, but the mech changed directions once again, and the entire suitrep kit tore from his grasp. Numbly, he watched it spiral away into the atmosphere below.

"Rage, you're awfully quiet back there," TJ said. "Everything okay? Rage?" He must have checked Rade's vitals then, because his next words were: "Shit! I'm swinging back there to patch your suit, bro."

"No," Rade said. "Stay... in cockpit."

Darkness encroached upon his vision. He felt like he was going to black out again, and he wasn't sure if it was because of the Gs, or his wound. Probably a combination of the two.

"I'm coming damn it!" TJ sent.

The hull began to vibrate differently, and Rade suspected that the cockpit hatch had fallen open.

"No," Rade said. "Too... risky. Boss."

Rade struggled to stay conscious, knowing that if he went under in that moment, he might never wake up.

But the weight of the darkness seemed to increase by the second. He couldn't stave it off.

Never... give... in...

"Stay with me, Rage!" TJ sounded desperate.

Rade's eyes closed with the weight of the world and he surrendered to oblivion.

Rade passed into and out of consciousness. He had flashes of himself strapped into the passenger seat, floating in space above the planet, escorted by Zeus mechs. Then he was in the hangar bay of a starship, weighed down by artificial gravity; he coughed terribly, tasting blood—it felt like he was drowning in it. Then he was passing through tight passageways on the gurney of a transport robot; his suit had been stripped off, and he felt extremely cold, but couldn't shiver: his breath misted on the tight translucent shell that contained him. Then he was inside a glass tank, lying on a bed; the telescoping fingers of a surgical Weaver pressed an anesthesia mask onto his face. When he saw those metallic appendages, he felt a sudden panic, remembering the needles that had almost been driven into his skull by a similar robot, but then the anesthetic took effect.

When he opened his eyes, he still lay on that final bed, surrounded by the glass walls. An IV connected him to a saline drip. A heart rate monitor beeped beside him. A Weaver resided inactive at his side. Beyond the translucent tank, he saw other glass containers holding soldiers he didn't recognize. A decontamination ward. A large one.

Facehopper must have instructed the monitoring AI to ping him when Rade had awakened, because the tiny incoming call light on the aReal goggles at his bedside began flashing. The drawn out period of the flash, along with the dark green color, indicated an incoming call from the chief.

Rade donned the goggles and accepted the call.

The chief's hologram appeared outside the tank, just as if he was standing there in the ward with Rade.

"Welcome back to the living," the chief said.

"I didn't know I was dead," Rade said.

"Actually, we thought we lost you twice," the chief said. "But you fought your way back every time. No thanks to TJ. He had a helluva time repairing your suit out there, by the way. His mech kept rocking back and forth as part of its evasive maneuvers, and nearly tore him away every few seconds. He somehow managed to retrieve his own suitrep kit, since you lost your own, and patched your suit near the upper limits of the atmospheric

death zone. Once the two of you entered orbit, he called in the rest of us to help. We got you to the Weavers just in time. A hair later, and we wouldn't be having this conversation. Your suit was filled with so much blood that you were choking on mouthfuls with every breath."

"Nice," Rade said. "Guess I owe TJ a beer."

"You owe him far more than that," Facehopper said. "Though I'm sure the most he'd ever accept from you is a beer."

"I'm sure, too," Rade said. "Which is why I suggested it. Hell, that's all I'd ever accept."

Facehopper nodded sagely. "We all would."

"How are Snakeoil and Mauler?"

"Snakeoil wasn't injured. Mauler on the other hand had to spend a good amount of time in intensive care, but he's recovering in sick bay proper now. He should be back on his feet before you get out of decon. As for everyone else, we were treated for minor cuts and bruises and promptly released. The Weavers couldn't get us out of there fast enough."

"Sounds like they're a bit overloaded," Rade said.

"Sick bay is a bloody mess," the chief agreed. "Literally. They've had to set up makeshift treatment areas in hangar bays two and three, as well as cargo bay five."

Rade regarded Facehopper grimly. "So what actually happened in orbit to spark this whole shitstorm in the first place?"

"You remember how the lieutenant commander told us the enemy fleet looped back to attack the colony world, and the UC repelled them, reducing their number to only three?"

"I remember," Rade said. "His words were something to the effect of, 'victory is assured.'"

"Yes. Well two more of the enemy emerged from behind a nearby moon during the ensuing chase, and in a pincer maneuver that I'm sure will be talked about in tactical history classes for the next hundred years, completely obliterated the UC pursuers. The surviving enemy ships returned to attack that portion of our fleet remaining in orbit above the colony world. We prevailed, but just barely. Other than the four ships guarding the Gate to the system, we only have one badly damaged cruiser and a frigate left in orbit."

"Two ships?" Rade said. "What happened to all those fancy

supercarriers we had with us?”

“Gone.”

Rade shook his head. “We really pulled through by a gnat’s ass, didn’t we?”

“Or a red cunt hair,” Facehopper said. “Depending on how you look at it. In any case, relief battle groups are on the way. They can’t get here soon enough if you ask me. Meanwhile, the telemetry drones have completed their scan of the system. It looks like there are no more enemy ships hiding out there. That’s the rumor, anyway. The lieutenant commander has refused to confirm or deny it at the moment. Given the current morale, if there *were* other enemies out there, I wouldn’t blame him and the senior command for smothering the news.”

“What about Radiance?” Rade asked.

“The relief convoy is bringing a few troop carriers,” Facehopper said. “Four divisions worth of Marines, to be exact.”

“Four divisions. If they can’t liberate the city, no one will.”

“Oh they’ll liberate the city all right,” Facehopper said. “But it’s not going to be pretty. The majority of the enemy reinforcements have holed up in the downtown core, according to the latest intel. The Marines will probably have to raze the remaining skyscrapers. Franco-Italians won’t be very happy.”

“They never are.” Rade paused. “So what else is new?”

“Not much,” the chief replied. “We’ve been getting software updates for our Implants daily. Probably has something to do with the group of alien infiltrators that tried to take control of the ship during the fifth watch...”

Rade sat up. “What?”

“Six of them closed off engineering, pretending to be masters-at-arms. An astute chief MA saved the day, with the help of the ship’s AI. Alpha Platoon was brought in to clean up.”

“You saying I missed some action?”

Facehopper frowned. “Only if you call retrieving six incapacitated bodies ‘action.’ Anyway, the developers have assured us that the latest round of patches will prevent infiltrators from penetrating our ranks again.”

“Didn’t they say that with the last patch?”

“Pretty much,” Facehopper agreed. “Which is why the doctor has been scheduling mandatory examinations for every crew member.”

“Probably a waste of time,” Rade said. “A smart infiltrator wouldn’t appear on the ship’s manifest in the first place.”

“But he would have to,” Facehopper replied. “Because the ship’s AI marks anyone not on the manifest as an intruder. The eyes and ears of the AI are pervasive.”

Rade tapped his lips. “There are ways around that.”

“You’re talking about the agreement the navy has with certain intelligence services? The pact that ordinary soldiers aren’t supposed to know about?”

“Whoever said we were ordinary soldiers?” Rade said. “Anyway, I’m sure that agreement is only a rumor, or a myth.”

“Tell me your version of it.”

“All right,” Rade said. “I’ve heard that certain operatives from certain agencies can pass unnoticed aboard ships, ghosts granted temporary entries in the manifest. Apparently the AI is required to collude with them, and keep their presence a secret.”

“I’ve heard the same,” Facehopper said. “Though in my version, such agents are usually assigned and confirmed by direct order of the commander in chief. The enemy hasn’t infiltrated that high up yet. I hope.”

“I hope so, too,” Rade said. “Because if they have, we’re probably all doomed.”



RADE WAS MOVED from the decontamination ward to the crowded sick bay a few days later, and then cleared to return to duty soon thereafter. His hair had grown back nicely by then, so that it looked like he had a buzz cut on top, with longer hair on the sides and back paired to a thick beard. He was tempted to shave everything down to the same size, but the length of the beard was a matter of pride among the platoon, so he cropped his hair only.

Working out in the gym of the cruiser *Steadfast* was a stressful affair—the vessel was crammed to the brim not only with the survivors of the destroyed ships, but with displaced Marines who wanted to work out as badly as Rade and the others. As such, the weight room was packed 24/7. The members of Alpha Platoon did their calisthenics in the cramped berthing area they shared with Bravo, and then made their visits to the gym in groups of

four. Some of the others found creative ways to turn the berthing areas and nearby passageways into gyms—using an exposed overhead pipe for pull-ups, pressing discarded torpedo caps while lying down, and so forth, but Rade preferred the real deal.

The first morning back, he and Tahoe secured a bench press in the weight room, and took turns spotting each other.

“So how are you adapting to life as an ordinary recruit?” Tahoe said during their rest interval.

“It’s not so bad,” Rade said. He was seated on the bench, while Tahoe waited to spot him behind the bar. “I can’t say I really missed being LPO down there. And it was great to be on point again.”

“Did you notice how the chief did the brunt of the work?” Tahoe said. “It was almost like TJ was afraid to step up and take control of the platoon.”

“Oh, he stepped up,” Rade said. “Near the end, anyway.”

“That was because he had to,” Tahoe said. “He was the one who split the platoon into two squads. He chose the placements, and when people started dropping in S2—the squad he directly managed—of course he had to act. If he hadn’t stepped the hell up at that point, I would have kicked his ass.”

“Cut him some slack.” Rade lay back and did his set, then swapped positions with Tahoe.

“You should apply for LPO sometime,” Rade said. “If you get it, you’ll soon learn the job isn’t quite as easy as you think.”

“Me?” Tahoe said. “Right. You see how much trouble with authority I have as it is. I don’t think I could lead.”

“You used to have trouble with authority, that’s true,” Rade said. “But not anymore. I haven’t seen you fight Facehopper in what, a year? And our last real scuffle was six months ago. You’re growing mellow. Getting old, Tahoe.”

“Ha!”

“Besides, an LPO gets paid more,” Rade said. “That’d make the wife happy.”

Tahoe raised an eyebrow. “I did not know that. I thought the pay was the same.”

“It varies, depending on the duty cycle when you check, and who’s in charge at the top. Sometimes the navy pays LPO more, sometimes it’s the

same.”

Tahoe did his set, then swapped positions with Rade.

“More money wouldn’t make Tepin happy anyway,” Tahoe said.

“She’s not happy with anything, is she?” Rade said.

“No.” Tahoe lowered his voice. “She’ll only be happy when I quit the navy.”

Rade swiveled on the bench to face him directly. “Is that what she told you?”

“Yeah,” Tahoe said. “She wants me to quit.”

“But you’re not going to,” Rade said.

Tahoe laughed heartily. “Of course not. If I start giving in to her demands, I’ll never hear the end of it. She’ll emasculate me so badly, you’ll swear I don’t have a dick. And get this, she wants me to stop working out, too. ‘I like you the way you are, Tahoe,’ she says. Right. She just wants to make sure I lose all my sex appeal, and become completely unattractive to other women.”

“You’re assuming that women find your muscles attractive,” Rade said.

“With my ugly face, muscles are all I’ve got,” Tahoe replied.

Rade did his set, then swapped with Tahoe.

“Still, I have to say, the appeal of the navy, and the Teams, has kind of lost its luster,” Tahoe said.

Rade pursed his lips, then sighed. “I hear you. I’m feeling pretty low about our jobs right now, too. It’s only natural, I think, when you’ve failed a mission miserably, and run away with your tail between your legs.”

“We did run, yes,” Tahoe said. “That’s definitely not going to help morale, especially with men like us, men who rarely flee. But for me, I think what it boils down to is: I’m getting sick of fighting.”

“What are you talking about?” Rade said. “We’re warriors. We live to fight.”

“This is true. But even warriors can grow weary of war.”

Tahoe performed his set, and when he was done Rade took the bench.

“You really believe we failed the mission?” Tahoe said.

Rade nodded. “I’d say so. We didn’t liberate the city. We didn’t secure that ship.”

“Liberating the city was never our lone responsibility, and as for the

ship, if we had stayed aboard we would have been killed when it self-destructed in orbit.”

“Good point,” Rade said. “Still, a part of me can’t help but feel that if we had remained aboard, we could have made a difference. It’s just too bad my clone had to come along and spoil everything.”

“I for one am very happy that clone forced us to depart,” Tahoe said. “By the way, you think they’ve cloned all of us?”

“No,” Rade said. “They need your blood, bro.”

Rade lay back and wrapped his arms around the bar, but before he could lift it off the rack, Tahoe spoke.

“If it was time to renew your commission tomorrow, rather than years from now, would you?”

Rade didn’t answer right away. He sat up and studied Tahoe. “You know what? Disillusioned as I am, I probably would. What else is there, for people like us? You said your wife would emasculate you? I don’t need a wife for that... civilian life would do that to me. My whole image is formed around this job. Without it, I’m nothing. I might not be LPO anymore, I might not have any real power, but I’m still a MOTH. And that means something to me. That gives me power in and of itself.”

“Yo, how many more sets you got?” a buff Marine asked.

“Two more, brother,” Rade said. “But these two are already waiting in line.” Rade pointed a thumb to other Marines loitering nearby.

“Damn it,” the Marine said. “Your navy needs to invest in bigger gyms.”

Rade shrugged. “Not my navy.” He lay back and did another set.



THE LIEUTENANT COMMANDER summoned Rade to his temporary office aboard the *Steadfast* a few days later. Lieutenant Commander Braggs shared the compartment with three other officers who worked different watch shifts. Though space was at a premium, the navy always found room for its officers to conduct their business in private: if the office was taken, Braggs would have simply used his quarters.

When Rade got there, he discovered the chief waiting for him as well. Facehopper leaned against the desk, his arms crossed in front of him. Seeing

them both there like that in their grim attitudes, Rade was reminded of his epic chewing out on the planet, and he wondered what he had done wrong now.

“Have a seat, Mr. Galaal,” Braggs said.

Rade took his seat.

“You know I’m not a big fan of preamble,” the lieutenant commander said. “So I’ll dive right in. TJ is no longer LPO.”

Rade found himself at a loss for words. When he recovered from the shock, he said: “But he performed so admirably.”

“We agree,” Braggs said. “But some people can’t take the stress for more than a few missions. Or a single mission, in this case. TJ came to us a few days ago and asked us to relieve him of the position. We tried to talk him out of it, but he was adamant.”

Rade nodded slowly. After everything that had happened out there, it was no surprise TJ’s nerves were shattered.

“And you’re telling me because you want to offer me the position again...” Rade said.

The LC nodded. “It’s yours if you want it.”

Rade sighed. “Who are you going to offer next, if I refuse?”

Braggs smiled momentarily. Smirked, really. “That information is classified.”

Rade looked at his hands. He clenched his fingers, then opened them.

Remember who you are.

“I’ll do it,” Rade said.

“Very good,” the lieutenant commander said. “We’ll start on the digital paperwork immediately. You may go.”

Rade went to the airlock; before the inner hatch opened, Lieutenant Commander Braggs spoke again.

“One second,” Braggs said.

Rade paused.

“There’s one thing I’d like to know,” the lieutenant commander continued. “Did you plan that whole damsel-in-distress incident at the end?”

Rade studied the LC in disbelief. “Do you mean, did I get hit on purpose?”

Braggs exchanged a knowing glance with Facehopper. “MOTHs have done similar things in the past to get what they want.” From the way he said

that, it almost sounded like he actually approved of such behavior.

Rade considered a moment, and then said: “I would never put my personal advancement above the well-being of my platoon mates. If I purposely allowed myself to get hit, either in an attempt to stress out TJ, or to garner your sympathy—I’m sure you’re implying one or the other—then that means I put not only my life at risk, but TJ’s as well. The chief tells me TJ climbed out of the mech and patched me up during the ascent, at great risk to himself. We both could have died up there. So to answer your question, no, sir, I did not get hit on purpose.”

The lieutenant commander pursed his lips as if he didn’t entirely believe Rade. Then he shrugged and said: “Dismissed, LPO Galaal.”

The relief convoy arrived and Alpha Platoon transferred by shuttle to a Kissinger class destroyer, the *Goliath*. Funny how the smaller ships often had the grandest names, as if to compensate for their diminutive size and armament.

As promised, the beer day was epic. Only two cans were supposed to be allocated per person, but somehow Manic and Fret managed to secure two complete six-packs for everyone. The next morning, Facehopper made the whole platoon clean up the vomit and spilled beer in the berthing area while hungover, and then he personally led them through a PT session. It was a light session compared to their usual standards, but that morning, the calisthenics seemed to go on forever.

Rade had his re-implantation scheduled for later that same morning. In retrospect, getting an Implant installed while hungover probably wasn't the best idea. And he thought the headache and grogginess he felt earlier in the day was bad...

After eight long weeks of space travel, they arrived at an out-of-the-way Franco-Italian resort planet, whose dome colony was seductively titled *Boudoir*.

"Enjoy your leave," Facehopper told them. "News on the vine is we're going to redeploy shortly."

"But it feels like we've only just finished our last operation," Fret said. "Aren't we supposed to have at least half a year between deployments?"

"Usually, yes," Facehopper said. "We just happen to be in the right place at the right time."

Fret crossed his arms. "Or the wrong place at the wrong time."

"Screw the half year wait," Bender said. "I'm much happier to redeploy immediately."

"There you go," Facehopper told them. "Now as I said, enjoy your leave."

The platoon members got into the usual trouble while on liberty. Kicked out of strip clubs, banned from the local gym, a few bar brawls with some rowdy Marines, and a mountain bike down the most technically

challenging hill in the dome that left Manic and Grappler with broken bones.

It ended all too soon. In precisely one week they were back aboard the *Goliath*. They transferred to another vessel a few days later, the cruiser *Patriarch*. It left orbit, heading toward a Gate that would take them once more to the outskirts of UC territory.

So far, they had been kept in the dark regarding the specifics of their new deployment. Rade guessed it involved the alien threat in some way. Had another colony fallen on the fringes of known space? And were the invaders truly alien, or were the Sino-Koreans at last implicated?

The platoon members kept pestering Rade for information, and he always told them honestly that he didn't have any. He asked the chief to enlighten him a few times, but Facehopper remained tight-lipped about the mission, and always responded with: "The LC will tell us in good time."

It took a week to reach the Gate. Then another week to cross that system toward another Gate, only recently constructed. According to his Implant, it led to uncharted space. Eight destroyers and twelve defense platforms guarded the entrance; their turrets were all pointed inward, toward the Slipstream, as if fearful that some terrible enemy might emerge at any moment. Behind them, a long queue of warships had taken up holding orbits, with new vessels arriving by the day. There were more ships out there than Rade had ever seen gathered in one place in his entire lifetime. He saw not only UC vessels, but also many ships of Franco-Italian make. The models ran the gamut from warships and cruisers to Builders and Harvesters. Whatever was going down, it was something big.

When the *Patriarch* assumed its own holding orbit, the Lieutenant Commander finally summoned Alpha Platoon to the briefing room.

"Many prisoners were captured at Radiance colony," Lieutenant Commander Braggs said. "Both robot, bioengineered, and human. Many subsequent interrogations have taken place. The Special Collection Service and other intelligence services believe they have extracted the location of the enemy homeworld from these prisoners. And it lies beyond this Gate."

"Holy shit," Fret said. "We're invading the alien homeworld?"

Braggs nodded. "We are."

Rade considered the ramifications. If their homeworld was anything like Earth, that meant there were billions of inhabitants. Likely an extensive defense system, both orbital and planet-side. Not to mention an opposing

fleet.

No wonder the UC had gathered so many ships.

“Is that even legal?” Lui said. “I don’t think it’s something the League of Systems would ratify.”

The lieutenant commander shrugged. “Forget the League of Systems. It’s legal if our government says it is. But think about it. Do we really have a choice? It’s either invade them now while they’re weak, or we let them recover enough to conquer more of our colonies, until they finally attack Earth itself. Best to cut down this enemy now while it’s still a sapling, then allow it to grow into a massive tree spreading seeds of war across the galaxy.”

“After all those interrogations you mentioned,” Tahoe said. “Do we know anything more about the enemy we face?”

“Not particularly,” Braggs said. “Though the SCS believes the SKs are involved in some way.”

“I knew it!” Lui said triumphantly.

The LC nodded. “We’re not sure in what capacity, however. The nano-machine technology is beyond them, just as it is beyond the UC and all other human governments. But the evidence pointing to the SKs comes from the bioengineering technology—there are certain genetic markers present in the DNA of the creatures we captured, markers that are a hallmark of Sino-Korean work. We don’t currently know whether the SKs willingly shared their bioengineering tech, or if the invaders took it by force. The SK government is not being overly cooperative with us, as you might have guessed.”

“Wait a second,” Keelhaul said. “With all the ships we’ve dispatched out here, who’s guarding Earth?”

“That isn’t all of our fleet out there,” the Lieutenant Commander said. “Not by far. You’re seeing maybe a quarter of our starships, all pulled from duty stations at nearby colonies. Many of the vessels are Franco-Italian as well.”

“So we’re leaving nearby colony worlds minimally defended,” Tahoe said.

“This is true,” Braggs said. “But which would you prefer? A minimally defended Earth, or minimally defended colony worlds? And I use the words ‘minimally defended’ loosely: there are still orbital platforms and

the usual planetary defenses taking care of the involved colonies.”

“Those didn’t seem to work so well when the invasion force came to Radiance,” Bomb said.

“Whatever the case, while an entertaining digression, we’re not here to discuss fleet strategy,” the LC said. “I’m sure you’re all eager to hear your mission.” He paused, solely to draw out the platoon’s suspense, Rade thought. Then he sighed, and said, softly: “We’re going to kill them all.”

“Sir?” Facehopper asked.

“Once we penetrate the orbital defenses, we’re going to nuke the planet from orbit,” the lieutenant commander said. “When the nuclear bombardment ceases, our air ships will follow that up with several bombing runs to soften up any survivors. Your mission will be one of clean-up. You’ll search for survivors, and when you find them, you’ll either terminate them directly, or you’ll tag the location for the bombers. Yours will be one of many such extermination teams dispatched to the resultant radiation zones. You’ll wear jumpsuits fitted with specialized auto-drip antirads. You’ll pilot Titan mechs modified with extra layers of radiation armor. You’ll be killing machines, sent to kill.”

Rade stared at the lieutenant commander numbly.

“Does anyone else have a sour taste in their mouths?” Manic said. “Suddenly I’m not so eager to go on this mission.”

“You call this a mission?” Bender said. “Sounds more like a slaughter. This is a homeworld. We’re nuking a *homeworld*. Whatever they’ve done, no species deserves this. Total annihilation. We didn’t sign up for this.”

“This is precisely what you signed up for,” Braggs argued. “Protecting humankind from threats by *eradicating* those threats. As soldiers, it’s your job to deal with the ugly parts of life so that those back home can continue to live their happy, peaceful lives in blissful ignorance. Think of it this way. There’s a hornet nest in a crack on the outer wall of your house. You seal that crack up with cement, trap the queen inside. You eliminate her and her colony for the safety of your family.”

“But at least there are still other hornet nests out there,” Bender said. “What we’re talking about here is the complete elimination of a species. We signed up to be MOTHs. An elite team of warriors. Not exterminators.”

“What about civilian lives?” Lui said. “What about the planet’s

ecosystem?”

“Civilian lives...” Lieutenant Commander Braggs echoed. “As far as we’re concerned, the enemy has no civilians. And we’re only going to bomb key sites. About eighty percent of the planet will remain untouched. Not that there’s anything there to worry about losing... according to what we know, it’s a barren, cold wasteland similar to Mars. Calling it a homeworld might be a bit of a misnomer, too. It’s more a colony world. Though the last colony the enemy has. According to the subjects interrogated by the SCS, there are only a hundred thousand inhabitants in total on the planet, distributed between two separate dome cities. Apparently, their species only recently bounced back from a major depopulation event. The scientists believe they can only exist through a host species.”

“Such as us,” TJ said.

Braggs nodded. He shook his head and took a drink of water before continuing. “I’ve watched the interrogations. The aliens are all so philanthropic about what they’re doing, like it’s such a great gift they’re granting us. Expanding our minds, and bestowing immortality, they say. ‘But you destroy our physical minds in the process,’ the interrogators say. ‘The consciousness of the host is always transferred to the new machine brain,’ the subjects answer. They truly believe they’re helping us. Enlightening us. There’s nothing worse than an enemy like that. Nothing. And by the way, the bodies of the bioengineered creatures we collected? The kraken, hammerheads, and others? All of their brains are composed of nano-machines, too. Hosts.”

“What about the robots?” Skullcracker asked.

“They’re just ordinary machines, far as we can tell,” Braggs said. “They have no nano-machines in their cores, and seem to utilize the standard neural nets found in most AIs. Their robos are based on our technology, and specifically designed to kill our soldiers and disable our war machines. If you think about it, it’s the best way to attack another species—get inside their skin, learn how they think, and develop your war machines based on variants of their own.”

“So what, we’re dealing with some kind of cybernetic brain parasites here?” Lui said.

“We don’t really know precisely what they are. All we’re certain of for sure is that they want to destroy us all. They attacked us first, and will

continue to attack, adapting each time until they've infiltrated our species to the highest levels of government. What we're doing here is simply preemptive." The lieutenant commander left the podium to pace the compartment. "You're right. All of you. It's cold-hearted slaughter we'll be dishing out. I wish we didn't have to be involved. Not for this. In bootcamp, we were all taught about honor, courage, and commitment. There is no honor in this. But the truth is, from what we know about the enemy, they have even less honor, and they won't stop, not until every last one of us becomes them. They want to use us to repopulate their species. The billions of lives on Earth? That's their ultimate target. The colony worlds are only stepping stones. As I said before, we have to cut them down now, while they're still weak. We can't let a single nano-machine survive. Eradicating them is the only way to truly protect humanity."

"Frankly, I don't know what's wrong with you all." Bomb glanced about the room. "I'm all for kicking alien butt. Let's eradicate the cunts."

"Question," Trace said. "Forgetting about the ethics issue for the moment, what happens when a host body dies? Do the nano-machines replacing the brain tissue die, too?"

"They do," Braggs said. "According to the scientists, mind and body are inextricably linked. It's a fascinating, if parasitic, relationship. In living hosts, the machines make use of the pulmonary system to dispose of those machines that have malfunctioned or expired, and they require the digestive tract to extract materials for the construction of replacements. Hosts eat the strangest meals. They like to sprinkle iron on their food, instead of salt."

"Are we so sure that no treaty can be signed with them?" Tahoe said.

"We tried," Braggs said. "Every converted human being is essentially one of their diplomats. While they each have the unique personalities of their previous hosts, their neural nets are all linked, galaxy-wide, forming not so much a hive mind, but an information network. It's similar to the adhoc networks our Implants create, though the range is much greater. Except their communication is done via very subtle gravity waves."

"Gravity waves still take time to propagate," Tahoe said. "Which makes me doubt the effectiveness of this 'galaxy-wide' network."

"True," Lieutenant Commander Braggs replied. "The best guess the scientists have come up with is that the nano-machines utilize some form of evaporating wormholes to reduce that communication delay. The scientists

claim they've detected evidence of Hawking Radiation emitted from several subjects."

Tahoe sent a text message directly to Rade's Implant.

Sounds like a lot of bullshit, to me.

"Okay, wait a second," Rade said. "One thing that bothers me about this whole operation is that we're basing everything we know about the enemy, and our entire attack, on information gleaned from interrogations. But what if they lied about the defensive capabilities of the planet? And the size of the population? Their intentions? Or maybe they were simply coerced into a false confession. We all know that subjects under duress will admit to anything."

"Duress only played a minor role, as far as I know," the lieutenant commander said. "And while it's true that none of the usual interrogation drugs worked, due to the nature of the minds we were dealing with, we discovered a backdoor, as it were. You see, there is something called a Half Host—a recently infected human being, whose brain is only fifty percent nano-machine. These Half Hosts can detect the flow of information passing between the enemy, and with so much of their brain tissue replaced by nano-machines they can actually understand that information, while still being cognizant of who they are, and their loyalty to us."

"We put these Half Hosts in the observation rooms during the interrogations. They monitored the gravity waves transmitted between the full hosts and the rest of their kin, and sieved the truths from the lies. They were able to monitor the information flow taking place between hosts outside of the interrogations as well, and they slowly put together the picture we have of the enemy."

"I should add that the Half Hosts were all volunteers. Their conversions were planned from the start: we allowed them to be captured, and sent overwatch platoons to follow their movements from the shadows and retrieve them when the time was right. These volunteers all knew they would be terminated when their brains reached a certain conversion percentage. They gave their lives to get us this information."

Rade nodded slowly. "I would still prefer if we could get independent confirmation about the homeworld and its defenses, say from telemetry drones. Because now it boils down to how much we trust these Half Hosts. Were they brave soldiers of the UC, or pawns of the enemy?"

“We sent telemetry drones through the Gate,” the LC said. “None returned. Which means either the enemy destroyed them, or currently no return Gate exists in that system. But don’t worry, once we pass inside, you’ll get your independent confirmation. We’re not going to begin the operation until we’ve established that the information we have is accurate. If the planet contains billions of lives rather than a hundred thousand, of course we’re not going to nuke it. And if it’s defenses prove far greater than we anticipated, then we’ll remain in orbit around the return Slipstream, and defend our position and stall for time until the Builders can construct us a Gate home. Either way you’ll probably see action: if not on the surface of the alien homeworld, then in repelling boarding parties on the *Patriarch*.”

Braggs paused to survey the men. “Any more questions or concerns?”
There were none.

“Good. We’re passing through the Gate in three days. Once there, it will be at least a week until we reach their homeworld. So. Ten days, men. Do whatever it is you do to prepare yourselves for a mission. Remain strong, and true. And remember what you’re fighting for: the carefree summer days; the sky at dawn and dusk; the gentle kiss of a woman. But most of all, remember who you are. You are more than men. You are MOTHs.”

As usual, Rade had no idea what was happening immediately after the *Patriarch* passed through the Gate. He heard the usual signs of combat—the deck vibrations and the distance moaning of bulkheads as the hull was subjected to the stresses of high speed turns and hull breaches.

After about five hours of that, the ship became eerily calm. Condition Zebra remained active, with hatches and scuttles sealed ship-wide. Rade quickly adopted those creative methods for emulating the gym that were pioneered by his brothers, and he worked out utilizing what was at hand in the berthing area. He needed something to distract his mind.

Chief Facehopper tapped in to update him shortly thereafter. The biggest problem the fleet had faced out there were mines: the first three ships sent through were completely obliterated by some kind of nuke minefield waiting on the other side. One of those ships was a minesweeper, coincidentally. The doomed vessels had triggered enough of the mines to allow the following ships time to launch countermeasures, and most of the remaining explosives were prematurely detonated.

But then the waiting dodecahedrons attacked.

Luckily, the enemy had left only a token force guarding the Slipstream, and the UC lost only another two ships in the ensuing battle. The fleet left behind the Builders and Harvesters, along with a guard unit composed of several warships, and proceeded toward the inner planets.

The seven day journey to the homeworld was filled with tension; minor skirmishes occurred daily with defense platforms launched from nearby asteroids along the way.

At the homeworld, the enemy fleet waited patiently. There were at least a hundred ships out there, twice as many as the UC possessed. The enemy forces were divided into three waves. The first formed a wide semicircle one million kilometers out from their world. The second formed a similar defensive pattern five hundred thousand kilometers out, and the final wave was two hundred thousand kilometers from the world, or roughly half the distance from Earth to the moon.

Not included in those numbers were the countless orbital defense

platforms directly above the planet, nor any of the land-to-space weapons.

“We expect to conquer a homeworld with fifty ships?” Fret said when Rade revealed the odds. “Someone could have told us this was a suicide mission.”

“You always said you wanted to die in battle...” Manic told him.

“Not like this,” Fret said. “Cooped up in a starship, having no say whatsoever in my fate. There are far better ways to go.”

“Sure you have a say,” Rade told him. “There’s an evac station down the passageway. You’re welcome to walk over there and hop into a lifepod at any time.”

Fret smiled sardonically. “After you, boss.”

“I don’t think so.”

When the space battle above the homeworld began, all of the platoon members keenly felt the sheer impotency that Fret had hinted at. There was literally nothing to do but sit and wait, hoping that their ship would survive long enough for them to begin the mission.

It took four days, but somehow the UC managed to break through the defenses and scatter the enemy. There was something to be said for the strategists and tacticians who worked in the UC Navy—they were second to none. The advanced AIs had helped, too, no doubt.

Another day was spent dealing with the orbital defense platforms, and the land-to-space lasers. By that point, only fifteen UC ships remained out of the original battle unit, with another ten orbiting the distant Slipstream. It was more than enough.

The fleet dropped its nukes.

Two days later, the planet proved unrecognizable. The atmosphere was filled with radioactive dust kicked up by the explosions, the entire surface clouded over. The planet was cold to begin with, and that nuclear winter would only worsen it.

And so it was into those conditions that the platoon found themselves descending through the irradiated atmosphere in a mech delivery vehicle. They were cocooned into the cockpits of the Titan model of mechs, war machines about a meter taller than the Zeus units, with the weight to match. Because of the extra radiation armor, the Titans didn’t have room for heat shields of any kind, hence the special delivery vehicle necessary to deploy them.

Rade glanced up and down the ranks. At those cold, faceless units clamped into their alcoves. That extermination team of mechs.

Is this really what we've become?

He glanced at the tactical display fed to him by the delivery vehicle. Blue dots represented similar vehicles around the craft, spaced roughly three kilometers apart. Some would contain radiation-shielded infantry units, others combat robots, and still others, mechs.

He accessed the external video feed to watch the descent. After the flames of atmospheric entry, the craft penetrated the cloud cover only to find itself in the heart of a blizzard of some kind. Whiteout conditions completely veiled the land below. The delivery vehicle jerked to and fro as powerful gusts of wind assailed it.

Since there was nothing to see out there, he switched back to his local video feed.

“Can the AI steer in this?” Grappler asked.

“They should have given us a human pilot, damn it,” Bomb said.

“An AI is more than adequate,” Harlequin said. “And in fact, in such situations, preferable. A human pilot would rely on autopilot in such a situation anyway, and—”

“Shut up, bitch!” Bomb said.

Rade felt the craft shake worse than it had yet. Then it rolled hard to the left. Then right again. There were no inertial compensators on a drop vehicle of that class, so he felt the full Gs as his Titan was pulled against the metal restraining clamps.

He glanced at the tactical display. Red dots were streaking past on all sides.

They were being attacked.

“So much for the nukes taking out their defenses!” Fret said.

“Resilient sons of bitches,” Bomb said.

Bright white light unexpectedly consumed Rade’s vision. The Gs became so intense he felt like he was going to black out. He closed his eyes, fighting it.

An alarm sounded.

He opened his eyes. The white was still there. It was the blizzard, he realized. The bulkhead in front of him was completely gone.

Yet he was still clamped in. As were other brothers in their Titans

beside him.

Staring into the open space in front of him, he realized the craft had been torn in half right down the middle, and the piece his mech clung to was spiraling out of control toward the unseen surface far below.

To Be Continued...

I don't like leaving readers hanging, which is why I've decided to publish all three full length novels in the trilogy at the same time. That's right, book three is available now (or will be shortly). Find out what happens to Rade and his platoon without having to wait.

[Continue the adventures in *Titan* \(Alien War Trilogy Book 3\)](#)

postscript

Please help spread the word about *Zeus* by leaving a one or two sentence [review](#). The number of reviews an ebook receives on Amazon has a big impact on how well it does, so if you liked this story I'd REALLY appreciate it if you left a quick review. Anything will do, even one or two lines. Thank you!

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Don't be shy about emails, I love getting them, and try to respond to everyone!

about the author

USA Today bestselling author Isaac Hooke holds a degree in engineering physics, though his more unusual inventions remain fictive at this time. He is an avid hiker, cyclist, and photographer who sometimes resides in Edmonton, Alberta.

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And of course I'd be remiss if I didn't thank my mother, father, and brothers, whose untiring wisdom and thought-provoking insights have always guided me through the untamed warrens of life.

— Isaac Hooke

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