ISAAC HOOKE



ATLAS 3


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ATLAS 3

ISAAC HOOKE

47NORTH

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ATLAS 3

PROLOGUE

Shaw looked through the cockpit window.

She was some eight thousand one hundred lightyears from home, the farthest from Earth any human being had ever traveled. The intrepid spirit in her was happy. Living the dream. But the other part of her, the side that missed human contact and yearned for the feel of green grass beneath her feet and the caress of a fresh breeze against her face, wasn't so happy.

She wanted to go back to Earth. But she couldn't.

Not until she was finished out here.

She couldn't shake a growing sense of unease as she gazed from that window. None of the constellations in this alien quadrant were familiar to her. Though to call this region "alien" was probably a misnomer: Here, *she* was the invader. The alien.

But that's not what bothered her.

The blue-white sphere that ate up the view below took full credit for that.

It was a sun.

Or at least, it once was.

Now it was just a large mass of inert gas. For all intents and purposes, it *should* have been blindingly bright at this range. According to the galactic charts stored in her aReal, it had been classified as a G-type main sequence star, the same as Earth's sun. True, eight thousand one hundred years had passed since its light had reached the extrasolar observatories of humankind responsible for categorizing the star, but even so it should have had enough fuel to last at least another *five billion years* in the G state.

Yet here it sat, dead. A white dwarf, fusionless, its dense, Earth-sized mass supported only by electron degeneracy pressure. It was surrounded by a hollow sphere of cast-off nebular gases having a diameter of approximately

two AU. The blue-white light the dead star emitted came not from fusion but rather from its stored heat, which would slowly radiate away over the next trillion years, never to be replenished.

Some external force had prematurely accelerated its life cycle, killing the star. The Phants were to blame somehow, Shaw knew, but she didn't understand the how of it, or the why.

Her eyes drifted toward a lone vessel that lay much closer than the dead star: the Foundry. It was cylindrical in shape and revolved around its central axis like an old-style Earth ship from the days before artificial gravity; she suspected the rotational motion abetted the manufacturing that went on there. No external lights illuminated the hull; the ship's presence on the visible spectrum was due solely to the blue-white radiation cast by the star. On the thermal spectrum, however, the vessel practically *glowed*.

The Foundry grew in size as Shaw's shuttle approached, so that soon the vessel's vastness eclipsed the sun entirely. Her onboard autopilot fired compensating thrust, slowing her craft as it neared the target's curved hull; lateral jets activated, yawing the shuttle so that the narrow aft section pointed toward the larger ship. More jets fired and the constellations shifted, drifting past in a direction perpendicular to their former motion as the shuttle revolved in a wide circle, syncing with the rotation of the Foundry.

Reverse thrusters activated; the G forces dragged Shaw forward in her seat. She felt a pinching pressure in the hip region where the waist clamps dug into her jumpsuit. Forget about inertial dampeners and supergimballed seats: her so-called allies hadn't designed this shuttle for comfort.

Her craft shuddered as the aft section made contact with an airlock on the larger vessel. The external clamps locked into place. The fit was perfect.

The stars continued to rotate outside the cockpit window, interrupted occasionally by the blue-white orb of the dead sun. The Gs didn't let up. Indeed, now that the shuttle was linked to the Foundry, the pull caused by the centrifugal force made the Gs feel even stronger. When she relaxed her arms, they hung down in front of her. It felt like she was strapped into a seat high up on some amusement park ride, facing directly downward.

She checked her aReal. The gravity vector read 1.2 G, pointing at the cockpit window. She suppressed a wave of nausea. Changing from zero G to any sort of gravity often evoked discomfort, especially when the preceding weightlessness lasted for any significant length of time. It didn't help that the gravity vector was at odds with her visual perception, or that stars drifted past

continually, seeming to fall upward.

She closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and then deactivated the seat clamps.

She fell immediately, crashing into the window. Unsure if the glass was rated for her weight, she meticulously pulled herself upright until she stood between the downward facing seats. It felt like she was perched on one of those observation decks with the glass floors that some space stations liked to set up to scare the living bejeebers out of visitors. Except that this glass might actually break.

She hauled herself onto the backrest of the closest seat and then pulled herself through the door that led to the extensive cargo hold beyond. Standing on the partition that separated the hold from the cockpit, she walked over to the rightmost bulkhead (which was originally the deck, but the odd gravity vector had changed that). She climbed the rungs set into the metal.

When she reached the overhead (previously the aft bulkhead), she used the downward-hanging handgrips to pull herself along, like a kid on the monkey bars of some playground. She tried not to look down the twenty-five-meter drop to the cockpit partition, wishing the whole while that the shuttle had artificial gravity. A jetpack would have been nice right then, too, but her alien allies wanted to make things difficult for her.

“Flammable material of any kind is not allowed in the Foundry,” Azen had said. “They will not let you board if you wear a jetpack.”

Azen. The alien who had rescued her from the Phants and taken her to his homeworld. The alien who was a Phant himself: an interdimensional being whose form varied between vapor and liquid, depending on the environment. She wasn’t sure how much she could trust him. So far he had been true to his word.

So far.

She moved her hanging body forward, hand over hand, and when she was beneath the airlock, the hatch irised open automatically. A circular hole seven meters in diameter appeared above her.

The corridor beyond was completely dark, lit only by the ambient illumination from her shuttle’s cargo bay. She noticed there was no inner airlock. That made sense, given that the environments already matched. The atmospheric contents of both shuttle and Foundry weren’t much different from the void of space.

This wasn’t a place where organic life was intended to thrive.

Shaw activated the headlamp on her helmet, half expecting something to leap down and attack her. She hauled herself through the airlock and into the gloomy, expansive corridor beyond. She paused there on her knees, feeling a little winded from the monkey-bar crawl. Her breath sounded loud inside the confines of her pressurized suit.

After a moment, she planted one foot firmly on the deck and stood up, her second boot connecting with a noticeable absence of sound.

The rectangular corridor she found herself within was a veritable grand hall, given its approximately twenty-six-meter height. Fibonacci spirals etched the metal at random intervals. It was quite different from the bulkheads of intermeshed and living pipes she was used to aboard these alien vessels; she suspected it was designed by some species the Phants had conquered.

She sensed motion behind her. Glancing over her shoulder, the light from her headlamp illuminated a metallic, black shape on the opposite side of the airlock. So tall that it scraped the ceiling, the form appeared humanoid, though its body was stretched and elongated to an alien degree—the head was more oblong than round, the smooth torso formed an ellipse, the two arms and two legs were segmented ovals. The only distinguishing feature on the head was a long bar of glowing red where the eyes should have been.

It was one of the alien mechs Azen had told her about. At roughly twice the height of an ATLAS 5, its sheer size proved daunting. The tubing and bulges associated with servomotors and hydraulics were completely absent; instead there were slight circular indentations around the joint areas. Everything seemed part of one smooth, nearly seamless surface.

She didn’t see weapons of any kind, though she did spot what looked like a “mount point” on the right arm, which told her that the mech hadn’t yet been equipped with weaponry. Good. Though the very fact the thing was posted there and looking at her told Shaw that a Phant possessed it.

She stared anxiously at the mech through her faceplate for a few seconds, feeling beads of sweat roll down her forehead. Then she tentatively took one step away, then another.

The possessed mech turned its head aside and ignored her. Because of what Azen had done earlier, she would appear as a friendly.

Behind her, the deck airlock spiraled closed in ominous silence. She felt the momentary vibrations beneath her feet.

She proceeded along the Fibonacci-engraved corridor, feeling entirely

out of place in that hall built for giants. It was all she could do to keep walking, and to constantly suppress the sensation that the mech was following her. A furtive glance over her shoulder told her that the thing remained in place by the airlock.

Azen had programmed the HUD (Heads-Up Display) in her helmet aReal with a map of the vessel, and she took the wide corridors and branches indicated thereupon, making her way toward a flashing waypoint.

At the indicated destination, she found a short ramp and scaled it. The bulkheads and overhead fell away so that she stood within the vast, cylindrical compartment that spanned the length of the vessel. The area had a diameter of about two klicks, so that when she looked up, the overhead seemed as distant as a high-rise or small mountain.

A sudden dread filled Shaw: Around her, rank upon rank of giant mechs covered the deck, exact replicas of the one she had seen guarding the airlock. Their vision sensors were dark, so she knew they were inactive. Still, the mechs unsettled her. Azen had warned her about this of course, but seeing them with her own eyes made everything hit home. There were just so many of them—literally thousands—arranged in organized rows and columns, crowding every visible portion of the curved deck, continuing all the way around the inside of the vast cylinder.

Looking straight up as she followed the many ranks with her eyes, she realized that what she had at first assumed to be circular adornments in the overhead were in fact more alien mechs; they stood glued in place thanks to the centrifugal force of the revolving hull, their oblong heads hanging down. Everywhere she looked she saw the things.

A mech stood watch next to her, looming just beside the ramp she had scaled. The glowing vision sensor told her it was active. This one proved unarmed as well—not that it needed weapons to rip her apart. Though just as tall as the previous mech she had encountered, it seemed somehow smaller, no doubt because of the psychological dwarfing effect caused by the vast space around it.

The cyclops-like head turned to follow Shaw as she passed. She did her best to ignore it, because other than the head motion, the mech made no attempt to interfere with her passage.

She moved deeper into the expansive compartment; those daunting black forms crowded right up to the gangway on either side, standing like metal sentries. The lack of atmosphere ensured her boots produced no sound

when they touched the metallic deck, and the effect somehow comforted her. She couldn't imagine walking through here with her boots clanging away loud enough to wake the dead.

She looked back a few times to ensure she wasn't pursued. The alien mech remained at its post by the entrance. She wanted to put as much distance between herself and that thing as possible before she did what she had come to do. She wasn't sure how much it really mattered though, not with those others standing watch around her, onboard AIs likely ready to spring to life at the first sign of trouble.

She walked on for ten minutes. The far side of the cylinder was still a ways off at that point, but she decided she'd gone far enough.

She glanced over her shoulder: The sentry mech was a dot in the distance and still resided by the entrance. She zoomed in on her aReal. The mech's head wasn't even facing her.

Shaw did a quick scan of the surrounding area, running her gaze up along the curving deck all the way to the overhead, searching for signs of any active mechs or other entities on patrol. She saw only the giant, inactive black bodies, patiently waiting to be sent to war.

She weaved between two of the inactive mechs that bordered the gangway and moved inward until she was three ranks deep. She gave the area one last look over and then, satisfied that none of the mechs observed her, she reached into the pocket of her jumpsuit and removed a fist-sized object. As nonchalantly as she could, she affixed it to the leg of the closest alien mech and input twelve minutes. She activated the timer and a countdown appeared on her HUD.

11:59. 11:58. 11:57. . . .

She returned to the gangway. She casually leaned against one of the mechs in the front ranks, letting the back of her jumpsuit contact the tall, metallic calf area.

Azen was with her. The green Phant resided within a specially constructed graft attached to her jumpsuit, running along the spinal area. To any nearby alien entities, she would have appeared similar to a possessed human host: a body with a steel bar cybernetically attached to the skull and spine, with a Phant embedded inside the metal and in control of her mind. Her friend Fan, who had been marooned with her on Geronimo, had been converted into such a host while she watched helplessly. It wasn't something she hoped to witness ever again.

The graft she wore was embedded into her jumpsuit, *not* her body, and was prevented from contacting her ventilation undergarment by some type of padding, which supposedly provided protection against Azen's deadly touch. Ally or not, she didn't feel all that safe with a Phant situated so close to her body, knowing that if it flowed even a millimeter toward her, she could be incinerated. Azen had hinted that he could have disintegrated her anyway merely by touching the padding or the suit itself, but that he had to be in some kind of special "mode" in order to do so.

Still, he'd never actually threatened her, at least not directly, and everything he'd done so far had seemed in the best interests of humanity. He almost seemed friendly, really. So much so that Shaw had even assigned Azen a gender. Male.

Regardless, when the Phant started venting from the back of her suit in that moment, Shaw felt more than a little relief. She glanced over her shoulder, straining to see past the rim of her helmet, and caught a glimpse of the green mist that constituted Azen's body as it migrated from her jumpsuit into the black metal behind her.

She counted down the moments. Azen had said ten seconds were required to completely leave the suit and possess the artificial intelligence (AI) of the mech.

Shaw lingered an extra five to be sure, then stepped away.

Returning to the gangway, she looked up and studied the alien mech. There was no indication Azen had successfully transferred to the unit's AI. The lone visual sensor on the otherwise featureless face did not brighten. Nor did the mech move in any way.

Shaw waited, unsure of what to do. She wondered if she had moved away from the mech too soon. Perhaps Azen hadn't finished the transfer process and a part of him remained inside her jumpsuit.

She was about to approach when the alien mech abruptly knelt, startling her. Its vision sensor activated and that wide, red cyclopean eye stared at her. For a moment she thought the mech was going to attack her, since to her its stance screamed aggression.

But then a seam formed in the torso and a hatch flipped down, revealing an inner cockpit not entirely unlike that of an ATLAS unit—which made some sense, given that the alien mechs were partially modeled after captured ATLAS 5s.

Shaw pulled herself onto the thigh, then into the cockpit. When the

hatch folded closed, darkness enveloped her. Her headlamp was useless here. Navigating a menu on her aReal with her eyes, she shut off the light to save power.

Inner actuators pressed into her jumpsuit, enclosing her body like a cocoon; her legs were forced into a flexed position as the mech's kneeling posture was translated to her own.

Still seeing nothing, she stood up. The actuators yielded beneath her, but as she couldn't actually see yet, she wasn't sure whether she was in control of the mech or not. Had the unit really stood up?

An external vid feed abruptly filled her vision. She looked down on the ship's cylindrical core from the height of the mech, which had indeed risen to its full twenty-five-meter stature. There were no external lights on the unit—discounting the glow from the visual sensor of course, which wasn't enough to illume the surroundings. Instead, Azen had activated some sort of night vision, giving everything a dark green tinge.

She took a step forward. Control of the mech was indeed hers. The mech's interface would feel awkward to Azen, who would need time to practice, but for Shaw, controlling the mech felt only vaguely different from piloting the ATLAS 5 she had discovered on the planet Geronimo. These things were specifically designed for human pilots after all. Human *host* pilots, that is, with Phants grafted to them.

She felt slightly clumsy operating the overlarge machine at first, but quickly acclimated. She focused on taking one large step after another, making her way back across the gangway toward the main entrance.

She disliked the surreal green coloration the night vision enforced on everything. It was hard to pick out details. Spec-ops soldiers might enjoy such "stealth" perception, but not Shaw. When copies of the machine were made, she'd have to get Azen to install a light source of some kind in the hull.

Up there in that mech she felt powerful, yet exposed at the same time. She wondered what the sentry up ahead would do now that the Phant inside her jumpsuit had flowed into the AI of the mech instead. Azen had assured her the sentries would let them pass regardless. Shaw wasn't so convinced.

Sure enough, as she neared the entrance, the mech on duty moved to intercept her, blocking access to the ramp that led to the lower deck. In her night vision, it appeared as a green figure with a soft white glow around its visual sensor.

Shaw didn’t say a word. She knew Azen would be communicating with the Phant inside it at that very moment, using her mech’s AI to exchange data with the other unit’s. Phants could also communicate directly via telepathy; Shaw didn’t know how it worked, other than that it took a minimum of twenty Stanminutes to exchange a message. Far too much time right then.

Glancing at the countdown on her HUD, Shaw waited, resisting the urge to fidget. Any movements, no matter how subtle, would be mirrored externally by her mech. Azen probably already had enough trouble explaining why his passenger was no longer a host. If he had to explain fidgeting, too, that could be the end of them.

The alien sentry finally stepped aside, apparently satisfied with whatever explanations Azen had supplied.

Shaw proceeded into the tighter lower deck. She advanced at a confident lope, using the HUD map for guidance. She was forced to crouch slightly because the overdeck scraped the top of her oblong head if she stood too tall. It felt odd, traveling these corridors that had previously felt like vast metal halls but now seemed like cramped green cages.

The passageway widened as she reached the main corridor leading to the airlock; two alien mechs could walk abreast there, just barely, if they desired. The overdeck wasn’t any higher, however, and she still had to maintain a slight crouch.

She glanced at the timer on her HUD. Five minutes left.

She neared the airlock.

The original sentry stood in front of the sealed hatch in the floor, facing Shaw, blocking her way.

Here we go again, she thought.

She waited, knowing that Azen was probably already exchanging messages with the alien mech.

One minute passed.

Two.

Still the mech did not move. The corridor was just wide enough for her to squeeze around the sentry if she wished, but she wasn’t going to risk that.

Let Azen do his job.

She flicked her eyes nervously toward the timer on her HUD, watching it steadily count down.

She wanted to say something to Azen, wanted to warn him that time was running out, but of course he knew. Saying anything would only serve to

distract him. Besides, he had ordered Shaw not to speak while she was aboard the Foundry. She wasn't sure why, given that there was no atmosphere out there to transmit sound, but Azen seemed convinced that any words coming from her mouth would betray them.

At the three-minute mark, the alien mech moved aside.

Finally.

She glanced at the timer. Two minutes remaining.

Shaw stepped past the mech, feeling anxious. Part of her wondered if the enemy mech was scanning her vital signs. Her heartbeat. Her respiration. If so, then it would know how nervous she was. She forced herself to calm down.

Clear your mind, Shaw.

The airlock spiraled open below; her night vision represented the cargo hold as a solid green mass due to the relatively bright lights shining from within.

Before she could drop through the hatch and into the shuttle's hold, the giant sentry plowed into Shaw from the right flank, pinning her mech to the bulkhead.

The inner actuators of the cockpit tightened around her, squeezing her to the side in a stance that mirrored the posture of her mech. She pressed against those actuators but the cocoon wouldn't budge.

This wasn't part of the plan. Not at all.

She spoke at last. One word. "Azen . . ."

"Fight, Shaw Chopra," Azen said via the cockpit speakers, using the synthesized voice of the internal AI.

Shaw placed both of her hands against the bulkhead, but no matter how hard she pushed, her mech remained absolutely pinned. Her opponent had probably braced its body against the opposite bulkhead, which allowed it to exert the greatest possible pressure upon her. She wouldn't be breaking out of that grip any time soon.

A proximity alert sounded on her HUD and she knew that the second sentry was fast approaching from behind. She glanced at the timer on the HUD.

One minute.

She couldn't see the mech that pinned her, couldn't turn her head far enough to look at it, but she reached around with one metallic hand, groping . . . the feedback sensors told her that her fingers had clasped one of its

smooth limbs. Moving her fingers along that limb, she felt what she thought was her opponent's wrist. She clamped her fingers around it and tried to wrench the limb sideways.

It didn't budge.

Fifty seconds.

"Azen, what would happen if you flowed into the sentry's brain case?" Shaw said.

"Nothing," Azen answered. "I wouldn't be able to wrest control away from the existing entity."

"But I bet you'd distract it," Shaw said.

Azen didn't answer immediately; apparently he was carefully considering her request. And then: "Be ready."

Shaw repositioned both hands against the bulkhead in front of her and began pushing steadily. Slowly she increased the pressure she exerted, mindful all the while of the proximity alarm and the HUD countdown.

Forty seconds.

Abruptly the sentry's hold weakened.

She shoved backward with all her strength, smashing her captor into the far wall. She broke free of the mech's grasp and twisted around to hurl her opponent to the deck.

Her night vision revealed the second mech sprinting down the corridor. It had almost reached her.

The gaseous form of Azen misted from the mech beneath her and quickly vented back into the torso of Shaw's mech.

Thirty seconds.

"Azen, you in?" she said.

"Go!" Azen returned via the AI.

Shaw leaped into the bright green hole in the deck. She dropped through the airlock and into the solid green mass of the cargo hold, whose lights overwhelmed her night vision.

She spread her legs, hoping her feet would land on either side of the gap in the partition that led to the cockpit—it wouldn't do to smash one of those heavy feet through the cockpit window.

She touched down soundlessly on the partition. She knew because her knees bent, slamming into the enclosing bulkhead. Her twenty-five-meter-tall body barely fit the confines of the shuttle's hold.

Above her the airlock spiraled closed. Azen had used the mech's AI to

interface with the shuttle already, no doubt.

"Open up!" she said.

The vid feed to her helmet cut out as the cockpit actuators pulled away. The mech's hatch fell open at a forty-five-degree angle, slamming into the encasing bulkhead. The illumination from the cargo bay flooded inside. It felt odd viewing the world with her own eyes, under normal lighting conditions again.

She pulled herself through the partially open hatch, wrapped her arms around the mech's smooth waist, and slid down. The sleek surface didn't afford much of a grip so she dropped a little too fast. Her boots slammed into the metal partition and she nearly lost her balance.

She hurriedly climbed into the downward-facing cockpit of the shuttle, using the backrests on the seats for support. Azen was already there: she caught a glimpse of green mist vanishing inside a nearby console.

The craft shuddered and broke free from the Foundry vessel.

Before she could seat herself, the rear thrusters fired at full power.

Shaw was wrenched backward, clinging to the seat for all she was worth. But even with the enhanced strength of the exoskeleton, her grip failed. She collided with the cockpit partition behind her and the G forces glued her there. She couldn't get the "amusement park ride" analogy out of her head.

Azen switched the view on the main window to the rearmost camera so she could watch the cylindrical ship recede. That was somewhat courteous of him. *Somewhat.*

Before the Foundry ship could launch offensive measures or make any attempt to pursue, it exploded. Debris caused by her handiwork scattered in all directions, though it was only a fraction of what could be expected for a vessel of that size: more than three-fourths of the craft had vaporized instantly. The expanding remains reminded her of a space firecracker with the middle cut out.

There was no shockwave—the only threat was from the expanding debris, which Azen quickly accelerated away from.

After some moments, Azen issued stabilizing thrust. Weightlessness returned, giving Shaw a moment to pull herself into the leftmost seat. When the clamps took hold of her waist, Azen accelerated in a new direction.

Shaw closed her eyes, trying to settle in for the long wait. It would be several days before the two of them reached the mothership, which lurked out

of sight on the far side of the dead star.

She found it difficult to calm down. Opening her eyes, she glanced at her shaking gloves. Her breath still came in rapid heaves. Her heart yet pounded. She felt completely drained.

She wasn't entirely cut out for this kind of work. She wasn't a spec-ops soldier. Not like Rade, a man she wondered if she'd ever see again. Though to be honest, she'd been through worse, fighting for her life against odds that would make even the most dedicated spec-ops soldier blanch. Even so, that feeling of being run through a washer and hung out to dry got nastier every time.

Might as well get used to it, she told herself.

Because she wasn't done fighting.

Not by a long shot.

CHAPTER ONE

Rade

I’m not the same person I was when I joined the Navy.

I still remember the day I walked into the Military Entrance Processing Station in New San Antonio, so full of hope, so damn naive. I swaggered past the full-body scanners and on a whim chose the Navy because of a cute girl in line.

During the welcome speech given to the recruits, I perused the guidebook installed in my embedded ID and learned about the MOTHs. MObile Tactical Humans—the special forces of the Navy. Its members endured the hardest training known to man, and the privileged few who graduated were given the most important spec-ops missions in the galaxy.

That was for me.

The crucible of Basic Training prepared me for what was to come. The hammer that was the First Phase of MOTH school forged me, and I succeeded where ninety-eight percent of men failed. The waters of Second Phase quenched me, and prepared me for all missions at sea. The moon drops of Third Phase tempered me, and taught me how to survive in space. The small-unit tactics of Fourth Phase completed the process, and sharpened me into the spec-ops commando I am today. When I graduated, I was a finely honed combat knife, ready to be wielded wherever I was needed.

And then the deployments began.

Every time I fought for my life, nicks and grooves appeared in the blade I had become. When I watched my friends die, a stress fracture appeared down the middle. When I killed a woman who reminded me of one of them, the fracture deepened. Finally, when I was captured and tortured, the blade broke in two.

I’m only now putting the pieces of that blade back together.

I used to be so innocent. Shielded from the dark side of humanity. But

now I've had that blissful wool lifted from my eyes and every day I stare into the murk and I ask myself: Is it worth it?

I try to remind myself that wherever there is darkness there must be light. That always something good, something beautiful, resides out there, even in the shadows.

I try to remind myself of that, but often fail.

Darkness.

I used to wonder if I had it in me to take another man's life. But because of my training, killing became an automatic thing. I didn't even need to think about it. Out in Mongolia during my first deployment, I cut down tangos—targets—left and right. *Tangos*. We called them that because it gave us a way of dehumanizing those we shot. I felt a bit of guilt after each kill, but not much. These were bad men who hated us and what we stood for, militants who wouldn't hesitate to pull the same trigger against us if given the chance.

I've since graduated to mowing down aliens. When I fight the invaders, it's like I'm squashing bugs under my boots, nothing more. I'm sure they feel the same way about us. As you might expect, I experience even less guilt when I kill them versus another human being.

Darkness.

War has inured me and my brothers to death. We cheer when we see an alien's body ripped apart in an explosion of black blood and guts, or laugh when an alien flails about, covered in flames, frantically moving from place to place as it burns to death from the jellied gasoline of our incendiary rounds. We cheer, because if we didn't, we'd go insane.

I'm definitely not the same person I was when I joined the Navy.

To be honest, I don't even know who the hell I am anymore. I'm probably fighting for all the wrong reasons. I'd like to say I went to war out of duty, or to save humanity, but that isn't the case, at least not anymore. Because for me, it's mostly about vengeance. Alejandro. Shaw. Big Dog. Lana. They all died because of the enemy.

And I would see that enemy pay.

Sure, I'm all for helping humanity, just as long as a whole lot of enemy corpses pave the road along the way.

At least that's what I tell myself.

I have to.

It's my way of picking up the broken pieces of the knife.

I sat in the briefing room of the *Gerald R. Ford* along with the rest of Alfa platoon. Until that day, the powers that be had yet to devise any sort of viable strategy or defense against the enemy, given the seemingly insurmountable nature of our foe.

But I knew that would change with this briefing. You didn't assemble MOTHs unless you had something important for them to do.

Beyond the briefing room's starboard-side window swirled the blue and white clouds of the gas giant Tau Ceti II, a planet located deep within SK (Sino-Korean) space. Tau Ceti II orbited the system's habitable zone, making its three moons the perfect sites for terraforming. Indeed, these moons had once been thriving colonies. Covered in sprawling meadows and forests, they had housed one million inhabitants each.

That changed when the Skull Ship arrived. My platoon first encountered this evil craft at the tail end of a Slipstream eight thousand lightyears from here. We'd gone on a covert exploratory op, which ended badly. We fled, destroying the Gate behind us, and in our hubris believed that would be enough to keep the aliens away.

We were wrong.

The first Skull Ship came some eight months after our initial encounter. It repelled all attempts at attack and attached itself to one of the three aforementioned moons, Tau Ceti II-c, and began its own terraforming. My platoon joined an advance force sent in to help the SKs repel the threat.

We failed.

Last week, another Skull Ship appeared seemingly from nowhere in orbit above a second moon, Tau Ceti II-b. Like the first, it arrived without much fanfare, promptly launching an attack against the colony's sole city, Hongleong. The colony fell immediately, and within twenty-four hours the enormous vessel had lodged its lower tip inside the moon's crust and had begun transforming the surface.

It seemed only a matter of time until a third vessel arrived to lay claim to the last remaining habitable moon. Who could say how many more such craft the enemy had? There wasn't much we could do against them. Each vessel possessed a sweeping, superheated coronal point-defense weapon similar to the coronal discharge of a star. The weapon was capable of incinerating anything sent against the Skull Ships, from nuclear torpedoes to

supercarriers.

The hulls of the cranial-shaped ships comprised metallic lattices overlaid one atop the other, countless tiers deep. Some of those layers were relatively thin, like the uppermost regions, which resembled eye sockets. When those eye sockets were viewed under zoom, massed entities of glowing blue or purple could be seen beneath the thin, three-dimensional lattice.

These glowing entities were utterly alien to anything humankind had ever encountered. Known in official circles as species X25910, they were nicknamed Phants by the rest of us. Gaseous in the heatless and pressureless void of space, liquid in Earthlike environments, they were seemingly invulnerable. Phants had a peculiar ability to possess human-developed Artificial Intelligences, from those found in combat robots such as Centurions all the way up to the main AIs found aboard supercarriers such as the *Gerald R. Ford*.

Phants could also incinerate human beings on contact, jumpsuits and all, though most of them, colored blue, moved too slowly to be of much threat in that regard. Purple Phants, however, moved very fast. It was a purple Phant that had killed my best friend and platoon brother Alejandro. There were red Phants, too, which were capable of possessing a human in a process known as "integration," whereby cybernetic components were grafted into the skulls and spines of a host.

Other than that, all we really knew about the alien species was their determination to convert our colonies into geronium, the radioactive fuel that powered all human starships. The conversion process was facilitated by creatures resembling giant slugs. These behemoths burrowed under a planetary surface, somehow transforming the crust into geronium in the process. The slugs had smaller, crab-like aliens attached to them whose roles seemed to vary between worker and protector, depending on the situation.

The harvesting process required a populated world—the unseen energy fields produced by life abetted the conversion in some way. The invaders had apparently conquered countless alien races before us, and could revive said races on demand to prepare and populate target worlds for harvesting, or to serve as Phant hosts. That humanity had hundreds of worlds already colonized was a big incentive to these aliens, as we saved them the population step of the process.

So far, the enemy had invaded only the two inhabited moons. But we couldn't let them come any closer to Earth. We couldn't allow any more

innocent lives to be lost.

We had to stop them here, in this star system.

Lieutenant Commander Braggs took the podium at the front of the room. Fifteen years my senior, the officer in charge of Alfa and Bravo platoons, MOTH Team Seven, he still sported a full head of brown hair. He had the hard, angular face of an Olympian, with the toned body to match.

He appeared particularly anxious today. Normally, like most commanding officers, Lieutenant Commander Braggs had the uncanny ability to portray an outer facade of calm and unaffectedness no matter the circumstances. But even our unflappable Lieutenant Commander had lost his poise today, as he had done only two other times in the past. The first was when Bravo platoon had failed to report in when we'd originally encountered the Phants eight thousand lightyears away. The second time was when he announced the arrival of the original Skull Ship in our space.

The Lieutenant Commander cleared his throat. "Top SCS"—Special Collection Service—"analysts have been extensively poring over the logs of the offensives staged against the original invading ship, Bogey 1. Coming in at one-fourth the size of the Tau Ceti II-c moon, the ship is one hell of an object, with one hell of an electromagnetic signature. The analysts studied every last part of the EM spectrum associated with the vessel during those assaults, running the gamut from the visual down to the gamma ray level. And they noticed something.

"During the first offensive, orchestrated by the local Sino-Korean presence in Tau Ceti, incredible surges of energy were detected from Bogey 1 prior to each of its tactical maneuvers. These surges were not limited to the firing of the ship's coronal weapon, which by itself created a massive surge, as might be expected.

"In the second offensive, while Alfa platoon dropped to the moon with the Marines in the operation known as Crimson Pipeline, the combined forces of the allied UC, FI, and SK fleet initiated a concentrated attack upon the enemy from orbit. The tip, or 'chin,' of Bogey 1 was partially embedded within the moon's crust at that point, so the vessel could not maneuver during the assault. But that didn't prevent the bogey, whose massive hull jutted—and continues to jut—several thousand klicks into space, from attacking. The bogey fired its coronal weapon methodically at the fleet, while at the same time venting Phants from its hull in an attempt to capture the human vessels. Incidentally, those portions of Bogey 1's hull located within the moon's

mesosphere remained inactive during the battle, and did *not* contribute to the plasma outflow, probably because the enemy didn't want to harm its assets in play on the Tau Ceti II-c surface. That was a good thing, because if it *had* fired into the atmosphere, Alfa platoon and the Marines down there with you likely would have been forced into a premature tactical retrograde. A hasty one."

"We had a hasty enough retrograde as it was," Chief Bourbonjack commented.

"Indeed. In any case, one big difference between this second offensive and the first was that the pulses of EM energy preceding the firing of the coronal weapon were sourced many klicks *beneath* the surface of the actual moon, rather than aboard Bogey 1 itself. Our analysts speculate that the EM bursts are emitted by a component that serves a crucial role in the command structure of Bogey 1. Based on partial data retrieved from the embedded ID logs of the recovered SK pilot Lana Wu, our analysts are calling this structure the 'Observer Mind,' and believe it is responsible for the tactical operation of the ship. The alien equivalent of our Combat Direction Center, if you will."

I'd saved Lana from the alien being known as the Guide—a purple Phant that possessed an SK Artificial—a robot built by humanity to look identical to an actual human being, warts and all. The Guide claimed to be the official envoy to humanity, and had Lana interrogate Hijak and me aboard a captured SK frigate. Lana had been integrated with the alien species via a skull-and-spine graft, enabling a red Phant to control her mind. During our interrogation and torture, Hijak and I had spilled the passwords to our embedded IDs, giving the enemy access to all the audio and video feeds our Implants had recorded since we became MOTHs.

I rescued Lana from her possessing Phant, and we escaped with Hijak into the ring belt of Tau Ceti III, where ATLAS 6s attacked us. Before she died, Lana told me about some Observer Mind the Guide reported to, but claimed she wasn't sure what it was. I guess we knew, now.

"I'll note here that identical energy bursts are being detected in the heart of the second Skull Ship, Bogey 2, which slammed its 'chin' into the crust of our sister moon, Tau Ceti II-b, several days ago. The shipboard location of the energy bursts implies that Bogey 2's Observer Mind has not yet transferred to the moon as Bogey 1's has. With respect to why the Observer Mind vacated Bogey 1 in the first place, the SCS analysts are drawing a blank. But the current thinking is, if we destroy these Observer Minds, we

cripple the ships. This corroborates with the data from Lana Wu's embedded ID.

"Unfortunately, eliminating the targets won't be easy. It doesn't help that we don't know what the Observer Minds actually look like. We have locations based on EM sourcing, nothing more. One target resides within the heart of a starship whose design and layout is completely unknown to us. The second rests deep within the alien nest under Shangde City on the opposite moon, where the warrens swarm with hordes of deadly entities, including something else we've discovered recently. Something worse than slugs, crabs, and Phants."

"Something *worse*?" Lui said dubiously. He was Asian American and, like Bomb and Manic, one of the official ATLAS 5 pilots on Alfa Platoon. "What's worse than slugs, crabs, and Phants?"

The Lieutenant Commander pressed his lips together. "What you are about to see was picked up at an agricultural station several klicks outside Shangde City. It was recorded during Bogey 1's initial invasion of Tau Ceti II-c."

The vid feed from an open-air hydroponics bay replaced my vision, thanks to the Implant in my head. I saw rows of some kind of cereal crop, the long, sprouting yellow stalks arrayed side by side. Translucent pipes crisscrossed above each row, with nutrient tubes running down to the plants.

Black clouds filled the sky, and above those clouds, at the top of the heavens, I saw the dark, cranial upper half of the Skull Ship. The presence of those clouds implied a time frame only a few hours after Bogey 1 grafted to the moon.

A shape abruptly plummeted from the sky. I made out random appendages as it passed in and out of the clouds, and I had the impression it was far larger than the parts I observed. The nearby stalk of one of the cereal plants obscured the creature as it emerged from the cloud base near the horizon and I lost sight of the thing.

A wave of dust erupted not too far away and I knew the object had landed. The screen of particles expanded outward so that in moments I saw only darkness.

The dust began to clear. Seconds later, a towering, dark form emerged from the murk. Again, I had the impression I was witnessing only a fraction of the overall entity, despite the fact this "fraction" was as big as a football stadium. I caught only a one-second glimpse of the thing as it pummeled

through the hydroponics bay toward the camera. My first thought was that I observed a small part of some superslug, but when the Lieutenant Commander replayed the recording at half speed, I realized the body was too bulbous to belong to a slug. Also, its surface was gelatinous, seeming to quiver as it moved. Slugs didn't have skin like that.

The vid feed blinked out.

Lieutenant Commander Braggs ran his solemn gaze over the lot of us. "What you just saw was an alien entity more massive than any yet recorded. Some of our analysts believe it may be the progenitor of all alien life infesting the moon. The mother of the slugs and crabs, or the Queen, if you will.

"While your platoon was out trying to capture the Artificial known as the 'Guide,' we sent Bravo platoon to investigate the area where this vid was recorded. Bravo discovered a massive sinkhole where the hydroponics station once resided. The platoon followed the sinkhole for many klicks beneath the surface, until the passageway branched off into the warren of caves and tunnels that comprise the main alien nest beneath Shangde City. There Bravo dispatched seventy-five HS3 drones for mapping purposes, many of which remained behind at strategic points to act as network repeaters in an attempt to overcome the EM interference inherent to those tunnels. The HS3s mapped a good portion of the warren, though at great cost: Only three HS3s returned and Headhunter of Bravo platoon suffered a mortal wound."

We dropped our chins at the mention of Headhunter. I'd missed his funeral because of my capture by the Guide, but even so, because of the classified nature of his op, no one else save the members of Bravo had known what had happened to him. And now that we knew, it only made his death all the harder to take. At least for me. Because he'd died getting us the mapping data we probably needed for our own mission.

Just as other good men and women had given their lives for us—for me—in the past.

But I was done grieving.

I was here to fight.

I was here to see my vengeance carried out.

Lieutenant Commander Braggs continued. "So this is the deal. Operation Potentate. Two alien targets. Two squads. That's right, I'm splitting Alfa in half. Facehopper will lead Digger Squad, comprising Cyclone, Ghost, Trace, Mauler, TJ, Bomb, and Fret. Digger will be

responsible for taking out Bogey 1's Observer Mind, located beneath Shangde City on Tau Ceti II-c. The Queen will be your secondary target, and it may be guarding the Observer Mind. The weapon of choice will be two nuclear assets, ported by the team. Every member of Digger will pilot an ATLAS 5, as the map data retrieved from the HS3s indicates tunnels wide enough to support mechs."

"What about the tunnels beyond the unmapped areas?" Fret said. The tall, lanky man was one of our resident communicators. Snakeoil, his direct opposite in build, was the second. "How do we know our mechs will fit in there?"

"Would you rather insert without ATLAS 5s?" Lieutenant Commander Braggs said. When Fret didn't answer, he nodded. "Thought so. I'll leave it up to Facehopper on how to proceed if the tunnels get too cramped for viable mech operation. While Digger is down there, two companies of UC Marines will stage diversionary attacks on the surface every six Stanhours to lure the horde from the tunnels. We want your path as free of enemy opposition as possible.

"The second squad, Outrigger, will be led by Chief Bourbonjack. Its members will be Rage, Bender, Hijak, Skullcracker, Lui, Manic, and Snakeoil. Outrigger's mission will be to eliminate the Observer Mind located inside Bogey 2, which is currently grafted to the opposite moon, Tau Ceti II-b. Outrigger will insert wearing jumpsuits only and will cut into the alien ship near an unguarded plasma vent. The squad will carry one nuclear asset, which will be ported to the vicinity of the Observer Mind. Our analysts don't believe you will find a Queen aboard the vessel because slugs and crabs have already been reported on the surface of Tau Ceti II-b, and as mentioned, the Queen is thought to be the progenitor.

"Once Outrigger and Digger squads have successfully inserted, the fleet will stage a full-blown assault against both Bogey 1 and 2 from orbit, providing a secondary diversion in space."

"Wait a second," Fret said. "A diversion in orbit is fine and all that, but I'm going to assume Digger Squad will need more than just a diversion and a few ATLAS mechs to get past the horde you mentioned. And Outrigger, wearing only jumpsuits, has it even worse. For one thing, if we meet any Phants, we'll be incinerated on the spot. This is a direct-action operation, isn't it? You know—stealth, avoiding enemy resistance, and the like."

"It is a direct-action operation, and both squads will need more than

diversions, yes," the Lieutenant Commander said. "Thanks to data obtained from Lana Wu's embedded ID, the jumpsuits of both squads will be rigged to emit an exact replica of the EM signatures Phants give off. For all intents and purposes you will be indistinguishable from the alien entities, or at least human beings possessed by them. We're going to graft steel bars onto the insides of your jumpsuits, just behind your backs, and those bars will house the necessary emitters. Uncomfortable as hell, but to other Phants you should seem like one of them—human hosts serving their kind."

"Is there empirical evidence that these bars actually work?" Fret said. "We've tested them in the field, right?"

Lieutenant Commander Braggs frowned. "We've only tested them in the lab so far, unfortunately. We have two Phants under containment, blue ones, imprisoned via the holding cell design the SKs shared. We prepared the aforementioned jumpsuits and sent human volunteers into the cells. Those wearing the modified suits were able to pass unnoticed, while those in the unmodified suits had to get out. Fast."

"So how do we know the other Phant types won't catch on to this trick?" I said. "The purple ones? The red ones? And how do we know the blue Phants weren't just pretending that the suits deterred them?"

The Lieutenant Commander met my eyes firmly and unapologetically. "We don't."

Trace spoke up. He was East Indian, Bengali to be exact. Best sniper I'd ever met. Though I was right behind him in terms of skill, with Ghost and Hijak a close third and fourth. "I understand why Outrigger has to go directly inside Bogey 2," Trace said. "Our torpedoes can't get through the coronal point-defense weapon. But as for Digger Squad, why can't we just drop a nuclear payload on Shangde City? Or dispatch one into the warrens using that sinkhole you talked about? Seems easier to me."

The Lieutenant Commander smiled ironically. "A week ago Brass decided Shangde City was unsalvageable and ordered a nuclear strike in an attempt to disable the Observer Mind. The missiles skimmed the moon's surface on approach, avoiding detection by Bogey 1 and the city's defenses. The impact and resulting detonation went according to plan.

"It didn't help. While we took out the surface defenses, including many robots and ATLAS mechs, the blast didn't penetrate deep enough underground. We might have caused a few cave-ins, but that's it, and the buried slugs simply bored their way out. Through it all the EM waves

indicative of the Observer Mind continued to pulse without interruption. It was like driving a tractor over an ant colony—we flattened the surface but did nothing to the colony underneath. And we can't actually fire a torpedo directly into the warrens because we don't have a guidance system fine-grained enough to navigate tunnels of that nature. Not without detonating prematurely."

"One of our highly maneuverable drones could do it," Fret said. "Or an ATLAS 5 in AI mode. Stuff one of those EM emitters you mentioned inside and set it loose."

Lieutenant Commander Braggs nodded slowly. "We considered dispatching the nuke with a fully automated team of ATLAS 5s embedded with Phant-mimicking EM emitters, but in the end the Brass decided they wanted real men in there. They wanted MOTHs. And I agreed with them."

"As do I," Bender said. "Not gonna let some damn robot do my job." The well-muscled black man barely fit his uniform. He wasn't wearing any of his usual items of jewelry—not to this briefing.

"This from our lead drone operator," Braggs said. "A man who commands support robots while embedded in the platoon. And a man who builds robots on the side, for fun. Is that irony I sense in your voice?"

Bender shrugged.

"Maybe we could pilot the ATLAS mechs remotely?" TJ, our other drone operator, said. "Like starfighters. We string out HS3s behind them to act as network repeaters, that way the mechs never leave signal range. The best of both worlds: we have human-controlled mechs without really putting the humans at risk. Not that I'm advocating it, of course. I'm all for getting up close and personal with the enemy. But I'm just saying . . ."

"Won't work," Braggs said. "As I mentioned, the enemy horde destroyed Bravo platoon's HS3s almost to the last drone. If we want to do this without arousing suspicion, we have to do it without drones—the EM emitters won't fit on the basketball-sized scouts, which means we can't hide them from the enemy. So no remotely controlled mechs."

"Which mission is harder?" Lui said. "Digger's? Or Outrigger's?"

I knew why he was asking: most of us wanted the harder mission.

"Both missions are of equal difficulty," Lieutenant Commander Braggs said. A political response.

"You're just trying to avoid rearranging the squads," Lui said.

"I wouldn't change the assignments even if you asked," the Lieutenant

Commander said. “The squads have been carefully balanced to suit each of your unique skill sets. These are the best possible teams for each target. Now if you are finished interrupting . . .” He waited, and Lui shrugged. “The inserts of both squads will be coordinated: Outrigger’s shuttle will depart a day in advance, arriving at Bogey 2 above Tau Ceti II-b shortly after Digger penetrates the warrens of the opposite moon. The fleet will remain hidden beyond the gas giant until the last moment, so as to not alert the Skull Ships. Once both squads are in place, the fleet will begin its diversionary offensive against the two bogeys. Keep in mind that because of the interference the Skull Ships produce, you will not be able to communicate with the fleet once you have achieved your respective inserts. There will be no further support troops. No quick reaction forces. No CASEVACs. You’ll be on your own until extract.”

“Extract,” Lui mused. “And what’s the retrieval strategy, exactly?”

“For Outrigger, once the nuclear asset is placed aboard and the timer is activated, you will retreat to the insertion point on Bogey 2 to signal pickup. Because of the interference, you’ll have to send it the old-fashioned way: Morse code via your helmet headlamps. When the insert shuttle, which will remain in orbit around Tau Ceti II-b, detects the signal it will dispatch booster rockets toward your position, facilitating the ride home. We’ll have EM emitters installed in the rockets so that Bogey 2 allows the things near, though we might not have to worry about that by then if you’ve succeeded in the mission.

“As for Digger’s extract, the usual ATLAS 5 booster payloads will travel down with the mechs and it will be up to each squad member to retrieve them. Once the two nuclear assets are in place and programmed to detonate, return to the surface, retrieve the booster payloads, and launch. You will rendezvous with the pickup shuttle waiting to collect you in orbit. We’ll go through the full insert and extract strategies during your respective prelaunch briefings. Any more questions until then?”

I was sure there were many, but no one said anything further.

The Lieutenant Commander stepped down from the podium and walked among us. “This is truly a momentous direct-action operation, one that could change the entire course of this invasion. Your two squads will achieve with stealth and ingenuity what a full army could never hope to do. You will succeed, because you must succeed. You will win, because you must win. Good luck to you all.”

That evening, my brothers of Alfa gathered for our final meal together in the mess before the platoon was to split apart. Because of our MOTH status we had a priority pass on the food line and were able to skip to the front. I felt sorry for the bastards who had to stand in the queue for hours, though it seemed that was the only exercise some of these crewmembers ever got, judging from the generous girths of a few people in line. The mess hall was one of several onboard, which served, collectively, around eighteen thousand meals a day to the more than five thousand crewmembers of the *Gerald R. Ford*.

There wasn't any place to sit down, so after I got my plate, I began eating while standing up, tray balanced in one hand.

I scanned the area while I ate, searching for signs that a table was about to free up. Most of the crewmembers seated around me kept to themselves, wearing that far-off look that came with Implant browsing. Hardly surprising, given that they'd probably seen the others at their tables day in and day out since the start of their tour, and they'd already spoken about everything there was to talk about. Using your Implant to watch a movie, play an interactive game, read a book, check messages, record a vid to loved ones . . . all that was far more preferable than actually having to talk to the person seated beside you, especially when he'd only rattle off the same stories and complaints you'd heard a thousand times.

My brothers and I were guilty of the same "shutting out" behavior at times, but never before a mission. When we ate together before an op, camaraderie ruled the day. Which was why it was so important that we got a table.

A seated group of Marines chatted loudly and amiably nearby—likely they had a mission tomorrow as well. Maybe they were members of the very same company that would support Digger Squad.

One of the Marines met my eyes. He surveyed the rest of my platoon before turning his gaze back on me. "You were at Operation Crimson Pipeline?"

I nodded cautiously. "I was."

"Holy shit! These are the guys!" He got up and shook my hand eagerly. "You saved our butts back there!"

The whole group of Marines got up and let us take their seats. They all

shook our hands, telling us how great we were, and thanking us profusely.

I received the bulk of the thanks for whatever reason and I felt a little embarrassed, telling them: “You guys saved our hides back there, too, don’t worry.”

We all settled into our seats, feeling a glow inside. The Marines finished their meals standing up and waved us farewell.

Sitting near me, Fret was staring into space, obviously inside his Implant. I snapped my fingers in front of him, bringing his eyes back into focus. “This is our last meal together as a platoon,” I scolded him. “Let’s all try to be present, all right?”

“I was just watching the Lieutenant Commander’s briefing again,” Fret said. “You know, I could swear I heard doubt in his voice at the end. The skipper doesn’t think we’ll succeed.”

Trace laughed. “And so our resident purveyor of doom and gloom ruins our collective moods once again. We just got congratulated by a bunch of Marines and you have to go and say something like that. What nationality did you say you were again? Ukrainian?”

Fret made a face like he was offended. “Moldovan.”

“Figures,” Trace continued. “You New Eastern Europeans are all an unhappy, low-spirited bunch. Pissed off that the UC passed you by for membership and all. ‘The skipper doesn’t think we’ll succeed.’ Blah. He wouldn’t send us if he thought we’d fail. He has absolute faith in our abilities. Absolute.”

“Oh I’m sure he has no doubt about our abilities,” Fret said. “But what he’s not sure about, what *I’m* not sure about, is that nukes are enough. What if these Observer Minds can’t actually be destroyed? Like Phants?”

“Then we have other problems to worry about than failing the mission,” Manic interjected.

“I’ll say.” Fret shook his head theatrically. “If nukes don’t harm the Observer Minds, we die for nothing.”

“And Petty Officer Doom and Gloom steps into the ring with the gloves off once again,” Trace chuckled.

Facehopper set down his fork. “Bollocks. None of us are dying this mission.” Our leading petty officer, he hailed from England. He had a roguish charm about him that made him instantly likable to most people. He had a sharp wit, and was always willing to lend each and every one of us his ear. The men loved him. Well, except for Tahoe maybe, who seemed a bit

standoffish toward the LPO. “I don’t know why you’d even say that. ‘Die for nothing.’ Bloody hell. You know how I feel about morale leeches, mate.”

Fret crossed his arms. “Remember what I told you once, boss? How a hefty dose of pessimism is healthy for us spec-ops people?”

“I’m not backing down on this,” Facehopper said. “We’re going to complete our respective missions, no matter the outcome. And none of us are going to die along the way. Don’t let me catch you saying that again.”

“Damn right none of us are going to die,” Chief Bourbonjack said, approaching our table with a food-laden tray.

“Chief!” Facehopper said.

Another man gave up a chair at a table nearby and our fearless leader took it and sat down with us. Bourbonjack reported directly to Lieutenant Commander Braggs. Streaks of gray ran through his hair and beard, and his dark eyes were always observing, taking in and measuring not only the situation at hand but also the temperament of the men around him. He had a nose that matched those hawkish eyes—hooked, like a beak.

The Chief swallowed a chunk of chicken. He rarely ate with us, but today was a special occasion. “No more talk regarding the mission, boys. Not a word. Facehopper is right, now is not the time for morale leeching. Hell, there’s never a time for it. If you don’t like it here, Fret, you can pack up your belongings and head back to Moldova.”

Fret lowered his gaze, staring at his plate.

The Chief nodded to himself. “It’ll be quite a while before we see each other again, let alone eat borderline-decent food. Let’s enjoy our last meal together as a platoon.”

We dined in silence. The clang of utensils against plates rang out across the mess hall. Muted conversations echoed here and there.

“I’m certainly going to miss y’all,” Manic said. He had a port-wine stain just above his eye, vaguely reminiscent of a moth (the insect), which he often liked to brag was the reason he’d joined up with the MOTHs in the first place. It was prophetic, he claimed.

“Since when did you start saying *y’all*?” Snakeoil said. The short, buff comm officer frowned. “Lui and I are the ones from Tennessee.” The two of them were among the few of us who weren’t immigrants and actually fought with the army because they wanted to be here, rather than because of the EEI Act—the Enforced Enlistment of Immigrants and Illegals.

Manic smiled halfheartedly, swallowing a portion of his baked potato.

“Been hanging around you two dimnuts for too long I guess.”

“Dimnuts?” Lui said, pausing with his fork a handspan from his mouth. “What the hell is a dimnut?”

Manic shook his head. “Never mind.”

“I want to know.” Lui scowled at Manic. “And why the hell were you calling me one?”

“Like I said, never mind.”

Lui gave him a dark look and then stuffed the contents of his fork into his mouth.

Bender gazed at Manic, snickering behind his hand.

“You going to be okay?” Manic said to Bender in mock concern.

Bender finally couldn’t take it and erupted in a loud chortle. “I think Manic’s tied with Hijak for the ‘pussy of the month’ award.” He laughed some more. “If you’re gonna talk shit, better be ready to back it up, bro.” Bender shook his head and muttered, “He’s going to miss *y’all*. Gayest thing I’ve ever heard.”

Hijak frowned. “He’s not the one who wears gold chains.” Hijak was a newer member of the platoon. Like Lui, he was Asian American, though he’d had extensive plastic surgery done to hide his Asian features. I used to resent him because he’d taken the vacancy left by my dead friend Alejandro, but Hijak and I had gone through hell together and thoroughly bonded. He’d been a caterpillar when he joined Alfa but he was a seasoned MOTH now. I couldn’t imagine the platoon without him.

Bender scowled at Hijak. “Shut your skinny ass, caterpillar.” The drone operator wore only one gold chain today. This was unusual, as he typically wore several when off duty.

Hijak shrugged. “Just saying.”

Bender set down his fork. “Just saying? What are you ‘just saying,’ bitch? That I look gay?” For a second I thought he was going to stand up and throttle Hijak. “Take a look at your skinny bitch arms. Or the womanly face you paid your plastic surgeon for. *You’re* the one who’s gay.”

Trace patted Bender mockingly on the shoulder. “Maybe you should take your lover outside, Bender.”

Bender shrugged him off. “Gay,” he spat.

“Easy, Bender,” Chief Bourbonjack said.

Bender gave Hijak one last glare before picking up his fork and continuing his meal.

“I wish there was a flesh cantina aboard,” Manic said abruptly. “Or a Skin Musician rental shop. Seeing all these untouchable Navy girls is too much sometimes. I’ve had blue balls since the day I came aboard.”

“Watch porn on your Implant or something, bro,” Hijak said.

Bender smirked. “We know what kind of porn you like.”

Hijak rolled his eyes.

“Untouchable Navy girls?” TJ, our other embedded drone operator, said. An olive-skinned Italian, he was just as muscular as Bender, and his left arm was tattooed to look like the limb of an ATLAS mech, replete with rivets, servomotors, and weapon mounts. His right arm was inked with a slew of military robots, such as Centurions and Raptors, which competed for every square inch of skin. He had an Atlas moth tattooed to his neck, and the wings extended down his chest. “Taken or single, officer or astronaut, it doesn’t matter. Give the girl the adventure she’s looking for and she’s yours. Trust me, you can have more than your fill of sweet treats aboard this carrier if you manage things properly.” He took a sip of milk, then seemed to remember that the Chief was among us because he added hastily: “Not that I’ve ever done that.” He was careful not to glance the Chief’s way.

“What you do in your spare time is your business, TJ,” the Chief said. “And make sure it stays that way.”

“I’m with Manic,” Fret said. “I could sure use a sex robot right about now. You know, I never really understood why Fleet doesn’t provide Skin Musicians for all serving members, free of charge. That would solve a lot of problems.”

“I’m not sure that’s the best idea,” Hijak said. “And not just because of the exorbitant cost. Some people can get very attached to Skin Musicians, to the point of distraction. It would interfere with our deployments just as badly as any liaison with a real woman would.”

“Just put it in your house, then,” Fret said. “That way you got a robot wife at home, not work. Everyone wins.”

“Everyone except real women,” Snakeoil said. “This is no joke, guys. There are millions of young men who won’t even look at real women anymore. Why? Because of the robos they have access to, and the porn. Why do you think guys like us kill it when we hit the nightlife? Because we actually go out. Because we actually get turned on by real women. Seems to be a rarity in today’s almost asexual world.”

“Hey, if women are feeling lonely, they can get robots for themselves

too, bro," Fret said.

"And that's exactly my point," Snakeoil said. "A lot of women do, which is why our society is cracking at the seams. No one loves real human beings anymore. No one is having real sex. Birthrates have plummeted across the colonies; even Africa, that former bastion of population growth, has suffered a drastic decline."

"Well, the Sino-Koreans are to blame for Africa," Hijak said. "Ever since they took over the place and started implementing their infamous population control measures."

"You can't really blame Sino-Korean policy for that," Lui said. "Longevity treatments have a lot to do with it, not just in Africa and other Sino-Korean territories but the rest of the world and the colonies, too. What incentive do people have to make little copies of themselves when they can live upwards of a hundred and fifty years? Good quality years, mind you, not the crappy, stay-at-home-all-day-inside-your-Implant kind."

"Getting back on topic," Hijak said, "I have to disagree with the whole women-are-buying-sex-robots thing. It's the guys who are doing it, mostly. We're aroused by visual cues: big breasts, wide hips, dainty feet. Women are turned on by other things. Sure, looks can help, but they also want someone powerful. Dominant. And for all that, a man who desires them immensely."

"Like you know anything about women," Bender chuckled. "Mister Gay Caterpillar. Besides, robots can be programmed to do all that stuff you mentioned. Being dominant, desiring."

"You can't program a robot to be a billionaire," Hijak said. "Or the CEO of a company."

"Some robots are billionaires and CEOs," Lui said.

"Well, since we're back on this topic . . ." Fret piped in. "Just think for a moment if we all had robot wives. It would be marital bliss. You'd never have to worry about her cheating. You could turn her off when you were on deployment or if she ever started to nag you or act in other annoying ways. Hell, keep her off all the time, except when you want sex."

Hijak shook his head. "All you're doing is marrying a glorified masturbation device, then. I'd rather take the real thing, thank you very much."

Fret frowned. "You're new, so it makes sense that you don't know this yet. But let me clarify something for you. The divorce rate among MOTHs is extremely high. As in, roughly ninety percent of us who marry get divorced

within a year. The fact is, we're away too long. Far too long." He glanced at Tahoe, and referred to him by his callsign. "Cyclone here is the only one of us who has kept his wife. Three years in the service, and still married. That's got to be some sort of record. The rest of us have tried marriage here and there, but the fact is, we'll probably remain single until our service terms are up."

TJ nodded. "Fret's right, unfortunately. You want a real woman? Fine, you got it. But she's not going to be your wife. For us, all we have are the girls we get on the road, or the MOTH groupies, and that's the way it's gotta be. That's the way of the galaxy. We're not the provider figures in women's lives. We're the lovers. The ones offering the adventure. We're the ones banging the CEO's wife when she goes off on her girls' night out."

Snakeoil crossed his arms, emphasizing his biceps peaks. "I'd rather bang a Skin Musician than seduce some married woman."

TJ shrugged. "Married or not, women have minds of their own. If they don't want sex, they can say no. Funny how they never bring up their husbands until after the deed is done, though."

"Now I see why none of you can keep your marriages," Tahoe said, shaking his head. A Navajo, he was one of our heavy gunners, and my best friend. "If you go into the marriage assuming the woman will cheat, then you're going to have problems, man."

TJ laughed. "So what, you're saying that if we *believe* she won't cheat, she magically won't? Don't tell me you're one of those crackpots who swear that positive thoughts and visualizations shape the universe around you? That the universe will hand you whatever you desire on a silver platter? Because I can tell you right now, the universe doesn't do handouts."

Tahoe sighed. "That's not what I was saying. Just that in marriage, attitude is half the equation. Listen, take it from me, there are some incredibly loyal, loving women out there. And by the way, there's more to married life than just sex. What about feeling loved, needed? What about being the best man you can be? A great woman can bring that out, which is why some of us actually *want* relationships. Let me tell you a story."

"Oh man, here he goes." Bender rolled his eyes.

"Once upon a time there was a little girl," Tahoe said, ignoring the jibe. "Now this little girl, she was visiting an animal shelter, and saw a dog cowering in its cage: a poor, slat-ribbed, mangy-looking thing. The little girl just fell in love immediately, and knew she had to have it. The shelter

operator warned her that the dog was a mean son-of-a-bitch, but the girl wouldn't listen, so he finally gave in. After some wrangling he managed to secure the dog in one of those portable pet kennels, and he sent the girl and her new dog on their way. But straight up, he expected her to return the animal the next morning.

"When the little girl got home, she opened the kennel, wanting to feed the animal, but the dog wouldn't come out. Whenever she reached inside to touch the animal, it growled, or barked, or bit her. But she kept her cool, and instead set food out near the entrance to the kennel. After a few minutes the animal approached the opening and ate, but as soon as it finished, the dog retreated to the back of the kennel again. This behavior repeated several times over the next few days."

"What about doggy doo-doo?" Manic said. "Don't tell me she let him roll around in his own excrement all day?"

"Sort of like what your mom did to you?" Bender said.

TJ laughed, and exchanged a high-five with Bender.

"The kennel was one of those self-cleaning models," Tahoe explained. "Anyway, despite its behavior, the girl was patient with the dog, and didn't stop loving it. She believed in the animal, and knew that underneath its tough facade was a little dog not so different from her. A dog that just wanted to be loved."

"I think I'm going to shed a tear," Bender said.

"As I was saying, the little girl persisted, and never gave up on the dog. Each day she moved its food farther and farther from the entrance to the kennel, until finally she got the animal to come out entirely. As the weeks passed, the dog's ribs filled out, and slowly but surely it began to realize that it didn't need to snap at her when she tried to touch it, and that it didn't have to gulp down its meals as fast as possible because more food was always coming.

"The shelter operator was surprised when he bumped into the little girl six months later, because she was leading an unfamiliar dog. This one had a shiny coat and walked around wagging its tail with its head held high. It was extremely happy and friendly. He asked her what happened to the other animal he'd given her, and was shocked when she told him this was the very same dog. Her love had transformed the animal into a completely different beast. A better one."

Bender rolled his eyes again, and I waited for him to make some remark

that would ruin the moment. Manic was the one who spoke, however.

"I get it, you're the dog!" he said in mock understanding.

"Yeah, and the little girl is you," Bender told him.

Tahoe shook his head. "Why do I try?"

Ghost raised a hand. "Great story, Cyclone. But guys, listen to what I just heard on the news: the UC-SK alliance is considering dismantling the Gates leading to and from Tau Ceti." Ghost was an albino. Long pale hair, soapy-white skin, eerie red eyes. Even his beard was white. Imagine a demon or dark elf from some science fiction or fantasy novel and you'd have Ghost. "As if dismantling them would somehow stem the advance of the invaders or something. Destroying the Gates to and from Geronimo didn't stop the enemy from coming here, did it?"

"You're assuming the return Gate to our space was even destroyed," Manic said.

"It was destroyed." I gazed at Manic angrily, hoping he'd give me an excuse to get up and throttle him. Shaw gave her life to destroy that Gate and I wouldn't have anyone saying otherwise, brother or not.

Manic lowered his eyes.

"Yes, well," Ghost continued, "the only thing dismantling the Tau Ceti Gates will accomplish is trapping us here."

"Never happen," Skullcracker said. The heavy weapons operator had the tattoo of a skull inked onto his face and when he talked, which was rare, people listened. He was one of the toughest, most devoted MOTHs I'd ever served with. "The Brass would return us to our space beforehand. One of the first unwritten rules of the MOTHs and even Big Navy: We don't leave our men behind."

I was about to mention how we'd left Shaw behind, despite that very rule, but I remembered the Chief's words on morale leeching.

"I actually wouldn't mind if we were trapped here," Mauler said. "Leaves us more of the enemy to fight for ourselves." Mauler was the other newer member of our platoon. Another heavy gunner, he replaced our fallen brother Big Dog. Like Hijak, Mauler had proven himself to be a valuable contributor to the brotherhood. He'd earned his callsign in the previous deployment when he'd punched an enemy robot to death, breaking all his fingers in the process. He was a bona fide UC native, and like Lui and Snakeoil, joined the service not because he had to but because he wanted to.

"Still full of the false bravado of a caterpillar, are you?" Trace said

mockingly. “Shed the chrysalis of your caterpillar roots: become a MOTH!”

“It’s not bravado,” Mauler said. “I truly mean it.”

“I’m with Mauler,” Hijak said. “I don’t care if the Brass traps us in this system. Just as long as we’re pitted against the enemy. Rope us in and let us fight to the death, I say. The invaders are going to pay for what they did to me. I’ll have my vengeance.”

Trace opened his mouth, some witty response probably forming on his tongue, but when he caught the dead serious look in Hijak’s eyes, he said nothing. Trace glanced at me, saw my own somber face, and looked down.

The whole platoon knew Hijak and I had been captured and interrogated. They could still see the spots where our hair had been shaved at the back of our heads to make room for the pain boxes we’d had bolted to our skulls. They saw the scars on our wrists from the harnesses of the torturer.

My brothers probably knew we’d broken under the strain, even though none of them had asked, and we’d never told them. They knew because of the way we acted whenever we talked even peripherally about the event.

Uncomfortable silence floated between us, broken only by the background din from other tables. Someone laughed nearby.

Bomb was playing with his food, shoveling the baked potato and grilled chicken around with his utensils. The second black man in our platoon never wore jewelry and had his head shaved on either side, forming a dark mohawk. He was well built, though not nearly as muscular as Bender.

“You going to finish that, brother?” Bender said.

Bomb offered him the plate.

“Yeah baby!” Bender scooped the contents into his own dish. “Chicken breasts!”

Lui shook his head. “Never seen anyone get so excited about chicken breasts.”

“Good old chicken,” Bender said, producing a container of barbecue sauce from his cargo pocket.

Lui stared in disbelief. “You carry barbecue sauce around with you?”

Bender slathered the chicken with the dark brown sauce and dove in without shame. “Only when going to the mess,” he said with a full mouth.

“Making a mess, more likely,” Lui said as sauce splattered Bender’s chin.

“Why, you want to take a picture?” Bender said with his mouth full.

Lui grimaced. “Hell no!”

Bender shrugged. “Thought you were a foodie.”

The conversation continued like this. Light, superficial. None of us really wanted to get too deep. Nerves, I guess. That and the fact we weren’t all that thrilled about splitting up from our brothers, though we’d done it often enough in the past. This mission was different than those other times, however. The stakes were far higher.

I gazed from face to face, recording the moment in my embedded ID. I wanted to remember my teammates as they were, right then, dining together for what could be the last time. Because despite what Facehopper had said, I knew anyone present could die. When next we gathered, there might be more than one missing face. I hoped not, I really did, but I was well aware of the realities of war. Facehopper and Chief Bourbonjack might want us to believe that no one would fall, but that was only because it was their job to keep morale high.

But I couldn’t believe it. I knew the truth.

None of us were invincible.

On the way out of the mess hall we passed the line of enlisted men still waiting for food. The queue ran all the way around the outer edge of the mess to the passage outside and the hangar bay beyond. I saw one guy near the front leave the line before he got any food, and then he followed us all the way to the back where he promptly dropped into the queue again. A duty shirker. I didn’t say anything. If I had his crappy rating, I’d probably do the same. Still, I was surprised he was able to get away with it. All it would take was a review of his Implant log and the commanding officer would have his ass.

I fell in with Tahoe at the rear of our platoon. His squad, Digger, would be reporting back to the berth, while mine, Outrigger, would continue on to hangar bay seven for the prelaunch briefing. Outrigger left for Bogey 2, the more distant Skull Ship, tonight. Even so, Digger would probably end up inserting a few hours before us, given the mission timings.

The platoon moved in pairs, except on the stairwells, where single file ruled the day. We jogged the whole way. Why walk, when you could run? Skip the opportunity for a workout?

Never happen.

To the uninitiated, moving from one destination to another on a ship of this size could feel like navigating a labyrinth. For example, to reach our berthing area, we’d have to take the stairwell up three levels, run halfway

across hangar bay four, take two rights and a left, go down two floors, take a right, cross the gym (readily identifiable a corridor away by the rank smell), go up a floor, pass the officers' mess, go down a floor, enter the "P way," take two lefts and a right onto the "I way," take a left, go up a floor, take a right, and voila—one cramped berthing compartment at your service.

And that was the fast route. It looked like we were taking the slow path that day.

"Sent your good-byes to Tepin yet?" I said to Tahoe as I jogged. That was the name of his wife, who lived back on Earth near base.

Tahoe nodded. "I did, actually. Recorded my last message to her earlier, right after the LC's briefing." That meant she'd get it ten to twelve hours from now, given the way the InterPlaNet worked. Assuming of course the Node Probes still moved in and out of the Tau Ceti Gates at their regular frequencies, transferring data bundles to the neighboring systems. I'd heard reports that Node Probe activity at the Gates had been curtailed, with the military trying to regulate what the media got out of the system. The Brass didn't want to cause a general panic, I guess. Still, it made me wonder how much the people of Earth and the other colonies really knew about the progress of the invasion.

"The joyful life of a married man in the special forces," Tahoe added. I knew he meant it as a quip, but it came off a little rueful.

I studied Tahoe for a moment. What the platoon had discussed back in the mess was true: the divorce rate in the Teams was sky-high. The fact that Tahoe was still married despite the terrible odds was something truly special—an example the rest of us could aspire to and one day hope to emulate. But was all truly well in his relationship?

I held a hand in front of him and slowed down: I didn't want the rest of the platoon to overhear our conversation. Didn't want to shatter the dreams of those who someday hoped to marry, nor feed the I-told-you-so's of the cynics who swore never to tie the knot.

At that point I almost didn't say anything further, unsure how deep I wanted to go just before a mission. But I plowed ahead anyway. "Things okay between you and Tepin?"

"Yes. No. I mean, I don't know." Tahoe sighed. "As good as can be expected, I guess. These long separations, they're tough. Did I tell you an old girlfriend got in touch with me about six months ago?"

I raised an eyebrow. "An old girlfriend? No, you didn't."

“For a while there I was sending her more messages than Tepin. Wasn’t my proudest moment. For me, it was just harmless flirtation. A way to get some external validation as a married man. To know that I still had it in me, you know? I just wanted to feel like I wasn’t tied down. Anyway, things started to escalate as we went back and forth, and it got to the point where she was sending nude selfies.”

“That’s not good.” When you were sending nude selfies over the InterPlaNet, the implied connotation was: *I’m ready to have sex with you*. “I hope you didn’t send any back?”

“What? No, of course not.” He reddened slightly and I thought he was lying. “Anyway, when she hinted at meeting and started probing for the dates I’d be back on Earth, the fantasy ended for me. Shit was getting real. So I pulled things way back. Stopped messaging her. Cold turkey.”

“Good.”

Tahoe nodded. “I had to do it. Those messages weren’t good for my marriage.”

“I’m with you all the way, bro. You don’t have to defend yourself to me. You did the right thing.”

Tahoe shook his head. “I feel so bad about it.”

“Why? They were just messages.” Though nudes were pretty bad, I had to admit.

“I know, but . . . Tepin would never do something like that. She’s loyal to a fault.” He sighed. “My problem is, I’ve been away too long. Sometimes I can’t even remember what Tepin looks like. Or my kids. And that scares me. Sure, I can pull up Tepin’s picture on my aReal, but as soon as I dismiss the image, I forget her face five minutes later. I don’t understand it. Honestly, Rade, one of my greatest fears right now is that I’ll be lying in the dirt on an alien battlefield somewhere, taking my last breaths, with my aReal or Implant down, and not having a freakin’ clue what my wife and kids look like. To die without even remembering my family’s faces. That’s gotta be one of the worst things.”

I wasn’t sure what to say. I jogged on in silence, the rest of the platoon far ahead of us.

We reached a stairwell. The other enlisted men could read the “priority pass” status of our embedded IDs and they moved aside or waited at the top and bottom of the stairs to let us through. The air rang with the sound of our boots against the grills.

“Tepin found out, you know,” Tahoe continued as we left the stairs behind. “Three months ago, a little while after I’d gone cold turkey, the old girlfriend sent me another message. I ignored it. Unfortunately, while answering one of Tepin’s textmails after that, I accidentally called my wife ‘Tiffany’—the name of the old flame.”

I shook my head. “Nicely done, bro.”

“Yeah, man. I can’t even begin to explain the misery I went through after that. She made me tell her everything, and I did. Then the interrogation came: When did I stop sending the woman those messages? When did I actually date her? Did I still love the woman? What about Tepin herself? And on and on and on. But then she just vanished. Cut off all communication with me. I sent her texts and vidmails apologizing daily but it was like messaging a black hole. I began to wonder if she’d gone and changed her embedded ID number on me. Two weeks later she finally answered, sending me a single sentence: ‘I want a divorce.’ For a while there I actually believed her. But it was a ruse. At least I think so. She just wanted to manipulate me into signing up for couples’ therapy.”

“And did you?”

“Well, no. I can’t. At least not while on deployment. But I made her a promise that we’d start couples’ counseling as soon as I got back.” He shook his head. “I don’t know why I’m telling you all this, especially now. Guess it’s because I won’t be seeing you for a while. Probably not the best time for an impromptu therapy session, though, is it?”

“It’s the perfect time,” I said, echoing my earlier thoughts. “Might as well get it off your chest before the real fighting begins.”

“Maybe,” Tahoe said. “Still, I feel like such a hypocrite for what I said earlier about love and married life. Who am I to talk, when I almost messed up my own marriage?”

“But you didn’t, Tahoe, did you? You’re still married.”

He nodded. “That I am.”

We passed the sealed doors of hangar bay three; the hangar had suffered damage during the previous battle and was still under repair. We opened and closed the airtight hatches of hangar bay four beside it and ran underneath the F-35 Avenger class starfighters before reaching another set of hatches in the rightmost bulkhead. Beyond it, we cut through a group of enlisted soldiers who were lined up outside the *Ford’s* sole tobacco shop—a popular spot, with a twenty-four seven queue. In the next corridor I caught a glimpse of

Manic far ahead, where he trailed the main platoon body.

"By the way, how are *you* holding up?" Tahoe said, panting slightly.

"Fine," I said cautiously.

"I saw your eyes back there," Tahoe insisted. "When Hijak mentioned vengeance. I could see the guilt written all over your face."

I sighed. "Can't hide anything from you, can I bro?"

Tahoe chuckled. "I'm using my spirit world powers."

"Yes. Powers you don't believe in."

"Just because I don't believe in them doesn't mean they don't work," he said.

"Navajo intuition. Nothing beats it."

"Damn right." Tahoe grinned, then became serious. "So truthfully, how are you holding up?"

I smiled wistfully. "Really, I'm fine. Sure, there's some latent guilt over what I did. But that's to be expected, isn't it?"

"Depends on what you did," Tahoe said. "Not that I want to know," he added hastily.

"I'm sure you've already guessed."

"Maybe. Maybe not."

I decided to tell him and get it off my chest. "I was interrogated on that ship by the Guide's slaves. By Lana actually. I—"

"Stop," Tahoe said. "I told you, I don't want to know."

"But I have to tell you, Tahoe." I slowed my pace, coming to a halt. "I have no one else I can talk to."

Tahoe stopped beside me. "Where's a stripper when you need her?"

I had to laugh at that. "I wonder what happened to Misty?"

"I'm sure she's still waiting for you in Gliese 581."

I looked at him pensively. If I was going to tell him about my capture, I had to do it before I changed my mind. "I gave up my embedded ID password, Tahoe. They tortured me and I gave it up. I thought I was stronger than that. Because of all the training I went through, training that taught me I was invincible." I shook my head. There was that false word again. *Invincible*. I closed my eyes. "I really thought, despite all the warnings about interrogation, that I was different somehow. Unbreakable . . ."

Tahoe didn't say anything. He didn't have to. We started running again and he jogged along with me in silence. That was enough.

I felt the burning in my muscles, my lungs, my throat. I listened to the

beating of my heart, the raggedness of my breath. I was alive and that's all that mattered.

We opened and closed an airtight hatch and proceeded into a scuttle. When we reached the top and closed another hatch behind us, we jogged on. Glancing at the HUD map that my Implant projected onto my vision, I saw that the rest of the platoon was only a few corridors ahead. They'd probably taunt us for falling behind. That was fine: we dished it out as good as we got.

"You know why the Brass is separating the two of us, don't you?" Tahoe said.

I shrugged. "They want to distribute our skill sets among the two squads."

"That's the official explanation," Tahoe said. "But the real reason is Facehopper wants us apart."

I felt my brow furrow. "Whatever for?"

"You remember that little disagreement him and I had during Crimson Pipeline?"

During the end of Operation Crimson Pipeline, Facehopper had ordered me to stay behind in an ATLAS 5 to guard the retreat, while instructing Tahoe and the rest of the platoon to return to the drop craft. Tahoe had refused, and wound up scuffling with our leading petty officer. It was one of the most blatant acts of insubordination I'd seen. Also one of the most touching.

While the two of them hadn't been on the best of terms since then, it seemed unlikely that Facehopper had handpicked the squads. That was the domain of the Chief and the Lieutenant Commander.

"I don't think Facehopper had anything to do with it," I said.

"It's true," Tahoe insisted. "He has the Chief's ear. And the skipper's. He thinks we're trouble together. Which isn't far from the truth. He knows you're one of the few I'd disobey a direct order for. And the Brass can't have that. No sir. They need us to be obedient little grunts. For the most part I don't mind. I like orders. I like the regimented life, and not having to think too much about whether what I'm doing is right or wrong. Just following orders like a true yes man. But if I'm given an order that puts my closest friends in danger, I'll always have a hard time following it."

I nodded slowly. I didn't want to encourage him but in all honesty I felt much the same way about him and the rest of my brothers.

"Facehopper knows we hopped the border into the UC together," Tahoe

continued. “Knows we went through training together. Knows there’s a bond between us stronger than any in the brotherhood. And yet he’s breaking us apart. It’s a shame.” He pulled up short. “You’re the closest thing to a real brother I’ve ever had. I’ll miss you, bro.” He gave me a sudden hug.

“Tahoe—”

He moved away and raised his hands defensively. “I meant that in the most brotherly way possible, of course.”

I grinned. “You don’t have to explain. I’ll miss you too, brother. I truly will. I only wish . . .”

“What?”

I looked away. “Nothing.” *I wish Shaw and Alejandro were here.*

We reached the berthing compartment, where the rest of the platoon members were making their farewells. I’d be continuing onward with Outrigger, toward hangar bay seven, leaving half the platoon, including Tahoe, behind.

I held out my hand to him. “I’ll see you when this is done.”

Tahoe clasped my palm. He couldn’t talk. There were tears in his eyes, as if he felt this was the last time we’d ever see each other.

I refused to believe that.

I squeezed his hand tighter. “We’ll make it through this, Tahoe.”

He nodded quickly, turning away. “Give ’em hell, Rade,” he managed.

I wanted to tell him the same thing, wanted to give him some last words of encouragement, but I was choking up, too. I didn’t want him to see me in this moment—me, this big tough MOTH, breaking down in tears. So instead I turned away gruffly and started the jog to the hangar seven deck, not daring to say good-bye to anyone else.

Give ’em hell, Tahoe.

CHAPTER TWO

Tahoe

I was back on the moon where I'd nearly lost everything, about to put it all at risk again.

I felt strangely happy about that.

I suppose it came down to the fact that, at the end of the day, I enjoyed being out on spec-ops missions. I never felt as truly alive, as truly *needed*, as when I was on deployment. Sure, the fam needed me. The wife, the kids. And I loved them. But my brothers needed me, too, more than anything. As did humanity. If we failed, who could say what systems would fall next? To lose meant that there would be no family, no home, to go back *to*.

This mission was what being on the Teams was all about. I just felt sorry for the poor son-of-a-bitches in our sister platoon, Bravo, who were forced to sit on their haunches while the rest of us were divvied up and set to work.

I had bitched to Rade about being split up from him, mostly because I wanted to be the one guarding his back. That was a selfish reason if there ever was one, because the truth was, he didn't need me—he had seven of my brothers watching him. Just as I had seven more watching me. Rade and I were in good hands. I knew the men with us would go to the gates of hell and beyond to save our sorry asses if they had to.

The gates of hell. Not that I believed in that or anything. I came from an astrophysics background and it was terribly hard to give credence to a heaven, hell, or spirit world when you were aware of the immutability of math and physics. Still, I'd almost reversed my stance recently. Fighting alien entities that seemed little more than supernatural mists would make anyone believe in spirits and the afterlife. As would watching friends die.

And almost dying myself.

I never told Rade, but after he and Hijak had been captured and carried

away for interrogation by the Guide, I experienced my closest brush with death yet. I was already shot up real bad by the time Rade vanished, but when the Chief led the rest of us in frantic flight from Shangde City, I was hit by another bullet and lost consciousness.

I found myself in a group of Wind Walkers, seated in a circle. Around us, as far I could see, perched other Wind Walkers in similar circles. Domes of white light encased each group, and from each individual, a different colored beam of light shot upwards into the sky.

Alejandro was one of the Wind Walkers in my group. As were my parents and grandparents. In the other circles I saw my ancestors seated among elders and medicine men. Some appeared in the guise of various animals. The fox. The rabbit. The horse. They were singing softly and the words comforted me.

Alejandro and I talked, laughed, and exchanged friendly jibes like in old times. But most important of all, he forgave me for letting him die.

"I chose to sacrifice myself that day, Tahoe," he said. "To save you and Rade. Always remember that. *It was my choice.*"

"But there had to have been something more I could have done," I said. "At the very least, avenging your death. But instead I ran. Like a coward."

"*Caramba*," Alejandro said. "You're almost as bad as Rade. I *wanted* you to run. There was nothing you could do. If you had stayed, you would have died."

I protested further but he brought me around to his point of view. He was always good at that. I still felt guilty over his death but the words helped.

We spoke of serious matters thereafter, like the need to remain positive even when all seemed lost, and the need to protect our brothers and our homeworld. The galaxy itself was at risk, Alejandro told me. The enemy would destroy everything if left unchecked, even the spirit world.

The Wind Walkers ended their song and began getting up and leaving. Alejandro rose, too, and I stood to join him.

"No," Alejandro told me. "Go back, Tahoe Eaglehide. Rade needs you. Your brothers need you. Go back."

He became a white buffalo, as did the other Wind Walkers, and the herd thundered away across the plain.

Feeling great sorrow at leaving them, I turned back, eventually waking up to find myself in intensive care.

I never really believed all the stories I had heard about near death

experiences. But what I saw that day wasn't something I could entirely explain with math and physics, or something I could forget. I told myself it was merely the delusions of an oxygen-deprived brain. But was it really?

"Cyclone, you there bro?" Ghost's voice came over the comm, speaking my callsign.

I'd slowed my pace right down, I realized. I was at the rear of the squad in my mech, ahead of Ghost, who acted as our drag man. I was supposed to remain ten meters ahead of him, but according to my HUD his ATLAS 5 stood right behind me, while the next mech in the squad, Mauler's, was about thirty meters forward.

"Sorry," I returned. "Zoned out."

"Hurry up or we're going to leave signal range," Ghost sent. The built-in network repeaters only worked so far in this heavy interference, and I had put enough distance between myself and Mauler for that to be a problem.

"What's going on back there?" Facehopper transmitted, his voice clicking with static. "Cyclone, Ghost, keep up with the bloody squad, mates."

"Sorry boss, Cyclone had to take a piss," Ghost joked.

Cursing my sudden inattentiveness, I hurried forward, quickly resuming my position ten meters behind Mauler.

The black smooth walls of the cave around us were lit only by the headlamps of our mechs. We were deep within the warrens beneath Shangde City and had reached the area via the huge sinkhole cut into the open-air hydroponics station outside the city. We'd used the maps provided by Bravo platoon to take the quickest route to the unexplored sections, which lay just ahead.

So far we had encountered no signs of the enemy. The surface-side attack by the Marines had apparently drawn most, if not all, of the horde to the city above, leaving the caverns devoid of life. However, even if we encountered slugs, crabs, Phants, or other alien life, allegedly it wouldn't matter—the EM emitters the Brass had embedded in our jumpsuits were supposed to fool the enemy into believing we were on the same side.

We all piloted ATLAS 5s. Body-encompassing, humanoid-shaped war machines that stood twelve meters high. Over a thousand hydraulically actuated joints. Onboard hydraulic pump and thermal management. Crash protection. Jumpjets. Head-mounted sensor package with built-in LIDAR, night vision, flash vision, zoom, and other augmented reality perception boosts that smoothly integrated with our helmet aReals. The mounts on the

forearms held three weapons each: Gatlings, serpent missiles, and incendiary throwers. A hot-deployable ballistic shield on the left arm assembly offered protection against armor-piercing bullets.

The actuators of my ATLAS 5—callsign Wolfhound—enveloped my jumpsuit like a cocoon, and because my Implant was deactivated to protect against the infamous EM attacks of the Phants, with each step I could feel the slight resistance of those actuators. It was a feeling that registered only on the periphery of my consciousness and I often forgot I was inside a mech. So readily was my brain fooled by the sights, sounds, and tactile feedback provided by the inner cocoon that for all intents and purposes I *was* the ATLAS 5.

The squad brought with it two high-yield nuclear warheads. One ATLAS mech ported each payload and by doing so sacrificed its ability to use weapons and shields, as the portage required both arms. Even though the pilots wouldn't directly experience the weight of the warhead, the load stress placed on the joints and servomotors of each ATLAS was mirrored by the internal cocoon. This imparted the illusion that the pilot carried a moderately heavy weight. The whole point of the load mirroring was to prevent pilots from overtaxing their ATLAS 5s. As such, carrying the warheads proved tiring to the operators and we were forced to swap out. Fret and Mauler were the lucky ones this time round.

"The first thing I'm going to do when I get back is order myself a nice, juicy cheeseburger," Ghost sent directly to my aReal, apparently worried I would zone out again. "Slathered in melted cheese topped with caramelized onions. Some mayo, too, and a generous helping of Dijon mustard, along with fresh arugula leaves. Plus a dill pickle, sliced into three pieces. Oh, and we can't forget the bun. It's gotta be brushed with butter and toasted on the grill."

"You're just as bad as Lui," I said over the comm. "All you can think about while on deployment is food."

"You're forgetting about sex," Ghost sent. "Food and sex. The only things on my mind."

"Great," I muttered sarcastically.

"Food and sex are the flavors of life. They're what being human is all about. And they're the two things we can't have on deployment. So of course I'm going to think about them."

"Chug down an MRE or something." Meal, Ready-to-Eat.

Ghost laughed over the comm. “Don’t even get me started on MREs. Those, my friend, definitely don’t count as food. Sustenance, perhaps. Food, no.”

“Maybe you should invent a cheeseburger-flavored MRE.”

“Already been done,” Ghost sent. “Tastes like shit in a tire.”

I snickered. “Why am I not surprised you know what shit in a tire tastes like?”

“You laugh,” Ghost sent. “But back when I was training, the instructors made us lug tires through the bay beside the New Coronado sewage outlet. You quickly learned to keep your mouth shut.”

“Too bad the lesson was lost on you,” I muttered.

Ghost got the hint and kept the comm clear.

“We’re passing into the unmapped portion of the warren,” TJ announced a short time later.

I glanced at my HUD. We had indeed reached the great unexplored unknown. Ahead of our position, the map was a mass of pure black; a new tunnel slowly filled out as our two Centurion scouts advanced. The combat robots were equipped with the Phant-mimicking EM emitters, like us.

I trudged onward, and though I tried to keep my mind clear, my thoughts drifted to my last conversation with Rade. I’d owned up to almost cheating on Tepin. I felt so ashamed. I shouldn’t have told him, though, I had to admit, getting it off my chest did make me feel better. Better him than the crackpot shrink assigned to our unit.

I was a married man, a *father*, in the military. I never realized what a guilt-trip that could be sometimes. It was a funny thing, watching your kids grow up from afar. Via pictures. Vids. Sound bites.

“Say hello to your daddy, sweetie,” Tepin had said in the last message I’d received.

“Hello daddy.” My daughter Aniidastehdo waved at the camera.

Aniidastehdo. Her name meant “fresh start.” It was supposed to symbolize the chance our family had to start over in a new country. I remember the day she was born like yesterday: I’d just completed Fourth Phase of my training and was well on my way to becoming a MOTH. I was sending monthly deposits home to the wife. My CO at the time, Chief Adams, was in the process of arranging a residency for her and my daughter. We’d finally escaped the poverty and were about to embark on a new phase of life.

Before any of my kids were born, I used to want to be a father more than anything. And I swore I wouldn't repeat the same mistakes my own father had made. The long absences. The gambling. The drinking.

And yet here I was. At least I didn't have the latter two vices. But the absence part, well, that was something out of my control.

It felt wrong to be enjoying this work so much, and to be putting myself in the line of fire as often as I did. I risked having my children grow up without a father—there was no greater absence than death.

I hadn't yet told my wife I'd been shot. I wasn't sure what I'd say when she saw the scars. Tepin knew I had to make sacrifices so that the kids could grow up in the UC. But seeing those bullet and shrapnel scars would terrify her.

Maybe I'd make an appointment with a good plastic surgeon or rejuvenist in Gliese 581 before I got back. Sometimes small deceits were necessary in a marriage, if not for your own sanity, then for the sanity of your partner.

"Switch to Bicentennial Man's POV," TJ announced over the squad-level comm, bringing me out of my head. His voice was a mix of trepidation and excitement. "You're not going to believe what the robos are seeing."

Bicentennial Man was the nickname of one of the Centurion scouts. The other's monicker was Lead Foot.

I switched to Bicentennial Man's perspective.

The light from the Centurion illuminated a vast cavern with a floor cloaked in a dense mist. Black columns with flaring tops and bottoms erupted from the mist. Long blankets of translucent silk draped the space between the columns like spider webs.

Small slugs, looking like mech-sized larva, were scattered throughout the cavern and clung to the silk and columns in random locations. Those hanging from the pillars seemed to be devouring the rock, while those on the silk appeared to be creating the diaphanous substance, issuing white strands from their mandibles.

So far, none of the slugs paid any attention to the Centurions. Apparently the embedded EM emitters were working. Then again, maybe they would have ignored the robots either way.

"What the bloody hell are those things?" Facehopper sent.

TJ answered. "Remote scans are inconclusive, but they seem to be miniature slugs, minus any attached crabs. As for the silk, it appears to be

organic, but nothing like spider or worm silk. The substance is actually emitting an EM field of some kind. If I had to guess, I'd say the structure was some kind of communications relay. Sort of like one of our own InterPlaNet nodes. Used by the Queen, or whatever else leads these things, to maintain contact with her troops. Bear in mind, this is a highly uneducated guess"

"Maybe we should burn it," Bomb sent, sounding eager.

"No," Facehopper returned. "I don't want to risk alerting the enemy to our presence this early in the game. TJ, have the Centurions hold their positions until we arrive."

We reached the chamber and proceeded forward in single file, keeping close to Bicentennial Man and Lead Foot. The dense mist blanketed the feet of our mechs to the ankles while swallowing the smaller Centurions to the waists.

The silk slugs didn't pause or make any movements to indicate they were aware of our passage. Either the EM emitters we harbored convinced the enemy we were on their side, or the things were blind and deaf. Anyway, the true test of the emitters would come when we encountered actual Phants.

Our Centurions did their best to choose a silk-free path through the columns. At one point, however, the wispy substance unavoidably blocked the way forward. The silk there was devoid of any slugs, so Facehopper authorized Bomb to clear it.

Bomb flicked his ATLAS arms through the barrier and the silk fell apart immediately. Other nearby slugs didn't seem to care, and we crossed the rest of the area without issue, leaving the dense mist and mysterious slugs behind as the cavern became a tunnel once more.

In the next cavern, we encountered another class of alien entity, again by proxy at first.

We all switched to the perspective of either Lead Foot or Bicentennial Man the instant the map indicated a change in the tunnel scale. I used Bicentennial Man's POV.

The cavern the Centurion stood in reminded me of a sepulcher because I spotted several metallic, coffin-like boxes on the ground, positioned in apparently random locations. Around these boxes resided hundreds of strange entities. The best description I could think of was a man-of-war, adapted for land. They were these bladder-like forms with long tentacles running out of their bodies on all sides. Those tentacles enwrapped the metal boxes and intertwined with the appendages of neighboring entities; bolts of electricity

visibly pulsed along the skin, passing to and from each creature. As I watched, some of the creatures shifted subtly, moving a pace to the left or the right, resettling.

"The Observer Mind?" Facehopper sent. "Looks like a big neural network."

"No," TJ returned. "According to the EM signal source, we have *much* deeper to go before we even get close to the Observer Mind. Though it's possible this is some sort of related mind ganglion. I'm reading several micro-Slipstream positions throughout the room, one for each metallic box."

"It's not a brain," I said on a hunch. "It's a power generating station."

I switched back to my own POV in time to catch Facehopper's ATLAS 5 turning toward me.

"Generating power for what, exactly, mate?" he sent. "We haven't witnessed any evidence that the crabs and slugs need power. They don't use lights. They don't use vehicles. Granted, captured human tech might need power, but how would the aliens actually transfer energy to the machines? You can't just walk a robot up to these creatures and plug in a charging cable."

"I think it's a reserve power source for the Skull Ship," I sent. "Humanity has developed wireless power transmitters, after all. The transmission range of our tech is limited, true, but it's possible these aliens have achieved wireless power transmission on a more massive scale. We've speculated that they employ quantum-sized Slipstreams to send information across vast distances in space, after all. It's not a huge leap of faith to imagine those same micro-Slipstreams used in power transmission."

"I disagree," Mauler sent. "Bogey 1 is self-contained. It doesn't make sense to build extra power plants beneath the surface of some moon. What would be the purpose?"

"If it's self-contained," I responded, "then why are we down here hunting Bogey 1's Observer Mind? And as for the purpose, who knows? Maybe the Skull Ship is using the extra power for terraforming."

"Whatever it does, I say we fry it." Bomb swiveled incendiary throwers into both arms.

"Same rules apply as before, Bomb," Facehopper said over the comm. "We're not going to do anything that might tip off the enemy."

"Maybe we should turn back, boss?" Fret sent, sounding hopeful. "Try another route?"

Facehopper deliberated a moment. “If we backtrack, it’ll be hours before we reach the next unexplored region of the map. The first diversionary attack by the Marines is probably wrapping up by now and the alien horde will be flooding back into the warrens. We can’t risk it. We have to move forward.” Facehopper pivoted his mech to gaze down the tunnel, where the cavern and its alien entities awaited up ahead.

“Not liking it, not liking it at all,” Fret sent.

“Me neither,” Facehopper returned. “But I don’t see that we have a choice. TJ, plot a crossing using data from the Centurions. Make sure to give the new alien entities a wide berth—I don’t want our ATLAS 5s coming anywhere near them.”

The Centurions waited until our point man Bomb arrived, then the robots proceeded forward on the course TJ had plotted. The rest of us entered the cavern one by one, moving forward in single file.

I followed the three-dimensional wireframe representing the course, which my aReal overlaid onto my view. Sometimes the path brought Wolfhound alarmingly close to one of those tentacles or metallic boxes, but always my mech passed by unharmed.

“TJ!” Bomb transmitted during one particularly tight section, where the electrified tentacles literally offered only half a pace of breathing room on either flank. “You sure this was the best course?”

“The best and only course, man,” TJ returned.

As I mentioned before, the tentacles and boxes seemed haphazardly scattered throughout the cavern, so that soon we moved from an area of high alien concentration to one where hardly any of the entities were present at all. We all breathed easier as the path proved clear for thirty meters.

It was my turn to carry one of the nuclear payloads. I hugged it to my chest with both arms. Ghost carried the other payload just behind me. We were positioned near the center of the squad, which was supposed to be the safest place for the payloads, at least in the tunnels. It didn’t feel all that safe in this wide cavern though, not with our flanks exposed on either side like that.

I was the first to notice something was wrong. I glanced to the left, at the nearest man-of-war, and saw that its tentacles were twitching wildly, almost like it was seizuring. Running my gaze across the other nearby entities, I realized they were *all* convulsing.

And then, as one, the entities began to advance, abandoning their

metallic boxes. They were still twitching. I observed the motion of a subset of the aliens for a few moments, enough time for my aReal to gather the data necessary to calculate their trajectory. I overlaid the data onto my HUD map:

All of the entities were converging on Ghost and me.

Or rather, the nuclear payloads we held.

And we were only halfway across the cavern.

"Uh, Facehopper . . ." I transmitted.

"I see them," Facehopper sent. "Hurry up, mates!"

We quickened our pace.

It soon became obvious we weren't going to make it. Ahead was another tight section, and already the tentacled entities were moving to seal off the path.

Mauler swiveled Gatlings into each arm. "Permission to fire, Facehopper?"

"Negative. Don't stir up the hornet's nest. Go faster! We can make it."

And so we went faster still, careening forward as the noose of tentacles slowly tightened around us.

Ahead, the Centurions had halted. I momentarily switched to Bicentennial Man's viewpoint to learn why: the tentacled creatures completely blocked off our path.

"Mates," Facehopper transmitted, "when you reach Waypoint Gamma"—a flashing waypoint appeared on my HUD, corresponding to the current position of the Centurions—"I want you to jet over the blockage."

I switched my perspective back to Wolfhound's in time to see the Centurions activate their jumpjets and clear the impasse.

One by one the three mechs ahead of me reached the given waypoint and leaped forward, firing their jets.

The men-of-war ignored them, intent as they were on Ghost and me.

I had to initiate the jump a little before the waypoint, because the entities had further tightened the noose, choking off the path.

As I jetted up and forward, those gyrating tentacles reached toward Wolfhound. They missed. I applied more vertical thrust just to be safe, because everywhere ahead of me sparking appendages were flinging upward.

"Watch those tentacles, Ghost," I sent.

"I see 'em," Ghost returned.

On my HUD map, I saw his green dot jetting across the cavern not far behind me.

I kept an eye on my jet fuel levels. My fuel burn was roughly three times that of the others because of the added weight of the nuclear payload. But I had way more than enough to make the jump.

Clearing the outer fringe of the man-of-war entities, I landed on the far side of the cavern and dashed forward, proceeding into the next tunnel after Facehopper's mech. I was glad to get the hell out of there. My HUD told me Ghost and the rest of the squad were close behind. Their vitals seemed fine.

As we jogged forward, leaving behind that forsaken place, Facehopper had everyone give a quick sitrep—situation report. Everyone was good. No one had fired at the enemy. No one had taken any damage. Trace, our current drag man, reported no sign of pursuit.

We'd survived our first trial unscathed.

Even so, we didn't stop running.

After about twenty minutes into the new tunnel, Facehopper called a halt, ordering a change of porters.

Ghost and I set down our respective payloads, glad for the rest. Mauler and Facehopper assumed portage duties and we proceeded forward at a more moderate pace. The threat seemed gone, but even so Facehopper had one of the Centurions, Lead Foot, take up the drag position. Privately I thought we should have placed a Centurion in the back from the start, but who was I to question our leading petty officer's squad arrangements? My relationship with him was rocky enough as it was.

We continued onward.

The tunnel sloped ever downward. The darkness seemed oppressive, eating up the light from our headlamps, drowning us, choking our morale.

Spirits, protect us from—

I cursed myself for a fool. There were no spirits. Praying to nonexistent beings was pointless. Physics didn't allow spirits . . . even the Phants, the closest thing to spirits I'd ever encountered, were not actually ghosts. They might seem supernatural. They might seem magical. But in the end, they could be explained away by the laws of physics. True, this would involve laws humanity did not know yet, but I had no doubt physics would prevail in the end.

Although if I did believe in spirits, the nearest match to a Phant in my culture would be a Chindi. According to Navajo beliefs, a Chindi was the ghost left behind after a person died, and it contained everything bad or inharmonious about that person. Touching a Chindi led to death.

Yes, a prayer couldn’t hurt. Just a small one.

Spirits, protect us from evil. Help us get through this. Help humanity win the day.

We reached a fork and dispatched Bicentennial Man down the rightmost path. Before the Centurion moved out of signal range, TJ determined the fork led away from the Observer Mind. Facehopper had TJ recall Bicentennial Man, directing him to send it down the opposite fork instead. We followed.

“Switch to Bicentennial Man’s POV,” TJ sent urgently a few minutes later.

I tuned to the robot scout’s perspective.

Ahead, the tunnel had opened into a wider chamber. The black walls ceded in areas to striking crystalline structures of green and yellow. From the floor, translucent hexagons jutted upward at different heights, glittering with light reflected from Bicentennial Man’s headlamp. It was beautiful.

Or at least it would have been, if not for the puddles of glowing, blue liquid scattered about the area.

“*Phants*,” Ghost sent.

CHAPTER THREE

Rade

I floated in orbit above the moon Tau Ceti II-b. The white-blue clouds of the gas giant Tau Ceti II roofed the heavens. Ahead, the black cranial shape of the Skull Ship, Bogey 2, blotted out the stars.

Glancing down, I saw the distant plains of the moon between my boots. Where the Skull Ship touched the surface, black veins emanated outward in a circular pattern, overtaking those green fields, poisoning them for hundreds of klicks around.

Three hours earlier I had performed a jumpsuit drop from the delivery shuttle on the far side of the moon. It had taken all that time for my orbital speed to bring me and the rest of the squad around the moon and into range.

We were in plain view of the Skull Ship. Our thermal signatures would be obvious at that range, as would, hopefully, our Phant-mimicking signatures. I could feel the EM emitter digging into my back at that very moment. The haphazardly installed metal beam felt extremely uncomfortable, but if it tricked the Phants and other aliens into believing we were one of them, I'd endure it. I had coped with far worse, after all.

I had one gloved hand wrapped around the handhold of the nuclear payload beside me. The warhead was currently inactive, and equipped with an EM emitter similar to the one I wore. It was also furnished with wave-canceling tech that would in theory mask the nuclear signature. On the opposite side floated Hijak, who helped me guide it toward our target. Like the device, his jumpsuit was colored black, matching the space background.

The remaining members of Outrigger Squad were dispersed around us within the confines of an imaginary sphere a hundred meters in diameter. Chief Bourbonjack, Bender, Skullcracker, Lui, Manic, Snakeoil. Our aReals functioned as network repeaters, boosting the range of our individual comm units to compensate for the interference produced by the Skull Ship.

As our orbit brought us nearer the target vessel, I couldn't shake a glaring sense of insignificance. What the hell were we thinking by doing this? We were like eight mice trying to invade a skyscraper to plant a microexplosive. We might cause some damage, break some windows, but in the end the skyscraper would remain standing.

No, I reminded myself. *You set that microexplosive in the right spot, you bring the whole building toppling down.*

We could do this. We had to try, at least, because the alternative—sitting back and waiting for the enemy to destroy humanity's colony worlds one by one—wasn't going to cut it.

"Approaching Event Horizon," Snakeoil sent.

The Event Horizon had nothing to do with black holes. Metaphorically, it was the point of no return, roughly seventy-four klicks from Bogey 2 at this vector. The maximum extent of the bogey's coronal weapon, known as the Terminal Range, was farther away than that, and varied based on the approach, though in theory we could turn back and escape even while within that range, if we had enough warning. But after we reached the seventy-four-klick mark, we were committed and there was no going back.

We'd find out soon enough if these EM emitters actually worked. I remembered asking the Chief why the Brass didn't launch a few empty jumpsuits equipped with the emitters to gauge the enemy response.

"No point forewarning them," the Chief had told me. "Since actual human beings in jumpsuits are going to be performing the mission, those same jumpsuit-wearing men get to be the guinea pigs."

The first of us, Skullcracker, drifted past the seventy-four-klick delimiter of the Event Horizon.

The enemy did not fire.

That didn't necessarily mean a thing. Perhaps Bogey 2 was simply waiting until all of us were within range before activating its coronal weapon.

More of the squad passed the Event Horizon.

Still the enemy didn't fire.

Our turn came and Hijak and I crossed without incident.

The seconds ticked by. Behind me, the last of us traversed the marker.

Tense moments passed. I felt completely exposed, knowing that all it would take was a single eruption from the alien ship and none of us would escape incineration.

But the coronal weapon remained inactive.

Apparently the EM emitters were working.

“All clear,” Chief Bourbonjack transmitted. “Keep radio chatter to a minimum. Remember, we’re just possessed human hosts going home.”

We continued floating forward.

Though the internal environment of my suit was temperature controlled, beads of sweat broke out on my forehead. My breathing sounded loud in my helmet. I concentrated on that breathing and on the present moment, as I had been taught in training. In and out. In. Out. I wouldn’t allow myself to look too far into the future because if I did that, I knew I’d see only hopelessness.

The black shape of the Skull Ship consumed everything by then. When I looked up, I couldn’t see the gas giant because we were under the far-reaching eaves of the cranial vessel. Only when I gazed straight down did I see something other than Bogey 2, though what I saw was no less unsettling: the surface of the moon was entirely tainted black in this region.

If the Skull Ship decided to fire its coronal weapon at this close range we probably wouldn’t even know it. One moment we’d be floating through space, eight living and breathing human beings, and the next our carbonized molecules would be dispersed upon the interstellar wind.

“Initiate deorbital pre-burn and landing sequence,” the Chief sent, using fancy terms usually reserved for starship maneuvers. He used them because we all carried an extra set of small booster rockets strapped to our jetpacks.

I activated those boosters.

The process was automated, courtesy of the navigational AIs built into the devices, and as the rockets fired, my trajectory immediately shifted upward. When I reached escape velocity, the thrust reversed and I began to slow.

Nearing the hull of the Skull Ship, I glanced at the gravity indicator on my aReal: 0.15 G. The thing was so huge it gave off the gravity field of Earth’s moon. I wondered how it influenced the orbit of Tau Ceti II-b around the gas giant.

Roughly fifty meters away from Bogey 2’s surface, the booster rockets fired a final lateral burst at just the right angle and velocity to set me skimming along the hull. Basically I was in orbit around the Skull Ship.

The rockets disengaged and jettisoned from my jetpack.

I used my remaining jumpjets to fine-tune my flight path. I was so close that I could see the dense latticework of black pipes laid one atop the other, ten thousand layers deep, which gave the illusion of a solid hull when viewed

from afar. Those pipes were slowly moving, I thought, but it was hard to tell because of the blur my motion induced.

The surface fell away beneath me as I reached the expansive crater that was our insert site. It was so vast I couldn't discern the far side from here, but looking down I noticed that the walls tapered, forming a spiraling cone of sorts. It was difficult to make out the bottom of that cone in the ambient light because of the dark coloration of the metal, but I estimated it at eighty to a hundred klicks down.

The fleet's telescopic surveillance indicated that this region possessed the thinnest portion of hull, with the bottom of the cone having an estimated thickness of about half a meter to two meters. It was the best place for us to cut our way inside. The next thinnest area was the "eye" region of the cranial-shaped vessel, but since a considerable number of blue and purple Phants were detected beyond that location, it wasn't considered the best place to insert.

Chief Bourbonjack and Snakeoil swiveled around while letting momentum carry them forward and flashed their headlamps three times in unison, which was the agreed-upon arrival code. Golden Chariot, the delivery shuttle that was perched unseen in geostationary orbit above the north pole of the moon behind us, would intercept that signal and relay news of our arrival to the fleet, setting in motion the diversionary attack. We had roughly twenty Stanminutes until the fleet began its assault against Bogey 2.

Twenty minutes. It wasn't all that much time. By initiating a diversionary attack so soon, the fleet would more than likely induce the bogey into firing its coronal point defense. This weapon was sourced from the hull and erupted from almost every available surface. The crater cone below me served a special purpose during the activation of said weapon, as it appeared to be some kind of excess plasma vent, meaning that when Bogey 2 unleashed its corona, leftover superheated gases would eject there. Kind of like the kickback from a ten gauge but on a more massive scale.

Basically we were flying into the heart of a huge blast furnace, which just so happened to be turned off right now. Though in twenty minutes, thanks to the fleet, that furnace would probably switch on at full intensity.

I know that more than a few of us questioned the wisdom of launching a diversion against the ship in the first place, given the dangers to our squad, but Brass felt a distraction was needed in order to ensure we encountered the least resistance possible aboard. Apparently the idea was to pretend that we

had stolen something of value from the fleet: the nuclear warhead, or rather, classified tech. The fleet would send out comm chatter to that effect, knowing that the enemy would intercept it, implying that eight alien hosts had gotten away with the tech. The chatter would further imply that the human fleet wanted to prevent it from falling into enemy hands. By attacking so soon, the fleet lent credence to that story, bolstering the impression that we were alien hosts.

Still, it seemed like an unnecessary risk to me. Leave it to the trigger-happy commanders back in Brass to come up with a strategy like that. They wanted to be a part of Operation Potentate, the campaign that took down the enemy, at all costs, and therefore looked for any excuse to engage. But what if by doing so they put half of their key spec-ops soldiers in grave danger?

In the simulations, we'd always made it down the vent and aboard the ship in just under ten minutes. But simulations weren't reality, unfortunately.

Well, I was just a grunt and I didn't have any say in the matter. I'd do my job the best I could and just hope the Brass didn't royally screw us.

The squad members began diving. Hijak and I let our autopilots adjust our trajectories, slowing us down and steering us into the downward spiral necessary to traverse the crater cone. Around me, the black walls slowly tightened, digging into the core of the ship like a bore created by some giant drill. The pipes composing the hull still seemed to be moving, but I wasn't entirely sure because of my own motion.

Tall, pointed spikes of metal jutted perpendicularly from the ever-tightening walls, cutting across our path at angles. I was reminded of giant thorns. The spikes became denser the farther down we traveled, forcing our autopilots to continuously update the flight path, weaving us to and fro as the overall walls tightened. I felt the subtle G forces constantly and my grip on the payload was tested more than once. As were my nerves. Sometimes the autopilot seemed like it was about to steer us headfirst into one of those thick metal spikes.

We abruptly broke free of the thorny layer. The hull waited unmarred below, devoid of the metallic barbs. I felt like a man emerging from a briar patch.

I checked the time since we signaled Golden Chariot: ten minutes. Already we had surpassed our simulated boarding time.

Hijak and I touched down not far from the rest of the squad, landing roughly in the center of the fifteen-hundred-meter-diameter region that

marked the bottom of the crater cone. The nuclear payload we gripped felt moderately heavy in the gravity. Conversely, I hardly felt the hefty medbag I had strapped on above my jetpack.

Below, the hull was indeed moving. The many pipes forming the surface slowly swayed and undulated, as if alive. I had to shift my stance from time to time to avoid getting my feet pinched between two pipes. It felt like I stood at the junction between two rail routes, with the switch constantly activating to move the rails back and forth. Because of this, Hijak and I didn't dare lower the payload.

I glanced at him. Like me, he occasionally shifted his position to avoid trapping a boot between the pipes. The digital coloration of his jumpsuit had already changed to match the lighter black of the hull, replete with crisscrossing lines to represent the pipes.

We carefully picked our way toward the others, traveling across the shifting surface with the payload. It felt similar to moonwalk portage, except over terrain that changed with every step.

"This wasn't in the simulations," Bender sent. "Any explanation why the damn hull is moving?"

Snakeoil shook his head inside his helmet. "No."

"Maybe it's alive?" Lui transmitted.

"I don't care either way," the Chief sent. "Snakeoil, can we breach this, or do we have to signal the abort?"

Snakeoil extended a gloved hand and moved it from side to side. "I'm reading allotropic forms of carbon, iron, and magnesium, with traces of geronium-275 and other elements mixed in. I don't think it's alive, but we *can* breach it. Just not here."

"What do you mean?" Chief Bourbonjack sent.

"Fleet got the landing site wrong," Snakeoil answered. "Hull's too thick here. It would take me forty minutes to cut through. But according to my readings, the hull is much thinner up ahead."

"How far?" the Chief sent.

"About ten or eleven minutes away."

"We have only nine minutes until Fleet begins its diversionary attack," the Chief transmitted.

"Then we'll get there in five!" Snakeoil said over the comm, taking off at a running hop.

"Damn it," the Chief sent. "Everyone, after Snakeoil!"

The others were able to hop forward in much the same manner as on Earth's moon, using their jetpacks to further increase their speed. But because of the payload, Hijak and I advanced far slower, using more jetpack fuel to cover less distance with each hop.

The lattice of pipes that composed the metal surface below continued to undulate as we advanced. Once, between hops, my boot got wedged between two pipes as I landed and I tripped. I recovered, pulling the payload back up while Hijak waited patiently beside me. Ahead, other squad members stumbled occasionally as well, which made me feel a little better.

No enemies showed up to repel our advance. That was good, because it told me that the fleet chatter had worked, and the EM emitters in our jumpsuits were doing their jobs. Still, I couldn't get rid of the feeling that we were walking into some trap.

"This is taking too long, Snakeoil," the Chief transmitted. "We just passed the twenty minute mark. Fleet is going to begin the diversionary attack any time now. We need to start making the hole *now*."

"Still too thick here," Snakeoil returned. "Just a little farther, Chief."

"How *long*?" the Chief sent.

"Maybe another three minutes."

"Well move then!" Chief Bourbonjack barked. "Double time!"

It was too late to jet back up and send the abort. I knew that, as did everyone else, I'm sure. All we could do was move forward and hope we found a spot where we could cut inside, and fast.

The rest of the squad started to use more jet fuel between hops, increasing the distance covered with each leap. Hijak and I did likewise, draining our precious fuel at an alarming rate. It felt like we were going to be incinerated by superheated plasma at any second.

Finally Snakeoil came to a halt.

"Here," he announced. "The hull is half a meter thick. It's perfect."

"Then open up a hole damn it!" The Chief glanced nervously at the stars above, as if expecting some visual sign regarding our impending vaporization.

Hijak and I completed our final hop, joining the others. Though our arms were fairly exhausted despite the strength-enhancement provided by our suits, we didn't dare lower the payload, not with those undulating pipes below us. It wouldn't do to make it this far only to have the payload snagged by the hull.

Snakeoil handed Lui his heavy gun and then hastily slid the rucksack from his shoulders. He paused, shooting the Chief an alarmed glance. “I’m reading a spike in Observer Mind activity.”

The Chief nodded behind his faceplate. “So Fleet has finally begun its diversionary attack. We don’t have much time. Hurry up please, Snakeoil.” I could tell he was expending a lot of effort to keep his voice calm.

Snakeoil hastily retrieved the plasma cutter from his rucksack.

The shifting pipes around us started to glow red slightly, reminding me of blood. No matter where I looked, from directly below me to the topmost edges of the cone, all I saw was the ominous crimson glow.

“Chief!” Hijak sent, obviously referring to the hull.

“Snakeoil,” the Chief returned. “Get us that hole.”

And then Skullcracker screamed.

The shrill, ear-splitting yell over the comm was unrecognizable, but I knew it belonged to Skullcracker because of the speaker icon flashing next to his name on my HUD.

Skullcracker was not the kind of man you’d ever expect to scream, which made his howling all the more disturbing. His vitals were green, meaning his suit was still pressurized, but his heart rate had spiked.

Because of the way our helmets limited the periphery of our vision, Hijak and I had to turn the payload in order to see him.

The hull had swallowed Skullcracker’s left leg assembly up to the top of his boot. Three glowing metal pipes were coiled below his knee, squeezing, trying to yank him under. He had lodged his other boot against the surface and laid right back, pressing his gloves down against the surrounding pipes in an attempt to counter the pull.

Chief Bourbonjack was already rushing to his side.

“The hull . . .” Skullcracker sent over the comm. He was panting loudly, obviously from the pain, and the effort of resisting those pipes. “It just snatched me . . .”

The Chief grabbed him by one shoulder, while Manic and Bender clasped him on the other side. They heaved but Skullcracker didn’t budge. The pipes held him fast.

Around us, the surface continued to increase in luminosity. Each and every pipe was a bright, blood red, the same color as bare fingers held over a flashlight. I could feel the heat rising in my jumpsuit.

The coronal weapon was about to fire.

CHAPTER FOUR

Tahoe

Still employing the viewpoint of the scout, Bicentennial Man, I stared at the glowing puddles that lurked beneath the crystalline structures of the cavern ahead.

The liquid entities were blue.

Slower Phants.

And so far the aliens had made no attempt to approach Bicentennial Man, nor initiated any movements at all for that matter. It was almost like they were at rest, or hibernating.

There were empty spaces between those scattered puddles. It would be a tight fit, but our ATLAS 5s could cross, if need be.

Assuming the Phants didn't move.

"Should we turn back, try the other fork?" Fret said over the comm.

Facehopper hesitated. Probably calculating the distance to the previous fork. Finally he made up his mind. "The other branch leads away from the Observer Mind, so I can't justify going back. Besides, if we took that path, who's to say we wouldn't find ourselves in a tunnel filled with even more Phants? Eventually we'll have to bite the bullet and trust the EM emitters installed in our jumpsuits. Now is as good a time as any."

"So we're going forward?" Fret transmitted. I could hear the apprehension in his voice.

"We're going forward."

As usual, TJ plotted the course.

First we let the Centurion, Bicentennial Man, proceed alone toward the center of the cavern; when none of the Phants moved, we decided the EM emitter installed in the robot did what it was supposed to. Still, a part of me wondered if this was some ruse to get us all inside before the enemy attacked.

Bomb moved his ATLAS 5 into the cavern next, followed by Trace,

then Mauler.

My turn came. Staying three meters behind Mauler, I marched my mech, Wolfhound, forward. I constantly glanced to the left and right, watching for reactions from the Phants, but the things remained inert.

And so we walked into that nest of Phants, one by one. We moved forward slowly, carefully, sticking to the path overlaid onto our HUDs by TJ.

"Bros!" Bomb sent from up ahead. "Did you see that?"

"What?" Facehopper returned.

"I accidentally stepped near a Phant, and it actually moved *away* from me!"

As if to demonstrate, Bomb purposely led his ATLAS 5 from the path up ahead and sure enough one of the Phants, which happened to be within a pace of his mech, flowed aside.

Curious, I, too, deviated from the pre-plotted course, taking a hesitant step toward the glowing puddle beside me. The blue Phant trickled away, sliding over to the crystalline wall.

The EM emitters were working after all, though I don't think any of us were expecting the devices to *repel* the entities.

"Confirmed," I sent. "The Phants are definitely avoiding us."

"I can confirm it, too," Ghost transmitted.

"Roger that," Facehopper transmitted. "No more testing, please. Everyone stick to the path."

And so we continued forward, staying on the course TJ had provided. Personally, I wasn't all that eager to test out my EM emitter again anyway.

And then it was done. One moment we were surrounded by glowing blue Phants, and the next we were back in the familiar tunnel ecosystem. The alien entities remained behind. And so far there was no sign of the main horde.

We continued onward for some time. I could almost feel the weight of the countless strata of rock above me.

The tunnel sloped downward continually, remaining straight, and branching neither left nor right. If we came back this way, the climb would prove a bit of a strain on the ATLAS 5 servomotors, a stress that would be translated to our own bodies. I wasn't looking forward to it, especially considering that we'd probably be fighting the horde for every square meter by that point. Sure, the Marines were supposed to provide a diversion every six hours or so, but who could say whether successive diversions would be as

effective at drawing out the enemy? I wasn't going to delude myself into thinking our flight would be easy.

"Cyclone," Ghost sent directly to me. "Did I ever tell you I'm a father, like you?"

"Ghost, I'm not in the mood for small talk," I replied. "We need to stay alert."

The albino remained silent only a few seconds before continuing. "Got my girlfriend pregnant during training," Ghost said. I let him talk. If it relaxed his nerves then who was I to shut him up? I could always turn the volume associated with his feed way down if I really wanted to tune him out. "She was a civvie, of course. I'm not one to mess with Navy girls, not like some mutual associates of ours who will remain unnamed. After I found out about the pregnancy, I brought my girl up to Vegas and we got married, shotgun style.

"I thought we had things all worked out. She knew all about the deployments, so I figured she could handle the time apart, understand the commitment, you know? I vid called almost every day, at least while I was Earthside. And during space deployments I sent her messages four times a week." He paused. "But it didn't work out between us. I don't know why. We just couldn't . . . mesh. The Teams changed me, *consumed* me, I guess. She could tell I was growing distant.

"She gave me an ultimatum one day when it was time to renew my contract. She told me I had to pick between the Teams or her and my son. I chose the Teams. My brothers. And so here I am."

That struck me as odd because if my wife ever gave me an ultimatum, I would have chosen my family without hesitation, even if it meant deportation.

I didn't really want to encourage Ghost to keep talking, but he had me curious so I said, "What happened to the kid?"

"He's with his mom. I'm still married, so my family gets all the benefits of my military status, but the wife and I are unofficially separated. I try to visit the boy as much as I can. Haven't seem him in ten months, though. He'd be four years old now."

TJ interrupted our private conversation.

"Something odd up ahead," he said over the squad-level comm.

Instinctively I switched to Bicentennial Man's perspective. At first all I perceived was darkness. But as the Centurion swiveled its vision sensors

from place to place, I realized Bicentennial Man stood at the edge of a wide abyss whose distant walls, floor, and ceiling were lost to the murk. Only the cave floor just below the combat robot was visible, that and the walls immediately bordering the pit.

Soon the rest of us reached the gaping hole. Only two of our ATLAS 5s could fit the limited space of the tunnel opening at once, in this case the mechs of Facehopper and Bomb. The rest of us waited in pairs behind them; it was easy enough to switch to the perspective of the forefront pilots, though the view was much the same as that of the Centurion at their feet.

“Dispatch an ASS?” Trace transmitted. “And gauge the depth?”

ASS stood for ATLAS Support System drone. Each ATLAS unit had one—they were the equivalent of HS3 scouts.

“I got this,” Facehopper sent. The shoulder of his mech opened up and an ATLAS Support System drone launched. Switching to its perspective, I watched the basketball-shaped robot plunge into the abyss. It revolved during the descent, its light cone illuminating the nearest wall with each revolution so that all I saw on the vid feed was a darkness periodically interrupted by gray.

The ASS wouldn’t need to expend much fuel to return, as the spherical drone relied upon an inverse magnetic field to counter the forces of gravity. The inverse field effect was limited to objects of precisely the drone’s size, however, and our scientists hadn’t yet figured out how to adapt the tech to larger objects such as Centurions and ATLAS mechs; jetpacks and other propulsion systems would be around for quite a few years to come.

“I’m losing the signal,” Facehopper said over the comm. “Switching to autopilot and instructing the drone to return when it reaches the bottom.”

The vid feed from the drone winked out as it drifted out of range, and the dot on my HUD map representing the object froze.

The moments ticked past.

“Wonder how deep the damn pit is?” Ghost sent.

“Already too deep,” Snakeoil returned. “If the drone had returned by now, we could probably make it. But as it stands, we go down that hole, we’re not jetting back out.”

Bomb’s mech shifted in place. “See that ledge, boss?”

I switched to Bomb’s point of view at the forefront and picked out a small ledge running along the wall that bordered the abyss. The Centurions would fit readily enough, but I wasn’t so sure about our ATLAS mechs.

“TJ,” Facehopper said over the comm. “Send Bicentennial Man forward. I want that ledge mapped.”

From Bomb’s perspective I watched the Centurion step onto the shelf bordering the pit. The robot advanced at a march; it had no problem traversing the ledge, which proved a little bit wider than human hip width.

The robot passed from signal range and returned five minutes later.

“So what do we have, TJ?” Facehopper said into the comm.

“The ledge leads to another tunnel bordering the abyss, about half a klick away,” TJ sent. “It’s massive. Probably carved by one of those super slugs.”

“Okay,” Facehopper transmitted. “Does the ledge continue past the tunnel at all?”

“No,” TJ responded. “It ends right in front. Spills into the abyss.”

“All right. That tells me everything I need to know.” His ATLAS glanced down into the pit. “Now where the bloody hell is my ASS?”

“Why, boss, need to wipe?” Bomb sent.

“Funny.”

We waited a while longer, but the drone still didn’t return.

“Guess that means we’re taking the ledge,” Ghost said over the comm.

“We’re taking the ledge,” Facehopper agreed. “TJ, have Bicentennial Man lead the way.”

Bicentennial Man advanced once more onto the rocky shelf.

“What do you think happened to the drone?” Fret said.

“Probably best not to speculate,” Facehopper transmitted. “Bomb? After you.”

Bomb approached the ledge. The mech mirrored his body language, so I could tell he was apprehensive.

The spirits keep you safe . . .

“Are you sure our mechs will fit?” Trace sent.

“No problem.” Bomb stepped onto the ledge and flattened his ATLAS 5 against the wall. He pointed his feet sideways—they barely fit the shelf. Extending his arms for balance he began to sidestep. “See?”

“Feel sorry for the poor bastards who have to port the nuclear payloads across that,” I transmitted, regretting the words the instant I spoke them.

“Cyclone, Mauler, port the payloads,” Facehopper sent.

The choice of Mauler was expected since he was the newest member of the team and so of course would be given the crap jobs. And if I hadn’t

opened my mouth, there was a chance Facehopper would have picked someone else. Then again he might have been planning to choose me anyway —all I can say is: it never paid to be on the bad side of your LPO.

"Thank you, Facehopper," I sent, the sarcasm obvious in my voice.

"Myself and Ghost will go next," Facehopper transmitted, ignoring my comment. "Then Cyclone. Fret, Trace, you come after, followed by Mauler, with TJ and Lead Foot bringing up the rear. Those of you next to the porters, watch them. Take care of them."

I waited for the mechs of Facehopper and Ghost to step onto the ledge after Bomb, and then I scooped up one of the payloads and walked toward the abyss. I did my best not to stare overlong into the darkness below.

As a child, at night I had often explored the narrow, off-limit paths that wound through the sacred Hoodoos on my reservation. I had to carry my backpack over my head during the tighter clefts in the sandstone.

I told myself that this trial would be just like that. Except of course I now piloted a three-tonne war machine, and a nuclear warhead replaced the backpack.

I hoisted the payload above my head, flattened Wolfhound's steel body against the wall, and walked crabwise. My sideways-pointing feet barely squeezed onto the ledge. The upper segment of the warhead scraped the rock above me as I advanced. Carrying it like that threw off my balance slightly, but I compensated. Still, it wasn't a walk for the weak of heart, not with that gaping black hole lurking just behind.

Ghost was in front, to my left, on the ledge, while Fret was on my right. I knew that both of them were ready to act if anything should happen to the payload or me. Just as Trace and TJ would take care of Mauler.

"Great shoulder workout, huh Cyclone?" Mauler sent me.

"Yeah," I said between gritted teeth. Due to the load-mirroring effect induced by the actuators, it felt like I was holding up a sixty-pound rucksack. Lightweight, at least at first. But it got very heavy, very quickly.

Ahead of me, Ghost abruptly plunged from view as the rock broke away beneath him.

I turned toward him, watching the cone of light from his headlamp recede into the darkness.

"Ghost!" I said over the comm.

His light cone shone into my eyes and I blinked as Ghost jetted back into view; his mech landed on the unbroken segment of the shelf ahead.

“Sorry for the scare, guys.”

I was glad he was all right but not so glad about the meter-long gap he’d left in the trail in front of me.

“You messed up the ledge,” I transmitted.

“I can’t help it if the rock won’t take our weight,” Ghost sent. “Need help getting across?”

My eyes focused on the intact portion of the shelf beyond the collapse. “No, I can make it.”

“Careful, Cyclone,” Facehopper said over the comm.

I cautiously approached the gap, wondering how stable the surrounding rock was and how close to the hole I dared go. I paused half a step from the missing segment and input a jumpjet path into my aReal to circumvent it. I programmed the autopilot to perform the actual jump as I didn’t feel confident enough to manually operate the jumpjets while porting a nuclear warhead above my head.

I held my breath and then activated the autopilot.

I jetted diagonally upwards and down again . . .

Spirits watch me, spirits guide me.

I landed on the intact side of the ledge; some of the rock broke away under my weight and shards plunged into the abyss. But otherwise the shelf held.

Behind me, Fret, Trace, Mauler, and TJ all jetted across successfully, as did Lead Foot, the Centurion bringing up our rear.

After several tense minutes of this cramped, sideways advance, Bomb finally announced: “I’m at the opening. TJ wasn’t joking when he said it was big. It’s big all right, baby. Enormous.”

Up ahead, the ATLAS 5s piloted by Facehopper and Ghost vanished one after the other, presumably into the offshoot tunnel, which I couldn’t see from here.

A few steps later the rock wall in front of me fell away, revealing a cylindrical passageway about as wide as a football field. It did indeed look like a super slug had carved it, as TJ said. I could almost imagine the slug’s surprise when it discovered, to its dismay, that the hole it had been tunneling opened out into a pit. Whether it had arrested its forward motion in time or plunged to its death I couldn’t say.

I stepped into the broad passageway, feeling relief and trepidation at the same time. Relief because I could now lower the payload and give my arms a

rest. Trepidation because I didn't want to meet whatever it was that had tunneled the passage.

The remaining mechs successively came inside behind me.

Mauler set down his own payload. "Man, my arms are killing me."

Trace and TJ assumed portage duty of the nukes, giving Mauler and me a breather.

Though there was enough room now for all of us to walk abreast if we wanted to, the squad proceeded forward in a zigzag fashion, each member keeping ten meters behind the next mech. We weren't really expecting any rocket attacks in there but I knew Facehopper would rather play it safe.

We marched through the downward-sloping tunnel for only seven minutes before TJ signaled us to switch to Bicentennial Man's perspective.

The lead Centurion stood on the edge of a wide vault, one of the biggest natural underground caverns I'd seen yet. The rock was relatively nondescript, lacking crystalline structures of any kind. There weren't even any stalactites or stalagmites.

However, on the ceiling resided . . . *things* . . . far worse than any stalactites, at least to me: long, oval, white shapes glued to the rock by the hundreds. They covered nearly every free space. I was reminded of maggot eggs on the hide of a dead animal.

"Place gives me the willies," Bomb said over the comm.

"If ever there was a time to turn back, this is it," Fret transmitted. "Those things look like *eggs*."

"Then that's a good thing," Facehopper sent.

"How is that a good thing, boss?" Fret asked.

"If those are eggs, we could be close to our secondary objective. The Queen."

"You think the *Queen* laid those?" Bomb sent.

"You have to admit, it's a possibility," Facehopper replied. "Assuming those are, in fact, eggs."

"What kind of Queen lays eggs on the ceiling? Got a vagina on her head or something?"

We rendezvoused with Bicentennial Man and Facehopper had TJ send the combat robot forward. Bicentennial Man stepped underneath the ovules and marched to the outermost extremities of our network repeaters, and there the robot halted.

It seemed safe, so the rest of us proceeded into the egg chamber,

sticking to our zigzag formation.

I gazed up at those white ovules suspiciously. The objects were a good ten meters away. They didn't move, didn't glow, but merely sat there, almost like deposits of some kind. Maybe they weren't eggs but rather excretions of some sort.

"I'm detecting lifeforms within the ovules," TJ sent.

Okay, so they were eggs.

"The readings match those of the silkworm slugs we encountered earlier," TJ continued. "I don't think our Queen Bitch laid them, though, because given her estimated size and the size of some of the superslugs we've seen, these eggs would have to be a lot bigger. As in, ten times bigger."

"So what laid them, then?" Mauler said over the comm.

"Dunno," TJ sent. "Maybe other silkworm slugs. Maybe Bomb."

"Har har," Bomb returned.

A stream of yellow slime suddenly drizzled down onto Bomb's mech. One of the ovules had cracked open directly overhead.

Bomb paused to wipe the slime away, looking up. "Goddamn—"

The same ovule burst entirely and a black mass spewed free.

Bomb reacted too late and the dark mass plunged into his mech, sending him to the cave floor.

Half of us trained our Gatlings on other ovules in the ceiling while the other half closed on Bomb as he attempted to wrench the alien object from his mech.

I was part of the latter group and I got a close-up view of the thing that had fallen on to his ATLAS.

It appeared to be a man-sized larva of some sort, reminding me of a smaller version of the silkworm slugs. Its black body was covered in thick yellow slime.

"Get it off me!" Bomb yanked at the larva but succeeded only in stretching the thing. Hundreds of tiny suckers lined the underside of its body, and these had fastened firmly to Bomb's chest piece.

Other than a spike in heart rate, Bomb's vitals seemed fine, as did his mech.

"Let go of me, bitch! I'm not your momma!" Bomb violently twisted and pried, but the larva stretched like rubber and refused to let go.

"Calm down, Bomb," Facehopper sent.

Bomb released the larva and it slapped against his chest piece with a

sickening smack. It remained motionless thereafter save for the slight, repeated expansion and contraction of its thorax region, which seemed to denote breathing.

Bomb swiveled a Gatling into his arm. “I said let go, bitch.” He touched the tip of the barrel to the larva.

“Bomb!” Facehopper sent. “Hold!”

Trace was positioned on the left flank of Bomb, and was potentially in the line of fire of that Gatling. He quickly maneuvered his mech out of the way.

“Bomb!” Facehopper repeated. “Stand down!”

Bomb remained still, keeping the Gatling pointed at the larva. Finally he withdrew the weapon. “Yes boss.”

“I’ll try to get it off you.” Facehopper took a step forward and reached toward the thing. The moment his steel fingers touched the larva, the creature released Bomb and wrapped itself around the arm of Facehopper’s mech instead.

“That didn’t work out quite the way I expected,” Facehopper sent.

Bomb stood up. Another bout of liquid drizzled down from the ceiling on to him. We all swiveled our Gats upward, but nothing further emerged from the egg. Bomb stepped his mech out of the way, cursing over the comm.

I kept my gaze on the ceiling, scanning the other white ovules, looking for signs of activity, but everything else seemed quiet up there.

Facehopper struggled with the larva for a few moments, twisting and pulling at it as Bomb had done. Then he gave up. “Well, I’m open to ideas here, mates.”

Mauler swiveled an incendiary thrower into his right arm. “What about some liquid fire?”

“Go for it,” Facehopper sent. “Just a tiny burst, though. Try not to harm the thing.”

“Oh, I see, now that you’re the one who’s affected, weapons are okay,” Bomb transmitted grumpily.

“I did say just a tiny burst,” Facehopper returned.

“Well I’ll do it, then.” Bomb shoved Mauler’s mech aside and carefully aimed his own incendiary thrower at the larva. He loosed a minute spray of jellied gasoline, which landed squarely in the middle of the creature.

Unfortunately for the larva, the yellow slime coating its body seemed to be flammable, and the alien positively ignited upon contact with the flame.

The creature released Facehopper with a loud squeal and landed on the cave floor. Fed by the oxygen content of the air, the flames continued to burn, and the larva convulsed, repeatedly bending and folding its body. It loosed one last terrible shriek before finally dying.

A charred, organic mess was all that remained as the flames went out. I was reminded of a human body after a Phant was done with it.

“Whoops,” Bomb transmitted. He backed away, raising his metal hands defensively.

“Relax, Bomb,” Facehopper sent. “I’m not blaming you. I gave the order. What’s done is done. And you did free my mech.”

I heard a chittering in the distance then. It made the hairs on the back of my neck rise.

“Facehopper, listen,” I transmitted.

Facehopper remained motionless, cocking the head of his ATLAS 5. Then: “Defensive positions! Arrowhead formation!”

We took our places.

“TJ, send Bicentennial Man forward. And have Lead Foot guard our rear.”

I watched the green dots of the two Centurions move to the fore and aft of our formation; the combat robots halted within signal range.

The chittering grew louder.

I switched to Bicentennial Man’s perspective.

Up ahead, crabs piled out of a massive, dark hole on the far side of the cavern. Thick cords trailed behind them, linking them to an as-yet-unseen slug. Sharp spikes armored their black carapaces. Each crab had eight pairs of legs, with pincers and crushing mandibles on all sides. Through their black, semitranslucent skin I could discern hell-black hearts beating inside. The oxygen in the air bound with their blood and turned their hearts black—that was my theory, anyway, because when I’d first encountered these crabs in an oxygenless environment, their hearts had been red.

I remembered that first time so clearly. I had been so afraid back then. Unsure of what to expect. I had worn only a jumpsuit, and for a weapon I’d carried a mere heavy gun. Even so, I had mowed down dozens of them before the Phants came and killed Big Dog.

I still felt fear now, but it was controlled. Constrained. I could focus, think clearly. It helped that I was locked away within the cockpit of a mighty ATLAS 5.

The horde advanced undeterred toward the combat robot, despite the fact that Bicentennial Man carried the same EM emitting technology as the rest of us.

I guess killing a baby alien marked us as enemies regardless of whether we gave off the same EM signatures as Phants. It was probably a little obvious by then: ATLAS mechs carrying nuclear payloads into a cave system otherwise dominated by organic lifeforms?

You would stand out, too.

The crabs continued toward us, the mandibles on their multiple heads flexing angrily.

CHAPTER FIVE

Rade

The hull all around us glowed a bright red. It reflected from our faceplates, casting our features in crimson. The bogey's coronal weapon was prepping to fire, or maybe it already had and the kickback hadn't reached us yet. Either way, the excess plasma vent we stood inside of was about to become the blast furnace we had all dreaded. The core temperature of my suit had already jumped twenty degrees.

Skullcracker was still trapped, his leg swallowed by the three hull pipes. Bender, Manic, and Chief Bourbonjack yanked at his arm assemblies, but despite the team's strength-enhanced exoskeletons, they couldn't free him.

"Breacher!" Chief transmitted.

Snakeoil rushed forward. He held the tip of the plasma cutter to one of the glowing pipes that gripped Skullcracker. The instant Snakeoil activated the cutter, the pipe uncoiled, releasing Skullcracker as if afraid of the highly focused energy beam.

Snakeoil shot the Chief a confused expression, and then returned his attention to the task at hand. He reactivated the cutter and the other pipes that clutched Skullcracker yielded before the energy beam even touched them.

Skullcracker's leg was free—Bender, Manic, and the Chief were finally able to hoist him from the hull.

Snakeoil stepped back and the pipes gradually moved back into place.

I quickly surveyed the brightening area around us and wondered if another section would open up and swallow anyone else. My eyes were drawn back to Skullcracker. Blood misted in pulses from multiple breaches in his suit below the knee. His vitals dipped. The skin and muscle of his leg would expand outward to plug the tears in the suit, which was good, because it saved his life in that moment, but also bad in the long run because it sucked the blood from his body.

“I want his leg patched and his suit sealed!” the Chief bellowed over the comm. “And Snakeoil, cut us that opening! We need to get inside, *now*!”

Under the light of the glowing hull, Bender and Manic hurriedly retrieved patches from Skullcracker’s suit-rep kit and sealed the multiple tears below the knee region of his jumpsuit. Bender used a SealWrap funnel to secure his glove to the fabric, and with the surgical laser embedded in the hand assembly, he enlarged one tear so that he could directly apply skin seals to the tissue underneath.

Meanwhile Snakeoil worked on the hull with his plasma cutter. Just like before, whenever he brought the high-energy tip to the surface, the nearby pipes reflexively folded away, like living entities trying to avoid pain. It didn’t make much sense to me; these glowing pipes produced superheated plasma, and yet they seemed afraid of a simple energy cutter? Perhaps it was part of some self-defense mechanism to avoid damage from external particles or weapons.

Whatever the case, Snakeoil was able to bore a passage through the half-meter-thick hull merely by swinging the cutter in a wide, ever-deepening circle. At the bottom of the shaft he was making, the beginnings of a dark hole leading to the inside appeared; there was no explosive decompression, which meant the inner chamber had no atmosphere.

When Snakeoil deactivated the plasma cutter, the edges of the hole slowly contracted as if to reseal the gap. It was an evil-looking orifice if I ever saw one, those pitch-black insides surrounded by a shrinking, red-white rim.

“Breached, Chief!” Snakeoil said.

Around me, the hull was becoming blindingly bright, with the heat inside my jumpsuit bordering on the unbearable.

“Lui, go!” the Chief said.

Lui dove through the gap. The moment he passed inside, he slid upward and out of view as if caught by the current of some rushing river—or a gravity field that ran at right angles to the hull.

I tried to access Lui’s aReal, wanting to switch to his viewpoint, but I couldn’t initiate a connection through the interference caused by the hull.

The hole had shrunk considerably. Snakeoil knelt, circling the cutter around the perimeter to widen the gap once more.

Meanwhile, Bender and Manic finished with Skullcracker. Using the injection slots on Skullcracker’s gloves, Bender gave him a final painkiller

and pick-me-up cocktail, allowing Skullcracker to rise unsteadily.

Chief Bourbonjack gestured for Manic and Bender to leap into the gap. They did so.

Snakeoil rewidened the hole again, compensating for the ever-shrinking rim.

Around us, the area was quickly becoming an oven.

The Chief turned toward Skullcracker. “Inside!”

Skullcracker gritted his teeth and took a tentative, limping step forward.

“Too slow!” The Chief wrapped his arms around Skullcracker and dove into the opening with him. “Follow—” the Chief transmitted to the rest of us before he was cut off.

Snakeoil made the hole extra large for Hijak and me, circling the plasma cutter three times around the border of the gap to make room for the payload we gripped.

“Go!” Snakeoil transmitted, stepping back.

The hole was just wide enough to fit the warhead—we porters would have to carry it through in single file. Hijak and I positioned ourselves accordingly.

By now the surface was so blinding that the brightness filters in my helmet had kicked in. Those filters didn’t stop the heat, unfortunately, and sweat streamed down my cheeks and ribs in profusion. My flushed face throbbed in sync with every sluggish heartbeat.

Hijak went first, leaping into the shrinking hole. His weight, and the weight of the payload, dragged me forward.

When the payload was halfway through the gap, the device abruptly jerked sideways, drawn by the horizontal artificial gravity field within, and I was literally yanked inside after it.

The blinding glow was replaced with darkness as I plunged through. I felt the G forces of the gravitational field immediately; it took a moment of disorientation before I realized I was falling.

“Autopilot: stabilize and break fall!” I said into my helmet.

The brightness filters in my faceplate deactivated; light from my headlamp reflected from a bulkhead right in front of me, replacing the darkness with the blur of my descent.

The G forces abruptly shifted as the other end of the payload pivoted outward and away from the bulkhead. Hijak’s jetpacks were firing to slow his fall.

“Autopilot—”

My autopilot finally took control and the gyroscopic stabilizers fired, swinging my body around and reorienting my feet toward the deck below. I had to switch hands on the payload handle because otherwise the motion would have wrenched my arm from its socket.

The vertical jets on my suit engaged, rapidly slowing my descent. The flow rate increased to equalize my end of the warhead with Hijak’s.

The Chief and Skullcracker moved out of the way below and in seconds we hit, rather hard. The payload was ripped out of our grasps and smashed into the deck.

Without warning Snakeoil landed on top of the warhead, making me jump.

I glanced up. Far above, the red-bordered hole Snakeoil had cut into the ceiling gave off the only light, and in seconds it spiraled shut. Before it sealed entirely, a bright cloud of plasma vented into the compartment.

My squad brothers and I instinctively dropped.

I ducked my head, covering my helmet with my hands.

Nothing happened. I glanced up. The cloud had dissipated before reaching us.

Above, the red-bordered hole was gone and there remained only darkness.

The temperature within my jumpsuit was quickly normalizing.

We’d successfully breached the alien vessel.

I stood up. The cone of light from my headlamp didn’t penetrate far into the darkness. I saw only the latticed bulkhead beside me, which silently undulated, and the deck immediately below, whose convoluted pipes formed a static gangway of sorts that we could actually stand on without our boots getting snagged.

“Gravity is 1.05 G,” Snakeoil sent over the comm. “Not sure why these aliens would generate an internal gravity field and then not bother with an atmosphere to go with it.”

“If they really conquered hundreds of other species,” Lui transmitted, “there’s no way they could provide a common atmosphere for all of them. But one common thing they *could* provide was gravity.”

“They’d have to pick those species capable of surviving 1.05 G,” Snakeoil sent.

“They would,” Lui agreed. “Maybe it’s a common gravitational level

associated with life galaxywide."

"Save the speculation for the postmission debriefing," Chief Bourbonjack transmitted. "Skullcracker, how's the leg?"

"I can walk," Skullcracker sent back.

"Good. Because you're going to be on your feet for quite some time." The Chief turned toward Snakeoil. "How far to the Observer Mind's energy signature?"

The Observer Mind sent out periodic EM pulses, or pings, that could be traced. The signal source was indistinct outside the vessel, and vaguely pointed to the central region of the Skull Ship. But now that we were inside we should have a far more accurate reading.

I glanced at my HUD map. The unexplored region of the ship ahead of us was shown as a large black mass. Far inside that mass a blue waypoint flashed, indicating the latest calculated position of the Observer Mind.

"A long way, Chief," Snakeoil said. "Roughly two days, at an optimistic pace of six miles an hour."

The Chief nodded slowly. "Not so different from our external readings, is it?"

"The pings are coming from nearly the exact same position the scientists triangulated," Snakeoil agreed.

"I guess I was hoping we'd prove the scientists wrong." The Chief frowned. "Two days."

We'd all been briefed and knew what to expect. We'd entered a ship that was a quarter the size of the Tau Ceti II moons. Of course it was going to take quite some time to navigate to our destination, even in powered suits. We were lucky it was only two days, especially with the injuries Skullcracker had sustained—without the strength-enhancement provided by his jumpsuit, he probably would have had to stay behind.

"Well, nothing for it," the Chief continued. "Settle in everyone. We've got a helluva long walk through enemy territory ahead of us. Spread out. I don't need to remind any of you what will happen to us if we're discovered and our EM emitters don't fool the enemy. Snakeoil, let me know if the Observer Mind signal source spikes again."

Snakeoil nodded. "Will do. So far I'm only getting the pings."

The squad spread out and proceeded forward, with Snakeoil assuming the role of point man and Skullcracker the drag man. Skullcracker didn't bother to hide his limp—it wasn't worth the effort to preserve his pride.

Manic and Bender joined me and Hijak on the payload, helping us carry the object, which felt drastically heavier under the artificial gravity. We agreed to switch out with other members of the squad every half hour.

We moved away from the undulating bulkhead, making our way deeper into the chamber. The pipes soon vanished into the murk behind us: Though our headlamps lit the way, the darkness pressed in around us and we couldn't see more than five meters in any direction. It was like we existed in some limbo world between the living and the dead, with no objects to interrupt the black monotony. And though we marched forward, the murk never changed. We were trapped on an island of our own making amid a sea of darkness. Through it all, only the deck remained constant beneath us.

Snakeoil interrupted the march. "I'm reading another spike in Observer Mind activity."

The Chief nodded. "The fleet is making them fire the coronal weapon again."

"No klaxon," Lui observed. He stood a few paces ahead of me. "No sign of any crewmembers mobilizing or locking down. They don't appear too concerned about the fleet attack, do they?"

"Presumably they would have switched to combat readiness earlier," the Chief sent. "But I get your point. Keep in mind that we've only infiltrated the farthest extremities of the ship so far. We've barely pierced the skin of the alien apple, so to speak. The key word being *alien*."

Eventually a bulkhead emerged from the murk and we followed it until the pipes composing the surface opened into a narrow corridor that fit roughly five men abreast. The overhead of this passage was an ample fourteen meters from the deck. The warhead fit easily. Hell, even an ATLAS 5 would have fit. Too bad Brass hadn't approved the use of mechs for our squad.

On my aReal, the new section slowly filled out on the map as we advanced.

I noticed a soft slithering sound in the background, like multiple snakes rubbing against one another. Only after a moment did I realize the noise came from the undulating pipes in the bulkheads.

"Snakeoil, are you sure there's no atmosphere?" I said. It took an atmosphere to carry sound.

Snakeoil waved a glove back and forth. "You're right. I'm detecting a trace atmosphere of methane and water in this section. In fact, the

atmospheric pressure is rising the farther inward we advance. Apparently the aliens designed the ship with a layer of void padding the regions just inside the hull, though I have no idea why. Maybe it supports the overall structure in some way."

"I can see one reason why they'd do it," Lui sent. "If there was a hull breach, a void layer would prevent explosive decompression. And it eliminates the need to lock down the ship or seal the hatches and scuttles between compartments. Something that will only make our job easier. And you all saw how easily the hull opens up. They probably capture enemy ships that way. Without the void layer, opening like that wouldn't be possible."

"Still," Snakeoil transmitted, "that leaves the question of *how* they're creating the void layer. It's not done with gravity because the gravitational field has been constant since we entered."

"Not our job to figure out how this ship works, people," the Chief sent. "As I said before, leave the guesswork for the postmission debriefing."

"That's right," Bender agreed. "Our only job is to blow this bitch up."

That ended the discussion. Still, it was kind of funny hearing those words from Bender, considering that he was the closest thing to a scientist among us. He had a very wry sense of humor to say the least.

Some moments later we reached a branching corridor.

"Both paths bring us closer to the Observer Mind signal source," Snakeoil said over the comm. "Which isn't saying much, given how far away it actually is."

"First rule of labyrinths," Chief Bourbonjack sent. "Always take the rightmost corridor."

We did so and the software in our aReals began filling out the new passage.

It wasn't long before we got to test our emitters firsthand: an alien crewmember appeared up ahead.

"Stay calm, people," the Chief sent. "And don't say a word."

The thing was decked out in a humanoid-like jumpsuit with a glass dome on top, and it stood roughly twice the height of the tallest member of our team. It wasn't carrying a weapon of any kind, at least none that I could discern.

There was a glowing bar of white light attached to its right shoulder and what looked like speakers on its left. From the bat-like clicks and screeches coming from those speakers, I guessed the being navigated more via sonar

than vision—yet another reason to give the crew an atmosphere.

Beneath the glass dome that topped the suit, I discerned a crocodilian head covered in green scales; a gecko's bulging eyes stared from the end of that long, toothy maw.

We stepped to the side to let the thing pass and it gave most of us little more than a glance—further proof that the EM emitters were indeed working. When it squeezed by the payload, its gecko eyes lingered on the warhead, but in moments it moved on, making no attempt to stop us.

I gave it a backward glance and spotted something I hadn't seen from the front, what looked like the hilt of a bladed weapon, sheathed in a holster (or scabbard) on its back.

When the alien faded from view, Manic was the first to speak. "What the hell was *that*?"

"I couldn't get a reading through the fabric of its suit," Snakeoil answered. "No EM signature. No nothing."

"I know what was inside," Skullcracker said quietly over the comm. When we looked at him, he grinned ghoulishly. "Target practice."

"That's what I'm talking about, baby," Bender returned.

"Wait a second," Hijak sent. "On its back . . . was that what I thought it was?"

I exchanged a confused glance with him. "A sword."

Hijak nodded. "We're facing an alien species ten times more advanced than our own, and all they've equipped their crew with are swords. Priceless."

"Dude, I highly doubt they're swords," Lui sent.

"Maybe they're lightsabers," Bender joked.

"Well, it's certainly a change from the particle cannon we saw at Shangde City." We'd encountered an alien similar to this one, replete with jumpsuit, on the rooftop of the warehouse where the Guide resided. The alien had carried a particle weapon that took out entire chunks of the building we had used for overwatch.

"It kind of makes sense," Snakeoil transmitted. "If I was in charge here, I wouldn't want to equip my security forces with particle weapons. Too great a chance of collateral damage."

"Maybe it's a smaller version of the same weapon," Lui said over the comm. "With a more concentrated impact zone."

"Maybe." Snakeoil didn't sound convinced. "But swords or not, if these

beings are as impervious to our weaponry as the alien we encountered in Shangde, it won't matter."

"Which is why we have the emitters, people," the Chief said, obviously trying to keep morale up. "Let's continue the advance, please."

We passed two other alien beings later on in that same corridor, roughly ten minutes apart. Though the towering jumpsuit designs remained static—humanoid in shape, with a dome on the top—the aliens within belonged to differing races. Under the dome of the first was a bee-like, insectile head, while under the second I saw a featureless, moist white sphere, reminding me of the sclera of an eye. Unlike the shoulder-mounted sonar system of the first alien, these two only had light bars mounted to their shoulders.

I suspected these alien entities had a body shape that didn't match the outer dimensions of their suits; likely they resided in a cockpit of sorts beneath the domes and chest areas, similar to the cockpit of mechs. That was my guess, anyway. As usual, Snakeoil's sensor array was unable to penetrate the suits to get further details.

"All that fleet chatter must have worked," Lui transmitted. "These aliens don't seem overly concerned about the warhead. They must think it's some random tech." He, the Chief, Skullcracker, and Snakeoil had taken over the portage of the warhead. Because of Skullcracker's injured leg, I had offered to assume his place, but Skullcracker wouldn't have it.

"Keep in mind that we *are* masking the nuclear signature," Snakeoil said. "As far as the aliens are concerned, we're carrying around a big, empty, metal box. Scratch that: a *possessed* metal box." The latter was in reference to the Phant-mimicking EM emitter installed in the payload.

I was point man this time round, so it was me who first spotted the glowing blue vapor up ahead.

I halted instantly.

"Rage?" Chief Bourbonjack sent. That was my callsign. "What is it?"

"Phant."

"Continue as if nothing is wrong," the Chief wrote over the comm, switching to text mode. No one really knew if the Phants could actually hear us, especially through the suits, but it seemed a sensible precaution. "We're all one big congenial family here, remember."

A drop of perspiration trickled down my cheek and I hesitantly stepped forward.

The blue vapor seemed ominous, especially with the black electricity

that sparked occasionally along its edges. The electricity wasn't present when the things were in liquid form, and I'd almost forgotten how malevolent they could appear in their gaseous state.

"Nice and easy," the Chief wrote. "Loosen up. All of you. Subcommunicate calmness with your body language."

I increased my pace, doing my best to act nonchalant. It was hard. I knew full well what these things were capable of. I'd seen them dissolve two of my platoon mates right before my eyes.

The entity traveled toward us, and as it neared I moved to the side, giving the Phant room. The alien didn't change course—it still floated down the center of the corridor. The Phant would touch the squad if it continued in this fashion, unless we flattened ourselves against the bulkhead. Was that the expected protocol?

When I was about a meter away, I decided it was time to press myself into the bulkhead to make room for the thing. But before I could do so, the glowing vapor abruptly swerved to the side, giving me a wide berth.

I didn't dare alter my pace: I kept trudging forward as if I expected the Phant to move aside all along. I didn't look at it, either. Not directly anyway. However, I switched the POV of my aReal to the men just behind me in turn to make sure the Phant gave them a wide berth, too.

When it passed the last of us, I exhaled in relief.

"Well done, people," the Chief sent when it was gone. "Looks like our disguise is going to get us through this after all."

We spent the next three hours traveling deeper into the heart of the Skull Ship. I remember how difficult navigating the *Gerald R. Ford* had been at first. Well, that was child's play compared to this, which was like the *Ford's* labyrinth times ten. All we had to guide us was the signal source, which was very, very far away, a glowing waypoint at the heart of this unmapped darkness. We had to backtrack on several occasions after encountering various dead ends, and more than once we found ourselves in a passage that led to a complete circle.

The mapping software in our HUDs pieced together a blueprint of the previous corridors and compartments we traversed. We relied on the aReals built into our helmets to do this, of course, since our Implants were turned off.

I wished we had been able to launch HS3 scouts, but those basketball-sized drones carried a lot of electronics packed into a tiny space, and were

balanced just right—adding in the weight of an external EM emitter would've destabilized and grounded the devices. Centurion combat robots were viable scouting alternatives, since their polycarbonate bodies could actually take the weight of an emitter, but the Brass had decided we needed to go in as small and light as possible.

We continued to take turns porting the nuclear payload in groups of four, and we passed other alien beings that wore the domed jumpsuits. Some of the suits had more arms and legs than the standard humanoid design, and they continued to be occupied by species we'd never seen before. We also encountered several more blue Phants, all of which left us alone.

We were surrounded by enemies, and the farther we journeyed into the heart of this vessel, the more doomed I felt. If we were discovered now, there was no turning back. We wouldn't be able to fight our way out, not from this deep inside.

I vaguely wondered how Tahoe was doing. The members of Digger squad all piloted ATLAS 5s. Must be nice. Their mission was probably a breeze compared to ours, especially with Marines providing a distraction on the surface of their moon, drawing the swarms of slugs and crabs away from the warrens. Though to be honest, I preferred the harder mission anyway.

At the end of the fourth hour we encountered an odd, high-ceilinged compartment that cut across the corridor. Organic sacs, roughly half the size of human beings, strewed the deck. These sacs expanded and contracted at random intervals, puffing a white mist into the air.

"Snakeoil, flare please," the Chief said.

Snakeoil launched a flare, further illuminating the area. The chamber ended roughly five hundred meters ahead but stretched as far as I could see to the left and right, as did the sacs that populated it. Of course, the flare illuminated only two klicks in either direction, so none of us could say for certain what lay beyond the darkness.

"What the hell are they?" Manic took a step toward one of the puffing sacs.

"Careful Manic," the Chief said.

Snakeoil outstretched a gloved hand. "The expansion and contraction of each sac seems to be generating a surplus of ions . . . building up a massive positive charge. Odd . . . I'm reading signatures similar to micro-Slipstreams. If I were to guess, I'd say these sacs contributed to the coronal weapon somehow."

“I say we torch the place,” Bender sent.

“No,” the Chief transmitted. “Do that, and we compromise our position, ending the mission.”

“Have to agree with Bender,” Manic returned. “This is something we *can* do, Chief. If we destroy these sacs and take out the coronal weapon, then we render the Skull Ship defenseless, making it easy for Fleet to finish off.”

“But you’re making a very big assumption,” the Chief sent. “And an erroneous one. That this single area is the sole energy source for the entire coronal weapon, a weapon whose extents span the hull of the ship. If we’re lucky, by destroying this area we might take out a small piece of that weapon. But then again, maybe these sacs have nothing to do with the plasma generation at all. Remember what I said about leaving the speculating to the end of the mission? Let’s cross.”

And so we proceeded forward, making our way between the puffing sacs. We had to backtrack a few times until we found a path that could fit the payload and its porters, but in the end we passed through the chamber without incident.

Shortly thereafter we secured a side corridor that was free of alien presence, and the Chief called a half-hour halt inside it.

Hijak, Bender, Snakeoil, and I took first watch. MOTHs prided themselves in their ability to sleep on demand, since we never really knew when the next chance for sleep would come on a mission. As such, the instant Chief Bourbonjack, Lui, Manic, and Skullcracker lay down on the gangway, they were fast asleep. They were careful to position themselves in the center of the solid deck, I noted, as far away as possible from the undulating bulkheads on either side.

We four watchstanders perched in silence, weapons at the ready. I kept an eye on the far side of the passageway where it opened onto the main corridor. I couldn’t actually see said corridor, which was just beyond the reach of my light cone. Behind me, Hijak observed the opposite end of the passage, which was similarly shrouded in darkness. The writhing bulkheads provided an eerie backdrop beside us.

Usually, when keeping watch, I’d gaze through the scope of my sniper rifle, but the Chief had specifically ordered us not to. Looking through our gun sights wasn’t the best posture to assume, not while we pretended to be friendlies.

As I stared out into the murk, Shaw’s words came to me unbidden.

Remember me in the dark nights, when you think you can't go on. Remember me in the storm, when all hope seems lost.

I smiled sadly.

I remember you, Shaw.

I'll never forget you.

"There's no coming back from this mission, is there?" Snakeoil sent abruptly.

I glanced at him. His gaze was fixed squarely on the nuclear payload.

"Are you trying to take over Fret's doom-and-gloom role?" I joked. "What happened to the outgoing and positive Texan I used to know?"

Snakeoil shook his head. "Left that guy behind on the *Ford*. And I'm from Tennessee, not Texas." He didn't take his eyes from the device. "We're carrying a nuclear payload here. Even if we make it to the Observer Mind and place the bomb, we're not going to get out before it blows. I don't care if the nuke is timed or not. There are just too many factors that can go wrong. You know I'm right."

"Come on, man," Bender said. "You're our breacher. After the Chief, we're supposed to look to you for guidance. Don't be like this."

Snakeoil smiled wanly. "Sorry. I should have kept that to myself."

"Damn right you should have," Bender said. "I for one plan on coming back from this mission. I never considered it a one-way ticket to hell."

Hijak spoke up. "But it will be for at least one of us."

"What the hell you talking about, caterpillar?"

"Someone's got to stay behind to protect the nuke once we arm it."

Bender chuckled over the comm. "You're so wrong it hurts. The Chief would never allow that. Think about it for a second. For one goddamn second. If you were the Chief, would you let any of us stay behind? Would you have the heart?"

Bender had a point.

Still, while the brotherhood was precious, somehow I doubted the Chief would hold any of us above the overall welfare of humanity; if a sacrifice needed to be made, the Chief would see it done. In all likelihood, he'd volunteer to carry out the sacrifice himself.

I also knew that if we found ourselves cornered and with no hope of escape, he'd detonate the nuke right then and there, taking as many of the enemy along with us as he could.

That's what I would do if I were the Chief, anyway.

I peered steadily into the darkness, keeping up my watch on the far end of the passage.

Hijak transmitted directly to me on a private line: “Do you ever think about our capture? Our interrogation?”

I didn’t answer him right away, feeling a chill deep inside. Would we ever get over what happened to us? Would our broken selves ever be whole again?

“Yes,” I said finally.

He didn’t answer right away. And then: “Not a day goes by where I don’t think about what happened, and what I did. Of how I betrayed the platoon and everything the MOTHs stood for. Of how I let my weak Chinese half take control.”

“Still blaming your heritage.” I shook my head. “Look, Hijak, it wasn’t your fault. We’re MOTHs, and yet in the end we’re also human.”

Hijak didn’t say anything for a long moment. “When the time comes, I have to be the one who stays behind and guards the nuke. It has to be me, Rage. Will you support me in this?”

I didn’t answer him, because of course I couldn’t support that. If anything, I’d rather be the one to stay behind. Assuming the Chief would let me make the sacrifice.

I forced those dour thoughts from my mind, hoping Hijak wouldn’t say anything more.

He didn’t.

The rest of the squad awakened after the designated time, and the four of us took our turn at rest.

I fell asleep instantly and when I awoke fifteen minutes later, I felt groggier than when I had started.

I reluctantly took my place on the nuclear payload and hoisted the heavy object from the deck. The strain quickly brought me back to my senses. Nothing like the shock of PT to wake up the body.

We returned to the main corridor and journeyed onward.

Skullcracker was limping worse than ever.

“How’s the leg holding up, Skullcracker?” I sent.

“Fantastic,” Skullcracker deadpanned. “Feel like I could run a marathon. Ten marathons.”

We hadn’t been walking for more than ten minutes when Snakeoil paused beside the slithering pipes of the bulkhead to our right.

“Odd,” he transmitted.

Chief Bourbonjack approached him. “What?”

He moved his gloved hand to and fro. “I’m reading human life beyond this bulkhead.”

“*Human* life?” The Chief wore a troubled expression behind his faceplate. “Prisoners?”

“I don’t know, but according to these readings there are thousands of them on the other side.”

“Maybe we should use the plasma cutter?” Lui sent.

Snakeoil reached for his cutter, glancing at Chief Bourbonjack for confirmation.

The Chief stared at the bulkhead. “No. The aliens could have eyes on us at this very moment. We have to act like possessed human hosts would, and that means no cutting our way through bulkheads. Keep a lookout for any entrances.”

Some time later we found a small passage leading through the bulkhead and we took it. Our path proved unimpeded. There were no doors or hatches of any kind to bar our way, as in all previous corridors on the ship.

In moments the passage opened into a wide chamber. Contained within was a glass tank roughly thirty meters wide by four meters tall. Inside, thousands of naked Sino-Koreans rested lethargically, scattered across the glass floor, which was covered in feces. Their bodies appeared dangerously malnourished: bony arms and legs, swollen bellies. Because of the tight confines, most of them lay fairly close together—some were even piled atop one another. An area had been left clear in the center of the room, where a spiderish black robot linked by a cord to the ceiling operated on a human. The robot was installing a cybernetic graft similar to the one I had seen embedded within Lana’s skull and spine.

Some of the naked, slat-ribbed SKs close to the tank wall drunkenly watched our approach. They didn’t seem to recognize us as human, or if they did, they were too weak to do anything about it, because most of them remained prostrate. Perhaps they assumed we were alien hosts.

However, one gaunt woman, her body smeared in fecal matter, clambered upright and limped toward the glass. She might have been beautiful once. Not anymore. Her eye sockets and cheeks had hollowed and her breasts had deflated. I had the distinct impression of fragility; I worried that if she fell over, all the bones in her thin body would break like porcelain.

“Chief . . .” I said.

The SK woman bumped into the translucent wall and began mouthing words. She clasped her hands together in obvious supplication. Begging for help.

“We have to do something,” Lui said.

“What would you suggest?” the Chief said.

Lui pointed out metallic protrusions on the glass several meters away. “That looks like a double airlock. We could go inside, crack open our suits, and share some of our MRE canisters.”

“And then what?” the Chief said. “Go back? After teasing them into thinking we were going to rescue them? They’ll mob us. We’ll have to fight our way out.”

The woman stared at us, eyes pleading for release.

“They won’t mob us,” Lui said. “Look at how weak they are.”

The Chief grimaced. “When you’ve got a meal in your belly, or the chance at one, you’d be surprised at the strength you can work up. If we go in there, I guarantee you, we’re fighting to get out again.”

“We have to at least *try*!” Lui insisted.

“Remember what I said about alien surveillance?” the Chief said. “We’re being watched at this very moment. You’d have me blow the mission for this? Risk the fate of humanity?”

Beside Lui, Hijak remained uncharacteristically silent. Though he was half Chinese, Hijak never really liked that part of his heritage. He was treated fairly badly while growing up in the UC because of it. Still, he seemed affected. Beyond his faceplate, I could see the pain written across his features.

“I could shoot the glass,” Hijak said quietly. “The rest of you would crowd around me, hiding me from any watching alien eyes. I’d fire, break open the tank, vent the atmosphere, and end the suffering and alien experimentation, granting these people merciful release.”

“You’re assuming you can even penetrate the glass,” the Chief sent. “But even so, I’m afraid we wouldn’t be able to hide the fact we were the ones who did it. People dropping like flies? Can’t hide that. Sorry, as much as I hate to do this, I have to order us back. There’s too much at stake. The entire human race rides on our actions. We can’t help these people. Let’s go.”

We all turned to leave.

Except Hijak.

The Chief noticed. “Hijak. We’re going.”

“Wait.” Hijak stumbled toward the tank.

He reached the glass and extended his glove, resting it flat-palmed against the surface.

Within, the terribly thin SK woman lifted her hand toward the glass, touching it to the same spot on her side.

Even from here I could see the dejection in the woman’s eyes as understanding dawned on her. She knew we weren’t going to do a thing to help her.

I noticed something else in her gaze as a wan smile formed on her lips.

Forgiveness.

Hijak turned away.

I was glad when we left the tank far behind. I knew that woman, with her grim smiling face and hollow eyes, would stay with me for the rest of my days, haunting me late at night when I couldn’t sleep. As she would haunt Hijak, I’m sure. I rationalized what we had done by telling myself, “If Shaw could sacrifice herself for humanity, so could those SKs.” It was a cruel excuse but it helped.

Early into the next hour, the gaseous form of a purple Phant floated into view up ahead. I happened to be at point once again, and the sight caught me off guard because so far we had only encountered the blue ones.

Instinctively I froze.

“Rage?” the Chief texted.

“Another Phant,” I wrote back. “Purple, this time.”

I started forward again. I had to trust in the EM emitters. We had come this far. We couldn’t turn back now.

I forced myself to take one step after another. A purple Phant. The same class as Alejandro’s killer.

I stared into the glowing mass as it approached. Those swirling gases calmed me somehow; the bolts of electricity along the extremities seemed beautiful. My pace slowed. I felt drawn toward the vapor.

“Rage . . .” The Chief’s text filled my aReal.

I stumbled slightly and the trance broke. I quickly averted my eyes and walked steadily onward, trying to ignore the pounding of my heart as the entity grew near.

The Phant moved faster than the blue ones we’d encountered previously and it headed straight toward me. Would I have to slide out of the way of this

one?

At the last moment it veered aside, giving the others and me a meter to spare as it passed.

When the gaseous entity moved beyond Lui, our drag man, it recentered in the passage and began to hover from view.

Before it completely vanished, Bender, one of our four porters this time, accidentally dropped his end of the payload.

The warhead tilted to the side, its edge crashing into the floor with a resounding thud.

The purple Phant halted.

It began drifting backward, moving slower, cautiously toward us.

Nicely done, Bender, I thought.

Bender quickly hoisted his end of the payload back up. No one else made any movements nor said a word.

The Phant floated toward our drag man. Lui remained stock-still. The gaseous entity swiveled to the side as it passed, giving him the usual one-meter berth. The thing proceeded forward in that way, passing Bender and halting beside the nuclear warhead.

The Phant hovered in place for several moments, electricity sparking along its edges. It seemed to be analyzing the payload contents in some way.

The alien entity abruptly retreated down the corridor at high speed. It passed Lui and when it reached the edge of our ambient light, the Phant halted. It remained there, ten meters away, motionless, waiting.

“What now?” Manic wrote.

The Chief wrote back: “Move.”

We marched forward.

I glanced over my shoulder: the purple Phant shadowed our advance, maintaining its ten-meter distance behind Lui.

The Chief sent another text message a few seconds later: “Halt.”

The Phant halted with us.

“I’ll be damned,” the Chief sent verbally.

All of our eyes were on the Phant, watching to see how it would react to the Chief’s spoken words.

It did nothing. The entity remained in place, its vapors drifting back and forth over the same spot, bolts of electricity sparking from its core. I guess the interdimensional being couldn’t hear us through our suits after all.

“What does it want?” Hijak sent over the comm.

“It knows we’re up to something,” Bender said.

“Then why doesn’t it just disintegrate us?”

“Maybe it’s not quite sure about us,” Lui sent. “And wants to see where we’re going with the device. Or maybe it’s figured out what we’re actually carrying.”

“Impossible,” Snakeoil transmitted. “The wave-canceling tech would prevent that.”

“Either way it’s here and we’re stuck with it,” Lui returned.

“Could be waiting for its friends to arrive,” I transmitted. “These things communicate telepathically, and according to Lana Wu, the telepathic signals take twenty Stanminutes to propagate no matter the distance.”

“Guess we’ll know soon enough whether or not this thing summoned the cavalry, then,” the Chief sent. “Continue moving people.”

We resumed our advance. The Phant remained ten meters behind Lui at all times.

Eighteen minutes later the cavalry arrived.

Jumpsuited aliens crowded the corridor, coming at us from both the front and the back. Bat-like screeches and pops issued from those aliens that navigated by sonar, while bright light shone from the shoulder-mounted bars of those relying on eyes. I activated my noise-canceling device to filter out the shrieks, and I darkened my helmet glass to reduce the light from the bars. During all of this the purple Phant retreated, vanishing from view.

Because of the large size of the alien jumpsuits, only two enemies could fit abreast in the corridor at once. Each opponent carried one of those swordlike weapons in its appendages—I say appendages, because some of the jumpsuits came equipped with arms, others long tubes that were more like tentacles than anything else. The aliens held the swordlike weapons like rifles, using the two handles situated on the fore and aft of each “blade” as grips.

“Uh, I don’t think those are swords,” Bender transmitted.

“Drop and fire at will,” the Chief sent. “Snakeoil, with me! We’re arming the payload.”

I flattened myself to the deck as my brothers either dropped or crouched around me.

Half of us aimed at the rear of the passageway, the other half targeted the fore. With my sniper scope I chose my targets in the cramped lamp-lit corridor and fired.

Unfortunately, though our bullets, rockets, and grenades flung the foremost aliens backward, none of our weapons actually pierced their jumpsuits. They always got up again, entirely unharmed. We couldn't make a dent in the "glass" domes that capped the suits, either.

The Chief and Snakeoil stayed near the device. The two-man rule of nuclear armament required that both the commanding officer (CO) and executive officer (XO) agreed to the armament order. The Chief was our CO in this case, and while the rest of us were technically the same rank under the Chief, Snakeoil—as our official breacher—was the nearest to an XO; he'd been supplied with the second pair of physical keys, along with the second half of the armament code.

"The payload is armed!" the Chief announced, crouching low. That was step one of the detonation process. Step two involved inputing an actual countdown. Presumably the Chief had not done that yet.

None of the aliens had fired on us so far. They seemed to be aiming those rifle-swords of theirs very carefully.

I started concentrating my fire on their weapons and I found that by striking the blades near the tips, I could readily mess up their aim. In one case I sent a weapon spiraling out of an enemy's hands entirely.

"Target their weapons!" I said into the comm. "Try to disarm those in the forefront!"

The next tall alien in my sights had its weapon aimed right at me. Before I could fire, my sniper rifle disintegrated, collapsing into a plume of gray dust.

"What the—"

Still lying prone on the gangway, I immediately yanked a pistol from my belt. I trained the 9-mil at the same alien, wondering why it hadn't loosed a second shot at me. Then I realized it had shifted its aim.

Beside me, Bender's rifle disintegrated, too. Like me, he remained very much alive.

The enemy soldiers were eliminating our weapons . . .

"Chief, they're trying to capture us alive." I fired my pistol, striking the enemy's weapon and throwing off its aim.

"Told you those weren't swords!" Bender freed his own pistol and began firing.

"Snakeoil," Chief Bourbonjack transmitted, "turn off the wave-canceling tech. I want the enemy aware that we have a fully armed

thermonuclear warhead aboard their starship.”

I didn’t look at Snakeoil or the Chief. I was too busy firing my pistol at the enemy, trying to disrupt the aim of as many of them as I could.

A few moments later I heard Snakeoil’s voice over the comm. “Wave-canceling tech offline!”

That didn’t deter the enemy whatsoever. So far we kept them at bay on both sides and avoided losing more of our weapons, but the passageway had become so crowded that those of us with higher-impact rifles could no longer force the aliens backward with each strike. Even rockets and grenades didn’t have much effect, other than to create shockwaves that pinned us to the deck and spiked the temperature.

The alien press slowly advanced on both flanks. With our gunfire, we kept knocking the swordlike weapons of those in the forefronts away, but that wouldn’t matter when the enemy was close enough to throttle us.

Motion drew my eye to the warhead. The Chief had reopened the command console: security protocol permitted only physical entry of any detonation or disarmament operations.

And judging from the grim expression on his face, the Chief wasn’t about to disarm it.

No, he was going to trigger the nuke.

CHAPTER SIX

Tahoe

The alien crabs filled the dark hole ahead of us, covering every square meter of space, advancing unchecked toward the Centurion scout.

"Pull Bicentennial Man back, TJ," Facehopper sent. "Looks like our emitters aren't going to deter the enemy this time."

I had been viewing the scene from the POV of the combat robot, and I switched back to my own viewpoint at that moment. I couldn't see the horde anymore in the darkness, not from where I stood. Around me, the ATLAS 5s of my brothers were arrayed in an arrowhead formation.

About twenty meters ahead the Centurion emerged from the murk, followed by the first of the crabs—its claws snapped angrily at the air. More crabs came, cords trailing away into the darkness toward the currently unseen host slug.

"Looks like we royally pissed them off," Fret transmitted.

"Killing a baby alien would do that," Mauler sent.

I gazed at the organic mess on the cave floor, the corpse of the alien Bomb had accidentally incinerated. On the ceiling ten meters above hung the punctured ovule that had given birth to the creature. Similar white eggs jutted down all around it, blanketing the rock overhead.

"Launch incendiaries toward the ceiling!" Facehopper said over the comm. "Warning shots only! Have the flames fall short of their precious eggs. Let's see if we can convince the horde to back down."

I released a measured spurt of flame upward, as did my brothers; none of the jellied gasoline actually touched the eggs, though one or two of the objects blackened slightly from the heat. Some of the flaming liquid arced over our position and landed on the rock floor between us and the crabs, where it continued to burn.

Instead of deterring the horde, the warning shots only seemed to spur

the crabs on. They came faster now, limbs clattering even louder. Some shrieked in outrage. I realized they were of the larger variety, roughly the same size as our ATLAS mechs.

"Uh," Fret sent, "they're a little big."

"We can take them," I responded.

"You know how huge the host slug is going to be, right?"

He had a point.

Facehopper turned his incendiary toward the ceiling once more. "Torch as many of the eggs as you can, then turn the flames on the crabs."

We did so. The fire spread easily from egg to egg and in moments the ceiling was a burning conflagration. Charred larvae burst free, falling in thrashing masses that died before hitting the ground. Their steaming bodies carpeted the cave floor around us.

The crabs chittered in outrage and surged forward.

Next, we unleashed our incendiaries at the horde. Thanks to the oxygen in the cave, the front ranks burned. Badly. The alien entities flailed about blindingly. All that fire increased the ambient light levels.

A second row of crabs bashed through the first, some of them catching fire, too, as the jellied gasoline spread.

We unleashed more flames and the next rank of crabs reeled, but those burning creatures were getting a little close for comfort. It wouldn't be hard for the crabs to rub the jellied gasoline onto our mechs, either accidentally or intentionally. And if that happened, our cockpits would become ovens.

"Switch to Gatlings, mates!" Facehopper sent.

We did so, and threads of Gatling fire began to sever the cords that connected the crabs to the still-unseen host slug. The fiery alien units dropped the instant their corresponding umbilicals detached.

More crabs crawled over the dying ranks. Their lower limbs caught fire thanks to the jellied gasoline still burning on their brethren.

We continued firing, cutting the cords with relative ease. But we were running through our ammo at an incredible rate.

"Controlled bursts, mates!" Facehopper sent. "We don't have infinite bullets here."

Finally the host slug showed itself, heaving forth from the darkness behind the crabs. It looked like a giant version of its mollusk namesake, minus the shell—this hulking, semigelatinous, oval-shaped mass with long feeler antennae in front and two smaller mandibles where a mouth should be.

Oozing slime, hundreds of umbilicals ran out from its skin, connecting its body to the crabs. As expected, the slug was of the gargantuan variety, coming in at the height and breadth of a stadium, so huge that it nearly touched the cavern's ceiling and far walls. Because of the angle, I couldn't see much more than the front of the thing, but given the proportions of previous slugs I'd encountered, this one would have to be the length of several football fields. Muscles rippling beneath its black corrugated skin, the thing ponderously wormed forward, breaking away charred eggs from the roof as it approached.

Though I was inside an ATLAS mech, a deep-rooted fear formed in the heart of my being in that nearly forgotten place where I'd stowed the ghosts, boogeymen, and other monsters of childhood. My hands trembled involuntarily as I turned my weapons on the thing, and I experienced a somewhat nauseating revulsion, the same sort of feeling I got when looking at maggots infesting the corpse of a dead bird, except magnified tenfold. This creature was an abomination, its main purpose to terraform the moon into geronium, rendering it uninhabitable to all life in the process.

I opened fire. Beside me, the others trained their Gats in turn on the creature, but the giant slug proved impervious to our threads of superheated, one-hundred-round-per-second bullets.

I remembered how much effort it had taken to kill one of these varieties during Operation Crimson Pipeline. With multiple Raptor and gunship air strikes, endless shelling from Equestrians and Abrams, and countless rocket and grenade attacks from the over five hundred infantry and support troops, we'd finally taken it down.

Unfortunately, we had only eight ATLAS 5s today.

"Still think we can take it?" Fret sent sarcastically.

If the spirits actually existed, we could have really used their help right then.

"Rockets!" Facehopper sent.

I switched to serpent rockets and launched several toward the slug, as did my squad mates.

The cave thundered and explosions filled the air, but as far as I could tell we didn't damage the slug whatsoever. The giant slithered straight through the impacts.

We had been concentrating fire on the slug, which was a mistake, because doing so allowed the remaining crabs to close with our ranks. I was

near the front of the arrowhead formation and I had to physically bash a crab aside.

“Prepare to fall back!” Facehopper said over the comm. “Mauler, Trace, grab the payloads. Everyone else switch to Gatlings! Keep those crabs at bay!”

As the ATLAS 5s of Mauler and Trace broke formation, I swiveled Gats back into my hands and severed the trunk-sized cords of the crabs rushing me. They seemed to come in constantly: shoot down one and another was always there to take its place. Sometimes a crab’s momentum carried it forward even after I’d severed its cord and I’d have to swing a forearm to bat it aside.

Through it all the gargantuan form of the superslug continued to approach, bearing down on us like some giant battering ram.

Spirits save us . . .

“Payload one secured!” Mauler transmitted.

“Payload two secure!” Trace sent immediately after.

“Fall back!” Facehopper ordered.

We retreated before the crab onslaught. Wading through the charred larvae, I used strategic bursts against the enemy behind me, mindful of my ever-decreasing ammo levels.

In moments we joined up with the Centurion at our rear, Lead Foot, and fell back into the neighboring tunnel. We kept our two porters, Mauler and Trace, secure in the middle of our formation.

I’d harbored a slim hope that the superslug wouldn’t be able to fit the bordering tunnel, but looking over my shoulder I watched as the determined creature squeezed inside. It actually moved faster in this passage than in the wider cavern, with a speed I didn’t think something that large would be capable of.

The explanation for its velocity dawned on me as I fled.

Similar to snakes, these slugs had transversal muscles running up and down their bodies. Since this tunnel was more of a snug fit, rock pressed into the creature on all sides, and, as such, the slug could shove off from the surrounding surfaces with every muscle in its body at the same time. So of course it could move faster than before.

There was no more pussyfooting around. We fled for our lives, pushing our mechs to their top speeds.

Ghost and I brought up the rear. At the periphery of my vision, I saw

Ghost trip.

I turned back for him.

“Come on!” I hauled him to his feet.

Ahead of us other squad members launched serpents, trying to slow the superslug, but our colossal pursuer continued its advance unabated, herding us back toward the abyss.

The thing closed to within eight meters of my mech.

I switched to incendiary throwers, twisted my torso, and unleashed a spray of jellied gasoline at the slug as I sprinted. Ghost did the same beside me.

The flames plastered the behemoth’s front side. The heat made no difference: the superslug continued steadily forward, rapidly gaining on us.

The abyss was still about half a klick ahead.

We weren’t going to make it.

“Jetpacks!” Facehopper shouted as the slug overcame us.

I jetted upward, as did Ghost beside me.

The slug collided with me and I hurled my fists into its flesh, jabbing the tips of my incendiary throwers into the skin like swords, securing Wolfhound in place so that my mech wouldn’t slide down and be crushed by the slug’s incalculable tonnage.

Around me, the jetting ATLAS 5s of my brothers did likewise, lodging the tips of their Gats or other weapons into the slug’s flesh at random intervals along its front side. Even Mauler and Trace managed to secure themselves with one arm while still gripping the nuclear warheads in their free hands.

Below me, flames from my earlier incendiary attack burned from the slug’s skin. I felt a slight rise in temperature within my cockpit.

TJ had neglected to signal Lead Foot and Bicentennial Man; the dots representing the combat robots winked out as the superslug crushed them.

“So what next, boss?” Bomb sent.

“We tag along for the ride,” Facehopper answered.

“You know where this ride ends, don’t you?” I said. “That’s right, the abyss.”

We never did hear back from the ATLAS Support System drone we’d sent down to explore its depths, which could have meant any number of things. None of them good.

Facehopper didn’t answer right away. When he did, his voice sounded

grim. “Get ready to use your jetpacks again, mates. When the slug stops in front of the abyss, do your best to jet away. Make for the ledge if you can and try to get back to the other tunnel that borders the drop.”

“You’re assuming, of course, that the slug will actually stop . . .” Trace sent. “What if it decides to plunge right on into the abyss instead?”

“Then we’ll have to use a bit more jumpjet fuel,” Facehopper replied, somewhat deadpan.

Up ahead I saw the tunnel fall away into darkness. We had reached the abyss.

Now was the moment of truth. Would the slug stop or would it continue on over the ledge?

The slug didn’t stop.

“Jet upward *now*!” Facehopper sent. “Don’t let it drag you down! Try to make the ledge!”

I pushed away from the slug as it burst through the opening, and I thrust my ATLAS 5 upward with my jetpack. The shaft that contained the abyss was much bigger than the superslug, so I and the others had ample room to maneuver around the creature. However, since the alien was the diameter of a football field and the length of several of them, I still had some distance to traverse. I kept an eye on my jumpjet fuel level, which was dangerously low.

“Try to make the ledge!” Facehopper repeated.

I thrust my mech toward the thin shelf that ran along the wall beside the tunnel opening.

Below me, the slug emerged entirely from the passage and began the long plummet down the shaft.

There were quite a few crabs attached to the rear of the slug, crabs we hadn’t been able to attack before because we had no access to them. These crabs swung up and outward in an arc as they were drawn along by the momentum of the host.

Toward us.

I was forced to jet backward, away from the tunnel and the ledge, to avoid hitting the crabs or getting tangled up in their cords.

Mauler, holding one of the warheads, wasn’t so lucky; a crab struck his payload and latched on, pulling him down.

I immediately cut the fuel supply to my jetpack and plunged after him. I fired my Gatling at the crab, severing its cord and killing it.

Mauler shoved the crab carcass away and activated his vertical jets at

full burn. I checked his fuel gauge on my HUD: he wouldn't have enough to make it on his own, not with the extra weight of the payload.

I thrust toward Mauler and met him halfway. I wrapped my arms around the chest area of his ATLAS 5, below the armpits, just as his jets cut out.

"I'm out of fuel!" Mauler sent.

"I know." My jumpjets stuttered under the combined weight of our mechs and the payload, and I moved upward in spurts. I glanced at my own fuel supply. Dangerously low. The darkness of the abyss beckoned below, waiting to draw us down into the depths of hell.

To Facehopper I sent: "We're not going to make it!"

Facehopper's ATLAS 5 was already there above me.

Leaving one arm wrapped around Mauler's chest, I reached up to grab the outstretched hand of Facehopper's mech just as I, too, ran out of fuel.

Facehopper exhausted his own fuel supply a moment after that.

But then another metallic hand wrapped around his. Fret.

This process repeated: one of my brothers would latch onto the highest ATLAS, jet upwards, then when he ran out of fuel, another brother would grab his mech in turn.

Soon we'd formed a chain eight ATLAS 5s long. Ghost formed the final, topmost piece. His ATLAS 5 sputtered and jerked as his jetpack fought against the weight. His mech approached the tunnel opening in spurts from below. He reached upward with his free arm.

We're not going to make it, I thought, glancing at his fuel gauge.

But just before Ghost's fuel ran out entirely, he managed to wrap his large steel hand around the ledge.

"That's it, I'm out," Ghost said as his pack cut out. He hung there precariously.

The chain of ATLAS 5s gently rocked to and fro, the metal of our hulls groaning and creaking.

We couldn't simply eject from our cockpits and jet our way back up in our jumpsuits. We'd set up our mechs to draw fuel from the tanks of our suits if the main cylinders expired, which meant we'd exhausted our jumpsuit fuel supplies, too.

So there we were, this chain of mechs with a combined weight of over twenty tonnes, hanging helplessly over an abyss of unknown depth, the lot of us held in place by the arm of a single ATLAS 5 whose servomotors were rated for maybe a quarter of that weight. It was no wonder Ghost couldn't

bend his arm and pull himself up. We were lucky the arm hadn't ripped off entirely.

I glanced past Mauler into the unending darkness below. I hadn't heard an impact from the slug, though a form as massive as that would definitely make a resounding thud. That meant it hadn't hit the bottom yet.

The bottom. I wondered if the pit even had one. Maybe it passed right through the mantle into the core of the moon and emerged on the other side. With the oddities we'd seen in these warrens so far, that wouldn't surprise me.

"Mauler, see if you can climb over Cyclone and the rest of us," Facehopper said.

Below me, Mauler released the payload with his right hand so that he held it entirely with his left. The shift in weight pulled him sideways.

I tightened my grip on the lone arm I had wrapped around his chest. Above me I felt Facehopper's hold stiffen on my other wrist.

Mauler reached up and wrapped his free hand around my neck.

"Let go of me, Cyclone," Mauler sent.

I did. Slowly, reluctantly, but I did.

Mauler's weight shifted to the back of Wolfhound's neck, which was transmitted to my own neck via the load mirroring. My head snapped forward. I felt a couple of vertebrae in my neck grate together. Wasn't pleasant.

"Help him if you can, Cyclone," Facehopper sent.

"Trying," I said between gritted teeth.

I positioned my arm around the backside of his mech and held him in place as he released me and reached higher. I was just glad to get that pressure off my neck.

Mauler wrapped his steel fingers around the wrist of Facehopper's mech above me and hauled himself up.

I set my free arm against my chest, providing a ledge for Mauler's feet. The payload was now at just the right height to bounce repeatedly against my head. Fantastic.

Mauler positioned the payload behind my mech's extended arm so that when he let go of Facehopper the weight of the warhead wouldn't yank him backward. Mauler pulled his mech higher, placing his feet on my shoulders. Then he stood up, sliding the payload as far as he could around the other side of Facehopper's ATLAS 5. Mauler let go of the mech with his other hand

and, balancing precariously, reached upward. In another moment his weight left me entirely.

Mauler proceeded that way up the chain and when he reached the halfway mark, Facehopper said over the comm: “You might as well start your way up, too, Cyclone.”

And so I did, pulling myself along the ladder of mechs, using their servomotors and actuated joints for purchase. The metal hulls of the ATLAS 5s groaned under the strain beneath me. I ignored the sound, trying not to think about what would happen if one of those joints failed. I moved faster than Mauler, because I had both hands free, and soon I was right behind him, ready to give him a boost if necessary.

Facehopper was about to join us but TJ recommended against it. “There are too many sheer forces on the topmost mechs already, especially Ghost’s,” TJ sent. It sounded like he was winded. As his mech was located just below Ghost’s, that wasn’t all too surprising, given how much weight he bore and the load-mirroring effect of the cockpit actuators.

Mauler and I continued alone up the chain.

And then, near the top, Mauler somehow slipped.

I wasn’t watching but when his ATLAS slammed into Wolfhound, I nearly lost my hold on TJ’s mech.

Mauler rebounded from my steel body and I reflexively flung out a hand, narrowly latching onto his wrist. He dangled into the abyss, repeatedly bouncing against TJ’s mech beside us.

I hauled him upward; the servomotors whined outside my cockpit, and my arm burned from the load resistance.

Mauler latched onto Ghost and I released him.

I exhaled in relief. That was much too close.

“Thanks, bro,” Mauler sent.

“Just get your ass over that ledge,” I returned.

Mauler climbed over Ghost and finally hoisted the payload onto the ledge and pulled himself up.

I scaled Ghost’s ATLAS 5 next. As I neared the upper rim of the tunnel, Mauler abruptly shouted a single word over the comm.

“Shit!”

Mauler’s mech leaped over the ledge and out into space, payload and all.

Time seemed to slow down for me. I reached out, trying to grab him,

but he had jumped too far.

His ATLAS 5 descended, inexorably, into the abyss.

“Mauler—” Facehopper began.

Our leading petty officer was cut off as another superslug plunged through the tunnel opening.

The gargantuan tore Ghost and the rest of us from the wall as it passed, and we were sent hurtling down after Mauler, our delicate chain breaking apart as we BASE jumped into the depths of hell.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Rade

The press of alien jumpsuits in that tight corridor didn't slacken, and it hemmed us in from both sides.

The Chief's hands moved swiftly over the warhead's command console as he input a countdown.

I wished there was a way out of this. But there wasn't. We were going to die in a nuclear explosion inside an alien vessel. We would cause as much damage as we could, but even so we were far from our objective, the Observer Mind. It seemed like such a waste.

Manic loaded a last rocket round from his belt and fired. During the resultant flash explosion I noticed the living bulkheads shrank away from the impact zone.

Wait a second . . .

"Chief!" I said over the comm. "Wait."

Looking from the command console, the Chief glanced at me. I saw relief in his eyes but also anger. He was ready to die. We all were. And now he wanted to know why I'd brought us back from the brink. And it'd better be a damn good reason, those blazing eyes said.

"Who has an incendiary thrower?" I sent.

Manic and Lui answered in the affirmative.

"Manic, point your incendiary at the bulkhead and fire a controlled burst."

He did so. Incendiary throwers added oxidants to jellied gasoline, allowing the weapons to function even in oxygenless environments such as this. The instant Manic ceased spraying the weapon, the flames burned out.

I didn't watch the fire touch the bulkhead directly as I was still busy releasing my 9-mil at the aliens. I glanced to the side as the flames faded, however, and I saw what I expected: the living pipes had moved away from

the fire, creating a gap that slowly closed as I watched.

Manic turned, wide-eyed, toward the Chief.

“Good job, Rage,” the Chief said. “Manic and Lui, make us a corridor. Snakeoil, follow them. Use your plasma cutter and widen the corridor as necessary for the rest of us. Hijak, Bender, Rage, and myself will go in after Snakeoil, carrying the warhead. Skullcracker, you’ll bring up the rear. We have to move quickly—the corridor will be shrinking the whole time.”

While the rest of us covered them as best we could, Snakeoil pulled out his plasma cutter, and Manic and Lui approached the bulkhead.

“Let’s get this done,” Lui said.

Manic and Lui sprayed the bulkhead with their incendiaries. The pipes comprising the undulating surface instantly parted before the streaming flames. Staying abreast, Manic and Lui moved into the gap.

Apparently realizing what we intended, the jumpsuited aliens pressed forward with renewed urgency. Weapons were passed down their ranks so that those who had dropped them (thanks to our sniping efforts) were armed again.

“Lift the payload, people!” the Chief said. “But *keep firing*! Move! Skullcracker, watch our backs!”

I switched my pistol to automatic mode and then I, Hijak, Bender, and the Chief hoisted the nuclear warhead between us. We fired into the approaching enemy with our free hands from our positions on either side of the payload.

I managed to divert the aim of one of those rifle-blades but I couldn’t knock it away entirely. I switched targets to another alien whose weapon was coming to bear and I deflected its attack as well.

Snakeoil dove through the shrinking gap in the bulkhead after Manic and Lui. He circled his plasma cutter around the rim of the passageway as he went, widening the undulating walls and preventing them from returning to their prior configurations too quickly.

We four porters hurried inside behind Snakeoil. The fit was tight, and my right side scraped against the shrinking bulkhead. I was forced to position my free hand and the 9-mil I held in front of my body. Still, I didn’t need the weapon right then. And though entering a shrinking, claustrophobic-inducing hole on an alien vessel wasn’t on my top-ten list of things to do before I died, it was a relief to be out of the line of fire.

After us came Skullcracker, bringing up the rear. He still had his heavy

gun, and he walked backwards, whaling on the aliens that crowded the shrinking entrance behind him.

The hole was too small for those aliens to fit, of course, at least while standing. One of them managed to squeeze into the gap by crouching, but it couldn't move very far, not under the impacts of Skullcracker's heavy gun.

The bulkhead resealed behind Skullcracker and swallowed the alien.

None of the other troops pursued. In theory, they could have used their disintegration weapons to carve a path but that would mean damaging their own ship. Better to simply meet us on the other side of this bulkhead. Wherever it led.

The uneven surface of the deck changed in realtime as the pipes contracted. Somehow we managed not to trip, advancing as fast as we could across this passageway hewn through the living walls of the vessel. The bulkhead sealed in our wake so that it felt like we traveled inside some air pocket through a slab of solidifying magma.

Ahead, I hoped the bulkheads would give way soon, but as time passed and still the undulating pipes didn't end, I had a sick feeling in my stomach that Manic and Lui might run out of incendiary rounds before we emerged. If that happened, we'd be crushed by the peristaltic contractions of the very passage we carved.

"Maybe this wasn't the best idea," Bender transmitted, mirroring my own thoughts.

And then we were through.

Following Snakeoil, I emerged into an empty corridor, as did the three others who ported the payload. Skullcracker stumbled through last.

We lowered the warhead in relief.

"What was that you were saying, Bender?" I sent.

"That was the best idea ever," Bender transmitted.

"And keep those ideas coming," the Chief said.

Skullcracker watched the bulkhead slowly seal behind him. "Tell me we won't ever have to do that again."

"How many incendiary rounds do you have left?" the Chief asked Manic and Lui.

Manic shook his head. "Almost out."

"Me too," Lui sent.

The Chief compressed his jaw behind his faceplate. "There you go, Skullcracker. We won't ever have to do it again. Though I'd much rather we

had the option."

"What now?" Manic sent.

"We continue toward the target," the Chief said matter-of-factly. "But first: Snakeoil, with me."

He and Snakeoil disarmed the payload and then the Chief had Snakeoil reactivate the wave-canceling tech that masked the nuclear signature.

Spare weaponry was quickly doled out between us, and I was given a sniper rifle once more, as was Bender—though he would've probably preferred a standard-issue rifle, judging from the sour expression on his face.

"Let's be on our way before the cavalry comes again," the Chief sent. "The ruse is up, boys. Point and drag men, I want you on extra alert."

The squad spread out again and moved forward at a faster lope than before, carrying the nuclear warhead ever deeper into Bogey 2. The enemy was aware of us now, but there wasn't much else we could do but continue our mission. I didn't think it was likely we'd actually reach the Observer Mind though, given how far away it was, but the closer we could bring the bomb, the greater the chance of inflicting actual damage on the target upon detonation. Even if we didn't harm the Observer Mind, if we got close enough maybe we'd still succeed in crippling the Skull Ship.

We passed a side corridor. I stared into the darkness, letting my aReal map as much of the passage as it could in the brief amount of time my helmet pointed in that direction.

As I moved on, a male voice emerged from the murk, speaking perfect English.

"Help me!"

The squad halted.

I stared into the side corridor but could see nothing beyond the ambient light of our headlamps.

"Help me!" the voice came again.

It sounded almost like . . . no, it couldn't be.

Alejandro?

The Chief and I exchanged glances.

"It's a trap," Skullcracker said.

"Rage, Hijak, check it out," Chief Bourbonjack said.

Hijak and I proceeded down the corridor at a jog. My heart was literally pounding.

Alejandro.

Alive after all this time.

I almost couldn't believe it.

I felt trepidation, matched by a nearly unrestrained joy.

Those eerie, undulating bulkheads swayed and flowed around us. If they contracted and tried to crush me to death, I'd fight through them, because in that moment I'd do whatever it took to reach Alejandro.

In seconds the cone of light from my helmet illuminated a small, squirming shape up ahead, which protruded from the deck. It was a jumpsuit, about the same size as my own, glued to the gangway via some sort of resin.

I hurried over to the jumpsuit and knelt to peer inside the helmet.

It wasn't Alejandro.

The disappointment I felt was staggering. I actually lost my balance and had to rest a steadying hand on the victim's jumpsuit. I'd wanted it to be Alejandro so badly that I'd hallucinated.

"Chief, you better get over here," Hijak sent.

"What is it?" the Chief returned. "What did you find?"

"An SK."

"I am Fan," the SK said, using his external speakers. "Please, get me out of here."

He sounded nothing like Alejandro. But we human beings had a way of torturing ourselves when we lost those people we cared about. We would imagine we saw them on the street when we spotted a stranger of similar build, dress, and hair color in the distance. We'd go to them and upon seeing their face we'd realize our mind's deception. Or we'd think we had heard their voice and we'd follow it to the source, only to find someone else speaking entirely.

While the rest of the squad came up, bringing the payload, I had Hijak move aside, then I peered into the SK's faceplate. Even though I shined my headlamp directly inside, the bulky rim of his helmet prevented me from seeing the back of his head, so I couldn't tell if there was a metallic bar grafted onto the rear of his skull.

"Turn your head to the left," I told him. "As far as you can."

Fan obeyed.

I saw his right ear fully, but other than that, the rim still occluded the back section of his cranium.

The Chief came up beside me. "Is he a host, then?" Chief Bourbonjack spoke over the squad-level comm, keeping his external speakers deactivated

so that Fan couldn’t hear.

I shook my head. “I can’t actually tell. Short of taking off his helmet, there’s really no way to see the back of his head.”

The Chief glanced at Snakeoil. “Readings?”

“Though the jumpsuit looks almost the same as our own, and is probably in fact based on our tech, it seems to be of alien make,” Snakeoil sent. “As such, I can’t get a reading through the it. No vital signs. No EM signatures. Can’t even scan the public profile on his embedded ID. But I’ll tell you what I *can* read, and that’s the resin binding him. It’s made from an allotrope of geronium, similar to the stuff we found caking the buildings in Shangde City.”

I exchanged a worried glance with the Chief. Crabs and slugs had produced that resin in Shangde City. Did that mean those alien breeds loitered somewhere aboard this ship, too? We had enough trouble as it was dealing with the other aliens.

“Set me free,” Fan said, using his external speakers.

“What the hell are we going to do with him?” Manic said over the squad comm.

“Well, he *is* human,” Lui sent. “We can’t just leave him here. We already left enough people behind back there.”

“Yeah, but that’s because we had to,” Manic returned.

“Exactly,” Lui countered. “This man has a jumpsuit. He can live. We can get him out of here.”

“Did he give a name?” the Chief transmitted.

“Fan,” Hijak sent.

The Chief momentarily used his external speakers to address the SK. “Fan, switch to frequency 134 please.”

That was a new comm line the Chief had just formed, which we could all use to communicate with the SK instead of having to rely on external speakers that might attract unwanted visitors. If we needed to exclude Fan from our conversations, we could still revert to the squad-level comm.

“How did you get here?” the Chief sent over the new frequency.

“Please, get me out of this.” Fan squirmed against his resinous binds.

“Not until you tell me who you are,” Chief Bourbonjack said.

“I told you, I am Fan.”

“Care to expand on that? Are you military?”

“Yes. I’m part of the fourth regiment, second battalion, city defense

group, Tau Ceti II-b."

The Chief seemed unconvinced. "And how did you get here exactly?"

Fan met the Chief's piercing eyes. "I was captured when the robots turned. They took me to a holding facility beneath a football field. I woke up here, encased in resin."

"Why would the aliens deposit an unpossessed human in an empty corridor?" Snakeoil transmitted on the squad-level comm, excluding Fan. "It makes no sense."

"Unless they put him here because they wanted to lure us," the Chief answered. "Though the question is, why?"

"To delay us, maybe?" Lui put forth.

"He could be a weapon of some kind," Manic offered.

"The possibilities are endless, aren't they?" the Chief said. "And none of them point to his presence doing us any good."

"We should leave him," Hijak said.

Lui turned toward Fan. "How did you get that jumpsuit?"

"I had it when I woke up," Fan insisted. "The aliens must have put it on me."

"Why do you speak English so well?" Lui said.

"English immersion," Fan answered. "First seven years of schooling."

"How much oxygen do you have left in your tanks?"

"It looks like . . . about four days' worth."

Lui turned toward the Chief and switched to the squad-level comm again. "Chief, you have to let him come with us."

The Chief half smiled and half frowned in that kind of grimace he made when he thought something was a very bad idea.

"Chief," Lui continued. "Please. We've already abandoned so many innocents. We can't leave this man, too. If the aliens put him here to delay us, then the sooner we let him go, the faster we can move on. We're good men. We don't leave innocent people to die."

But we did that earlier, I thought bitterly. *With the refugees in the glass tank.*

The Chief bit his lip and then nodded. On the public comm he said to Fan, "Against my better judgment I'm going to set you free. Better not make me regret the decision."

Skullcracker patted his heavy gun. "Don't make any of us regret it."

"I won't," Fan said. "I won't. Thank you, all of you."

The Chief waved Snakeoil forward. “Cut him loose, breacher.”

Snakeoil hefted his plasma cutter and knelt. He brought the cutter close and activated it, slowly outlining Fan’s jumpsuit, melting the resin that held the SK in place. Fan was able to sit up halfway through but the Chief ordered him back down.

When it was done, Snakeoil stood back and the Chief allowed Fan to stand.

“Skullcracker and Bender, I want you two to keep watch on him,” the Chief transmitted openly.

“With pleasure,” Skullcracker returned, eyes gleaming as he regarded Fan.

“I’m watching you, bitch,” Bender sent to Fan.

The SK ignored the comments and glanced at the nuclear payload. “You came to destroy the ship?”

The Chief smiled, saying nothing.

“Perhaps I can help you.”

Chief Bourbonjack’s smile transformed into a feral grin, replete with teeth. “I highly doubt that.” He turned to regard the rest of us. “We’ve tarried here long enough. Let’s move, people. Rage, Manic, Snakeoil, with me on the payload.”

We hoisted the payload between us and returned to the main passage, traveling in the direction of the Observer Mind once more.

“I can help you,” Fan insisted as we walked. His gaze was still on the nuclear payload.

“I’m listening . . .” Chief transmitted. “But that doesn’t guarantee a thing.”

“My Implant is still active,” Fan said.

The Chief seemed puzzled. “Your Implant is active.”

“Yes. You know what that means, don’t you? It has continued mapping, even while I was unconscious. Using visual data sent from my helmet cams, rather than my eyes.”

“Using visual data from your helmet,” the Chief mused, sounding doubtful. He switched to the private comm. “Snakeoil, I thought you said his suit was of alien make. How could it interface with his Implant?”

“Assuming he’s telling the truth, Chief,” Snakeoil replied, “that isn’t so farfetched, given the external design. As I said, though the suit is of alien make, it *is* based on our own tech.”

“If that’s true,” Manic said over the private comm, “it’s scary how easily they’ve reverse engineered our technology.”

Snakeoil nodded. “With possessed human hosts helping them, it’s probably not all that difficult, unfortunately.”

“And his claim that his Implant is still active?” the Chief sent. “How is that even possible, given the EM blasts the Phants like to use to overwhelm its circuitry?”

“Maybe he got lucky,” Lui transmitted. “And they haven’t gotten around to blasting him yet.”

“Either that, or he’s one of them . . .” Hijak sent.

The Chief eyed Hijak, apparently carefully considering his words. Then he turned toward Snakeoil. “One last thing. If the SK’s suit is really based on human tech, wouldn’t the aReal built into his helmet do the mapping already? Why would he have to rely on the Implant?”

“The aReal *would* do the mapping,” Snakeoil agreed. “But if he was logged into his Implant when he fell unconscious, the helmet would continue sending data to the Implant, not the aReal.”

“Good point.” Chief Bourbonjack switched to the public comm. “Well, Fan, let’s take a look at this map data of yours. Send it to Snakeoil here. He’s the one—”

A transfer window abruptly appeared on my aReal, cutting off the Chief. The data source was labeled “unknown.”

The Chief frowned at Fan and then turned toward the rest of us. “Snakeoil, accept the transfer. You’re our buffer. Everyone else, drop the connection.”

I promptly dismissed the incoming data window.

Snakeoil remained silent a moment. And then: “Even though it’s just a data file, I had the virus scanner take a look anyway. No infections. I plugged it into the mapping software. Looks legit. If this data is accurate, I should be able to plot a much more direct route to the Observer Mind. Will probably save us a few hours.”

“Propagate it to the rest of us,” Chief Bourbonjack ordered.

I watched the map fill out on my HUD as I received the data. Out of curiosity I overlaid the EM emission source corresponding to the Observer Mind. None of the new mapped corridors actually approached the Observer Mind—though a few came close. In any case, the map data would definitely help us get there faster.

“All right, Snakeoil,” the Chief sent. “Best route?”

“I’m plotting a path now,” Snakeoil said over the comm.

“I still don’t like it.” Hijak sent over the private line. “And I’m not just saying that because this Fan guy is an SK. He shows up right after we finish fending off an alien attack and gives us map data that just so happens to reveal the fastest route to our destination. Smells like a honey pot to me. You know, the kind sys admins use to trick hackers into logging into jailed shells, and while the hackers are busy poking around, monitor processes dispatch police robos to pick them up.”

“If it’s a trap, or a trick, we’ll simply detonate the payload,” the Chief transmitted.

“Exactly why I don’t like it,” Hijak transmitted. “But I digress.”

Fan had been excluded from most of the previous conversation, but the Chief cut him back in to say, “We’ve decided not to use your map data.”

The Chief was testing Fan of course, since we *were* relying on the data—in fact, Snakeoil’s computed course appeared as a series of interconnected lines on my HUD map at that very moment. But the Chief wanted to see how Fan would react. A sneaky tactic, maybe, though one I would’ve used myself.

Fan appeared unperturbed. “As you wish.” He bowed his head. “You are my rescuers.” With a glance at Skullcracker and Bender, he added: “And my captors.”

“Don’t you forget it,” the Chief told him, apparently satisfied with his response. “By the way, I’d advise you to shut down your Implant at your earliest convenience. Assuming you want to live, that is.”

Keeping our weapons at the ready, we proceeded at a steady lope. We followed the course Snakeoil had plotted and took the indicated branches when they came.

The map proved accurate thus far, though the corridors we chose were eerily devoid of life. We should have encountered at least one jumpsuited alien or Phant by now, to be consistent with the traffic we’d experienced earlier. But there was nothing.

“Does anyone else feel like these passages are a little too quiet?” Bender sent, excluding Fan.

“Where the hell are they?” Hijak said on the comm.

“Maybe all the nearby aliens were drawn to the coords of our previous attack,” Lui put out there.

“Yeah well,” Hijak sent, “they should have been able to muster for a

second attack by now."

"Don't jinx us," Manic transmitted. "If the aliens want to stay away, let them. Maybe they're scared. They've seen how easily we can bypass their bulkheads."

"They're not scared," Snakeoil said over the comm. "They probably already know we're almost out of incendiary rounds."

"I still think we should dump the SK," Hijak interjected.

"And I still say he stays," Lui sent.

"I'm with Lui," Snakeoil said. "He did give us the map data, when all is said and done."

"Yeah well," Hijak responded, "the moment that map proves wrong, and it will, trust me, I say we toast him."

"You're all from the UC?" Fan interrupted, oblivious to the private battle over his fate that was taking place. "I visited New America, you know, when I was a youth. And Sino-Korea. Traveled all the way to Earth."

"Keep quiet!" Bender sent.

"I actually want to hear this," the Chief transmitted. The amusement was evident in his voice. "Go on, Fan. Tell us about your little visit to Earth."

"Yes," Fan sent, giving Bender a defiant look. "As a child of Tau Ceti system, I undertook the prerequisite journey to Earth, the mother world, in my late teens. What I found there proved vastly disappointing. The racism. The bigotry. Such a closed-minded people. And the citizens of the UC are not alone in this. The SKs of Earth are guilty, too. They pretend to esteem us but the moment we turn our backs they call us 'spacers' and treat us like feces. But perhaps my worst impression of Earth was the stinking masses of humanity . . . everywhere you go, an endless sea of people, billions and billions of them, choking the life from the planet! I had wondered why I saw so many greenhouse and livestock domes in orbit—it's because the overpopulated planet is incapable of supporting food production anymore!"

"Wait, that's not entirely true," Lui transmitted. "We have whole parcels of land outside the cities set aside for hydroponic farm towers and whatnot. I'm sure you've seen the buildings, the ones that look like huge steel spruce trees. Plus a lot of crop growth is done underneath the ocean these days, with sunlight piped in via optics."

"Well, I am telling you only what I saw. You say parcels of land outside the cities are set aside for farms? I did not see them. Nor these steel trees you mentioned. Instead, outside the cities, all I saw was suburbia, suburbia, and

more suburbia. And when the city planners were not expanding outward, they were building upward! Skyscrapers like nothing I had ever witnessed devoured the sky. Multiple levels of roadways. Vehicles, people, and robots everywhere. On the sidewalk. Above the sidewalk. On the roads. Pure insanity. Too many people. Way too many. The governments of Earth would do well to trim the population.

"Look at the colonies. Most of them cap out at one million people. That's the perfect number for a planet. Not too many, not too few. Enough room for genetic diversity. Enough room to share the world with other compatible life. Before the invasion, we used to have herds of buffalo roaming the grass steppes of Tau Ceti II-b. A million, actually. Just as there were a million songbirds. A million deer. A million horses. Do you see where I'm going with this? Too many of any one animal species ruins a planet. But by limiting the numbers of each one, a balance is found, an accord with nature. And the world takes care of itself. That is a healthy planet. That is a healthy ecosystem.

"Think about it: If Earth implemented population control, not only would nature operate more smoothly, but so would the man-made constructs of government and business. Bureaucracy would be reduced. Food and wealth equally shared, rather than hoarded among the rich countries. Everyone would have access to spacefaring technology. Everyone would have their own robot, and free food for life. This is the reality of the grand experiment known as the colonies, and it could be the reality of Earth as well."

"I'm all for the colonies," Lui said over the comm as he walked. "And I have a lot of respect for people who live out in space. But what exactly are you trying to say? That we should round up the billions of people on Earth and launch them to the colonies? Sorry dude, there aren't enough terraformed worlds to hold them all if we're going to limit the populations to a million."

"The simplest solution would be to institute some sort of yearly lottery to reduce the number of people," Fan transmitted.

"A slaughterhouse lottery, you mean," Manic sent.

"That is one way, but not one I would advocate. Sterilize anyone born into the society of Earth. Then, only those who win the lottery are allowed to forgo the reproductive suppressants. Take away the rejuvenation treatments as well, and in six or seven decades you could have the population of Earth down to twenty percent of what it is now."

“That sounds suspiciously like what the invaders want.” I glanced at Chief Bourbonjack.

The Chief raised an eyebrow behind his faceplate. “All right, I’ve heard enough. Quiet on the comm line please.”

I could tell from the disgusted faces that I wasn’t the only one disturbed by Fan’s views.

“Chief, are we really sure this guy’s not a host?” Manic sent on the private line. “He’s got some weird-ass ideas.”

“He *is* a Sino-Korean,” Bender transmitted on the same line. “Who knows what brainwashing bull-crap his government has fed his mind.”

“Dump him?” Hijak asked the Chief.

Lui’s torso bobbed slightly left and right—he was shaking his head inside the helmet. He opened his mouth but before he could speak the Chief answered.

“Fan stays, for now,” the Chief sent. “Now as I said, quiet on the comm line please.”

We continued down the corridor, following Snakeoil’s plotted trajectory. The corridors continued to check out, matching Fan’s blueprints perfectly.

Still, it seemed odd that we hadn’t encountered a soul since meeting the SK.

I was trailing the group, acting as drag man, when my sixth sense fired: I felt certain someone was following us.

I glanced over my shoulder, shining my headlamp back the way we had come, but I perceived only the dark passage with its undulating bulkheads.

Though he was ahead of me, the Chief noticed my backward glance, probably because of the shifting light from my headlamp. He turned toward me. “What is it, Rage?”

“Dunno,” I said.

“Did you hear something?”

“Not exactly.” I shifted my grip on the rifle. “It’s just . . . I can’t shake the feeling that something is following us.”

The Chief raised a hand, halting the group. “Never ignore your instincts. Check it out. Lui, go with Rage.”

The two of us retreated cautiously down the passageway, our headlamps lighting the way in the dark.

And then I saw it.

Some kind of black slime oozed from the ceiling onto the floor.

"I don't remember this condensation being here on the way," Lui sent.

"That's because it wasn't." I knelt. There was no way I was going to touch the substance, not when I knew what contact with alien matter like that found in Phants could do to a man. I ran a quick scan with my HUD instead. It seemed to be some form of bio-matter. "That's not condensation. Chief, you getting this on my vid feed?"

"I am," the Chief answered. "The two of you get back here. *Now*."

We retreated slowly at first, keeping our aim pointed steadily into the murk. As soon as the slime was out of sight, we turned around and jogged toward the others.

Before we rejoined them a thin tentacle thrust from the darkness behind us.

It wrapped around Lui's neck assembly, hauling him backward.

"Lui!" I opened fire with my rifle, severing the tentacle.

A bulbous shape darted forward, taking up half the corridor.

I continued shooting. Lying on the gangway, Lui fired at the creature with me.

The thing slowed and finally dropped to the deck only a short distance from Lui's boots. Its tentacles flopped around the deflating bulb that was its main mass. Black slime seeped from the bullet holes, further shrinking it.

Lui got up and together we stared at the thing, not quite sure what to make of it.

The rest of the squad hurried to join us.

"What the hell . . ." the Chief sent. "You two all right?"

"Fine, Chief," Lui replied.

"Never better," I said.

The Chief turned toward Fan. "Have you seen one of these before?"

The SK shook his head.

"The EM emitters didn't protect us from it," Lui said.

"No they did not," the Chief agreed. "Like I said earlier, the ruse is up."

While the rest of us kept our guns trained down the fore and aft of the corridor, Snakeoil examined the carcass. "Looks like a jellyfish of some kind."

Lui prodded the gooey remains with his rifle. "An air-based jellyfish?"

"The environment here is similar to the upper atmosphere of a gas giant," Snakeoil said over the comm. "Scientists have hypothesized that life-

forms like this might exist in such an atmosphere, though until today we've never actually encountered any."

"But the gravity of this place is all wrong for a gas giant," Lui sent.

"Not necessarily," Snakeoil transmitted. "You're forgetting other influencing factors, such as the gale-force winds found in a gas giant's upper atmosphere. Such winds might counter the high gravity, similar to the buoyancy effect of water."

"Gale-force winds would rip this thing apart," Lui sent. "Plus, where's the wind?" He held up a gloved finger as if testing for a breeze.

"Let's move on, people," the Chief said.

We hoisted the payload—I was one of those assigned to portage duty this time around—and continued forward. Snakeoil led the way, followed by us four porters, and three more bringing up the rear with Fan.

We all watched the darkness keenly. It wouldn't be fun to endure a repeat of what had just happened, with some random tentacle suddenly spiriting one of us away.

Snakeoil paused up ahead. He was gazing toward the rightmost bulkhead. His aReal interpreted what he saw and transmitted updates to my HUD: a cavernous side compartment appeared on my map, something that wasn't present in the previous data.

"New map data." The Chief glanced accusingly at the SK. "Fan, have you been hiding this from us?"

Fan shook his head adamantly. "No. My helmet must been facing away when I passed this way. But I thought you weren't using my data map anyway?"

"Let's dump him!" Hijak urged over the squad comm.

"Quiet," the Chief replied.

"Guys, you better come see this." Snakeoil stepped into the side passage.

We approached the entrance and set down the payload, and then joined Snakeoil in the corridor. Bender prodded Fan forward behind me.

The passage opened into a vast cavern. We saw hundreds of tall, equally spaced plates that seemed to be made of black resin. Thousands of decagonal cells were carved into each plate. Glowing Phants in gaseous form floated between the cells, the bolts of electricity from their bodies providing much of the ambient light.

Jellyfish-like entities, similar to the one we'd just gunned down, also

moved between plates; the bulbous masses of their bodies rhythmically expanded and contracted, propelling them forward.

Manic and the others shoved their way past, lining up along the inner wall as they took in the strange sight.

“Looks like a beehive,” Manic sent.

One of the cells collapsed as I watched, and I saw a blue Phant emerge. It glowed brighter than any Phant I had seen before.

“Some kind of nursery?” Lui transmitted.

“That, or a mess hall,” Snakeoil said over the comm.

“Maybe we should plant the nuke,” Bender sent. “Might not get an opportunity this good again.”

“No,” Chief Bourbonjack said over the comm. “We stick to the plan. We get as close to the Observer Mind as possible, then we plant the nuke.”

I glanced at my HUD map. The Observer Mind was still more than a day’s march away.

Bender unhooked a grenade from his belt. “Still, might be worth it to cause a little damage while we’re here.”

“You remember what I told you earlier about drawing undue attention to ourselves?” the Chief told him.

“Uh, Chief?” Lui sent. “It’s a little too late for that now.”

Some of the closer jellyfish had turned around and were hurrying toward us. The bulbs of their bodies pumped furiously, tentacles dragging along behind them. They were joined by blue and purple Phants.

“Grenades and rockets, people!” the Chief yelled over the comm. “Give ’em hell!”

We hurled grenades and fired our Gustavs into the cavern. Resinous cells burst and jellyfish exploded, spraying the inner bulkheads with black liquid and writhing tentacles.

“Good enough!” the Chief sent. “Tactical retrograde, men!”

We retreated to the payload; four of us scooped it up and together we proceeded from the area at a jog.

Skullcracker and Snakeoil brought up the rear. Behind them, tentacles flailed through the opening and into the corridor. Our drag men opened fire with their heavy guns, covering our retreat.

“Can I have a gun?” Fan asked.

“No!” the Chief returned.

We jogged down the corridor as fast as we could, those jellyfish

harrying us the entire way. Skullcracker and Snakeoil unleashed sporadic gunfire all the while, doing their best to keep the enemy at bay.

Purple Phants began to sweep past the jellyfish. We all knew how well bullets worked against *them*.

The nine of us abruptly piled into a wide compartment. A series of ribbed protrusions ran along the deck and bulkhead; between those ribs, dark passages led off to other portions of the ship. It seemed a hub of sorts.

In the center of the room, at the confluence of the ridges, a raised dais jutted from the deck, topped by a flat, metallic disc.

“Another compartment that doesn’t match the map,” Hijak sent, excluding Fan.

Indeed. According to my map, the corridor should have continued onward without interruption. As I watched, the HUD blueprint updated, replacing the previous passage with a pinwheel-like cavern that matched what I was now looking at.

“Perfect place for an ambush,” Lui sent, also excluding Fan.

We all turned to regard Fan, who was giving us a sheepish grin from where he stood beside Bender. He realized very well that the map data was different.

The sound of gunfire from Skullcracker and Snakeoil reminded us of our predicament.

“Cross!” the Chief said over the comm.

Tentacles slammed into the chamber behind us, searching, seeking, but Skullcracker and Snakeoil severed them with their heavy guns.

Hijak, Manic, Lui, and I struggled to lift the payload over the ribs in the floor. I was about to suggest a coordinated leap with jumpjets when the Chief spoke.

“Taking too long,” the Chief transmitted. “Porters, use your jetpacks!”

“Wait Chief, we’ve got company,” Manic sent.

The vaporous forms of blue and purple Phants crowded the other entrances to the chamber. They slowly floated inside, forming an ever-tightening noose.

“On me, Snakeoil!” the Chief transmitted, voice sounding grim.

Snakeoil joined him at the command console. We porters started to lower the payload.

“Keep moving!” the Chief sent us.

“Where?” Lui returned.

“Away from the Phants!”

And so we did, letting the Phants herd us toward the center of the chamber—the only place we could go. While we were doing this, the Chief and Snakeoil inserted their physical keys and entered their respective halves of the armament code into the device.

The Chief turned toward the Phants when it was done. “Back off!” He said over the external speakers of his helmet, keeping his gloved hand over the command console. “Back off or I blow the thing!”

The Phants didn’t obey. Maybe they didn’t understand, or maybe they thought the Chief was merely bluffing. Even so, I thought it odd that the Phants moved so slowly. They were capable of much faster speeds, especially the purple varieties.

They probably intended to capture us.

Tentacles still thrashed at us but Skullcracker handled them with bursts of his heavy gun.

“I’m not kidding around here!” the Chief shouted. “I’ll blow it!”

The Phants continued to close.

They left the Chief no choice. Did the encroaching aliens really care so little about a nuclear device going off in their ship? Or maybe they actually preferred that we detonated the bomb here rather than next to their Observer Mind.

“Lower the payload,” the Chief said.

We did.

Chief Bourbonjack promptly input thirty seconds into the command console and dialed the yield to full.

“Warning, full-yield nuclear detonation in T-minus thirty seconds,” a female voice intoned from the payload.

“*Twenty-nine.*”

“*Twenty-eight.*”

The Phants continued to tighten the noose. The tentacles harassed us continually, but we all helped fend them off. Some of us fired at the Phants as well, but the bullets passed right through the gaseous entities.

“This is it,” the Chief sent over the sporadic gunfire. “I’m sorry, people. I had hoped it wouldn’t come to this.” I heard what sounded like a profound sigh over the comm, though it was hard to tell with the gunshots. “It was good working with you. You’re the best of the best. I’ll see you all in the afterlife reserved for men like us. That land beyond the stars where all the

greatest warriors go.”

I glanced at my companions. Their faces were grim, yet accepting, as they took their last breaths and fired at the enemy.

So this was it. I never thought the mission would end like this, with us blowing ourselves up so far away from our objective. But what choice did we have?

Still, I had to wonder how much damage we would really cause. What if our lives were spent for nothing? The Phants would almost certainly survive. They were interdimensional beings that existed only partially in this universe.

But what of the ship? I thought of the malleable behavior of the surrounding bulkheads. Maybe when the nuke detonated, this part of the ship would rearrange itself to vent the explosion—though I highly doubted anything within the vaporization range would escape.

Like ourselves.

“*Ten.*”

“Wooyah brothers!” Skullcracker shouted as he fired into the enemy. “To the end!”

Was there truly no escape? If only we had more incendiary rounds . . . maybe we could use the heated outflow from our jetpacks to carve a tunnel through the deck? But given our relatively low fuel levels, I doubted we’d have enough to create a hole deeper than a few meters. Assuming of course that the gangway at our feet yielded in the same way as the bulkheads.

“*Five.*”

Here I was, still trying to find a way to cheat death, even down to the last few seconds of my existence. It was my fighting spirit, I guess. It refused to allow me to back down. But there were some things you couldn’t fight, no matter how badly you wanted to.

“*Four*.”

Suddenly I just let go. I surrendered. Accepted the fact that there was nothing I could do to get out of the situation. Not this time. We were going to detonate that nuclear warhead and die.

“*Three.*”

We all knew there was a chance something like this might happen while on duty someday. We accepted that burden each and every time we went out into the field.

Vaporized by a nuke, lightyears from home.

Well, at least it would be quick and painless.

I took heart in the fact that we all died here for a reason. That was more than most men could say.

"*Two*."

My only regret was that I'd never see Tahoe again.

Remember us.

Remember me.

I'm coming, Shaw.

"*One*."

CHAPTER EIGHT

Tahoe

I plunged backward into the abyss in my ATLAS 5. The superslug consumed the view above me. It was probably around a tenth the size of the shaft. I say probably, because I couldn't see the extents of the rock around me; save for the nearby wall, most of the abyss was shrouded in darkness.

The slug squirmed as it fell—transversal muscles elongated and shrank its body, lateral muscles bent it left and right.

Crabs were released en masse from the slug's flanks. These smaller creatures slowly drifted upward away from us, cords trailing beneath them like the ripcords from parachutes.

Below, the darkness remained impenetrable, hiding the eventual terminus of our fall. Because of the murk, it didn't seem like we were plummeting at all, and it was deceptively easy to believe we were on some mech spacewalk instead. That said, the sole wall visible beside us provided a reference point, and all it took was a glance at the blurry surface to remind ourselves that we were indeed falling. Fast.

Inside those ATLAS mechs, my brothers and I basically dropped like boulders. Without jumpjet fuel we couldn't change our horizontal vector. This was entirely unlike jumpsuit-only freefall, where the positioning of our bodies and limbs readily influenced the drag we experienced. Our mechs were far too heavy for that. Only when our air brakes were active would we have any horizontal control.

"Um, so what's the plan?" Fret sent.

"Maybe we can latch onto the wall?" Trace transmitted, in reference to the blur of rock beside us. "Then climb up?"

"Good luck with that," TJ sent. "You want to pulp your mech, by all means try it."

"What if we attempted an emergency landing?"

“On the wall?” TJ sent. “Still too fast. Look how rocky it is. Like I said, you’ll pulp your mech, if you don’t end up tangled in the cords of your chute first.”

“TJ’s right,” Facehopper’s voice came over the comm. “We can’t use the wall.”

“But we are going to make an emergency landing, right?” Fret sent.

“At the bottom of the abyss, yes,” Facehopper responded. “It’s all we *can* do.”

“I wouldn’t suggest attempting an emerg while we got a superslug hanging above us,” Bomb transmitted.

“We’ll have to get on top of the thing,” Facehopper agreed. “Use your air brakes, mates. Rendezvous topside.”

My brothers began snapping upwards around me as if some giant, invisible hand plucked them from view one by one, when in reality all they had done was activate their air brakes.

I engaged Wolfhound’s own braking system. Articulated flaps immediately swung wide from my legs and upper torso. I felt the sudden change in Gs as Wolfhound reoriented and flung upward. In less than a second my motion was checked. However, I had slammed into the slug’s underside.

Damn.

Glued there against the dark flesh by the massive creature’s downward velocity, I retracted my air brakes and shoved against the slug to turn myself around, wanting to face it.

I unleashed my Gatling at close range. Threads of superheated bullets harmlessly embedded into its flesh, and to the slug, I was sure, it felt like little more than the equivalent of an insect bite.

I alternately dragged, alternately rolled myself along the slug’s skin, making my way toward the outer perimeter. The creature had stopped struggling so much during the free fall and only occasionally squirmed.

Not far from me I saw TJ and Bomb, also caught beneath the slug. It was comforting to know I wasn’t the only one who’d miscalculated and slammed into the thing.

The two of them shoved off from the slug’s far flank and out into empty space. Then they reactivated their air brakes and vanished from view. I checked my HUD, and on the map I saw their green dots reposition above the slug. Almost everyone else had gathered there by now, just within signal

range topside. Everyone save me and Mauler. The rest of my brothers had obviously retracted their air brakes and were waiting for us.

I spotted Mauler's mech underneath the slug nearby. He was struggling with his payload, which had snagged against the creature somehow. He fired his Gatling into the thing's flesh but still couldn't tug the bomb free.

I drag-rolled myself to him, well aware that the abyss could bottom out at any second.

"It's stuck!" Mauler sent as I came close.

The payload seemed embedded in a giant gill of sorts. Mauler tugged at the device repeatedly but the heavy warhead still wouldn't move.

I grabbed the far side. "On three. One. Two. Three!"

We both pulled.

It still wouldn't budge.

"Cyclone and Mauler," Facehopper transmitted, his voice crackling with static. "Where the hell are you? The cave floor could be coming up any second here."

I didn't want him to send anyone down to get us, needlessly risking another brother's life. So I returned over the comm: "We're on the way, Facehopper."

"You better be," Facehopper sent back, the doubt obvious in his voice. He knew me all too well. "Ghost and I will wait for you. Everyone else, begin emergency landing procedures."

I bent toward the edge of the payload where it was snagged in the gill. One of the mech-sized handles had lodged beneath a skin fold. I tried to reposition the device but it was held fast.

I could see the bullet holes where Mauler had unleashed his Gatling. He had missed a key, fleshy pouch. I extended my own Gat and let off several bursts, cutting away said pouch.

The bomb broke free.

Mauler immediately dragged the payload toward the slug's right flank.

I went to his side, intending to help him, but he sent, "I got this, bro."

The two of us approached the slug's rounded flank. I waited for Mauler to shove off. He did so, and drifted out into the empty air before engaging his air brakes and vanishing above me.

I jumped next. Wolfhound moved outward and upward, away from the slug.

The rock wall beside me was coming up a bit too fast. I engaged my air

brakes and as my descent slowed, I steered away from the rock.

The slug plunged past on my left . . .

A resounding boom filled my cockpit and the G forces abruptly shifted horizontally.

Apparently the slug had decided to convulse its body just as I passed, striking me with its flank and sending me careening straight toward the wall.

Spirits help me!

The ATLAS 5 bounced off the rock with a loud groan of metal. Wolfhound spiraled in place a few times and some dizzying moments passed before the air brakes attained the proper orientation to reengage. I flew up and out of the way just as the rearmost section of the slug took another pass at me.

The trailing umbilicals of the crabs were all around me by then, like thick, carbon-fiber elevator cables.

"Watch the cords, Cyclone," Facehopper transmitted.

I tried to avoid them but there were too many around my current position. I brought my Gatlings forward to fire but I was too late: I struck one cord, then two, and before I knew it I was entangled.

I tried shifting my arms, intending to mow through the cords with my Gats, but I couldn't move. I was wrapped too tightly.

Gatling fire came down, cutting the cords just above and below me, and I was free again.

Thank you, Facehopper.

I sloughed the umbilicals from my body and changed the angle of my descent so that I moved away from the cords and the crabs connected to them.

A crab suddenly careened from a bulge in the rock wall and came spinning toward me.

I tilted backward and the drag from my airbrakes allowed me to narrowly avoid the entity.

Above me, almost everyone else had already initiated emergency landing procedures. Their green dots were frozen on my HUD map, out of range. Only Ghost and Facehopper remained; their air brakes were disengaged while they waited, plummeting fifty meters above me.

As I neared, Facehopper said over the comm, "I'm reading a problem with your emergency parachute system, Cyclone. I want you to try to initiate an emergency landing."

Each mech contained a set of three emergency parachutes as a backup in case the aerospike thrusters on the feet of the mech malfunctioned (or the mech exhausted its jumpjet fuel supply, as was our case).

I pulled up Wolfhound's diagnostics on the HUD. The emergency parachute system was flashing red, among other warning lights. That didn't bode well. Guess I took more damage than I thought when I hit the rock wall.

Keeping my air brakes engaged, I instructed Wolfhound to release the emergency parachutes.

The expected gut slam of G forces didn't hit. The parachutes didn't deploy.

I tried again.

Nothing.

"Cyclone? Sitrep?" Facehopper sent.

"Emergency chutes are out," I told him.

My air brakes alone weren't going to cut it. I'd never slow down enough to survive. Facehopper and Ghost activated their own air brakes to remain close to my side. Below us, the slug and its crabs dropped away. I still couldn't see the bottom of the abyss through the murk but that didn't mean it wasn't there, lurking just out of sight.

"All right, here's what we're going to do," Facehopper transmitted. "Ghost, you're going to activate your own emergency landing system. I want you out of here and secured."

"What about you?" Ghost returned.

"I'm going to latch onto Cyclone's mech and engage my own chutes, bringing him down with me."

"Even if your air brakes weren't damaged, three parachutes aren't enough to support the both of you," Ghost commented.

I hadn't noticed the damage to Facehopper's air brakes before, but taking a closer look at his mech I saw the bend in the upper left articulated flap. To stay balanced, he had to orient his body at an odd angle.

"Three parachutes are enough," Facehopper insisted. "Look at Trace and Mauler. Neither of them needed help with the nuclear payloads."

"Not yet, anyway. But if the payloads prove too heavy in the end, Trace and Mauler can simply drop them." That was true: There was no chance of payload detonation, not when the nukes weren't armed. Plus, the activation mechanism was rated to survive a fall from up to three klicks. "But we can't just drop Cyclone. So, I'm going to have to insist that we distribute his load

between us."

I slid my eyes downward. No sign of the ground, yet.

I decided to intercede. "If you distribute my weight between the two of your mechs, you risk both your lives. I won't allow it. Besides, that close together, it's too easy for your chutes to get tangled up. If that happens all three of us are dead."

"Then it's settled," Facehopper said. "I'll carry you alone."

"Wait, what if I eject?" I said. "You can carry me down as a passenger. There's no risk that way."

"But then we lose a mech," Facehopper returned.

"Not necessarily," Ghost sent. "Let Cyclone eject, but while he rides in my passenger seat, I carry his mech all the way down. If his ATLAS proves too heavy, I release it. If not, I hang on. Either way Cyclone survives."

"That's actually reasonable," Facehopper transmitted. "But I'm going to be the one to do it."

"Boss," Ghost sent. "Your left air brakes are damaged. You know your weight is unbalanced. As far as I'm concerned, any extra drag you add at this point is an unnecessary risk. You're our LPO. I can't let you put yourself in danger like that. I got this. I'll carry Cyclone and his mech down. There's no more time to decide." Ghost tilted the angle on his air brakes, edging his ATLAS 5 toward me.

Facehopper hesitated; I thought he was going to disagree, but then he said, "All right, carry his mech then. But I'm taking Cyclone as my passenger. Less weight for you to shoulder."

"Again I have to disagree." Ghost latched onto my mech. "*Any* extra weight will unbalance you, boss. We can't risk it. I got this. Trust me."

Facehopper sighed over the comm. "Fine. Take him. But if you're descending too fast, I want you to drop his ATLAS like we agreed. Understood?"

"Got it." Ghost positioned his steel arms around my waist, just below the cockpit hatch. "Ready, Cyclone?"

I hated having to give up my mech, even momentarily, but it had to be done. I didn't want to be responsible for any of my brothers losing their lives. Just as they wouldn't want to be responsible for me losing mine.

"Wolfhound, open her up," I instructed the AI of my ATLAS 5.

The cockpit hatch unlocked and the inner cocoon released me. Because I was facing the drag, the hatch didn't fall open right away.

“Ghost—” I started.

He seemed to know exactly what I wanted because he swung his mech around so that the two of us faced upward. I gave the hatch a kick and immediately it flung open, hitting Ghost’s metal hands, which were wrapped around Wolfhound’s waist.

I crawled out of the cockpit in my jumpsuit and then carefully climbed onto the arm of Ghost’s mech, Antares. The moment I went out there, the first thing I was aware of was the all-consuming sound of the rushing air, as relayed to my helmet from the external microphone. I activated the noise-canceling tech in my aReal and instantly muffled the sound.

I grabbed onto the servomotors, actuators, and fluid tubes around me for purchase, and pulled myself onto the shoulder of Antares. I used too much force and almost swung my body right off the mech. As my boots were yanked into the air above me, I wrapped my gloves around a nearby fluid tube, hoping it wouldn’t break. I gingerly reached past the upper left air brake, grabbed onto the housing unit behind it, and hauled myself over. Once there, I grabbed onto the topmost edges of the passenger seat behind Antares’s head and dragged myself down.

Tightly gripping the handrests, I swung my boots down so that my body was positioned just above the seat. I grabbed the old-style buckle with my rightmost glove and, maintaining my deathgrip on the left handrest, attempted to fasten the clasp one-handed. It was difficult, because the right side of my body kept drifting upward whenever I let go of the handrest. Where was an automatic seat clamp when you needed one? After three tries I finally secured the buckle and tightened it so that my body was snug against the seat.

“Good to go!” I sent.

Ghost righted himself.

Facehopper still drifted alongside us. “You first, Ghost. Initiate emergency landing procedures.”

Ghost launched Antares’s three emergency parachutes. The canopies opened above us and I felt the G forces as we shot upward.

Facehopper rapidly plunged into the void below, but then he too pulled his own chutes and ascended as the fabrics opened. He wobbled back and forth, constantly shifting his body to compensate for the damaged air brake. It was probably a good thing he didn’t have to handle the weight of my mech as well.

Facehopper moved past us fairly quickly as we were heavier—the drag from our three chutes couldn't sufficiently counteract our weight.

"Looks like you'll have to cut away Wolfhound," Facehopper said over the comm. "You're falling too fast."

"Not yet," Ghost replied.

"I trust your judgment," Facehopper sent. "Good luck, mates." He vanished into the darkness above and passed beyond signal range.

Ghost and I were alone.

"I hope you know what you're doing," I told Ghost over the comm.

"I've done this a hundred times," Ghost replied.

"Really?"

"No."

"Reassuring."

I was staring at the continuous blur of rock beside us, wondering if the pit would ever end, when abruptly the wall fell away entirely.

We had plunged into some vast cavern whose extents were well beyond the ambient light of our headlamps.

"Hang on, Cyclone!" Ghost sent. I heard the undisguised fear in his voice.

"Get ready to drop Wolfhound," I told him.

He didn't answer.

There was nothing around us save blackness. I knew the bottom was coming. I could feel it. I leaned over the passenger seat, glancing down to peer into the void below.

Drop Wolfhound, I thought. *Drop Wolfhound.*

The noise-canceling tech in my jumpsuit was still filtering out the gushing air, so when a distant reverberation arose from below, I heard it distinctly. The slug had finally hit the bottom.

"Let go of Wolfhound," I sent.

"Not yet," Ghost replied stubbornly.

"Saving the mech won't matter if we both die in the process!"

Still he clung to my ATLAS.

Some moments later another, louder reverberation reached my ears, and I realized the earlier sound had come from the *first* slug.

Even though I couldn't see the bottom in the darkness, I knew we were close. I had my aReal extrapolate the position, based on the rate of descent of the second slug and the resonance of its impact, accounting for Doppler shift.

I overlaid the computed position onto my vision.

The bottom was indeed coming up fast.

Too fast.

CHAPTER NINE

Rade

At first I thought the nuclear warhead had detonated because, around me, the bulkhead of the enemy starship blinked out.

I stood instead with my squad brothers on an abandoned rooftop, overlooking a city whose buildings were caked in a familiar black resin.

This definitely wasn't the afterlife.

In the milliseconds that it took to get my bearings, I managed to get out one word. "Chief!"

But Chief Bourbonjack had already input the final digit of the disarm code on the command console. I don't know when he'd started entering that six-digit code, but it had to have been at least two seconds ago, before the alien bulkheads winked out. Maybe he'd been bluffing after all, and had input most of the disarm code beforehand so that he'd only have to add one or two digits if the enemy actually yielded. I don't know. Either way he'd saved us. Barely: the timer on the nuclear payload was frozen at 00:00:00:103, or one hundred and three milliseconds before detonation.

The Chief lifted his gloved hand from the warhead command console and slumped visibly.

"We've died," Manic said. "And this is hell."

"We haven't died yet," the Chief said, looking up. "Though I won't dispute that we're in hell. Snakeoil, position update?"

I returned my attention to the city that stretched before us in the twilight. I thought it might be Shangde because of the geronium-caked buildings that reminded me of tree trunks with anthills clumped around their bases. The solar panels built into the asphalt were probably still absorbing the weak sunlight but the city's generators weren't converting any of it to power, judging from the dark street lamps and lightless buildings.

The blue and white gas giant that could only be Tau Ceti II filled much

of the sky, while stars populated the remainder of the heavens. The sun appeared as a pinpoint in the distance and cast the landscape in the dim light of what I assumed was perpetual twilight—which would be the case if this were indeed Shangde.

"We're in Hongleong City," Snakeoil said over the comm.

Bender turned toward him. "Say what?"

"The capital of the moon Tau Ceti II-b," Snakeoil returned. "The celestial configurations and building layouts confirm it."

Tau Ceti II-b. I was disappointed because for a moment I had entertained the hope of joining up with the rest of Alfa Platoon, but we were on the wrong moon for that: Digger squad resided on Tau Ceti II-c, not b.

"What the hell happened to Bogey 2?" Bender pressed.

"Nothing." Snakeoil pointed. "It's right over there."

In the distance, the colossal Skull Ship ate up the horizon, reaching from the ceiling of the gas giant all the way down to the surface of the moon.

"The question really should be," Snakeoil continued, "what the hell happened to us?"

"Ahhh frick." Lui sat down heavily. He let his boots hang over the elevated dais we all stood on.

I wasn't the only one who was disappointed, apparently.

Lui started to twist off his helmet assembly.

"Lui, wait—" Manic took a step toward him.

Snakeoil intercepted Manic with a hand. "It's safe. The air's breathable and the geronium-275 radiation from the buildings isn't too intense, yet."

Lui removed his helmet, aReal visor and all, and set it down beside him. He inhaled deeply of the air, then bowed his head and rested his chin on a gloved fist. "What a mess. A goddamn mess. Mission's *over*, dudes. We failed."

One by one the rest of us opened our faceplates. We kept our aReal visors lowered over our eyes.

I took a long whiff of the cold air. It stank of char, but at least it wasn't stale like the recycled environment of my suit.

"The mission wasn't a complete failure," Snakeoil said. "We gathered important intel. And before we left, we inflicted heavy damage on that jellyfish mess hall or whatever it was."

"Ha," Lui said. "I'm not sure I'd call that damage *heavy*."

"We hurt them," Snakeoil insisted stubbornly.

Lui chuckled. “Like a pinprick hurts a thumb.”

I turned off my headlamp and others did likewise. We didn’t need them here. The twilight, though weak, provided more than enough illumination to see by.

“Fan betrayed us,” Hijak said. “I think it’s telling that he didn’t teleport down with us.”

Hijak was right. Fan wasn’t with us. I hadn’t even noticed up until that point.

“He ran away during the firefight,” Bender said. “I let him go. Too many other things to worry about.”

“He’s the least of our worries,” the Chief said. “Let’s hear some ideas on how the hell we got here, people.”

“Um, we’re facing an incredibly powerful alien species whose technology is ten times more advanced than our own?” Manic said.

The Chief regarded him crossly. “That’s not an answer.”

I reviewed the vid log of the last few moments leading up to our sudden displacement, from the encircling of the squad by the Phants and their jellyfish, to the nuclear countdown initiated by the Chief. I hadn’t realized it at the time but the entire squad had stepped onto the wide dais in the center of the chamber. The Phants and the jellyfish had herded us there. In the vid archive, I could clearly see Fibonacci spirals engraved into the metallic disc.

At this moment we stood upon a similar disc, situated atop a comparable dais on the rooftop.

I told the Chief.

“Maybe we can use their own tech against them,” Manic interjected when I was done. “And have the disc send us back somehow.”

“You might be on to something!” Bender mocked. “Because of course our aReals can interface with these teleporters. Human tech *always* seamlessly integrates with alien tech. If it’s true in the movies it’s gotta be true in real life, right baby? Man, you’re so smart Manic! Wish I had your IQ.”

“Hey, I’m thinking out loud, okay?” Manic said. “Trying to brainstorm some ideas here.”

“Yeah well, I’d prefer if you ‘brainstormed’ ideas that might actually *work*, bitch.”

Normally the Chief would have interceded at this point, but he let them verbally spar. We were all pissed at failing the mission and needed to let off

steam one way or another.

“What I don’t get is why the enemy wouldn’t just send down more troops to finish the job, now that they’ve realized the nuke hasn’t detonated,” Lui said.

“While you boys have been arguing,” the Chief said, “I’ve been busy running a search on my offline copy of Lana’s embedded ID transcripts.” Only the Chief had a copy of that, as the contents were highly classified. It wasn’t something available to mere grunts like us.

“Lana?” Manic said.

“The former Phant host rescued by Rage and Hijak.”

“Rescue her?” I said bitterly. “Yeah. Only to let her die in the end.”

Obviously uncomfortable, the Chief cleared his throat. “Anyway, here are the results of my search. Apparently these discs are called ‘Acceptors.’ They’re teleporters, as we guessed already. But here’s the thing: the source objects can teleport only when the target Acceptor is clear of matter. Seems to be a safety mechanism of sorts because if the teleportation actually happened while anything was on the target, the incoming object could combine with it, depending on its position. Hardly a desirable outcome to say the least.”

“That doesn’t entirely make sense,” Hijak said. “What about the atmosphere just above the Acceptor? The safety mechanism ignores that? What if the air is full of toxins? Wouldn’t the teleportee ‘merge’ with the gas, even if he were inside a jumpsuit? Filling his body and suit with toxins?”

“Look, I don’t claim to be an expert on the things, goddammit,” Chief Bourbonjack said. “I’m merely telling you what I found.”

“I just thought of something,” Manic said, growing pale. “You say these are ‘teleporters’? But what if the source disc actually destroyed us, while the destination disc reconstructed our bodies? And we only think we’ve been teleported, when in actuality we’ve been cloned—our bodies and neural imprints duplicated down to the molecular level to make us believe we’re the same people—but our original selves, the bodies containing our actual souls, are dead!”

“Don’t overcomplicate it, Manic,” the Chief said. “I’m sure our souls or psyches or whatever you want to call them teleported, too.”

“But you don’t know that, not for sure,” Manic said. “We could all be the living dead. Seriously. And . . . and what if the source disc didn’t destroy our original selves during the process, and those of us down here are mere

copies? That means we're still soulless clones but our original bodies are aboard Bogey 2, fighting for their lives. No wait, the original nuke would have detonated by now, wouldn't it? So our source bodies are still dead. But if it *did* detonate, how come we're not seeing any damage to the ship? And __"

"Manic . . ." the Chief said warningly.

Lui rubbed his chin. "So. Going back to what the Chief was trying to say: aliens from Bogey 2 won't teleport down because we're still standing on the disc."

"Bingo," Chief Bourbonjack said.

We all exchanged glances, then got up in four-person teams and started dismantling the surrounding superstructures on the rooftop. We tossed the remains onto the disc, blocking every square meter of it to be on the safe side. Eventually we ported the warhead off the Acceptor and quickly shoved debris into the empty area left behind.

Snakeoil attempted to contact Fleet but the effort proved futile—all he received was static, courtesy of the interference from the Skull Ships. I couldn't see the individual fleet ships up there in the twilit sky, though I doubted I'd be able to distinguish them from stars anyway—assuming they were actually still in orbit.

"So what now?" Hijak said.

"We certainly can't stay here," Chief Bourbonjack said. "Bogey 2 has probably communicated with the local alien presence by now, and likely a party has already been dispatched to clear the debris from this Acceptor."

"We should find an armory," Bender said. "You know, restock our ammunition, recharge our suit batteries, refill our jetpacks."

"Probably a good idea," the Chief agreed. "But after we restock, we need to find a shipyard or a working communications array and then get the hell off this rock."

I enlarged the HUD map of the city. We had the full layout of Hongleong and the blueprints to all its buildings, even the classified ones, thanks to the planetary data shared by the SKs before the mission—the city was essentially lost to them and they had nothing to gain by hiding information from us.

I highlighted nearby munitions depots on my map and turned toward the Chief.

"This is the closest armory," Snakeoil said, beating me to the punch. A

blue dot flashed several buildings away. “It belongs to the city defense forces. Or used to. As a plus, the building also has a communications array. Though whether it’s working or not is another story.”

“Good find,” the Chief said.

“We don’t have enough jetpack fuel to leap between buildings like we did in Shangde City,” Lui said. In that op we’d brought along extra fuel, unlike today. “We’re going to have to hike it.”

“How do we know this armory won’t be crawling with enemy?” Hijak said. “Or already looted?”

“We don’t,” Chief Bourbonjack responded. “But we’ve overstayed our welcome if you ask me. Let’s move!”

And so we did.

The payload didn’t fit the stairwell, of course. However, the building we stood on was only three stories high and the black resin that caked it reached right to the rooftop, forming a thirty-five-degree ramp to the ground. Thus, we were able to port the warhead to street level without wasting any jetpack fuel.

After touching the solar-paneled asphalt we immediately hurried onto a side street, wanting to put as much distance between the building and ourselves as possible. The coloration of our jumpsuits changed to match the dark gray around us.

At the far end of the street, Chief Bourbonjack called a halt. “I’m separating the squad into bounding overwatch. Rage, Hijak, Skullcracker, Manic, you’re FT1.” Fire Team 1. “You get first overwatch.”

We lowered the warhead and dug in while the Chief brought Fire Team 2 forward through those too-quiet streets. Though we’d left the Skull Ship far behind, it still felt like we were trapped in the heart of enemy territory, not knowing when and where our hidden opponents would strike next.

It was only two weeks into the invasion, yet Hongleong City seemed utterly deserted. Only about half the population had evacuated, which meant five hundred thousand people were potentially trapped here. Though given the expediency with which the invaders had captured and eradicated the populace of Shangde City before it, probably only five to ten thousand refugees were actually still alive. If that.

“You really think we’ll use it anymore?” Hijak nodded at the warhead.

Manic shook his head. “Doubtful. There’s got to be at least five thousand survivors hidden in the city,” he said, echoing my own estimates.

“If we use the nuke, they die.”

“Eventually they’ll die anyway,” Hijak said. “If not from starvation, then from geronium radiation. Besides, if we don’t nuke the place, Brass will probably eventually do it from orbit for us. Like they did to Shangde City.”

Manic exhaled in disgust. “Hopefully Brass decides to do that *after* we get off this dead rock.”

I kept one eye glued to the scope of my rifle, scanning the buildings and their resinous bulges for any sign of attackers.

“How’s the leg, Skullcracker?” I said.

“Probably gangrenous,” he said from his watch position behind me, a little too casually.

“Want one of us to take a look at it later?” I resisted the urge to glance from my scope. Hijak and I were the designated snipers, and the lives of Fire Team 2 depended on our overwatch.

“Nope.”

“You sure?” I said.

Skullcracker chuckled. “That’s right, keep asking. And I’ll keep saying no. When we reach some Weavers, maybe I’ll let the robos have a go. Until then, piss off.”

“What’s the matter, we’re not good enough to treat you?” I said jokingly.

“Refer to my previous comment.”

On the HUD map, the dots of Fire Team 2 intermittently froze, a sign that the advance group was nearing the maximum range of our aReal nodes.

The dots abruptly swerved into an alleyway and the Chief sent a message, his voice cutting in and out with static: “Advance, FT1.”

The four of us got up, hoisted the payload, and moved forward at a jog. We made our way across the bottom of the gorge formed by the shoulders of the black resin that encrusted the lower halves of the buildings. I wondered vaguely if any survivors watched from the uppermost windows, and if so, why they didn’t try to get our attention. I guess it could be because we were still suited up, with aReal visors covering our eyes, looking all too much like some type of combat robot.

Weaving between smashed vehicles along the way, we reached the alley that housed Fire Team 2 and deposited the warhead. Then the four of us spread out and advanced in zigzag formation. I was point man, Skullcracker drag man. I kept my gaze to the forefront, scanning the buildings as I went.

After a hundred meters we took cover in a side street, ducking between the resin that coated two adjacent buildings, and there we waited for Fire Team 2 to leapfrog us in turn.

I aimed into the street and scanned the surrounding buildings, doing my job.

“Do you really think Fan was a traitor?” Manic said while we waited.

“Of course he was.” Hijak answered. His voice was directed away from me, so I knew he hadn’t looked from his sniper scope. “When Rage and I were aboard the Guide’s ship, we encountered other SKs who had joined the aliens of their own free will. They weren’t hosts—they simply decided to throw in their lots with the bad guys. Fan obviously did the same thing. It’s not really unexpected. SKs are always looking out for themselves and don’t really care who gets harmed along the way.”

“Hijak,” Lui said. “Can we tone down the anti-SK rhetoric for a little while? Please?”

Hijak shrugged. “Just saying.”

“I’d argue that Fan *was* a host,” I said, concentrating on the street through my scope. “I’m not so sure these aliens would allow a non-host to wander freely around their mothership.”

“He wasn’t exactly wandering freely when we found him,” Hijak said. “But even so, you checked Fan yourself. You told us he wasn’t a host.”

“Actually I couldn’t tell. His helmet blocked my view of the back of his head.”

“If he was a host,” Manic interjected, “then why did he seem so human?”

I had to sigh at that. “You haven’t met a host before. It’s not so big a stretch for them to play at being human, especially when they have the contents of an entire human mind and its associated embedded ID to work with. The woman whose body we salvaged? Lana? She was a host at one point. I was utterly convinced she was human. A Keeper named Jiāndāo.”

“We were drugged, humiliated, and tortured,” Hijak said. “We would have believed anything back then.”

It was a struggle for me not to close my eyes. I hadn’t meant to bring our interrogation up. It just came.

And now I regretted it.

The Keeper had called me Floor. Something whose only worth was to be stepped on.

I had resisted her, at first. But after a mere seven days I caved and told her everything. Seven days.

I pushed thoughts of my humiliation and breaking aside, and concentrated on the task at hand. I would overwatch my brothers who were out there and exposed. I would do my duty and prevent anything from happening to them.

I would.

Fire Team 2 deposited the payload at our location and moved forward, eventually assuming an overwatch position a hundred meters ahead.

That was our cue. The four of us hoisted the warhead and jogged onward. We dropped the device off at Fire Team 2's location and leapfrogged them until we reached the next suitable overwatch.

"Why does it seem like we always find ourselves given the butt end of the stick?" Manic complained quietly after we had settled into our newest position. "Deep in enemy territory, surrounded by bad guys, with no way out and no contact with home base. The story of our lives."

Hijak exhaled. "Relax, Manic. We've seen worse."

"What do you mean *we*? You're still the new guy on the team. You've hardly seen anything."

"Cut it, Manic," I said, scanning my scope from left to right. "Hijak has witnessed enough shit to last a lifetime, trust me. We all have."

"It's bad karma," Manic insisted. "I'm telling you. We should have helped those refugees on the ship when we had the chance. And now we're paying for it."

"Yeah well, look what happened when we tried saving one of those so-called refugees," Hijak said.

Manic shook his head. "Like I said, karma, bro. We would have never met that Fan dude if we'd helped the others."

I exhaled in exasperation. "Shut it, Manic. Let's not draw any more attention to ourselves than we have to."

"Their footsteps are louder than our voices," Manic complained, referring to the approach of Fire Team 2. I felt him shift beside me. "Look around. Just take a look. Like I said before, if ever there was a hell, this is it."

I didn't answer. None of us did. We didn't want to goad him into continuing his morale-leeching tirade. He stayed quiet, thankfully.

Though honestly, the devastation in the city was starting to get to me, too, even if I wasn't as vocal about it as Manic.

I could imagine, not too long ago, cute girls in short skirts swinging their hips as they sauntered down this very street. I could almost smell the greasy scent of fast food wafting in the air, and hear the laughter of children playing in a nearby park.

All that was left were the dead streets filled with smashed vehicles, electric signs, and other vestiges of defeat, and the ruined buildings covered in bulbous, black masses, with dark pits leading to the alien hordes lying in wait beneath the city. The air hung with the stench of burned petrol and flesh.

Manic was right. Welcome to hell.

About half an hour later we arrived at the city defense force armory.

The inside was smashed and looted—the residents had probably made a run for the munitions after the invasion. That was what I would have done, anyway. The facility contained ATLAS 5 bays, but they proved empty. We found a locked weapons locker, and with Snakeoil's plasma torch, cut our way inside. We distributed the grenades within between us, but none of the remaining small arms ammunition was actually compatible with our weapons, so we ended up swapping our loadouts for SK equivalents.

Snakeoil produced a few magnesium-ion battery packs he'd snagged from vehicles and robots along the way; we connected to the terminals via our universal charge ports and repowered our suits. We also repurposed fuel from backup power generators, which gave our jetpacks six or seven more spurts each.

The communications array was utterly destroyed, so we decided our next destination would be the starport. There was another comm station we could check along the way but in all likelihood it was razed, too. Our best chance at getting out of here was to find a ship or shuttle.

Resupplied and ready to go, I relieved Hijak of his guard position at the entrance to the armory so he could grab some ammo, recharge his suit, and siphon the jetpack fuel we'd set aside for him.

I crouched beside the doorway and aimed out into the street. The SK sniper rifle felt fairly close to its UC equivalent; it helped that I'd swapped out the scope with my old one. Still, I doubted I'd be setting any sniping records with the thing.

As I scanned the street, something unexpected crossed my sights.

A kid stood in the middle of the devastated roadway, staring right at me. He held a doll of some kind in his right hand.

"Uh, Chief," I sent over the comm.

The kid took off immediately, scrambling up the black mass caking a nearby building.

“Talk to me, Rage,” Chief Bourbonjack returned. “What’s going on out there?”

“Civilian sighted, Chief,” I transmitted. “A kid.”

“We’re on our way.”

A few moments later the Chief, crouching, joined me at the entrance. “So where’s this kid?”

I pointed out the building across the street. “Zoom in on the second window from the top, three from the right. Just above the resin.”

The Chief followed my instructions, focusing on the broken window three stories up, at the upper edge of the black mass encasing the building. The kid was peering past the bottom of the window frame. “I see him.”

The rest of the group joined us, crouching in a file behind the Chief.

“Viewing” icons activated on my aReal, indicating which other members of the squad were observing the scene from my point of view.

“What are we going to do?” Lui said.

“Nothing,” Bender spat. “We’re soldiers, not babysitters.”

“We can’t just leave him,” I said.

“Why not?” Bender said. “Could be a trap.”

“A trap?” Snakeoil said, sounding exasperated. “The invaders wouldn’t use a kid as bait.”

Bender cocked an eyebrow. “Wouldn’t they? I’m sure they’re familiar with human psychology by now. They know how to press our buttons.”

“The Phants wouldn’t need to set up such an elaborate trap,” I said. “With all the robots they’ve possessed, and all the crabs and slugs probably swarming in the warrens underneath us at this very moment, why bother? There are only eight of us. The enemy could overwhelm us at any time.”

“Have to agree with Rage,” Skullcracker said. “When the enemy chooses to attack, they’ll attack openly. We can’t leave the kid.”

“But that’s not our mission,” Bender insisted stubbornly.

“We don’t *have* a mission anymore,” I said. “Other than saving lives.” I glanced at the Chief for support.

Chief Bourbonjack nodded slowly. “We’ll do our best to help the kid. Manic, Lui, I want you to enter the building from the other side. Climb the resin to the third floor, get in and camp out in the hallway outside the kid’s apartment. We’ll give you five minutes. Once you’re in place, we’ll flush the

kid your way.”

Manic and Lui hurried into the street and vanished around the corner of the building.

I kept my eyes on the window, observing the kid via the zoom in my helmet aReal. He remained crouching behind the window frame the entire time.

On my HUD, the dots representing Manic and Lui promptly froze on the other side of the building, and I knew they were out of comm range. Even so, I had absolute faith they’d be in position when the time came.

“I hope you’re right about this not being a trap . . .” Bender said.

When the assigned five minutes had passed, the Chief ordered Hijak and me forward to flush the kid out.

The two of us hurried across the street at a crouch. We reached the black resin at the base of the apartment building and began clambering up the lumpy surface. Dark caves led down into the resin at random intervals around us, but we continued upward, ignoring them.

I glanced at the window above but couldn’t discern any sign of the kid from this angle. He had probably moved farther inside already.

I reached the broken window at the top of the resin and peered in.

It was a bedroom. Animated posters depicting Chinese superheroes covered one wall. A nightstand lay just below the window, and beside it, a single bed: the comforter had a bunch of tiny ATLAS mech designs sewn into it. Child-sized clothes from a wooden dresser had been dumped onto the floor.

“No sign of the kid,” I sent. “Going in.”

I was just at the edge of comm range and couldn’t make out Chief Bourbonjack’s reply through the static. I glanced back and waved. The tiny figure at the entrance to the armory waved back.

I looped the sling of my rifle over my shoulder assembly and carefully lowered myself first onto the nightstand and then onto the floor—a tricky task, given the bulk of my jumpsuit. I assumed a guard position at the entrance to the room as I waited for Hijak to follow me inside.

When he was in, Hijak knelt to peer under the bed. He glanced at me, shaking his head.

Next Hijak searched the closet, but again found nothing.

I left him guarding the area and I moved out into the corridor. I made my way toward the front of the suite, pausing beside every room along the

way to scan the contents. I didn't see the kid, but I noticed plenty of places he could be hiding. I wasn't going to check those places just yet, however.

At the vestibule, I halted. Because of their close proximity, the dots of Manic and Lui had updated, so I already knew they awaited on either side of the door outside.

Without opening the door I sent: "Any sign of the kid?"

"Nope," Lui returned.

I told Lui to join me and, leaving Manic at the entrance, we split up to properly search the apartment. We left the front door tantalizingly open.

I found the kid in the study, cowering behind a desk.

He was shaking, and his were eyes wide with fear. He hugged a small toy to his chest—it looked like a miniature ATLAS 5.

I held out a gloved palm to him.

He glanced at my hand with those fearful eyes but didn't otherwise move.

I beckoned slowly.

He bit his lower lip and shook his head.

And then the kid tried to run past me.

"Oh no you don't." I sprung forward and caught the boy by the arm. He twisted frantically, as if trying to rip his own arm off. I hastily stepped forward and hugged him to my chest so that he wouldn't hurt himself. He continued squirming in my arms.

"Calm down," I said. I switched on the Korean-Chinese translator, since my command of the language was fairly bad. "Calm down."

The child kept struggling. I was never really all that good with kids. Especially crazy ones.

I moved to the corner of the room and set him down. I crouched, extending my arms, blocking any avenue of retreat.

"Look, I'm here to help you," I said.

Shielding his head with one arm, the kid curled into a ball against the wall. When he glanced up at me he whimpered softly. Tears streamed down his cheeks.

I had no idea what to do.

"I'm Rade," I said.

The child didn't answer.

I pointed at myself. "Rade."

Still nothing.

My eyes focused on the toy the kid gripped tightly in one hand. A miniature ATLAS 5.

"You see that?" I pointed at the toy. "I pilot those. ATLAS mechs." The kid's eyes drifted to the doorway behind me and then he shielded his face once more.

Glancing over my shoulder, I saw Lui there.

"Maybe I should try?" Lui said.

"No, I got this." To my helmet AI, I added: "Feed nozzle, extend."

Lui snickered. "Don't tell me you're going to try giving him some of your MRE?"

"Why not? The kid must be starving."

"Sure," Lui said. "But that's an MRE. Not food."

"Hey, if we can eat it, it's good enough for a kid. Probably tastes better than what he's used to, anyway."

Lui seemed affronted. "That better not be some kind of racial stereotype you're throwing out there."

"Not at all," I said, thinking fast. "I meant, you know, the food in the aftermath of the invasion."

Lui seemed satisfied with that answer.

I returned my attention to the kid and waited for him to look at me. When he did, I pointed at the feed nozzle in my helmet. Exaggerating my gestures, I took a sip on the straw-like extension, drinking the banana-flavored gruel. The smell permeated the room.

"Mmm." I said, trying to pretend it tasted really good. I circled a gloved hand over my belly.

I turned the feed nozzle toward the kid and took a step forward, but the child cowered lower.

"He's never going to let you bring that close to him," Lui said.

I shot Lui an annoyed look and then gazed at the child once more. Lui was probably right, I had to admit.

So I activated the nozzle and let a substantial amount of liquid meal replacement pour onto the floor instead. Then I backed away.

When the child looked up, I pointed at the goo. "Eat."

"That's disgusting, Rage," Lui said. "Even I wouldn't eat it."

I glared at him. "Will you just—"

The kid abruptly dashed forward and began licking the liquid MRE from the floor like an animal. He kept his eyes on me the whole time.

“Told you he was hungry,” I beamed.

“You could have at least grabbed a cup from the kitchen or something,” Lui said. “We’re not barbarians.”

“That’s a good idea,” I said. “Would you mind?”

Lui rolled his eyes and walked out.

When he came back with a cup, I filled it up with MRE liquid and placed it on the floor in front of the kid—the child had finished my first offering a while ago and had returned to his spot in the corner.

I stepped back.

The child snatched up the cup and eagerly guzzled the contents. Yellow gruel trickled down his chin. When he was done, he wiped the liquid from his chin and swallowed it, then licked the inside of the cup. The kid kept his eyes on me the whole time.

When he set the cup down between us, I held out my glove.

“Take my hand,” I said.

He shook his head.

I took a step forward—

The kid tried to dart past again.

I grabbed him.

Once more he flailed in my arms, this time stronger than before. I was starting to think it had been a mistake to feed him.

“It’s okay,” I said, trying to keep my voice soothing. “I’m going to get you out of here. I’ll bring you to your family.”

Those last words set him off, and he started screaming and yelling and even punching his fists into my jumpsuit.

I’d had it.

I set the child gruffly back down in the corner and backed away.

“He’s all yours,” I told Lui as I retreated to the entrance of the study.

Lui went forward and knelt beside the child. He spoke Korean-Chinese directly to the boy in soft, sympathetic tones.

After some gentle urging from Lui, the kid erupted in a flood of words that I couldn’t understand. Tears streamed down his face.

Lui glanced at me. “His folks are dead,” he told me sternly. “When you said you were going to take him to his family, he thought you meant you were going to kill him.”

I felt sick to my stomach. “I didn’t know.”

“No. You didn’t.”

Lui spoke some more soothing words to the child and then extended his hands. The kid glanced at me and slowly stepped into Lui's waiting embrace. Lui hefted him into the air and triumphantly swiveled toward the doorway.

The kid abruptly reached over Lui's shoulders, toward the corner. He'd dropped the ATLAS 5 toy.

Lui plucked the plaything from the floor and returned it to the child.

I spotted a child-sized aReal visor on the desk. I snatched it up and handed it to Lui. "This might come in handy."

Over the comm I ordered Manic, who still lingered by the entrance, to meet us in the bedroom.

When Manic arrived, Lui was already halfway out the broken window —he had one foot on the nightstand, the other on the black substance caking the building outside. He still carried the child.

The boy suddenly straightened in his arms.

"It's okay," Lui told him in Korean-Chinese.

That was when I heard it.

"Shh!" I said.

Lui paused. The child's face had become deathly pale.

"I don't hear—" Manic said.

I cut him off with a raised hand, and I amped up the external volume sensors on my helmet.

Yes, I could clearly make out the sound then. A distant, eerie echo. The bone-like rattle of claws and mandibles.

It originated from the caves pocking the resin just outside.

And it was slowly increasing in volume.

CHAPTER TEN

Tahoe

I was falling down the abyss with Ghost. His mech, Antares, gripped Wolfhound in its arms. I wasn't aboard: I sat in the passenger seat of Antares, above the jetpack and behind the head. Below, though not yet visible through the darkness, the calculated position of the cave floor overlay my vision.

And it was approaching far faster than I would have liked.

"Ghost," I said. "You have to drop Wolf—"

Ghost released Wolfhound and the Gs shifted immediately: the drag from the parachutes kicked in, slowing the two of us.

Wolfhound plunged away into the darkness. I knew the onboard AI of the mech had taken over and would try to land via air brakes alone. An impossible feat, but it would try.

Ghost and I were still falling relatively fast, despite jettisoning the extra weight. I wasn't sure our descent was survivable.

The cave floor finally emerged through the murk below and I watched as Wolfhound crashed into the rock. On my HUD map, the green dot representing the mech instantly darkened.

Ghost shifted our position slightly so that we wouldn't land on top of Wolfhound.

The bottom came up fast and we hit extremely hard. Antares's legs folded right up to its chest and the ATLAS 5 shook with the vibration of the impact, rattling my teeth and shaking the hollows of my lungs. A viscid black substance from the cave floor splattered into the air around us.

Antares stood up as Ghost extended his legs. The parachutes detached, the air brakes retracted.

We'd formed a crater of sorts: the shockwave from Antares's impact had cleared a layer of slime from the surface in the immediate vicinity, forming a small circular rampart that ringed the mech.

Ghost swiveled a Gatling into the ATLAS 5's right hand and a serpent launcher into its left, then he steered Antares toward the wreckage of Wolfhound.

The slime coating the cave floor proved ubiquitous. It engulfed Antares up to the ankles, and exerted a gentle suction, judging from the slightly strained whir of the servomotors.

"Like walking in mud," Ghost complained, leaving a trail of deep footprints in his wake.

He reached Wolfhound and knelt.

I left the passenger seat and, being careful not to touch the cave floor and the thick black slime, I crawled onto the sparking wreckage of my mech.

Wolfhound was definitely unsalvageable. The left leg had smashed up through the cockpit, while the right leg had sheared the head clean off. The arms had plowed through the air brakes, leaving a tangled mess.

I said a prayer for Wolfhound's spirit, in the small chance that the AI actually had one, and then I crept to the storage rack built into the leg. The distorted panel was jammed tightly into place—I had to get Ghost to help me open it. Inside, my heavy gun was twisted beyond recognition. There were still some intact grenades, however, and I took them.

Since I was basically weaponless, with only a pistol at my belt, Ghost gave me access to Antares's storage rack and I retrieved the standard-issue rifle he had stowed. There was also a sniper rifle in the rack but I left that behind as it was Ghost's preferred weapon. I grabbed a few rounds of ammo and then climbed back into the passenger seat to wait for the rest of the squad.

The green dots of my squad members began to appear on my HUD as one by one they plunged into range. Facehopper came first, followed closely by Trace and Mauler, dragged down as the latter two were by the weight of the payloads. The porters chose not to drop their warheads and landed with the devices. Those were some hard landings, though. The slime craters they formed were about twice as wide as the one Antares had made.

Ghost did some quick recon while everyone else was arriving, and found the two superslugs, or rather, their remains. A stream of dark liquid oozed from the orifices of each alien carcass. The broken carapaces of dead crabs surrounded them and reminded me a little of rotten, cracked eggs, at least from the way the black blood seeped lengthwise from their bodies.

I could see nothing in the murk beyond the two slugs other than the

cave floor beneath us. Any walls or ceiling were lost to the darkness. Judging from the distance we had fallen, the extent of this cavern had to be fairly monstrous. And I somehow doubted the place was natural.

When the remaining mechs had landed safely, Facehopper gathered us. I checked the ATLAS 5 status reports on my HUD. Those who carried the nuclear payloads suffered the worst damage. Trace had some minor servomotor damage so that his mech walked with a limp, while Mauler's left elbow intermittently failed to bend. Ghost's arm seemed perfectly fine, even though he'd carried the entire weight of our mech chain up there. The squad's ammo situation was poor: almost everyone was nearly out of serpent rockets and Gatling rounds.

"Wolfhound?" Facehopper transmitted.

"Had to abandon the mech in the end," Ghost sent. "Looks like Cyclone is confined to the role of passenger for the duration of the mission."

"I'm no passenger." I unbuckled and stood up, lifting the rifle over my head. "I guarantee it."

"No one's questioning your bravery," Facehopper sent. "We all know you'll fight to the end." It was actually good, hearing that from him. Despite our differences, he still respected me. "What about the two slugs?"

"Found them about half a klick to the east," Ghost sent. "I marked the positions on the map."

"Dead?"

"Most definitely."

Facehopper's mech glanced upward. "How far did we fall, TJ?"

"Too far," TJ sent. "At least twenty-five klicks. Let's just say it could take us quite a while to return to the surface. Assuming we ever find a route back. On the bright side, we're that much closer to the Observer Mind. It's only eleven klicks away to our east."

Facehopper issued his orders before we could fully absorb the magnitude of our situation. "Zigzag formation, mates. Ten-meter separation. Bomb, Fret, you get the nuclears. I want you in the middle of the squad. TJ, take point. Ghost, drag. Both of you, launch ASS scouts. TJ, yours goes fore; Ghost, yours aft. Cyclone, you get to be the additional pair of eyes at the back of Ghost's head."

I watched Bomb and Fret hoist the payloads from the ground. That was about the only benefit of losing my mech—I didn't have to worry about carrying around the nuclears anymore, though honestly, I would have gladly

ported a nuke for the rest of the mission if it meant having Wolfhound back.

When we were in position, Facehopper said: “TJ, lead the way.”

And so we advanced into the endless cave-borne night.

Soft, slightly unnerving squishes issued from the ATLAS 5s as those metallic feet trod the black slime that carpeted the rock floor.

We’d gone maybe thirty meters past the second dead superslug when TJ reported towering black ovules protruding from the murk ahead.

Facehopper immediately called a halt.

I momentarily switched to the scout’s POV to observe the ovules firsthand. The things appeared tall, but randomly placed. They didn’t reside too close together—at least those currently visible on the outskirts—so our mechs could navigate between them if necessary.

“Big-ass eggs,” Bomb sent.

“TJ, see if your scout can find a way around them,” Facehopper sent.

I didn’t blame him for wanting to go around. We all remembered what had happened the last time we encountered ovules, and those were a tenth the size of these.

TJ instructed the scout to probe the perimeter and the drone vanished from range.

It returned ten minutes later.

“I gave the ASS a five-klick threshold in either direction,” TJ sent. “The ovule ranks end about four klicks to the north and two to the south.”

“So we go south,” Fret said. “Give the area a wide berth.”

Facehopper remained silent, and I knew he was weighing our options. Finally: “Proceed to within one hundred meters of the perimeter. Once there, line up, keeping separation at fifty meters. I want to check something first.”

“You think this is the Queen’s doing, don’t you?” I said.

Facehopper didn’t answer.

We approached the outskirts of the ovules and formed a line as requested, one hundred meters away, spacing our mechs fifty meters apart, which was about the limit of our weak InterPlaNet nodes in the persistent interference.

“TJ, send the scout forward,” Facehopper sent through the static.

The drone moved out.

I could still see one of the dead superslugs behind me, at the edge of the ambient light. Ghost’s drone was out there, too, watching our aft quarter with me.

I switched to the forward scout's perspective, shrinking the view to half size so I could simultaneously observe our rear.

Headlamps lighting its way, the scout passed into the rank of ovules. The alien objects were scattered randomly about the floor, and looked to be about twenty-five meters tall, or twice the height of our mechs. They were separated between thirty to fifty meters each. The ovules seemed to be empty shells: caved in on one side, their outer layers were blackened as if charred or spent in some way.

As the scout moved deeper, some of the objects appeared fuller and taller than the rest. These ones formed perfect, egglike ovals. They were hued differently, too, seeming more red than black, and they had what appeared to be branches of some kind coating the outer surfaces, like a layer of kelp. Those branches swayed in a breeze I couldn't feel in my jumpsuit.

One of the fuller ovules lay near the scout's course. As the drone passed, I realized those weren't branches coating the outside, but rather snakelike limbs of some sort. The limbs swayed back and forth, anterior ends opening and closing, revealing banks of white, razor-sharp teeth.

"Let's go back," Bomb said nervously over the comm.

"I'm with you," Fret transmitted.

"TJ, analysis?" Facehopper sent.

"I'm actually getting a jumble of readings," TJ responded. "The snake things seem to be individual life-forms. Kind of like parasites embedded within the shell. But beneath the actual surface I'm detecting another organic signature. A single life-form taking up all the available space inside."

Motion caught my eye directly above, outside the drone's perspective I'd established over a quarter of my HUD. I shut down the POV and looked up: a giant appendage, or tentacle, or *something*, darted through the air some distance above us. It came from some central point beyond the ovule ranks.

"Retreat retreat retreat!" Facehopper sent.

Our mechs sprinted away; the slime resisted our movements every step of the way.

The tentacle hurtled by above and to our right, passing us.

Ghost swiveled his torso toward the object and trained his Gatling gun on it, as I'm sure others were doing squad-wide.

"Hold your fire!" Facehopper transmitted.

I watched in amazement as the incredibly long limb ignored us and slammed down into the superslug's carcass ahead. On impact, the tentacle

shuddered and small, dark creatures fell away along its length, landing in the slime. These tiny creatures promptly beetled away into the dark.

"Halt!" Facehopper sent when it was obvious the alien limb had no interest in us.

The huge tentacle latched onto the superbehemoth's body and began dragging it toward the ovule ranks behind us. I stared, dumbfounded, as the appendage hauled the giant corpse past. Crushing any shells in its way, the body cut a swath through the ovules before vanishing into the darkness.

We remained motionless for a moment, speechless, unsure of what to do.

Then another tentacle abruptly launched from beyond the ovule ranks, this one seemingly headed straight toward us.

"Scatter!" Facehopper sent. "But hold your fire!"

We did so.

This second giant tentacle proved equally unconcerned with us. It hovered near a few members of the squad as it passed but otherwise left us alone. I caught a glimpse of dark objects swarming all along its surface—from here they appeared to be fist-sized insects of some kind.

The tentacle struck the floor not far from the corpse of the second slug, which was visible by then at the edge of our ambient light; the appendage groped around until it latched onto the behemoth's carcass, then it, too, dragged the body toward the ovule ranks.

"Get me some flares airborne!" Facehopper sent.

TJ launched flares.

More of the cavern was illuminated, and I followed the retreating tentacle with my eyes, toward the source.

What I saw was utterly repulsive.

I'm not even sure how to describe it.

Imagine all the creatures from your nightmares and place them there, in that heart of darkness, and join them all together, and you'd have an idea of what I was witnessing.

Nestled in the middle of the ovules lay this unfathomably large, unfathomably ugly, *thing*. A huge, bulbous, gelatinous mass whose extent not even the light from the flares could illuminate. I'd seen some tall buildings in my life, but overall this creature was taller and wider than any skyscraper I'd ever seen. No creature should be this massive. And yet there it was.

Its entire surface constantly shifted and moved, and when I zoomed in, I

saw more of those fist-sized insects, covering every square meter of the underlying entity, probably a few meters deep.

Long tentacles streamed away from the creature on all sides, bigger than the cables of the Golden Gate Bridge. Some of those tentacles were hovering rather threateningly above, as if listening, or perhaps “smelling,” for the next target. Fist-sized insects fell away from the hovering limbs in random chunks. Luckily, no tentacles passed directly over our positions or we’d potentially have those insects raining down on us.

One of the limbs had drawn the first slug to the outermost edge of the gelatinous creature, where the carcass was being engulfed slowly by a maw that had opened in the entity’s side.

The grotesque sight made me wonder: That vast pit we’d fallen down, was it some kind of garbage disposal chute? Were dead slugs and crabs purposely thrown into the abyss to feed this thing?

And if so, were the colonists also disposed of in a similar manner?

As I watched, a bulge appeared in one of those hovering tentacles, a swelling that moved peristaltically outward from the main body. It reminded me of the protuberance you’d see when a snake devoured something larger than itself.

The weight of the protuberance impelled the tentacle lower, and as the bulge moved outward, the tip of the appendage touched the ground roughly a hundred meters to the right of TJ’s scout, which was still embedded within the ovule ranks.

I switched to the scout’s viewpoint. As the bulge reached the end of the tentacle, the skin folded open and a fresh ovule emerged, covered in those squirming, snakelike appendages.

The tentacle began to retreat. It paused a short distance directly above the fresh ovule and quivered suddenly, causing a clump of fist-sized insects to fall away.

The alien snakes that covered the ovule greedily snatched up the insects. The whole thing oddly reminded me of someone jerking a food shaker over a fish tank.

“Well mates,” Facehopper sent in text mode. He didn’t want to risk voice. Probably a good idea. “I believe we’ve found our Queen.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Rade

The rattle of claws and mandibles continued to grow in volume.

"Let's move!" I said.

Lui, Hijak, Manic, and I hurried down the black resin that coated the outside of the building. We half ran, half slid across the surface, avoiding the dark pits along the way. The kid looked stiff as a board in Lui's arms. The sound of clattering mandibles echoed incessantly from the holes around us, rising in intensity as the unseen alien entities neared the surface.

On my HUD, the positions of the remaining squad members updated as we came back into range. The Chief and the others had abandoned the armory and relocated farther up the street.

"Chief, do you read?" I sent.

"Yes," the Chief returned through the static.

"Looks like we're going to be hip deep in crabs soon," I transmitted.

"Why do you think we moved?" the Chief returned. "We detected some massive reverberations beneath the armory. Something big is coming. Proceed to our position as fast as you can."

The four of us reached the bottom of the resinous slope.

The chitters crescendoed behind me.

I glanced back. From nearly every hole those dreaded eight-legged, multi-headed crabs emerged, mandibles thrashing eagerly at the air.

Lui shoved the child-sized aReal visor over the kid's eyes. "Watch some cartoons!" he told the boy, according to the translation my own aReal relayed.

I slid the sniper rifle from my shoulder and ran toward the Chief's position.

Beside us, the armory caved as a fresh sinkhole appeared. A behemoth of a slug burst to the surface. Its skin was white hot—it was in "burrowing"

mode. Two hundred alien crabs lined its upper flanks. Those crabs dove to the street even as I watched, and the cords that linked them to the host slug unwound behind them.

“Hurry up!” the Chief sent.

We joined with the Chief and all eight of us helped port the nuclear payload through the streets, moving as fast as our jumpsuits allowed. It was lucky we’d just recharged the suit batteries, because maintaining this speed while sharing the weight of a nuclear warhead was consuming power at a frenetic rate.

Bullets started to come in on us from behind.

“Don’t tell me they’ve got possessed Centurions, too,” Hijak said.

“When it rains it pours, bro,” Manic said.

Up ahead, more crabs flowed onto the street, blocking our route. Other crabs leaped down the black resin caking the buildings on either side of us. All of them skittered straight toward the payload and us.

In our free hands we wielded rifles or pistols, both set to automatic, and severed the cords that linked these new crabs to their as-yet-unseen host slugs.

Lui was the only one who didn’t shoot, as the kid occupied the arm that wasn’t holding the payload. The child still had his opaque aReal visor lowered, and hopefully was oblivious to the life or death struggle going on around him. Still, I doubted even a children’s show with the volume set to max could shut out the sounds of gunfire. Either way, I prayed none of the incoming bullets found the kid.

“Getting too hot!” the Chief said, not referring to the temperature. “We’re sitting ducks if we stay here. Time to dine and dash, men! This way!”

We sprinted up the sloping resin that plastered the building beside us, hewing down the crabs in our path, concentrating on severing the cords—the easiest method of killing the disgusting beings.

Just behind, the white-hot slug slammed into the black substance and began worming up the slope after us. Two Centurions accompanied it, firing away. The Phants possessing the robots were fairly bad shots, and shards of resin exploded into the air around me. Still, I knew that even poor shooters would score a hit eventually.

The resin led to the top of the two-story building and we piled onto the rooftop with the payload.

“To the opposite edge!” the Chief said. “We’re going to get airborne.

Transmitting waypoints!”

New beacons appeared on my HUD, flashing upon various rooftops ahead.

We hurried to the other side of the building and linked the AIs of our jetpacks so that the prerequisite thrust intensities and directions would be calculated automatically, taking into account our individual positions with respect to the payload. The AIs were set to activate when we leaped from the building.

Crabs were already swarming onto the rooftop behind us. The front portion of the slug slammed onto the terrace, scattering some of the creatures.

“On three!” Chief Bourbonjack said as we ran.

“One!”

I shot down a crab that leaped into our path.

“Two!”

Bender and Manic severed the cords of two more crabs that got in the way.

“Three!”

We reached the rooftop’s edge and jumped in unison, getting in a good boost from our strength-enhanced suits. Before the momentum from the jump ebbed, the AIs in our jetpacks kicked in, thrusting us toward the rooftop of the next building, which proved two stories taller.

Behind me, a few crabs leaped skyward. Their claws and mandibles snapped at the empty air just underneath my boots.

We landed on the target rooftop and began porting the payload to the far side.

The child remained remarkably calm in Lui’s grasp. I don’t know what program the kid was watching on his aReal but I sure could have used a sampling of it.

We leaped toward the adjacent building, where the next waypoint was set. Again, before our momentum ebbed, our jetpacks auto-fired, bringing us up and across.

I eyed my fuel levels, which were already precariously low. When we landed on the next building, I estimated I had enough fuel for maybe two more jets.

“Chief!” Snakeoil said. “The squad is almost out of fuel!”

“Just one more jump,” the Chief said as we dashed across the rooftop, weaving between the superstructures. “We’ll make our stand there.”

The Chief sent an updated waypoint and we veered sideways toward it. The target building was the highest in the vicinity at thirteen stories tall. It was about a hundred meters away to our right, and six stories up.

“Too high!” Snakeoil transmitted. “We won’t make it.”

Bullets started to come in at us from robot snipers who had attained the rooftops of other nearby buildings.

“Check your numbers!” the Chief sent. “We *will* make it.”

“We’ll be exposed during the jump!” Bender said.

“If we stay here, we’ll be even more exposed,” Chief Bourbonjack said. “We *need* that height!”

Before we could think about it too long, he led us to the edge and we made the leap. Our jetpacks kicked in.

Heights were never my strong suit and I made a point of not looking down.

As Bender had said, we were indeed exposed: bullets continued to come in, some so close that they ricocheted off the payload.

“Gah!” Snakeoil said. Blood spurted from his upper arm.

Three stories to the rooftop . . .

Two stories . . .

One by one the jetpacks around me began to shut off as the fuel ran out, and our ascent slowed.

My own jetpack deactivated and we were down to four. The AIs compensated for the missing thrust components and continued bringing us upward.

One story to the rooftop . . .

Two more jetpacks shut down, further decelerating our ascent.

I accidentally looked down at the dizzying heights between my boots and nearly regurgitated the MRE I’d sipped earlier.

But then the rooftop replaced the empty air and we landed.

What a relief.

My brothers and I carried the nuclear payload to the center of the terrace and lowered the device. Snakeoil patched his arm with the suitrep kit from the cargo pocket in his leg while we took up defensible positions. The majority of us faced the incoming horde on the southernmost edge. The Chief ordered Manic to watch the eastern edge, Lui the west, Bender the north.

Lui set the child down beside the payload, lifted the kid’s aReal, and told him what I guessed were words of reassurance. In moments Lui left the

boy to assume his assigned spot on the western portion of the building. Abandoned there in the middle of the rooftop, the kid huddled against the payload and put on his aReal once more. Probably a good idea.

I dropped beside the southern edge and scanned for combat robots in my scope. Hijak did the same beside me.

We were out of reach of the slugs and crabs, for now. Even so, I felt the building vibrate as one of the slugs repeatedly slammed into the base of the structure, which was caked in geronium. I wondered why the slug didn't switch to burrowing mode and sap the foundations out from under us. Either the alien entity wasn't very bright or some other reason ruled out that option—maybe the slug simply didn't like the idea of a million tonnes of concrete, metal, and glass potentially collapsing onto it.

While I focused on finding snipers, Snakeoil and Skullcracker, our heavy gunners, issued suppressive fire as necessary. The Chief held a Carl Gustav and fired selectively at the larger targets, including slugs and ATLAS 5s. I didn't spot any model 6s down there. Yet. For the most part we ignored the crabs, which were too distant to pose any threats.

Bullets slammed into the side of the building just below me.

Through my scope, I spotted several Centurions on the rooftop we'd vacated earlier. They were crouched behind various superstructures, aiming up at us.

"Hijak, Centurions just below," I said. He would see the enemy positions on his HUD map.

I fired and got one combat robot squarely in the brain case region on its chest. I moved my aim from robot to robot, and with Hijak's help I cleared them out.

When that was done, instinctively I checked everyone's vitals. The bars representing Manic and Snakeoil were a darker green, meaning that both men had sustained recent gunshot wounds, but otherwise the two of them were still in the game. So far, no one seemed badly injured.

More fire came in, this time from the rooftop of a building on our eastern flank.

Blood spurted from the front of Chief Bourbonjack's jumpsuit and he collapsed, almost dropping his Gustav over the building.

I low-crawled to his side, pulling him from the edge. I saw immediately where he was hit.

He had taken a gut wound: one of the most painful shots anyone could

endure.

"We have to get that sutured, Chief," I said, dragging him to the middle of the rooftop. He didn't contradict me—his face had gone very pale.

As rockets slammed into the southernmost side of the building, I worked on the Chief. I was vaguely aware as the squad retreated from the edge.

I removed the Chief's glove and arm assemblies, followed by his chest piece, revealing the liquid-cooling-and-ventilation undergarment, otherwise known as "cool vents." The stench from the gut wound was nauseating, but I didn't scrunch my nose or give any other indication that I was bothered by it. I didn't want to worry the Chief unnecessarily. But he wasn't even looking at me: he gazed off into space, jabbering something unintelligible under his breath.

"You're going to be all right, Chief," I said. "You're going to make it through this."

He gripped my arm suddenly and pulled me in. "Lead them, Rage. If I don't make it, lead them!"

I shook my head. "You're going to be fine. Let me work."

"Rage—"

"You're going to be fine!" His words evoked a panic in me. I couldn't imagine losing the Chief, let alone leading in his absence.

He clenched my arm so tightly that I felt his grip through the fabric of my jumpsuit. "If I die, *you—will—lead—goddammit*!"

I stared into his pain-maddened eyes. I couldn't say no to him. "Okay, Chief. Okay."

He released his death grip.

I injected morphine and he relaxed immediately.

I checked his vitals. He'd lost a lot of blood. I had to work fast.

"Could use a shot of bourbon, too, right about now," the Chief murmured.

With help from the surgical laser in my glove, I snipped open the cooling undergarment around the gut wound and pulled the fabric aside.

Bullets started coming in from behind me and I ducked right down. I wasn't close to the building's edge—gunfire shouldn't have been able to reach me here.

What now?

Glancing over my shoulder, I saw Centurions fanning out onto the

rooftop from the direction of the stairwell.

Damn it.

Skullcracker and the others ducked behind the various superstructures of the roof and turned their weapons inward, firing at the robot intruders. My brothers laid down suppressive fire while I dragged the Chief behind the nuclear payload for cover. It was the safest place to hide—the shielding on the warhead would block even the most powerful armor piercers.

I lowered the medbag from my back and retrieved the medical forceps. I applied a local anesthetic and switched my aReal to X-ray mode. Taking off my glove, I dug the forceps into the Chief's gut wound, reaching for the bullet that was now visible within his flesh thanks to the X-rays. It was tricky, because most body tissue appeared as translucent outlines in this display mode, while the bullet was solid black. So I had to guess the path the bullet had taken, but oftentimes guessed wrong and the forceps snagged in some intestinal fold, forcing me to backtrack and reposition. The smell worsened as I probed.

Meanwhile, the Chief gritted his teeth and slammed a palm repeatedly into the rooftop. I was about to give him more morphine when he relaxed entirely.

I double-checked his vitals. He'd merely fallen into the sweet bliss of unconsciousness—the pain had been too much.

Gunfire ricocheted from the payload beside me but I ignored it. I had to concentrate.

"We have to blow the stairs!" Lui transmitted.

A grenade went off somewhere, momentarily stemming the tide of incoming bullets.

"Breacher, got any plastic left?" Hijak sent.

"Hell ya!" Snakeoil, our breacher, replied.

I finally wrapped the forceps around the foreign object and slowly brought the bullet through the intestinal folds. The spent projectile caught on some tissue halfway through and I almost lost it. I reversed motion, slid the forceps deeper, repositioned, and backtracked. Finally the bullet broke the surface. I switched off X-ray mode, and as I lifted the forceps free, black sludge competed with blood in oozing from the wound.

The bullet's tip was flat, thanks to the momentum-draining impact against the jumpsuit. I pocketed it without thinking, though I doubted the Chief would ever want the macabre souvenir.

More grenades went off, more gunfire.

“Explosives placed!” Snakeoil transmitted.

Into the wound I injected the contents of an Xstat syringe—its tiny pellets would absorb the blood and provide a partial internal hemostatic seal. I sprinkled on some Mister Clot—topical hemostatic powder—and finalized the treatment with the application of a skin suture. That was the best I could do for now. He’d continue to bleed internally, as well as spill the toxic contents of his intestines into his abdominal cavity, until we could get him to a Weaver.

I checked my map and saw that the nearest hospital was about three klicks distant. It may as well have been lightyears away given our current predicament. Besides, even if we made it, the hospital was too close to the horde. The enemy would overwhelm our position before the Weavers could even begin to work on the Chief.

An explosion rocked the rooftop, and when I glanced over the rim of the device, I saw the stairwell cave inward, sealing off the entrance. In front of it the crumpled bodies of combat robots fanned outward. Blue, glowing liquid trickled from the twisted metal as the Phants that possessed the robots flowed free. We had to watch ourselves, because if any of those glowing entities touched us, we were dead.

“And that’s how it’s done, bitches,” Bender sent.

I replaced the Chief’s jumpsuit components. I wanted him ready to move if the opportunity arose. When he was suited up, I returned my attention to the battle at hand.

Gunfire was still coming in toward the payload, oddly enough, despite its position at the center of the rooftop, far from the perimeters. Had the Centurions already dug out the stairwell?

I peered past the nuclear device.

Centurions were leaping over the edge of our rooftop, scaling the very walls of the building to reach us. My brothers were taking them down, but the enemy kept coming. It was like all the combat robots in the city had converged on this building, and were climbing it with the aid of jumpjets.

I glanced at the kid, who huddled behind the payload near the Chief and me. The child still wore his opaque aReal, but from his body language I could tell he was scared—he was cowering, his jaw was clenched, his fists were squeezed tightly. But at least he was safe. For now.

I spotted two liquid Phants approaching Skullcracker and Bender from

behind.

"Skullcracker, Bender," I said over the comm. "Phants on your six."

Skullcracker and Bender immediately repositioned themselves. In the process Bender leaped over another nearby Phant. The liquid instantly spread apart underneath him, as if repelled.

Odd.

"Take that, bitches!" Bender said when he had resumed cover. Crouching, he fired into the next wave of Centurions.

A sniper's armor-piercing bullet struck Bender on the front left side. His suit absorbed much of the momentum, preventing him from somersaulting into the air, but he was still flung backward to the ground.

He didn't get up. Blood erupted from his side.

I swung my scope around, searching for the attacker. The sniper had to be on this very rooftop, given the angle of penetration.

There. A Centurion sniper was perched on the northern edge of the building, aiming at its next target: me.

I hastily positioned the red dot in my scope over its brain case, but before I could fire, the Centurion was sent reeling off the building. One of my platoon brothers had gotten it.

I glanced to my right. Hijak. He nodded grimly.

Another Centurion clambered over the northern edge.

I took it out immediately.

I realized most of us had migrated toward the southernmost edge of the rooftop, leaving the other sides unguarded.

In that moment, I remembered the Chief's words. *Lead them!*

"Lui, Skullcracker, cover the southern edge," I sent. "Hijak, take the north. Manic, the east. Snakeoil, the west. Skullcracker, you're the wildcard. Help out the others as needed. I'm going to look after Bender."

My brothers tossed grenades toward the building edges, then low-crawled to reposition themselves and cover their assigned sections. I almost expected Snakeoil to countermand me—as breacher, he was considered second in command after the Chief. But he leaped to obey. I guess he was just glad someone else was stepping in.

When I reached Bender, he was staring up into space. I did a quick scan of his wound.

Bender blinked. "Go away. I'm fine. Just need . . . a breather."

"Grenade!" Skullcracker shouted.

I glanced over my shoulder in time to see Skullcracker and Lui leaping from their compromised cover. Behind them, an enemy grenade went off.

I pulled the pin on my own grenade and tossed it at the southernmost edge to keep their attackers occupied. When the grenade detonated, Skullcracker and Lui were already in place behind new superstructures, and they resumed firing.

I returned my attention to Bender.

"Why you still here, bitch? Said I'm fine." He started to get up, but winced.

I forced him down, and dragged him behind a small dish-like superstructure for cover.

"The bullet hit your spleen," I said. "Basically destroyed it. The jumpsuit absorbed the rest of the impact. Spared your other organs."

"Great. Told you I'm fine. Now help me up, would you?"

"Not until I fish the bullet out of you," I said.

"No time," Bender said, shoving me aside. "Guess I'll . . . just get up . . . on my own."

He still had surprising strength, and against my better judgment, I capitulated.

I surveyed the rooftop, switching between the POV cams in the helmets of my squad mates. "Bender, reinforce Hijak on the northern side. I'm going to help Skullcracker and Lui on the south."

"Fine, bitch." He wormed toward Hijak, leaving a trail of blood in his wake. I shook my head. Someone would have to patch him up, soon, if he didn't do it himself.

I low-crawled toward Skullcracker.

Gunfire came down at me from above as a Centurion used its jumpjets to land on top of one of the larger superstructures.

I rolled to the left, firing as I did so, and took out the robot with a lucky shot. In the middle of my roll, I realized a puddle of glowing liquid was right beside me.

One of the Phants.

And I was about to roll right into it.

There was no way to halt my momentum. I couldn't even fire my jetpack, not without fuel.

I was going to be incinerated.

I closed my eyes.

The roll completed and I came to a stop.

I was still alive.

I opened my eyes, expecting to see a glowing puddle beneath me, but instead I found a patch of bare roof.

The Phant had retreated.

The glowing entity had assumed a position one meter away from me, and there it remained, motionless.

Curious, I lifted a hand toward it.

The Phant didn't move.

However, when I low-crawled my entire body toward it, the glowing liquid retreated.

I think I knew what was going on.

"Guys, the Phants can't harm us," I sent over the comm.

"What?" Snakeoil returned. "Are you sure?"

"Yeah. The EM emitters repel them."

"Good to know," Hijak returned.

The attack eased somewhat, and we advanced to the edges of our respective sides to fire down at the Centurions climbing the walls, also taking out any combat robots that tried to jet across from the surrounding buildings.

Hijak meanwhile persuaded Bender to let him take off his upper body assembly so he could apply a skin suture to the wound. Just like the Chief, Bender would still bleed internally until we could get him to a Weaver. I sent Skullcracker over to watch their six as Hijak worked.

Snakeoil and I returned to the Chief, who yet lay beside the payload. Liquid Phants were nearby, though they left a one-meter gap around him.

Hands pressed to ears, aReal still lowered over his eyes, the kid cowered against the payload beside him. Though the child himself didn't have an emitter, he was protected from the Phants by the Chief's emitter, as well as the emitter attached to the payload.

I purposefully stepped toward the Phants and they scattered.

"Can't believe we noticed this effect only now," Snakeoil commented.

"The scientists who developed the emitters probably never got closer than a meter to their Phant subjects," I said.

"I don't blame them," Snakeoil said.

I knelt beside Chief Bourbonjack. He was awake.

"You have to get off this rooftop, Rage," Chief Bourbonjack said. "Collect whatever fuel you can from the downed Centurions. Then get

everyone out. Don’t worry about me.”

“We’re not leaving you behind,” I said.

“You are, goddammit.”

Snakeoil did a quick scan of the area.

“Then you’ll have company, Chief,” Snakeoil said. “I just checked. Even if we collected all the fuel from the fallen robots, there’d only be enough for three or four of us to make a few good jumps out of here. The rest have to stay.”

“Maybe we should draw straws,” Lui said, coming up beside us.

“No one is drawing straws.” I stood up. “Because no one is staying behind.”

“I am,” the Chief asserted.

“Rage, sometimes you have to face the facts,” Lui said. “Not all of us are going to make it out of this. I’d gladly stay behind so the rest of you can go.”

“As would I,” Snakeoil said.

“We all would,” Lui agreed. “Which is why we have to draw straws, to see who gets the honor.”

“No one is staying behind,” I growled.

I didn’t want to believe it. Couldn’t.

I glanced at the collapsed stairwell. “We’ll take the stairs.”

Lui shook his head. “When we clear the debris, there will be Centurions waiting on the other side. All the way down.”

“We’ll deal with them.”

Lui raised his hands in defeat. “Fine, let me know what you all decide.” He turned around and began weaving his way back toward the southern edge of the rooftop, where Skullcracker had relocated.

“Even if you get me off the rooftop, I’m not going to make it,” Chief Bourbonjack said.

I squeezed my jaw. “Find me all the hospitals within a thirty-klick radius,” I instructed Snakeoil. “Try to identify those in fortifiable locations.”

The Chief chuckled. “Never going to give up, are you, Rage?”

“No, Chief,” I told him. “I don’t know the meaning of the words.”

“Listen to me,” Chief Bourbonjack said. “It’s better if some us die, rather than *all* of us.”

“Is it?” I told the Chief. “Easy enough for you to say. You get to be one of the dead ones.” That sounded cold, I know, but it was how I felt. “What

about the rest of us? We have to live with the guilt, knowing we left behind the best of our teammates. I can't do it, Chief. I can't."

Perched beside the Chief, the kid abruptly removed his aReal visor and looked up at me. He had this deer-in-the-headlights look on his face. I felt for him: if I were a kid I'd be terrified, too. It was partially my fault the kid was up here, stuck with us. I was the one who had spotted him in the first place. He probably would have been better off if we'd left him alone.

I went to the child, glad for an excuse to suspend the heartbreaking conversation I was having with the Chief, if only momentarily.

"I'm scared," the child said in Korean-Chinese.

"Be strong, kid," was all I could come up with. Like I said, I was never good with children.

The child flinched when Skullcracker's heavy gun went off nearby. "So loud."

"Nothing we can do about that," I said, letting my aReal translate. "That's the sound of us saving your life. Get used to it." Harsh words, I suppose, but I had no idea what else to say.

The kid mumbled something in response. The translation came from my helmet aReal: "Why don't you fight them with ATLAS mechs?"

I smiled sadly. "I wish we had some ATLAS units, kid. I really do. But all the mechs in this city are controlled by the enemy."

The child spoke again. "I know where you can find three mechs untouched by the Yaoguai," came the translation. *Yaoguai*. That's what the SKs called Phants. The fear was obvious in his voice.

I frowned. My gaze dropped to the miniature ATLAS 5 the kid still gripped tightly in one hand. "This isn't a game, kid. We don't need toys."

"No, the mechs I'm talking about are real. Not toys. ATLAS 5s. Made of steel. Taller than you. Three times as big. With guns and missiles. And shields. Big shields. Untouched by the Yaoguai."

"Are you absolutely sure?" I said. "Don't be joking around about this, kid. All our lives are at stake here."

"I saw them just this morning," the kid insisted.

I felt my brows draw together. "Where?"

"My friend Giger's garage," came the translation.

"If I showed you a map, could you mark it out?"

"No," the kid said. "I only know the way from my apartment. It's five blocks away from there."

“Your apartment . . . where we found you?”

He nodded.

The apartment wasn’t all that far behind us.

Maybe this was the way out I was looking for . . . if the squad siphoned the fuel from the downed Centurions as the Chief had suggested, we could send three or four of us out into the city and retrieve those ATLAS 5s, potentially drawing off much of the horde in the process. Then the selected men could return in the mechs and extract everyone else.

Assuming, of course, that what the kid said was true, and that those we sent actually made it.

Was it worth the risk?

I glanced at the Chief, who was close enough to have heard the whole exchange. There was a glimmer in his eyes, one I hadn’t seen since we’d boarded the Skull Ship, and I knew the answer to that question immediately.



Hijak, Skullcracker, and I made up the fire team sent to retrieve the ATLAS mechs. The kid would hitch a ride with me.

I’d taken Skullcracker along because he had the privilege escalation kit known as the SACKER installed in his embedded Id, which we’d need to authorize our access to the SK mechs. He still had that leg injury sustained on the first day of our operation, of course, but so far it hadn’t hindered his performance. I knew I could bring him along and trust that he wouldn’t slow us down or mess up.

I’d chosen Hijak because, in addition to his high sniping scores, he had an outstanding ATLAS qualification rating. I’d seen him pilot a mech twice in battle and the second time he’d been in an ATLAS 6. Though Manic and Lui were the platoon’s official ATLAS pilots (along with Bomb, who was with Digger Squad), I wanted someone with ATLAS 6 experience just in case. Manic and Lui hid their disappointment well.

Hijak, Skullcracker, and I quickly salvaged what fuel we could from the jetpacks of the fallen Centurions while the rest of the squad provided cover. In total, the three of us gathered enough fuel for around five to seven jumps each. I would run out of fuel first of course, owing to the extra weight of the kid.

I gave my medbag to Hijak and knelt so that the kid could wrap his hands around my neck assembly and perch above the jetpack, piggyback-style. Lui secured him with spare cord from the multipurpose canister near the front of his belt, and then secured the child-sized aReal over the kid's eyes.

"Watch something good, kid," Lui said, according to my translator.

Snakeoil handed me the last of his plastic explosives. "Good luck."

I gripped him by the hand. "We'll be back."

"I'll hold you to that."

I low-crawled to the northern edge of the building with Hijak and Skullcracker. The remaining squad members laid down suppressive fire for us, concentrating on the Centurions lurking on the destination rooftop.

"First waypoint is clear of tangos!" Hijak said.

"Hang on!" I told the kid.

I stood up and leaped over the building edge.

Gunfire whizzed past from the street as we dropped toward the target rooftop. Our jetpacks fired away, slowing our descent.

The moment we landed, two serpent missiles shrieked through the air behind us. The missiles continued skyward in random directions as if they'd lost their targets. Which they probably had—if the enemy had fired an instant earlier we would have been dead.

The three of us advanced toward the opposite end of the building, away from the horde. The next destination, a rooftop three floors down, was empty.

We jetted across. More bullets came up at us while in midair but we all made it without injury according to the vitals on my HUD. One person wasn't connected to our network, however.

"You okay, kid?" I said.

"Yes."

The green dots representing our abandoned squad members blinked inactively on the HUD map. We were out of range. It was up to us, now.

The horde activity around the next building proved even quieter, with the street beyond nearly empty.

When I landed, I glanced over my shoulder to see four Centurions jetting toward us. I eliminated two of them and Hijak handled the other pair.

We continued moving this way from building to building, occasionally delaying to eliminate pursuers. We crossed five different streets in the process and eventually took to the pavement in an avenue that was entirely

free of crabs, slugs, and possessed robots. Even so, I heard the agitated clatter of the horde some distance behind us, pursuing.

I glanced at my fuel levels.

"I'm about out," I said as I ran. I had enough fuel for about half a jump.

"One jet left here," Hijak said.

"Two for me," Skullcracker added.

"Kid, you okay?"

"Yes," the child answered.

As we proceeded toward the kid's apartment, the sound of the horde was never far behind, and I knew a substantial number had abandoned the thirteeen-story tower to give chase. Maybe all of them did. I hoped so, for the sake of those we left behind.

The clang of steel footfalls soon became the main sound of pursuit: the Centurions and ATLAS 5s moved the fastest, and would reach us first.

We had no time to dally.

I called up our route history on my aReal and led the way toward the kid's apartment at a lope.

The kid shifted on my back. Glancing over my shoulder, I saw he'd taken off his aReal.

"Do you recognize where we are yet?" I said in Korean-Chinese with the translator.

"No."

"What's your name, anyway, kid?" I said, not slowing my pace. "Or should I just keep calling you 'kid'?"

"I am Tung," he said.

"Tung. Well, my name's Rade. Rade Galaal."

The kid coughed softly. "You told me already."

"Did I? Okay, well, point is, you're safe with me."

"No one's safe," Tung said matter-of-factly. "Not with anyone."

He was right. I reminded myself that his family was dead. He'd probably seen them gunned down with his own eyes. My dearly departed friend, Alejandro, had suffered through the same ordeal.

There weren't any words of comfort you could say to a child who'd witnessed something as horrifying as that. The poor kid was probably scarred for life.

We were almost at the apartment.

"Do these streets look familiar yet?" I said.

“No.” Tung answered. A moment later, he added: “The robots got them. My family.”

I didn’t know what to say.

“When we reach the mechs,” Tung said, “will you kill the Yaoguai?”

“I’ll certainly try.”

Tung squeezed my jumpsuit tighter around the neck assembly. “Kill them all, Rade Galaal. Kill every last one of them.”

It was eerie, and somewhat heartrending, to hear a child echoing the same sentiments that drove me, an adult man. We all wanted vengeance it seemed, even the youngest of us.

Some moments later we reached the kid’s apartment.

“So?” I said, revolving in place.

“Here.” Tung pointed to the right. “That way.”

We hadn’t encountered any enemy units thus far, but the persistent clang of metallic feet continued in the distance, taunting us.

The kid pointed out streets and side streets as we jogged. “Left.” “Right.” “This alley.” “That one.”

In about six minutes we reached the promised garage.

It was some kind of mech repair shop. Five windowless garage doors sealed the bays. There was no geronium caking the shop, despite the fact most of the neighboring buildings were sheathed in the stuff. That was a good sign. I was a bit disappointed, however, because the bays weren’t tall enough to house ATLAS 6s. That meant models fives or lower. Assuming the kid was right.

I gazed at the front door. “Is your embedded ID on the access list?” I asked Tung with help from my aReal translator.

“Yes,” Tung said.

Conscious of the unseen horde bearing down on our position, I took the steps to the front office two at a time. When I reached the door, it didn’t open. From his perch on my back, the kid waved his wrist back and forth over the door sensor. Nothing.

“It’s not working,” Tung said.

“No really, kid?” That was Hijak.

“Why isn’t it working?” Tung continued in a whiny voice. “It worked this morning.”

Though power was out throughout the city, emergency batteries usually kept things like doors operational, otherwise people wouldn’t be able to enter

their houses during power failures. So if the battery hadn't drained yet, there was no reason the door should have stopped working, unless someone had purposely deleted the kid's ID from the authorization list since this morning.

Or unless the kid was lying.

"Giger!" Tung shouted. "Let me in! Giger!"

Nothing.

"Why isn't he answering?" Tung complained.

I studied the door. It was one of the irising models—there were no handles to blast away with the breach rounds of our rifles.

I peered into the window beside the door. In the room beyond I saw an empty countertop and, behind it, a shelf filled with mech supplies and parts. On the back wall hung a sign with a picture of a feisty-looking SK wearing large, translucent goggles. His hair was spiked and he gave the camera the thumbs-up gesture while winking. At the bottom of the sign, the following was written in Korean-Chinese: No shoes, no mech, no service.

Hijak and Skullcracker waited at the bottom of the stairs, watching my back. Hijak glanced up at me. "Plastic?"

"Plastic," I agreed. From my utility belt I unclipped the chain of microexplosives Snakeoil had given me and I tossed it to Hijak. "Make the first bay door go away."

"You got it." Hijak hurried to the bay and began placing the plastic.

I started down the stairs.

Before I was halfway to the bottom, I heard a whir from above and behind me.

I swung my weapon about, as did Skullcracker below.

The office door had irised open.

A pudgy SK stood in the entrance, the spitting image of the SK I'd seen on the sign through the office window. The same coveralls, the same spiked hair, the same thick aviator goggles.

The only difference from the character on the sign was that the real-life version wielded a sawed-off.

And the weapon was pointed directly at my head.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Tahoe

Watching from the scout's viewpoint, I stared at the huge, tentacled form of the "Queen."

"Doesn't seem to be reacting to our flares at all," TJ sent in text mode. "Probably blind."

One of the ovules near the scout shuddered and burst. A slug gushed onto the cave floor in a stream of black, amniotic fluid. Its girth was about the size of an ATLAS 5, and its length twice that.

The baby slug remained motionless for a few moments and then turned toward the deflated egg, whereupon it began devouring the still-living appendages that sheathed the shell.

"Recall your scout, TJ," Facehopper wrote.

I switched back to my helmet viewpoint as the ASS scout retreated.

"Bomb," Facehopper continued writing, squad-wide, "with me. We're arming the first nuclear, mates. Going to set the timer to three hours."

"What about the Observer Mind?" Fret wrote.

"Secondary orders are clear," Facehopper answered. "We are to take out the Queen if the opportunity arises."

"Is three hours enough time to reach the Observer Mind from here?" I wrote.

"Check your map," Facehopper wrote.

I glanced at the map. The glowing waypoint that represented the Observer Mind was roughly ten klicks away, within the mass of unmapped darkness to our east. Not far at all. Still . . .

"Three hours might be enough time to reach the Observer Mind," I wrote. "Assuming we can find a relatively direct path and that its calculated position is correct. But even if all goes as planned and we reach the Observer Mind within, say, an hour, how the hell are we supposed to get back to the

surface in the two hours before detonation? You know how far we fell. There's no way we'll make it out in time. Ain't no way. Not before the nuke incinerates us."

Facehopper's text cursor remained inactive a moment. "You're an astrophysicist. You understand blast physics. The vaporization range of the nuke won't extend beyond this cavern. Feel free to correct me if I'm wrong." I didn't, because he wasn't. "The same will hold true of the region around the Observer Mind. Which means, once we've placed both nukes and moved beyond the vaporization range, all we'll have to deal with are the shockwaves from the blasts. Sure, those waves will be incredibly strong, magnified as they are by the confined space, but even powerful shockwaves have to obey the laws of physics. We'll find a dead-end side passage, seal it off, and wait for the blasts to pass. Then we'll reopen the passage and continue on our way."

"Reopening a collapsed passageway might not be so easy," I wrote. "Plus, the shockwave could cause multiple cave-ins throughout the warrens."

"Then we'll dig our way out!!!" Yes, he actually wrote multiple exclamations. "It looks like you're vying with Fret for the position of Petty Officer Doom and Gloom. Listen, Cyclone, we *will* get out of here. Deciding on the nuclear countdown was always going to be a thorny issue. We have to leave enough time to escape, yet not so much time that the warhead is discovered."

It was tricky, he was right. Even so, these were our lives at stake here. "Let's take a look at the not-so-optimal scenario, then," I wrote. "What if it takes longer to escape the vaporization range of one or both nukes? What if the Observer Mind isn't located where it should be, or we have to retreat through some wide tunnel that's too big to seal off and doesn't have any side passages? Three hours doesn't leave us much margin for error."

"All right," Facehopper wrote after a moment. "All right. We'll set the warhead to detonate in five hours instead of three. That should be more than enough time to reach the Observer Mind, place the second nuke, escape its vaporization range, and prepare a shelter to survive the blast waves. That's two more hours we're giving the enemy to find this first nuke, but it's an acceptable risk, given the circumstances, and your arguments."

No one disagreed.

Five hours.

Despite Facehopper's optimism and insistence that we would get out of

there no matter what, I wasn't certain I believed him. Sure, we'd do our best to place the nukes in the most effective locations to harm the enemy, but whether we'd actually live to see another day was an altogether different matter.

We were low on ammo and had no jetpack fuel. The crabs and slugs near the surface were aware of our presence. The Queen would likely be notified about us shortly and then she'd alert her more-subterranean minions. We would eventually find ourselves embroiled in a battle to the death with the horde. When the ammo ran out, we'd have nothing to fight with but the metallic fists of our ATLAS 5s. Or in my case, the gloves of my jumpsuit.

We all knew Facehopper wouldn't purposely lead us to our deaths. It just wasn't his way. He'd do his best to get us out of here. And he would have never agreed to the op in the first place if it was a suicide mission. And yet, missions and the battle spaces containing them were pliant, ever-changing beasts. What started out as an entirely survivable mission could easily mutate into a death sentence.

"Bomb?" Facehopper wrote.

Facehopper and Bomb quietly emerged from their mechs to insert their physical keys, two each, into the warhead's command console, and to input their respective portions of the arming code. Once that was done, Facehopper set the timer to five hours, and then the two of them reentered their ATLAS units.

We covered the payload in slime from the cave floor, hoping the Queen and her minions would overlook the device. We debated whether or not to deactivate the EM emitter, since it could potentially reveal the location to the enemy. In the end we decided to leave it on, if only to prevent the Phants from possessing the control console.

Once the warhead was in place we retreated southward as quietly as possible, giving the eggs a wide berth. The thick deposits of slime on the ground were both a blessing and a curse: On the one hand, the slime softened our heavy footfalls. On the other, if we moved too fast, the suction could become nearly impossible to counter, so the squad had to advance nerve-rackingly slowly.

I remained in the passenger seat of Antares, Ghost's mech, the whole time, watching our aft quarter. I wished I still piloted Wolfhound, but damn it, I was going to fight for my brothers and make a difference even if all I had was a jumpsuit.

The Queen and her ovules faded into the darkness behind us; the flares had long since gone out.

But the timer was ticking.

Four hours, thirty minutes.

The layer of slime ended when we reached the southernmost extremity of the ovule ranks, and we increased our pace, swinging eastward, hurrying over the bare rock. According to the map, the Observer Mind resided twelve klicks ahead. Yes, moving south to skirt the eggs had increased our distance from the target. We had to make up for lost time.

It was Ghost's turn to port the second nuclear device. The only physical evidence of this was the slight hunch in the posture of his ATLAS 5. He easily kept pace with the rest of the squad, despite the fact he carried both me and the device—though obviously my own weight was negligible compared to the payload. TJ's ASS scout still remained on point and Ghost's on drag.

After some time, a rock wall loomed forth from the darkness ahead, and we followed it northward, toward our target. The Observer Mind was only four klicks away.

A few moments later TJ reported a large opening in the rock face up ahead, courtesy of his scout. It was guarded by two alien entities, one on either side. I switched to the scout's POV but I couldn't make out the aforementioned entities in the dim light.

"What kind of aliens are we talking about?" Facehopper sent, echoing my own unvoiced sentiments.

"Hard to say without sending the scout closer," TJ replied. "But if I do that, I risk alerting the aliens to its presence."

Too bad we had lost Bicentennial Man and Lead Food, because these ASS scouts didn't possess EM emitters—though it wouldn't matter anyway if the Queen and her abyss minions had been notified of our presence.

"TJ, Ghost," Facehopper sent. "Recall your scouts."

The ASS units returned and docked with their respective mechs.

"We're going to continue forward?" Fret sent, sounding worried.

"Do we have any other choice?" Facehopper returned. "We have a nuclear weapon ticking down on our six."

We approached.

Leaning forward to peer around Antares, I saw the opening in the rock up ahead. The pair of aliens appeared as indistinct masses in the murk on either side at first, but as we neared, I realized they were similar to other alien

classes we'd seen before. Some kind of a crab variant, as far as I could tell, minus the cords. I'd never seen crabs so big—almost the size of small slugs; they towered over our ATLAS mechs, coming in at twenty meters high. They didn't have eyes, but from the bat-like shrieks and clicks coming from their bodies, I gathered the creatures perceived the world via sonar.

Without warning, the two alien entities converged in the middle of the opening and blocked our way forward.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Rade

Release the child, UC," the man said in heavily accented English, keeping his sawed-off pointed directly at my head.

"Giger!" Tung let go of my neck and struggled against the cord that still bound him to my suit. I slowly knelt, placing my weapon on the stairs, raising my hands to show the man I intended no harm. Then I cautiously undid the ties around my chest, letting the kid slip to the ground.

Tung ran up the stairs and hugged the man's legs.

Giger kept his sawed-off trained on me. Those aviator goggles had the disconcerting effect of making his eyes seem slightly too large for his face. "Tung, get behind me," he said in Korean-Chinese.

The boy didn't move.

"We mean you no harm," I said.

Giger smirked. "I knew the UC was responsible for this invasion." He switched to Korean-Chinese and repeated: "Tung. Get behind me."

Tung finally complied; wearing a confused expression, he peeked past the man's right thigh to look at me.

"Tell me which of these bastards to shoot first," Giger told him.

"Him!" Tung pointed at me happily.

"The ugly one," Giger said. "Good."

"We're not the enemy here. You have to understand, Giger, we—"

"Don't call me that!" he yelled. "You haven't earned the right."

I resisted the urge to scoop my rifle from the stairs. I knew that behind me, Skullcracker already had him in his sights. "Lower the weapon, bro. Let's talk this through."

"You hurt the boy, UC," Giger said in English. "I can't allow such a deed to go unpunished."

"We didn't hurt him," I said. "Ask him. Go ahead. Ask."

Tung wasn't wearing his aReal, so the unit wouldn't have been translating the conversation.

Giger hesitated and then murmured something to the boy.

Tung furrowed his brow. "Hurt?" He shook his head. "Rade saved me! He is my friend!"

Giger gave me a thoughtful look. He seemed about ready to lower the rifle.

"He wants the mechs," the kid added.

Giger's resolve seemed to harden and he tightened his grip on the weapon. "Step away from my garage, UC scum."

"Is there anyone else with you?" I said, trying a different tack. "We can protect you. Come with us."

Giger's eyes narrowed. "I said, step away from the garage, UC."

I glanced at Skullcracker, who had his heavy gun firmly fixed on Giger, as expected. "First of all, the name's Rade Galaal. And this here is Skullcracker." My brother cracked a grin, splitting the skull tattooed onto his face. The effect was macabre and intimidating at the same time. "And the one holding the microexplosives is Hijak." Hijak waved amiably from his position in front of the first bay door, the magnetic disc of a microexplosive glinting in his hand.

"I don't care what your names are," Giger said. "Get out of here and never return. Thank you for bringing me the boy. Now go!"

"You don't understand," I said. "You're going to die if you stay here. We've woken up the horde. They're bearing down on us even now."

"Then lead them away from here!" Giger spat.

I didn't move. "Not without the mechs. Sorry, bro, ordinarily I wouldn't put civilian lives at risk like this, but we can't leave without those ATLAS 5s. Too much is at stake. You have two choices. Choice number one: You give us the mechs and come with us. Choice number two: We take the mechs forcefully, and you still come with us. Or at least the kid does."

"How about choice number three: I shoot you between your buggy little UC eyes?" Giger said. His choice of words seemed a bit ironic to me, given that his eyes were the ones that were buggy, courtesy of the aviators.

I smiled calmly. "We've already laid half our microcharges on your garage bay. And we carry three weapons to your one. Sure, you might take me out, but my man Skullcracker here will strike you down a second after. I guarantee it. He's spec-ops. Doesn't miss. And once you're out of the way,

my brothers will blow down the bay doors and take your mechs." I glanced at Tung. "And don't expect any hesitancy from my brothers just because you have a boy with you. My brothers *will* fire."

The SK stared at me, unblinking, seeming indecisive. Then he smiled triumphantly. "The mechs are not provisioned to obey UC scum. They are useless to you."

I nodded. "Skullcracker here is also our resident hacker. He can give us the necessary privileges no matter what ATLAS models you have in the bays." I hoped so, anyway. Some of the ATLAS 5 AI versions were more secure than others.

Giger seemed at a loss for words.

The distant clang of metallic feet echoed from the pavement and surrounding buildings, permeating the drawn-out silence between us.

I cocked my head. "Do you hear that? That's your ticking clock, my friend. Robots possessed by the Yaoguai. Hundreds of them. Your hiding place is compromised. If we don't take your mechs, *they* certainly will."

The distant footfalls were quickly rising in volume. The enemy was far nearer than I thought.

"Giger," I pressed. "Let us in. We're running out of time. End this game."

Still he hesitated.

Incoming fire from the street abruptly slammed into the stairs beside me, ending the standoff.

I scooped up my weapon and dove to the bottom of the steps. There I dropped, using the staircase as cover. I glanced up in time to see the outer door of the office spiral closed, and I caught a glimpse of Giger and the kid standing inside before it sealed.

So he'd made his choice, then.

Skullcracker ducked behind the shop's electronic billboard and returned fire.

"Hijak, finish placing those charges!" I shouted.

"Already on it!" Hijak said.

I surveyed the area through my scope. At the far end of the avenue, seven Centurions had taken cover behind random objects—a smashed vehicle here, the rut in a geronium fold there—making it hard for me to target the centrally located brain cases.

Skullcracker meanwhile continued to lay down suppressive fire,

covering Hijak, who was relatively exposed as he secured the final charges to the garage door.

“Hurry up, Hijak!” I slid the red dot in my scope over the eyepiece of an opposing Centurion’s rifle and pulled the trigger. Half its head blew away, effectively disabling the robot.

I shifted my aim to the right and hit a new arrival in the brain case before the Centurion could take cover.

Hijak yelped; I glanced back to see blood pump in spurts from his forearm.

“Just a flesh wound,” Hijak said, placing the next magnetic disc.

It looked like more than a flesh wound, but I didn’t say anything. I needed him to finish planting those microexplosives.

I aimed through my scope, taking out a Praetor combat unit. Praetors usually led a group of Centurions, but none of the combat robots with it backed down. That meant they hadn’t been linked to the Praetor and were probably individually possessed.

An Equestrian automated tank rumbled into view at the edge of the street. Its turret swiveled toward us.

Shit.

“Uh, Hijak?” I said.

“Fire in the hole!” Hijak yelled.

An explosion erupted behind me—the shockwave was consistent with a microexplosive yield.

I glanced back. Hijak had dropped beside the bay door, which now had an opening blasted through its base.

“Skullcracker, let’s go!” I said.

Hijak dove through the waist-high opening and I followed behind him; Skullcracker piled inside a second after me.

Flames gusted through the gaping hole as another explosion erupted just outside. The heat from the shockwave roared over us. Definitely a higher yield explosive—probably a shell from the Equestrian.

Glancing past the gap, I noticed that the sign Skullcracker had crouched behind only seconds earlier was gone. In its place remained a crater. Damn Equestrian.

I quickly surveyed the five-bay garage we stood within. There were no dividing walls between each bay, so I had a clear line of sight across all sections. The closest two bays proved empty, but bays three to five each

contained a dormant ATLAS 5.

The sight made me immensely happy.

Thanks, kid.

“Skullcracker, get those mechs hacked!” I said.

“On it.” Skullcracker ran deeper into the garage.

I leaned past the gap, aiming at the automated tank. I didn’t have a clear shot of the Equestrian—the treads were hidden from view by some rubble. I let off some rounds anyway but my bullets ricocheted from the tank’s thick hull. The Equestrian advanced, apparently seeking a better vantage point. The pile of rubble beside it became more extensive and momentarily shielded the tank from view.

Beside me, Hijak finished suturing the wound in his forearm and then lifted his rifle scope to his eye. He was standing and I was crouched, so that together we could scan for tangos at the same time.

We fired, taking out robots one by one as the gunfire poured in.

Skullcracker rejoined Hijak and me by the opening.

“What’s the news?” I asked him.

“The AIs are running an unpatched version of the OS,” Skullcracker said. “A backdoor let me install the privilege escalation kit in all three. The brute force attacks will take anywhere between five to twenty minutes each.”

“Always a catch, isn’t there?” I let off a shot, taking down a combat robot.

“Nothing’s ever easy,” Skullcracker agreed.

Five to twenty minutes. We just had to hold out for five to twenty minutes.

My scope abruptly filled with blackness: a Centurion had stepped right in front of the door.

Skullcracker unleashed hell with his heavy gun and the metallic body hurtled backward.

The Equestrian emerged from the other side of the debris pile; its main turret was pointed directly at us.

“Incoming!” I yelled, ducking behind one of the thick concrete pillars that bordered the damaged door. I sealed my face mask.

Hijak and Skullcracker joined me, doing the same.

The garage door exploded inward in fragments and broke from its hinges; the Equestrian’s shell detonated on the far side of the bay.

Superheated gas from the explosion roared through all five

interconnected bays, but since we had our faceplates down, the suits protected us from most of the heat.

Still, the internal temperature in my jumpsuit spiked rather uncomfortably.

Luckily there was no ATLAS 5 in that particular bay, otherwise the mech would have taken a direct hit and likely been irreparably damaged. A smart tactic on the part of the enemy would have been to fire a shell into all five garage doors, taking out whatever mechs lay inside. That was what I would have done.

Unless of course the enemy wanted to capture the ATLAS 5s intact. The Centurion Skullcracker had just taken down would have seen the mechs and alerted the others.

I peered past the thick pillar we used for cover. Now that the Equestrian had emerged from the shield of rubble, I had a clear line of sight on its treads.

“Grenade time,” I said. “Aim for the base!”

All three of us cooked grenades and leaned out in turn to toss them at the treads of the Equestrian.

The explosions derailed the metal treads, immobilizing the enemy. Its turret was still operational, however. From my cover behind the pillar, I saw the turret shift subtly toward me.

Wishing we had an antitank gun right about then, I ducked. “Incoming __”

Before I got the word completely out, another shell smashed into the pillar. Though the reinforced concrete shook, it didn’t crumble.

The shockwave roared past, and once more the temperature spiked in my suit.

The incoming gunfire became more intense, and didn’t let up, basically pinning us behind the pillar so that we couldn’t return fire. Another shell shook the pillar.

“Skullcracker!” I said. “Any updates on the mechs?”

“The brute force process is still running!” he answered. “All the news I got!”

The incoming gunfire ceased.

We exchanged confused glances.

I was about to lean past the pillar to check things out when a crab abruptly tore into the bay. It was one of the smaller ones, roughly human-sized.

So the rest of the horde was beginning to arrive.

We took out the creature almost immediately, but then another crab came in, piling in atop the corpse and forcing us away from the opening. We got that crab, too, severing its cord. The two bodies blocked the entrance.

The other four bay doors began to shudder, as if taking physical blows from more crabs outside.

The two carcasses were abruptly dragged outward from the first bay, ostensibly by other crabs wanting to clear the way for their attack.

Crouching, I stepped forward, momentarily increasing my angle of exposure to get a glimpse of the outside.

I saw an ATLAS 5 lurking out there amid the combat robots. It had stepped in front of the immobile Equestrian.

"ATLAS!"

I ducked back just in time: Threads of Gatling fire tore into the bay. The long streams of superheated bullets carved deep holes into the far wall, ripping into workbenches, disintegrating tool shelves.

The deadly fire abruptly let up, allowing another crab to come in.

We took it down, but then two Centurions dived inside.

I got one of them in the brain case. Hijak eliminated the other.

Another crab dove inside, forcing the dead alien into the far wall. Those swordlike claws swung toward Hijak—

Skullcracker severed the cord just as Hijak rolled to the side—

The crab died, its lifeless claw slamming into the vacated pillar.

A serpent missile struck the far side of the bay, sending another wave of heat over us.

The garage doors continued to shudder beside us, while more crabs crowded the entrance, mandibles and pincers clattering through the opening. We shot away those cords we could see, and when the crabs fell, others among their brethren dragged the corpses away.

Liquid Phants poured from the fallen Centurions in the bay. They were of the blue, slower variety, and ignored us completely, flowing toward the ATLAS mechs instead. They knew they couldn't reach us, not while the EM emitters were active. But the mechs were entirely fair game.

I got up, intending to herd the Phants away from the mechs, but another rocket struck, sending me and my brothers hurtling into the second bay.

"Skullcracker, get me those mechs!" I said, running in front of the Phants and forcing them away.

“Just a few more minutes.”

“We don’t have a few more minutes!”

Two Centurions jumpjetted into the bay past the latest crab assault.

I couldn’t fire—I was caught in the middle of a reload.

Hijak got one of the robots, but he had to dodge a crab’s incoming claw before he could fire again. Skullcracker was busy shooting that same crab, leaving the second Centurion free to engage me.

The combat robot calmly aimed its armor-piercing rifle at my face mask.

I had no time to raise my weapon and fire back, or to even jet away.

I was done.

The Centurion abruptly spiraled forward and landed lifelessly at my feet. A sparking crater had been gouged into its backside. Had another robot shot it in the back by mistake?

I glanced across the bay.

Giger stood on the far side of the stall, where he’d emerged via a service door set atop three steps. He held his sawed-off proudly in hand, and nodded at me. The kid, blotting out the world with his child-sized aReal, clung to the man’s shoulders piggyback-style.

Skullcracker managed to force the wave of crabs back, which had the unfortunate side effect of increasing the incoming gunfire from outside, effectively cutting off Giger and Tung from the rest of us.

Giger took the steps to the floor with purpose. He ducked behind a nearby four-sided metal trolley and wheeled it forward, using it to shield himself and Tung as they crossed toward us. Bullets slammed into the trolley’s thick side but the metal held. The rest of us laid down covering fire as best as we could.

Giger reached us and abandoned the trolley.

“Nice of you to join us,” I told him.

All five of us moved into the second bay, away from the opening.

The liquid Phants tried to circumvent us but Hijak and I hurried in front of them, repelling the entities. Eventually they would find a way around. Especially if the remaining units kept us occupied.

Gatling fire abruptly raked the garage door of the second bay, punching holes in the metal, forcing us to the floor.

More Centurions piled in through the opening in bay one, along with a crab.

From the floor, Giger fired at them alongside the rest of us. Threads of Gatling fire continued to slice the air just above, carving up the door and the far wall.

“Mech one is good to go!” Skullcracker announced. Moving away from the Gatling fire, he was already low-crawling across the floor toward the third bay and the indicated mech.

I searched the floor for the liquid Phants we’d intercepted. Where the hell had they gone? Then I spotted them behind me: the Phants had flowed around us and were making their way toward the same mech as Skullcracker.

Another round of Centurions invaded bay one, firing at Skullcracker; the rest of us laid down suppressive fire, taking out the robots. A crab tried to pounce but I severed its cord and it ended up falling dead beside our group.

Skullcracker was beyond the line of fire of the Gatling that was punching holes in bay two’s door; he got up and covered the rest of the distance to the mech at a sprint, leaving the liquid Phants behind.

The Gatling fire from outside cut out.

I knew what was coming next.

“Away from the doors!” I hauled Hijak to his feet.

Giger was already up, carrying Tung with him.

The four of us only just cleared the weakened bay door when it abruptly caved.

Two crabs charged inside.

I tripped on debris from the door. Lying flat, I spun to fire at the intruders, aiming above my boots. I severed the cord of one but a Centurion jumpjetted onto its body and sprayed gunfire back at me.

I rolled to the side and incredibly wasn’t struck.

I recovered and aimed at the robot, but the second crab surged forward and blocked my shot.

Before I could fire, Gatling fire from behind me bit into the crab.

Skullcracker’s mech.

The enemy Centurion dashed around the flailing crab body—

Skullcracker’s Gatling tore the robot apart.

“Mech two is ready!” Skullcracker sent over the comm.

“It’s yours, Hijak!” I said.

Giger and I covered Hijak as he crossed bay three to the next mech. I positioned myself in front of the liquid Phants, blocking them.

Skullcracker continued firing. He had activated the ballistic shield in

one hand and was careful to hold it between his ATLAS and the two open bays.

The second mech came to life. Piloted by Hijak, it took one step forward. Because of the angle, although Hijak wouldn't be able to view the street, he was in the perfect position to cover the openings to bay one and two, and together with Skullcracker he prevented any more of the horde from coming inside.

Giger, Tung, and I retreated to bay five, which held the last mech. Standing beside the inactive ATLAS 5, I waited for the SACKER privilege escalation kit to do its work. My intention was to stand guard and prevent any of the Phants from coming near.

The glowing entities spread out, some of them approaching the mechs of Skullcracker and Hijak, while the remainder flowed toward the ATLAS 5 I guarded. The mech hulls seemed to boost the range of the suit EM emitters—the Phants stayed the same distance away from the steel feet of the occupied ATLAS 5s as they did from my own jumpsuit: one meter out.

I had Giger carry the kid up the rungs of the third mech, and I told him to secure himself and Tung to the passenger seat. Giger obeyed, squeezing the boy in beside him and buckling the seatbelt around the two of them.

Somewhere along the line the kid had lifted his aReal visor; he was staring down at me with wide eyes.

"Are you okay, kid?" I shouted at him in Korean-Chinese, above the gunfire.

Tung didn't answer. What did I expect? At this point he was probably shell-shocked and traumatized for life.

Giger mercifully lowered the aReal visor over the boy's face. I hoped there were lots of episodes of that children's show installed in the thing.

"By the way, the mech pulls to the left!" Giger shouted, nodding toward the unit.

"That's the least of my worries."

Bullets drew my attention to the broken doors.

"Well, let's go!" Giger yelled.

"Can't." I said. "The mech isn't cracked yet!"

Hijak and Skullcracker were still keeping the attackers at bay, but that wouldn't last long as more of the enemy arrived.

We were running out of time. The third mech might unlock ten seconds from now, or ten minutes.

We couldn’t wait.

I was about to order Giger and Tung to secure themselves to the passenger seat of Hijak’s mech instead, so that I could become Skullcracker’s passenger and the five of us could get the hell out of there.

But before I could issue those orders Skullcracker transmitted the magic words:

“Mech three is good to go!”

I opened the storage compartment in the back of the mech’s leg and shoved my rifle inside. I left my pistol in my belt—it wouldn’t interfere with the mech’s internal cocoon.

“ATLAS 5 open!” I transmitted to the hacked mech.

The hatch fell open; impatient to start moving, I used the last of my jumpjet fuel to make the leap into the cockpit.

The hatch sealed and inner actuators pressed into me like a cocoon, enveloping my jumpsuit. I saw darkness for a moment and then the mech’s vision feed tapped directly into my helmet, overlaying my face mask with its twelve-meter-tall view of the outside world.

“Command language: English,” I said.

The Korean-Chinese characters of the HUD switched to English.

“ATLAS, identify,” I said.

“ATLAS Generation 5.” SKs liked to use female voices in their mechs. “Serial number 5845189. Mac address 74:88:16:93:ea:b5. Callsign Black Widow.”

I swiveled the ballistic shield into my left hand, loaded a Gatling into my right, and then took a tentative step forward. The mechs of Skullcracker and Hijak automatically transmitted the positions of the enemy units in their line of fire to Black Widow. Unfortunately, while the attacking crabs were indicated in red, every possessed combat robot was green—as they were SK models, my hacked ATLAS 5 considered them “friendlies” by default.

“Black Widow,” I told the onboard AI. “Initiate war game mode.”

“War game mode initiated.”

Every target turned red on my Heads-Up Display as the mode usually reserved for training came up.

I tagged the mechs of Hijak and Skullcracker as friendlies, and they immediately reverted to green on my HUD. Everything else—crabs, slugs, Centurions, enemy ATLAS mechs—remained red.

I returned my attention to the garage bays.

The crabs swarmed the two openings, preventing any exit. No matter how many of the creatures Hijak and Skullcracker felled with bursts of Gatling fire, their brethren always dragged the corpses away so that fresh aliens could replace them.

Our opponents either wanted us to exhaust our ammunition, or they were waiting for the host slug to reach the garage. My bet was on the former, as the slug probably would have slammed into the garage by now if that was the enemy's strategy.

"We have to get outside," I sent.

"You *think*?" Hijak transmitted.

The three intact doors repeatedly sagged inward, suggesting that other crabs remained out there, blocking the way.

"I'm going to blow the garage door directly in front of my ATLAS. Prepare to follow tight." I switched out the Gat in my right hand for a serpent launcher. "Firing in three. Two. One."

I crouched behind the shield and launched the serpent.

The garage door blew off its hinges. The ballistic shield protected my mech (and Giger and Tung) from the brunt of the shockwave the explosion produced.

The hingeless door curved outward slightly but didn't fall. Crabs just outside were probably blocking it.

"Giger, you guys all right?" I said via the external speakers.

"Yes!" came the response over the passenger comm.

"Hijak, Skullcracker, on me!"

I took a running leap at the door and slammed it open, crushing the crabs outside. I vaulted off the ramp formed by the door and crushed bodies, and then released another serpent rocket into the surrounding horde. Crab body parts splattered every which way, cutting a path through the enemy ranks.

I softened up the rest of them with my Gatling as I advanced. I couldn't allow the crabs to get close—I had to keep Giger and Tung safe. I heard Giger firing rounds from his sawed-off behind me and I knew he'd be doing his best to protect the boy. My mech pulled slightly to the left as I sprinted, as Giger had promised, so I had to compensate.

I dispatched serpents toward two enemy ATLAS mechs I spotted to the north. Rockets flew past from behind me, too, aimed at enemy targets, so I knew Skullcracker and Hijak were in tow without even having to look at my

HUD map.

The crab ranks thinned as I ran, allowing me to better evaluate the battle space. The garage lay at the end of a T intersection—three roads led away from it. A host slug blocked the southern avenue. The giant filled the entire concave gap formed by the geronium plastering the buildings there.

To the north was the domain of the possessed combat robots: ATLAS 5s, Equestrians, Praetors, and Centurions in the hundreds.

The eastern street seemed clear of horde activity and was the obvious choice for our retreat.

I continued carving a path through the thinning ranks of crabs with my weaponry, and when I emerged from their midst, the incoming fire from the north began in earnest. My ballistic shield was already in place, allowing me to deflect the Gatling and small-arms fire. I took care to ensure that the shield was positioned properly to protect the passengers perched behind Black Widow's neck.

I fired the ATLAS 5's jumpjets horizontally for an extra speed boost as I sprinted, taking care not to jump overly high and expose my mech to unnecessary fire.

The incoming missile indicator flashed on my HUD. I launched my Trench Coat, sending seventeen pieces of homing metal into the air. Ordinarily I'd drop when I activated the Trench Coat to increase the probability that the missiles would target the pieces rather than my mech. But I couldn't do that today, as I'd be overwhelmed by crabs if I dove to the street; and while I might survive such a scenario, Giger and Tung definitely would not. So I ran on, hoping the Trench Coat proved enough.

The missiles exploded a short way to my left and the alert deactivated. I blinked in relief.

I reached the side street and the cover of the buildings. As I raced inside, the gunfire faded behind me. I hurried between the geronium-caked apartments toward the next intersection, the mechs of Hijak and Skullcracker following tight. I was glad for the momentary respite from incoming fire.

It didn't last long, unfortunately. Up ahead, Equestrians and Centurions poured past the edge of the intersection, attempting to block our path.

"Rage . . ." Hijak transmitted.

"Punch through!" I sent back.

Shield raised, I raced around the robots and into the intersection. Shells went off around me. I glanced down the side street and caught a glimpse of

the hundreds of combat robots piling in from the north. They would have easily outflanked us if we'd stayed back there.

When I reached the encompassing buildings and geronium walls of the next street, I positioned my shield behind me to block the gunfire of the pursuing troops.

"Giger, are you and Tung okay?" I sent over the external speakers.

Giger's voice returned immediately over the passenger comm. "Fine. Just tell them to stop shooting!"

At the next intersection I turned down a crossing avenue, and passed beyond the line of fire once more. Hijak and Skullcracker were right behind me.

Streaming the horde along behind us, we made our way in a roundabout fashion back toward the office tower where the Chief and the rest of the squad waited for us.

The missile alarm went off twice more when the pursuing enemy launched serpents. Since the crabs were far behind, I could afford to drop to the street when I used the Trench Coat, and each time I emerged unscathed from the attacks, turning down a side street to remove myself from the line of fire. Hijak and Skullcracker avoided rocket damage in a similar fashion.

We arrived at the complex of buildings that led to the thirteen-story tower and the rest of the squad. We approached the area from the southwest, as we had fled from the southeast.

It appeared that only about twenty percent of the horde had remained behind to besiege the tower. I let off a few rockets, breaking away clumps of crabs from the bases of the surrounding buildings. Portions of the horde immediately broke away toward us, and gunfire erupted from the rooftops.

I sprinted Black Widow up the geronium that caked the closest building, a three-story warehouse. The geronium ended at the two-story mark and I jetted the final distance to the rooftop.

The terrace seethed with Centurions. Apparently the enemy had taken the time to spread out among all the rooftops in the vicinity of the tower, probably to prevent my squad brothers from attempting the same escape that Hijak, Skullcracker, and I had achieved earlier.

I crouched at the edge of the rooftop, positioning my ballistic shield in front of me. Hijak and Skullcracker joined my side and we interlocked shields. We switched our POVs to the vid feeds of the Gatlings, whose barrels we hoisted over the top edges of the shields. This way we formed a

single defensive unit and were able to take out our opponents without even having to leave cover. We were like a portable machine gun bunker. The hell we unleashed was so bad that some of the Centurions embedded on the rooftop actually vaulted over the opposite edge of the building to get away.

Once the roof was clear, we advanced to the opposite edge of the building and hop-jetted to the next rooftop. Thus we proceeded forward, moving from roof to roof, leaping onto the successively higher buildings as we approached the thirteen-story tower. We could've jetted directly all the way up to the target tower, but I purposely kept the jumps short to save fuel and to avoid overexposing ourselves to the enemy.

Each rooftop was crowded with Centurions (and sometimes patrolled by a few ATLAS mechs), and we employed the interlocking shield strategy to sweep each area clear, concentrating fire on any ATLAS 5s we encountered and utilizing serpent missiles when necessary.

Despite the short jumps, I received incoming gunfire from the streets while leaping between buildings, but that was mostly rectified by judicious positioning of the shield. Unfortunately, I was still exposed to serpent rockets while jetting. So far the Trench Coat had saved me, but when I was making a jump toward the second to last building before our target, the countermeasure only eliminated one of the rockets aimed at me. I was forced to alter my trajectory while launching another Trench Coat.

The remaining missile exploded beside me. The force hurtled my mech through the air, straight toward the building. Concerned about my passengers, I issued a last-second burst of thrust to pad the impact. I still struck the building's side rather hard. I slid downward almost immediately, and tried to get a grip with my hands, but merely ended up raking a path through the glass as I fell.

I was about to shove away from the building and jet the rest of the way to the rooftop when the missile alarm went off. A serpent had been fired from the streets below.

I launched the Trench Coat. I was still sliding down the building, so I punched Black Widow's right hand through a window and wrapped my fingers around a steel girder bordering the glass. That halted my motion, but the steel column moaned and for a moment I wasn't sure if it would support my weight. Thankfully the girder held.

I flattened myself against the glass as the incoming rocket screamed past.

I glanced downward and watched shards of glass descend the dizzying heights. The horde swarmed eagerly far below, waiting for me to fall so that they could rip apart Black Widow and devour me.

“Giger, Tung, you guys all right?” I said through the external speakers.

Giger spoke into the passenger comm. “Fine, we’re fine.” He sounded anything but. “Just get us off this shit building, please!”

“Need some help down there?” Hijak sent.

“Get on the roof,” I replied. “I’ll be right there. Once we secure the terrace, there’s only one more jump to our destination.”

That’s right, one more jump to the rest of the squad.

Well, two for me. First I had to attain the roof.

I was just about to make my way toward the top of the building when three threads of Gatling fire rained down from above, all focused on me.

I swiveled my body to the side and brought up my shield to protect Giger and Tung. Tiny impact bumps riddled the inner surface of the shield. It wouldn’t hold out long, not against three simultaneous Gatling attacks. Worse, I couldn’t fire back, not while my other arm gripped the building’s steel girder. And if I tried to jet away now, I’d be completely exposed.

We were trapped.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Tahoe

We were deep within the warrens beneath Shangde City, on the far side of the cavern that housed the Queen. A tunnel led out of there toward our target, the Observer Mind, but the way forward was blocked by two tall entities that looked like oversized, cordless crabs.

Neither of our two parties moved. Both sides merely stared at one another in uncomfortable silence. Actually, we were the ones who stared: the alien entities didn't appear to have eyes.

The pair abruptly stood to their full twenty-three-meter heights and unleashed a rapid staccato of clicks and shrieks.

"Make no aggressive movements," Facehopper wrote. "We don't want them to call the horde down on us."

One of the entities broke away from the entrance and crabwalked right up to Bomb who, as our point man, stood the closest to them. The alien went on to bombard his mech with a quick sequence of clicks that managed to sound one part accusation and three parts pissed off.

Bomb remained motionless.

The giant crab ended its tirade and then proceeded to stalk down our ranks.

"Apparently our EM emitters still count for something down here," TJ wrote.

"For now," Fret texted back.

The alien paused beside each mech as if it were searching for something; its front mandibles clashed together loudly every few seconds.

When the being reached Ghost and me, it halted, towering over us. The thing stood twice as high as Antares, Ghost's mech.

I remained stock-still in the passenger seat, worried that the super crab had detected my presence. I resisted the urge to crouch lower, not wanting to

make any sounds that might draw its attention.

The entity abruptly leaned far forward, its slime-covered mandibles hovering a mere handspan from my face. Those long, ant-like jaws could easy tear my jumpsuit in two, or separate my head from my neck. My helmet lamp illuminated a smaller pair of mouth appendages inside the maw, and beyond them a dark orifice whose translucent insides pulsed with the flow of black blood.

A line of silvery drool issued from the maw and oozed down the front of my faceplate.

“Guys . . .” I wrote on the common line.

The supercrab unexpectedly smashed a claw against Antares’s chest piece.

The ATLAS 5 fell backward.

The mech crashed into the cavern floor. Situated as I was in the passenger seat, for a moment I thought I was going to be crushed. But the mech ended up balancing on the hump of its jetpack so that from where I resided, strapped in to the seat above the pack, my faceplate was only a handspan from the rock floor. Uncomfortable yes, but alive.

Ghost had dropped the payload. The device lay upon the ground beside us.

The supercrab wrapped its pincers around the heavy warhead and hauled it away.

“No one move,” Facehopper wrote. “Cyclone, are you all right?”

“Perfect,” I wrote back, wishing there was a way to convey sarcasm in text.

The supercrab deposited the payload in front of the other entity, and the aliens released a stream of hi-pitched clicks toward the device as if scrutinizing it. Then the two separated, returning toward their original positions on either side of the entrance. The first crab dragged the payload along with it.

Once both entities were in place, they ignored us. Evidently, now that we had given up the nuclear warhead, we were allowed to pass.

“Can I move now, Facehopper?” Ghost wrote.

“Yes. Need help getting up?”

In answer, Ghost clambered to his feet. He took care to lean Antares forward first, rotating to one side so that when he stood there was no chance he’d accidentally harm me.

“Thanks for not crushing me,” I wrote to Ghost.

“You bet,” came his written reply.

“TJ,” Facehopper wrote, “can you confirm the payload’s wave-canceling tech is still active?”

“Confirmed,” TJ responded. “I’m reading no signature, nuclear or otherwise, from the payload. The tech is active.”

“Same thing I’m reading,” Facehopper wrote. “And yet the alien snatched up the warhead anyway.”

There were a few possible explanations for that. Perhaps our twin squad, Outrigger, had been discovered and the aliens had alerted their brethren on this moon to be on the lookout for similar devices. Or maybe there was some other signature emitted by the nuke, one that humanity couldn’t detect with its current technology, yet these aliens could innately sense. That latter explanation was the most troubling because it meant an alien scouting party might eventually track down our other nuke.

“Let’s see if these things will really let us pass,” Facehopper wrote. “Bomb, move into the passageway and wait for us.”

Bomb marched his ATLAS 5 forward.

Neither of the crabs made a move to intercept him and he strode into the outgoing tunnel without issue. Once there, he turned his mech around and waited.

“Okay, here’s what we’re going to do,” Facehopper wrote. “Everyone, load up your incendiaries and rendezvous with Bomb in the passage. When we’re inside, TJ and Trace, you’ll break off and approach the entity on the left, the one guarding the nuclear payload. Use your incendiaries to force the alien back. Don’t kill it, if possible. Mauler, while the two of them occupy the alien, retrieve the package. The rest of us will watch your backs. If the other alien attacks, then we’ll issue warning flames. We’ll resort to killing only as a last resort. Questions?”

“I think we should resort to killing from the start,” Bomb texted.

“You saw how fast that brought the horde down on us the last time,” Facehopper wrote.

“How do we know the horde won’t come even faster if we leave the two of them alive?” Fret texted.

“No more rhetorical questions. Let’s make this happen. Good luck, mates.”

Incendiaries swiveled into weapon mounts squad-wide. The alien

entities seemed to stand taller when they heard the noise, but they made no other movements.

We approached the wide passageway as a unit and rendezvoused with Bomb. Once there, TJ, Trace, and Mauler split off, going for the leftmost entity.

The entity detected their approach and stood up on its hindlimbs threateningly, flailing its forelimbs like a rearing horse.

TJ and Trace released warning flames into its exposed underside.

The alien recoiled, howling.

Mauler dashed in with his mech and scooped up the payload.

The rightmost entity quickly crabwalked toward the rest us, obviously intending to intercede. We turned our flames against the thing and it retreated, screeching loudly.

“Let’s go!” Facehopper said over the comm, using voice once again. There was no point in trying to hide our conversations any more.

We hurried down the passageway. The supercrabs pursued, but all it took was a few sprays of jellied gasoline to send the aliens reeling.

They emitted pain-filled, high-pitched squeals as their outer extremities were charred. Unfortunately, in only a few moments, the entities recovered and continued the chase.

“Top speed, mates!” Facehopper sent.

The squad of ATLAS 5s slowly pulled away from the aliens; servomotors and hydraulic gears whirred loudly as the machinery around me upshifted to near capacity.

Ghost brought up the rear, allowing me to unleash my standard-issue rifle at the two supercrabs. The gunfire didn’t seem to do anything except further enrage the creatures.

“Fork ahead,” Bomb announced.

“Launch your ASS,” Facehopper sent. “Right-hand tunnel. See if we can draw off one of them.”

“Always putting my ass on the line for you guys.” Bomb launched the drone; on my HUD I watched the green dot move into the right-hand fork and pause just inside.

The rest of us raced down the left-hand branch.

When the supercrabs reached the fork behind us, the diversionary drone issued a siren whoop and flashed its lights before retreating down the opposite passage.

Only one of the supercrabs chased after it. The other kept after us.

More tunnels branched off, but we stuck to the main. The passage began to curve so that the remaining crab was often lost from sight behind us. The thing maintained its pursuit nonetheless. It continued to slowly fall back but only because the squad moved at its top speed. We couldn't maintain that pace forever: servomotors would begin to overheat and hydraulic joints would start to lock up.

"Bomb, take the next side passage," Facehopper sent. "Everyone, follow."

As requested, Bomb turned into a smaller offshoot tunnel.

"When I give the word, shut off your headlamps, deactivate your emitters, and remain absolutely still," Facehopper transmitted. "I want no sounds coming from any of your mechs."

Ghost dove into the side tunnel after the others. The walls were tight here: if I wanted to, I could have touched the ceiling from my perch merely by lifting a gloved hand.

"Now!" Facehopper sent.

Even though the pursuing alien was likely blind, we all turned off our lights as Facehopper requested. Via the backlit display of my aReal, I also shut down the EM emitter in my jumpsuit, and then dimmed the screen.

Around me, all the mechs remained still, so that I heard only the nearby skittering of the crab and its occasional shrieks of outrage. That was the thing about ATLAS 5s. They were designed for silent running—when motionless, they produced almost no sound. For the spec-ops soldier, to whom stealth was a highly valued commodity, the advent of the silent mech was a game changer.

The absolute darkness proved unnerving. I switched to night-vision mode but still couldn't see a thing. Instead of an all-consuming mass of black, a nondescript block of green filled my sight.

The scrape of claws against stone rose in volume as the supercrab approached our hiding place. Loud clicks issued from the opening as the alien reached our side passage, but the thing passed us right by. I guess I was wrong about it being able to sense the nuclear payload. Then again, maybe it had to approach within a certain distance to do so. Either way, we seemed to have avoided detection.

When the noise of the alien's passage faded, we reactivated our headlamps and EM emitters.

“Remind me again why we couldn’t just kill the thing?” Bomb sent.

“We’ve attracted enough attention to ourselves as it is,” Facehopper returned.

TJ gazed down the side passage. “If the source coordinates are accurate, by continuing down this tunnel, we should reach the Observer Mind in two klicks. Assuming it’s not a dead end.”

I wasn’t sure whether to feel relieved or anxious. The Observer Mind, only two klicks ahead. Finally our target awaited. We could place the last nuclear and get the hell out of there.

“Mauler, send your ASS in,” Facehopper transmitted.

The drone revolved transversally, weaving past the ATLAS 5s. The scout’s light cone illuminated the rock in a clockwise manner as it proceeded down the tunnel.

I didn’t like how close those black walls seemed; the ATLAS 5s were already packed in there as it was. I almost suggested that we try a different route, but I doubted the other tunnels were any better.

“The interference is high in here,” Mauler transmitted. “Already I’m almost out of signal range. I’m setting the drone to autopilot, with instructions to return if it encounters any enemy resistance or a change in tunnel dynamics.”

“Good,” Facehopper sent. “Bomb, lead the way.”

We proceeded down the tunnel in single file. The already cramped rock slowly tightened, and my unease grew: it felt all too much like a closing noose. The squad members were forced to crouch their ATLAS 5s.

Eventually we had to stop when the way forward simply became too narrow.

TJ’s voice came over the comm. “The Observer Mind is less than five hundred meters ahead.”

“Five hundred meters and we can’t go any farther,” Facehopper said. “Bloody hell. Mauler, anything from your drone?”

“Nothing,” Mauler answered.

“Maybe we should turn back, try a different passageway?” Fret sent, echoing my own thoughts.

“Are you kidding?” Facehopper returned. “When we’re this close? TJ, launch your support drone.”

“Launching,” TJ answered.

His own drone emerged, weaving past the crouched mechs in front of it

to vanish down the tunnel.

“Just lost contact, two hundred meters in,” TJ transmitted. “Too much interference.”

The squad waited, keeping their mechs bowed low.

I was a little glad I wasn’t in an ATLAS anymore—I could only imagine the muscle soreness that cramped posture inflicted on my brothers. Some of the mechs were visibly shaking as the external actuators mirrored the micromovements of their operators. Well, they were MOTHs, after all. They could take it.

After five minutes, TJ’s drone still hadn’t returned.

“All right, mates,” Facehopper said over the comm. “Before we do anything else, I want some theories on the drones. What the hell happened to them?”

“Probably got possessed,” I said. It was the obvious answer, at least to me, given that there were no EM emitters built into them.

“That, or destroyed,” TJ sent. “Either way, I’m guessing more than a few Phants are waiting for us up ahead.”

Facehopper remained silent for a moment. “It’s only five hundred meters. We can do this, mates. We can get this done. But . . . we’re going to have to do it without mechs.”

“I was afraid you’d say that,” Fret transmitted.

“That’s right, eject, you wankers! We’re going in via jumpsuits.” Facehopper’s mech crouched further and the cockpit opened up. He emerged in his jumpsuit. “We’ll come back and retrieve the ATLAS 5s after we’ve placed the warhead.”

“And what if we can’t?” Fret countered. “What if a cave-in blocks our way back? Or Phants possess the mechs after we leave? The emitters are in our jumpsuits, not the ATLAS 5s . . .”

“We’ll have to take the risk,” Facehopper said over the comm. “I’d set a guard, but I don’t want to split off anyone at this point. We have to stick together, now above all times. Because like you said, we might not be coming back this way.”

“But what are we supposed to do without mechs?” Fret sent.

“We’ve been in worse situations without ATLAS 5s,” Facehopper returned. “We’ll survive. Let’s get this done, mates.”

Cockpit hatches cracked open all along the single-file line, and my squad brothers climbed to the cave floor. I unbuckled myself from Antares’s

passenger seat and swung down.

We retrieved rifles, grenades, and other armaments from the storage compartments in the back legs of the mechs. Spare ammo was passed around and I loaded up. Bomb, our breacher, gathered the few microexplosives we had.

We proceeded forward in our jumpsuits.

Ghost, Trace, Mauler, and I ported the nuclear payload. That's right, it took all four of us. And to think, we'd actually thought the device felt heavy *before*.

At least I wasn't the only one without a mech anymore. I was back in the game. Still, I felt extremely vulnerable without those ATLAS 5s around me. There was something to be said about being in the middle of a group of twelve-meter-tall mechs, each one capable of taking down a small army.

I wondered if I could persuade Ghost to give me an evolution in Antares when we returned this way.

Yeah, good luck with that. I'd have better luck convincing him of the existence of spirits.

We passed the two-hundred-meter mark, the last known position of TJ's drone before it exceeded signal range.

The tunnel continued to tighten, so that eventually we had to crouch while wearing our jumpsuits, too.

"Getting a bit cramped," Fret said.

The walls on either flank pressed in as well, forcing those of us who ported the payload to move either to the front or back of the device. Eventually that stopped working as the cave shrunk further—the nuclear payload was simply too wide for the tight confines.

"All right, this will have to do," Facehopper said over the comm. "Let's arm the payload, Bomb."

Some of my brothers exchanged confused glances.

Facehopper noticed. "The signal source is less than a hundred meters away. The vaporization range of a nuke of this yield will cover that easily. Am I right, Cyclone?"

I nodded. "The Observer Mind will be incinerated. Even if our readings are off and the target lies beyond the vaporization limit, the blast wave will finish the job."

Facehopper tipped his helmet to me in thanks. "There you go. Sure, maybe if we turn back and port the device down a different tunnel, we might

be able to get a little closer. Then again, if we do that we might find ourselves even farther away, in an even worse jam. And who knows how many minutes or hours we'll lose in the process? Right here, right now—this is probably the closest we'll ever get with the payload. And I'm happy with that."

Trace didn't seem impressed. "How can we be sure the target is actually there if we don't see it with our own eyes?"

"We're a hundred meters away," Facehopper replied. "The intermittent EM pings the Observer Mind sends out have to be fairly accurate at this range."

"Unless those pings come from a decoy."

"If they've set up a decoy, then we're a thousand klicks off target anyway and the mission is a scrub." Facehopper flashed a weary smile behind his faceplate. "I don't think we'd be able to tell a decoy from the real thing anyway. One hundred meters, mates. I'd say we've successfully reached our objective. We don't need to actually *see* the damn thing. This is it. We're going to arm the payload and get the hell out. Now please, Bomb, with me."

I was relieved to be placing the final warhead. Sure, while I was mildly curious about what the Observer Mind actually looked like, I didn't care to meet whatever had taken out those drones. I wasn't so eager to lose my life in these cramped tunnels.

The only worry I had was that the drones might have betrayed our positions. Launching them may not have been the wisest choice, but I could understand why Facehopper did it. He didn't want us going into this tunnel blind.

Mauler and I had been porting the front end of the nuclear, and so we had to make room for Facehopper and Bomb; there was just enough space for the two of us to crawl over the device. We joined Ghost and Trace at the rear of the payload and then watched Facehopper work.

When the device was armed, Facehopper entered a three-hour countdown, which coincided, incidentally, with the detonation time of the first nuclear.

When it was done, Facehopper transmitted: "All right, let's return to the ATLAS 5s, mates. I feel damn vulnerable like this."

I concurred, as did the rest of the squad I'm sure. Too bad I'd have to revert to being a passenger again.

I turned around. Ghost and Trace stood in front of me, and they were still facing the warhead. The light from my headlamp glimmered off

something past them, farther down the cramped tunnel.

I focused my headlamp on the spot, revealing a wall of some kind that completely sealed our retreat. In the light, the wall seemed to shift and shimmer hypnotically. When I zoomed in with my aReal, I realized it was composed of fist-sized insects—the very same ones that had enveloped the Queen.

I heard the things over my helmet speakers then. They produced a soft, sickening crinkle, like a thousand roaches scuttling over aluminum foil.

“Facehopper, we have a problem,” I said.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Rade

The three enemy mechs continued their relentless assault from the rooftop while I clung to the side of the building with my weapons hand. Their Gatling fire riddled the ballistic shield I carried in the other arm; in seconds those high-energy bullets would bore through the metal and into my mech. Unlike ATLAS 6s, the model 5s didn't have ballistically enhanced hulls. The unshielded metal would allow the gunfire to tear right through the cockpit and into my jumpsuit. Some of the bullets would probably emerge from the rear of the mech, killing my two passengers.

As the gunfire continued unabated, I frantically wracked my brain, trying to find a way out.

But then the Gatling threads swung upward.

Hijak and Skullcracker were drawing the incoming fire away.

I exhaled in relief, watching as the ATLAS 5s of my two friends arced past, shields directed toward the Gatlings. They landed on the rooftop above me.

I was about to launch my jumpjets to join them when something struck the building above me. Shards of glass plunged onto my shield.

I peered past the rim: One of the enemy ATLAS mechs clung to the steel girder five meters up. Its Gatling was pointed right at me.

I ducked behind the shield as the enemy unleashed several threads of superheated bullets at close range. Blisters of metal erupted upon the underside. There were maybe two seconds before the shield failed.

I had to free my weapons arm.

I rammed the edge of my shield through the glass window of the floor above and wedged it in place as far as I could. The broad shield still protected my mech from the Gatling fire, but just barely. I released the girder with my weapons arm, hoping the shield would be able to hold up my three-tonne

body.

It did.

I directed my Gatling past the edge of the shield and switched to the weapon's POV. The enemy ATLAS 5 was in my crosshairs. It gripped the building just like me, with one hand wrapped around a support girder. But instead of a shield in its free hand, it wielded a Gatling—the source of those superheated bullets raining down on me.

The enemy mech was defenseless.

Before the ATLAS could spot my exposed barrel, I opened fire on its brain case.

The one hundred rounds per second from my Gatling tore through the unshielded metal hull and into the brain, destroying the AI so that the Phant inside had nothing to possess.

The incapacitated enemy ATLAS let go of the building and plunged toward me.

I crouched behind my shield.

The enemy mech impacted.

My shield, wedged within the building, immediately tilted downward. I felt it slipping beneath our combined weight, so I slammed my weapons hand into the space underneath it and grasped the steel girder.

The disabled ATLAS slid off the reinforced shield and plummeted toward the horde below. The metallic body landed on the black substance caking the lower half of the building and then bounced the rest of the way down, clearing a path through the waiting crabs.

I retracted the shield, knowing enemy snipers from the surrounding buildings probably had me in their sights.

I glanced upward, estimating the distance to the rooftop, and then I shoved off from the girder and activated my jumpjets.

"Giger, Tung, you guys all right?" I said in midjump, remembering the civilian passengers I carried.

Neither of them answered.

"Giger? Are—"

"Yes yes," I heard Giger's frightened voice over the passenger comm. "Can we *land* now?"

"Roger that." I touched down on the rooftop.

Hijak and Skullcracker had taken care of the other two mechs and were just finishing up the remaining Centurions. Liquid Phants seeped out of brain

cases all over the place.

"Took you long enough," Hijak sent, glancing at me after taking out the final Centurion.

I approached the opposite side of the rooftop. Only one more jump to the destination.

I gazed up at the thirteen-story tower in front of me. Only one street and five stories separated us from the rooftop, but I couldn't make out any of my squad brothers near the topmost edges even when I zoomed in. There weren't any combat robots jetting up its sides to attack, which could mean the squad wasn't there anymore. Though the more likely explanation was the havoc Hijak, Skullcracker, and I had just caused.

"Chief, we're coming up," I said over the squad-level comm. "Don't fire. Do you copy, Chief?"

No answer.

Had they actually been forced to abandon the rooftop, or were they all dead instead?

No. They were simply out of comm range. That had to be it.

We vaulted toward the final rooftop. Even though it should have been obvious by then that we were the good guys to anyone observing from above, I repeated into the comm: "Don't fire, over."

The incoming missile alarm sounded. For a moment I thought the attack came from the rooftop, but I realized it was sourced from the streets below. I activated my Trench Coat, initiated evasive maneuvers, and continued upward as the rockets exploded behind me.

As I neared the top, Lui finally answered. "Don't soil your cool vents on me, big fella. We see you."

I was never so relieved to hear Lui's voice.

We reached the rooftop to find the rest of the squad members exhausted and almost out of ammunition. Everywhere there were pools of glowing Phants, always keeping at least one meter away from the men and the nuclear payload. The liquid entities flowed from the paths of our newly arrived mechs. In their midst, I spotted several fallen enemy ATLAS 5s that had attained the rooftop. It must have been hell to take those out, though I suspected the mechs had come up one at time, in the order they reached the building. That was a tactical error—if the enemy had held them back and waited until it could send in four or five at once, my brothers would have been utterly overwhelmed. We got lucky. Then again, so far the enemy had

acted in a fairly disorganized fashion. It seemed like they didn't have any overall leadership, at least for now. Best to take advantage of that fact while we could.

"Welcome back," Lui sent. "You missed quite the fight."

"As did you," I retorted. "Though I'm afraid we haven't seen the end of it yet."

Lui nodded grimly. "We haven't."

Everyone was on his feet, except for the Chief and Bender.

I tagged the squad members as friendlies on my HUD and then I went to the Chief. He was positioned behind the payload with Bender, in one of the few areas of cover remaining—most of the surrounding superstructures were mangled or shot up. Apparently the attacking Centurions and ATLAS mechs had been reluctant to fire upon the nuclear device. I didn't blame them. I did see a few bullet scuffs but the payload had held up well.

The Chief's condition hadn't improved. He was still passing in and out of consciousness. Meanwhile Bender had worsened—the internal bleeding from his ruptured spleen had continued unabated, and he was comatose.

Hijak knelt his ATLAS and disembarked; he strapped the unconscious body of Bender to his passenger seat. The two of them always played at hating each other, and sure, maybe there really was some actual animosity between them, but when it came down to it, they were brothers. And whether out of guilt or a need to prove himself, I knew Hijak would always be the first to cover Bender's back, and vice versa.

Skullcracker took on Chief Bourbonjack as his passenger. The Chief mumbled a few incoherent words while Skullcracker tied him in, something about how we could torture him all we wanted but he wasn't going to give up the password to his embedded ID.

With our passengers secured, Hijak, Skullcracker, and I took turns guarding the sides of the building, while the other two siphoned jetpack fuel from the fallen ATLAS 5s. We topped up our tanks and distributed the remaining fuel to Manic, Lui, and Snakeoil, who would have to follow in their jumpsuits. We could have carried the three of them in the hands of our mechs but that would have meant giving up either our shield or weapon arms. One of us would still have to port the nuclear payload and go weaponless, however.

Since I carried the civilians, it was agreed that I shouldn't give up my shield arm. And Skullcracker had the Chief, another passenger too valuable

to risk going about without a shield. That left Hijak for portage duty.

There wasn't much time until the enemy troops we'd drawn off reunited with the main horde below and ended this momentary lull in the battle. As such, I had Snakeoil plot trajectories to different nearby clinics, factoring in the current position of the horde and its inbound members.

He chose a hospital well away from the alien entities, roughly twenty klicks to the northeast. With luck we would lose the horde entirely, leaving the enemy with only a vague idea of where we had gone.

The southern edge of the rooftop started to take a battering as the attack picked up again. We retreated from that side, and the liquid Phants on the rooftop scattered from our path.

Hijak cleared the weapon mounts from his arms and then bent over to grip the mech-designated handholds on the nuclear device. He stood up, hugging the warhead to the chest of his ATLAS. From the slight slouch in its posture, I could tell the device proved heavy even for the mech.

The squad leaped off the north end of the thirteen-story tower, away from the inbound horde and toward the next building. The plan was to stick to the rooftops in the beginning, clearing away opposing robots as necessary.

I led the way, firing past my shield at the Centurions on the destination rooftop. I landed, covering Hijak as he came in behind me. He lowered the payload and we interlocked shields, providing protection for the nuclear device and the remaining squad members as they touched down behind us. When Skullcracker, our dragman, arrived, he linked the shield of his ATLAS 5 to ours and we cleared the rooftop using our mobile machine gun bunker strategy.

And so we proceeded forward, hopping from rooftop to rooftop, three ATLAS mechs, three men in jumpsuits, four passengers. The farther from the thirteen-story tower we traveled, the fewer and fewer enemies we encountered, until eventually no robots opposed us on the rooftops at all and the activity in the streets diminished to nothing.

"Giger, Tung, you guys all right?" I asked my riders for the umpteenth time.

"We're fine," Giger said over the passenger comm. He sounded weary.

We took to the streets and didn't encounter any further resistance on the way to the hospital, though I did spot the occasional Phant here and there.

When we arrived, the target building was caked in that familiar black resin, so we were forced to jet onto the rooftop.

By that time I was almost out of jumpjet fuel.

“Jumpjet status,” I said over the comm after I landed.

“Three jumps left,” Snakeoil sent.

“Two here.” Manic.

And so it continued down the line, with most of us down to two or three jumps each, mechs included.

“Damn it,” I said. “Where’s a booster rocket when you need one? Snakeoil, tell me that elevator has power.”

Snakeoil crossed the multipurpose helo/shuttle pad and tried the rooftop freight elevator. “Nope.”

That meant we couldn’t bring our mechs inside—the ATLAS 5s wouldn’t fit the stairwells. The hospital corridors were probably too small for the mechs anyway.

Despite the building’s lack of power, the medical robots—the Weavers—would still be operational, because like most of the smaller robots, they utilized magnesium-ion battery packs. Hopefully none of the Weavers we found therein were possessed.

I knelt Black Widow and ejected from the cockpit to unbuckle Giger and Tung.

Giger sat very still in the passenger seat. Drenched in sweat, his face was deathly pale.

I glanced down: a large shard of glass protruded from his upper thigh and blood soaked his denim pants.

“I thought you said you were all right?” I scolded him.

Giger grunted some weak response. He lifted his aviator goggles with shaking hands and wiped the sweat from his eyes.

I unbuckled the seatbelt and lifted Tung from his arms without protest from either of them. I could hear some children’s song blaring full-blast from the aReal visor, which Tung still wore.

“Lui, you’re in charge of the kid.” I set Tung down and Lui limped over to retrieve him. “Hijak, my medbag if you would?”

While Hijak exited his ATLAS 5 to return my medbag, I watched Lui take the aReal visor from the kid’s face; Tung’s eyes remained wide open, his face expressionless.

Lui said several soothing words in Korean-Chinese, but the kid didn’t answer. My brother waved a gloved hand in front of Tung’s face. The kid blinked, nothing more.

Lui glanced at me. “Doesn’t look good.” He limped toward the stairwell, leading the child by the hand. At least Tung responded in that regard.

Hijak handed me my medbag and I returned my attention to Giger. I cut away the denim surrounding the wound. I didn’t think the shard had struck his femoral artery, but he was still bleeding pretty badly.

I injected a shot of morphine into his thigh. It would be about three minutes before the effects of the morphine peaked, but he should be feeling instant relief. I wrapped the leg tightly above the wound, wanting to stem the coming tide of blood. When that was done, I plucked the glass shrapnel free. Blood spilled onto his leg.

Giger squeezed his eyelids tightly.

“Why don’t you let the Weavers work on him instead?” Snakeoil said.

“Oh I will. But the Weavers won’t be able to do anything for him if he dies before we reach them.” I felt it was my fault that he’d been injured so severely. I was the one carrying him on my mech, after all.

I injected the wound with the super-absorbent pellets from an XStat syringe, forming a hemostatic seal, and then I topped that with Mister Clot powder and a skin suture. I fixed Giger up with a plasma volume expander IV, securing the bag to his belt and taping the needle to the venous region of his hand.

“Snakeoil, help him walk,” I said.

Snakeoil lifted Giger’s arm over one shoulder. I was a little surprised that everyone was obeying me so readily. I guess most of them were quite shell-shocked by then and were just glad to have someone telling them what to do. I would have preferred the same thing in that moment. Being a mindless grunt, I mean.

Hijak had hauled Bender from his passenger seat and down onto the rooftop, while Skullcracker had exited his ATLAS and done the same with the Chief.

I assumed responsibility for Bender, despite Hijak’s protests.

“I want you to stay here with Manic on overwatch,” I told him. Like me, Hijak and Manic were uninjured, their vitals a bright green. “Get inside those mechs. I’ll send Snakeoil back to act as go-between if we can’t communicate from the ward.” I turned toward my mech. “Black Widow, guard.”

My ATLAS 5’s Gatling guns swiveled into place and it assumed a perimeter patrol along the edge of the building, scanning the streets for

hostile units.

The rest of us hurried inside the hospital, taking the stairwell, which required a breach round to open. Within, the emergency lights dimly lit the way. We activated our headlamps to see better. The concrete walls muffled our every footstep.

I carried the unconscious Bender in my arms and nearly tripped several times.

Skullcracker handled Chief Bourbonjack behind me and didn't fare much better. I was going to order someone else to bring the Chief because of Skullcracker's leg wound, but when I saw the determined expression on his face, I changed my mind. We all wore strength-enhanced suits, I reminded myself: Skullcracker could easily bear the Chief's weight despite his own injury.

I picked out the intensive care unit of the hospital via the blueprints the SKs had provided us with, and I exited on the second floor.

The coloration of our jumpsuits changed from the gray of the concrete stairwell to the sterile white of the hospital corridor.

Rooms opened off the main passage, but it was always dark inside them, the windows blocked by the black geronium caking the outside of the building.

The emergency lights flickered on and off, adding to the dreary environment. Our footsteps were no longer muffled and echoed loudly from the tiled floor. I cringed inwardly, knowing the sound probably carried throughout the hospital.

I couldn't shake the feeling we were walking into the heart of some alien den. That, or some kind of elaborate trap.

We finally reached the intensive care unit and unloaded Bender, the Chief, Giger, and Skullcracker onto individual hospital beds. We checked the Weavers for Phants by closing within one meter of the robots, under the assumption that our EM emitters would either cause the possessed Weavers themselves to flee or drive away any Phants inside them.

Satisfied that they weren't possessed, we wheeled the Weavers over to our injured, and placed the robots in battlefield mode, which instructed the onboard AIs to patch up our brothers as quickly as possible while still ensuring their safe recovery. In battlefield mode, quick fixes were favored over longer-term ones—i.e., limbs and organs would be repaired rather than replaced.

When that was done, I tested my connection with Hijak and Manic, who, according to the map, resided precisely two levels above me. “Guys, can you read me?”

“Yeah,” Hijak sent. “But getting a lot of static.” His voice cut in and out.

I was surprised to get even that weak signal. It probably helped that the two of them were located directly above. At least I wouldn’t have to send Snakeoil up to act as messenger. “Any sign of the enemy yet?”

“No.”

“Keep me apprised. The instant you spot any enemy units let me know.”

“Will do.”

Since no one was watching the entrance, I took Bender’s helmet with its built-in aReal and placed it by the entrance to the room. I programmed the aReal to sound an alarm if it detected motion in the outer hall.

On the far side of the ward, Tung abruptly surfaced from his catatonic state. He was strapped into a chair and squirmed and shouted as Lui wheeled over a psychological Weaver.

“Get it away,” my aReal translated the kid’s words. “Get it away!”

Lui set the Weaver aside and the kid calmed down.

I approached. “I’ll take it from here, Lui. Get that treated.” I nodded at the bloody hole in his boot.

“The broken wrist hurts more.” Lui glanced at Tung uncertainly. “Thought you sucked with kids?”

“I do, but apparently you suck more. I mean come on, *strapping* him in?” I knelt and began undoing the buckles that secured Tung to the chair.

Lui shrugged. “Standard operational procedure when dealing with catatonics,” he said as he limped away. “Read the manual.”

“You read it.” I said to his back. “That makes no sense by the way. Restraining catatonics. If you’re going to make up medical rules at least put some thought into them.”

When I released Tung, he promptly hugged my leg assembly.

“It’s all right, kid,” I said, letting my aReal translate the words into Korean-Chinese. “Everything’s fine.” Resting a gloved hand in his hair, I let him hang onto my leg. “The robot isn’t going to hurt you.”

Tung stiffened. “No robot! No robot!”

“Look,” I told Tung. “The robot is only going to perform a quick diagnosis, then give you something to make you feel better. Tung—”

But the boy began crying and wailing loudly.

"Kid. Kid!" When he had calmed down a moment later, I told him, "Would you like to see Giger?"

His face brightened.

I led him toward Giger. I wanted to show him what a Weaver was doing to his friend. Hopefully, the kid would understand that the robots were here to help.

Tung slowed as we grew near. He'd obviously seen the Weaver operating on Giger.

"Tung, look," I said, hoisting the child up to give him a better view.

The kid cowered against my jumpsuit, clearly afraid of the Weaver, even though its attention was directed entirely on Giger.

"Tung," I said, "these robots are our friends. They're helping us. Watch. It's fixing Giger's leg."

One spiderlike limb held Giger's wound shut. On a tray beneath it were the gory XStat pellets that the Weaver had fished out.

Another appendage extended toward the lesion, its segments telescoping outward, and it paused millimeters from the cut. The characteristic high-pitched whir of a cauterizing laser pierced the air, and I felt Tung stiffen in my arms. The beam was invisible, but tiny plumes of smoke erupted along the edge of Giger's wound.

"Giger!" Tung said. The kid's arm shot out aggressively toward the robot.

I was ready, and spun away, hugging the boy close to my jumpsuit.

Giger opened one eye and smiled at the child. He spoke in Korean-Chinese. "Doesn't even hurt." Of course it wouldn't hurt, given the amount of morphine I'd injected into him earlier, not to mention any local anesthetics the Weaver might have applied. "Let them help you, Tung."

"But the robots are evil!" Tung said.

Giger shook his head tiredly. "Not these, Tung. These are good. They will help you, if you let them. Do you remember when you first came to my shop? I chased you away, but you came back and when I wasn't looking, you climbed up on one of the ATLAS mechs. Somehow you lost your grip and fell. The ATLAS caught you. Saved you. Because it was a good robot. Like the ones here."

Tung regarded the Weaver suspiciously. "There are good spirits in these?"

Giger nodded, closing his eyes. “You have my word.”

Tung didn’t seem convinced. Even so, I brought the boy back to the chair and sat him down without resistance.

“The robot only wants to ask a few questions,” I said, letting my aReal translate. “Is that okay?”

Tung nodded with apparent reluctance.

“Do I need to tie you down?” I asked him.

Tung shook his head.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

I slowly wheeled the psychological Weaver over.

Tung’s eyes became saucers, but when the Weaver didn’t immediately attack him, he seemed to relax a little.

The robot began asking questions in Korean-Chinese. Tung glanced at me after each one, as if seeking my approval to answer. I nodded repeatedly.

I felt odd babysitting him like that, so after four questions, when Tung seemed even more comfortable, I told him: “I’m going to check on the others. Are you okay with that?”

Tung nodded reluctantly.

“If you need anything, call for me. Okay?”

Tung gave me an uneasy smile. He obviously wanted me to stay, but I figured he was in good hands with the Weaver. Besides, he wouldn’t ever really be alone with the thing: He was in the direct line of sight of everyone else in the room, and only three paces from Giger’s bed.

I went to a free chair between the beds of Giger and Bender, and sat back, taking off my helmet to rub my forehead. I stared at the aReal I’d placed near the entrance to the room, wondering if I should personally stand watch instead. In the end I decided that a few moments of rest would serve me better.

“Hell of a day,” I said to no one in particular, replacing my helmet.

“Isn’t that a UC expression for: What a *nice* day it is?” Giger said. The medical robot had finished with him and sat lifelessly at the base of the bed like a spider in slumber.

I snorted. “Sure. But it can also be used sarcastically. As in, what a terrible day this is.”

Giger frowned. “I never understood UC sarcasm.” His accent sounded thicker than ever, probably from the drowsiness the morphine induced.

“Most of the native speakers don’t, either,” I said, only half joking.

“When the citizens of a country don’t understand the nuances of their own language, then something is wrong.”

I chuckled. “Indeed it is.” I regarded him thoughtfully. “Why did you help us back there, in your garage? You seemed fairly adamant that we weren’t going to take your mechs.”

“Better you than the Yaoguai.” Giger gazed at Tung, who was quietly answering the questions put to him by the robot. “In the end, I helped you for the boy. Because you were right: We can’t stay here. To remain on this moon is a death sentence. Look at what happened to Tau Ceti II-c, *Hong Caodi*. The name means Fragrant Meadow, you know. It is not a Fragrant Meadow any longer.

“I tried to get out of Hongleong City when the Great Death appeared above our sister moon. I went with Tung and his family to the spaceports, which were packed. All the vessels were booked. ‘We must wait,’ the officials told us. ‘Until more evacuation ships arrive. Remain calm, return home, and wait.’ So we did. The next wave of evacuation vessels came but they still did not have room for us. So we waited for the next. And the next. Finally the Great Death reached our moon, too.”

Giger closed his eyes, shaking his head. But then he gazed at Tung fondly and smiled. “You know, the boy came to me when he was six years old. He wanted to learn everything there was to know about the ATLAS mechs my customers brought to the shop. He wanted to help repair them. I told him no, but he was persistent and came every day. I finally hired him on as an extra mechanic. Quarter time, mind you: I respect the labor laws. Still, can you imagine it? A six-year-old human mechanic. He was perfect, the same size as a mech repair bot, his body just the right dimensions to fit between the tight panels and inner compartments of a mech. I could only afford to pay him a pittance, unfortunately, but he did it because he loved it. All my other mechanics were robots and he helped me fix them, too, when they broke down.”

Giger sighed deeply. “But now? He’ll never work as a mechanic again. Look at him. He just turned seven and he can barely even talk to a robot. And I don’t know if you saw it, but even when he was riding the ATLAS mech with me back there, he was deathly afraid. This invasion, it has ruined him.”

I pressed my lips together, not really sure what to say. I did in fact remember how frightened the boy had appeared back in the garage, when he

was sitting up in the passenger seat of my mech, his aReal visor momentarily raised.

"This invasion has ruined a lot of people," I said.

"A lot of people? But what are other people compared to him? To this child prodigy, this genius, who has been left broken, his family murdered by its own butler robot. It is a tragedy." Giger's eyes shone with rage despite his obvious drowsiness. "Out of all of us, Tung has lost the most. And out of all of us, he is the one who must live, no matter the cost!"

"His family was murdered by its own butler robot?" I said in disbelief.

Giger nodded. "Possessed by Yaoguai."

"No wonder he's terrified of robots." I glanced at the kid. He seemed so brave to me. Though he hated robots and mechs, he was the one who had told us about the ATLAS 5s in the first place. And despite his fear, he had even ridden in one. Now he was allowing a Weaver to treat him.

Brave indeed.

"You're right, Giger. It *is* a tragedy, a goddamn shame, what happened to the kid. And I completely agree, Tung has to live. But so do the rest of us. My brothers and I haven't come here to die, I guarantee you. We'll protect you and the kid the best that we can, but I won't lie to you, we can't watch over you at all times. So I'm putting Tung in your care. I'm assigning you the job of his custodian and protector. You think you can handle that?"

Giger nodded gravely, resting a hand on the sawed-off rifle he'd placed on the bed beside him. "I can." He hesitated, then added: "I'm sorry for getting mad at you. I know you're trying to help us. It's just . . . so much pain, so much loss . . ."

I got up and placed a gloved hand on his shoulder. "No need to apologize. We're all on edge, here. Rest, Giger. Go ahead. I'll wake you when it's time to go."

Giger nodded and then slowly closed his eyes.

I glanced at Tung from across the ward, and shook my head. Trying to distract myself from what had happened to the kid, I looked from bed to bed, at my brothers who were receiving medical attention. These men had been through so much with me. I didn't know what I'd do without them. They were the best of the best.

And yet we had failed. We were supposed to be inside Bogey 2 at that very moment, preparing to detonate our nuclear payload, not cowering in some hospital half a moon away, recovering from wounds we should have

never had.

I wondered if Tahoe and Facehopper fared any better on Tau Ceti II-c. I hoped so. We had to bring down at least one of those Skull Ships.

Moaning softly, Bender stirred on the nearby bed.

I went to him. “How are you feeling, Bender?”

The Weaver had just finished patching up his spleen area, and at that moment was removing a syringe from the dorsal venous network of his hand.

“A little woozy,” Bender said. “Sort of like I’ve taken a stim and a depressant at the same time. Kind of a fun feeling, actually.”

I checked his vitals. His internal bleeding had stabilized, and according to the medical log his blood had been completely recycled.

“That bitch Hijak here?” Bender asked.

“No, he’s on the rooftop.”

Bender grimaced. “I checked the logs. Saw how he helped me back there. And you know, I can’t decide whether I want to kill him or nominate him for a medal.”

“Either way you hate him of course, right?” I grinned widely.

“Damn right I hate him,” Bender said, though I sensed the affection in his tone. “When we’re done here, I have more than a few hazings planned for him.”

“You know he’s not a caterpillar anymore, don’t you?”

“So?” Bender shrugged. “Never stopped me before.”

I had to smile at that. “True enough.”

Bender looked at me kind of strange. Like he was evaluating me or something. “Never thought I’d say this, but you’re going to make Chief one day.”

His words caught me off guard. “Naw, I—”

“You are,” Bender insisted. “And you know what? I’ll be proud to serve under you. Damn proud.”

My vision blurred slightly. “I don’t know what to say.”

Bender grinned. “How about, ‘You’re the most badass member of the Team, Bender.’ Or, ‘It’ll be an honor to lead someone of your caliber, Bender.’”

I laughed, but before I could say anything in answer, Bender closed his eyes and began snoring lightly.

You’re going to make Chief, someday.

It was an amusing thought but not something I aspired to. As I had told

Chief Bourbonjack earlier, leading men, and making life or death decisions involving the lives of those men, wasn't my forte.

But wasn't that exactly what I had been doing all day?

I shoved the thought aside, deciding that a quick tour of the unit was in order now that I was on my feet.

I reached Skullcracker, where the reek of disinfectant competed with the stench of rot. He was unconscious, and the lower assembly of his suit lay on the floor beside the bed. His cooling undergarment had been cut away from one leg. A thick, wet scab circled the area immediately below his knee, marking where the pipes of the Skull Ship had wrapped around him. The scab was surrounded by purple skin, and I could see lesions in the tissue where broken bone had probably protruded, though I couldn't be entirely sure as the Weaver would have set the break by now.

I was surprised Skullcracker had been able to walk on the leg for so long. I attributed the feat to one part strength-enhanced jumpsuit and two parts sheer endurance.

The telescoping limbs of the Weaver were yet working, moving like a spider spinning an intricate web; it repaired damaged blood vessels, injected antibiotics to kill bacteria, and deposited site-specific stem cells to replace lost tissue. The regeneration process would continue after we left the hospital, with the stem cells differentiating into specialized tissues in the coming hours, slowly replenishing any dead flesh. A limb-replacement operation might have been called for, but since the Weaver was running in battlefield mode, there would be no such surgery.

I moved on, saying a silent prayer for my friend.

I reached the Chief, but he was still under, so I passed him by and continued onward to Lui, who was having his broken wrist and punctured foot treated. Beside him, Snakeoil took a catnap in one of the chairs.

"How's Lui?" I asked Lui.

"Resting," Lui said. "Though he is a bit jumpy, as you might imagine. Though I'm not sure why we're referring to him in the third person."

I grinned. "Because his ego can't handle the first or second person."

"I suppose not. Makes him feel too important. Thanks for taking charge back there, by the way. That was one stressful situation. I'm just glad I didn't have to command."

I wrinkled my brow. "Sure, but who led you guys on the rooftop when we were gone?"

“Snakeoil.”

“Ah, okay. Well, I’m just glad we all got out of there alive.” I rested a hand on his shoulder. “But take it from me, you would’ve done a hell of a job leading, too.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence, Rage. But seriously, when they offer you the role of leading petty officer, take it.”

“I’ll think about it. *If* they offer, which they won’t. Besides, I’m not sure I like the thought of all that admin garbage. Plus, not being able to take the point position anymore? That’s going to hurt.”

“Hey, leadership always comes with a price,” Lui said.

“Indeed it does.”

I moved on, checking in with Hijak and Manic over the comm. “How are things looking up there?”

“Dead as . . .” Hijak sent through the static. “Dead as . . . damn, having trouble coming up with a good metaphor. Dead as the last robot that dared aim a rifle at my head?”

“Stay sharp,” I sent back.

Nearby, the Chief stirred, and I went to him immediately.

The Weaver remained attached to the Chief’s bed, keeping him under observation. The lower and upper assemblies of his jumpsuit rested on the floor, leaving his cooling undergarment exposed. A broad bandage wrapped his midriff.

According to my HUD, his vitals were stable. The robot had done a bang-up job on his gut wound. Like the Weaver caring for Skullcracker, it had probably injected stem cells, and I suspected the Chief’s condition would steadily improve in the coming minutes and hours.

Chief Bourbonjack glanced up at my approach and then reached out to grip my hand. “You did good, Rage.”

“You checked my vid logs?” I said.

The Chief nodded. “I did. The fast-forward version, mind you. And like I said, you did good.”

The Chief still gripped my hand. I felt the bio-printed texture of his flesh, which was similar to corrugated cardboard. My own hand was bioprinted—in fact my entire right arm was. My mech had turned on me during Operation Crimson Pipeline and had basically torn the limb away. Doctor Banye had been happy to issue a replacement.

I saw the crisscross scars on the Chief’s wrists, the kind of scars one

could only obtain from a Keeper's harness. I had similar scars on my own wrists, a physical reminder of the interrogation I could never forget.

"Yes," Chief Bourbonjack said, following my gaze. "You and I are more alike than different. Men like us, we're born to lead. We go through hell and we keep going. Even when we're cornered, trapped beyond any hope of rescue, our minds are grinding and churning, trying to find a way out. And usually we do, despite the odds, and despite how hopeless everything seems. We have nerves—and balls—of steel. It's why men follow us. We lead them when and where no one else can."

"Okay, Chief."

"One day you're going to sit where I am," the Chief said. "I know you're going to turn down every promotion the Brass sends your way. Because you want to fight, not sit behind a desk pushing pencils. But they'll make you leading petty officer anyway. Then Chief. You'll see. It's what happened to me. I refused advancement for as long as I could, but eventually the Brass had their way." The Chief lowered his head back onto the pillow and stared at the ceiling. "I never wanted to lead, you know. Like you, I didn't want the responsibility. Thankfully, so far I haven't lost many men. Those on the Teams are a different breed than ordinary soldiers. We don't die easily. But even MOTHs can fall when the circumstances become so dire, so *overwhelming*, that all of our advanced training and technology can't save us." He glanced at me, his blazing eyes piercing through to my soul. "If something happens and someone dies, I don't want you to go about blaming yourself, you hear? If it's anyone's fault at the end of the day, it's mine. Just like the failure of this mission rests on my shoulders alone."

"What are you talking about? It's not your fault, Chief."

"Oh, but it is. Just as Alejandro's death was my fault. And Big Dog's. And your capture." He smiled sadly. "If I had the ability to trade places with any man who ever died or suffered while serving under me, I'd do it in a heartbeat. But I can't."

The Chief's eyes became wet, and for a second I thought he was going to cry. But he blinked rapidly and the moment passed.

"I'll let you in on a secret," Chief Bourbonjack said. "The best leaders are those who don't want the job. Those who are afraid of losing the men under them. It's that guilt, that fear of loss, that makes them such damn good leaders in the first place. It forces them to think real hard before every decision they make."

“Wouldn’t it also lead to inaction?” I said. “Because of the fear of making mistakes?”

“It can,” Chief Bourbonjack agreed. “Which is why we can never second-guess ourselves. Always move on in the heat of battle. Never look back. Never regret what’s been done. Save the men you *can* save, and mourn the dead later.”

I nodded slowly. Mourn the dead later. I’d mourn them for the rest of my life, I knew.

I reached into my cargo pocket. “I have something for you.” I retrieved the flat-tipped bullet and dropped it into the Chief’s hand. “I extracted this little trinket from your gut, earlier.”

Holding it between his thumb and forefinger, the Chief examined the flattened projectile, turning it about in front of his face. “Funny how something so small can be so deadly. It seems like nothing, now. Just a tiny, harmless piece of metal. But the moment you put it in a rifle it becomes one of the deadliest objects in the world.” He tossed the bullet back to me. “Keep it. For good luck.”

I raised an eyebrow and then pocketed the item. I moved away to let the Chief rest.

Since I’d checked on everyone in the squad, I decided it was time to return to the kid and see how he was doing.

Tung sat quietly in front of the psychological Weaver. The robot had shut down, apparently having finished its work. But I knew full well that if there was anyone the Weavers couldn’t heal, it was Tung.

I mussed his hair. “So, how’s my favorite soldier?”

“Good,” he answered in Korean-Chinese, feigning a smile.

Well, at least he *could* smile. Ten minutes ago he couldn’t even manage that.

I wheeled the Weaver to the far side of the room, away from Tung’s hearing, and queried the robot for its diagnosis.

“Subject has been exposed to a traumatic event,” the Weaver said in its overly cheerful female voice. “Subject experiences intense negative psychological response to any reminder of said traumatic event. Subject has decreased capacity to feel empathy. Subject has difficulty concentrating. Subject—”

“The *short* diagnosis,” I interrupted.

“Subject suffers from acute stress disorder,” the Weaver said. “I have

applied appropriate antianxiety and serotonin-reuptake-inhibitor medications. Recommend immediate removal from the current environment and the commencement of acute stress disorder therapy ASAP, with particular emphasis on relaxation and cognitive restructuring."

He was only seven years old and already suffered from the same disorder that hardened adult soldiers endured. What a terrible thing.

I went back to the kid and knelt beside him so that we were at eye level. There was something I wanted to confirm.

"The Weaver told me it gave you medications. Did you take them?"

The boy didn't answer.

"Tung, did you take the medications?"

He finally met my eyes. "Yes."

"Good." Maybe there was hope for Tung yet.

I didn't really know what else to talk about. My eyes drifted to the small ATLAS 5 he had clutched through it all. It struck me as odd that he'd carry the thing, given what a robot had done to his family, but I didn't say anything.

Tung followed my gaze. "Want to hold Mister Smidges?" He offered me the toy.

I reached out but then changed my mind. I realized what an immense show of trust the kid was showing me: that toy, that little ATLAS mech, was all Tung had left in the world. "You hang on to him. You've got to protect him for me, okay?"

Tung hugged the ATLAS to his chest and then he tilted his head toward the toy, as if listening. He nodded in exaggeration and looked up at me. "Mister Smidges says you've been hurt, too. He says you've lost people, like me."

I nodded warily. "He's right."

"Did you love them? The people you lost?"

I stared at the kid. Anger, sadness, resentment, all bubbled to the fore inside me. "Yes." The word came out harsher than I intended.

Forcing a smile onto my face, I got up to go. This conversation was getting uncomfortable.

"You killed many Yaoguai for me out there, like you promised?" the child asked.

I felt my smile drop. "Yes," I lied. I hadn't killed a single Phant. The things couldn't *be* killed, as far as I knew. Though he might have meant the

combat robots possessed by them, and if so, then I spoke the truth—I'd brought down hundreds today.

"And what about the *Mara*?"

That was supposed to mean crabs, I think. "Of course."

The kid closed his eyes. "Thank you."

Before this mission began, I had wanted to see rivers of blood flow from the enemy. I had wanted vengeance, plain and simple.

But now for the most part all I cared about was getting my squad home again.

I couldn't tell that to the kid, though. The promise of vengeance was probably the only thing getting him through this.

"Rage," came Hijak's static-filled voice over the comm. "We've—" Static. "The enemy."

I stepped away from Tung. "Say again?"

"We've sighted the enemy." His voice was the epitome of calm.

My jaw clenched and I involuntarily glanced at the aReal I'd placed by the entrance to the room. The motion alarm hadn't gone off, of course.

"The rest of us will be right up." I tried to keep my tone serene.

"There's a problem," Hijak returned.

"A problem?" I sent.

"The horde isn't coming from only one direction."

I felt the hairs on my nape rise. "What do you mean?"

"We're surrounded, Rage. They're approaching from all flanks."

I was stunned.

Sure, I had suspected the enemy knew we were here. How could they not, given the liquid Phants we'd spotted every few streets along the way to the hospital?

But what I hadn't expected was such a swift, organized response. Least of all one that would catch us so terribly off guard. Our pants were down, right to the heels.

Thus far, the enemy had been acting as if they didn't have any overall organization. But it seemed they had found someone or something to lead them. Some alien general. Maybe the Guide?

I should have known better. Here I was, dawdling, checking up on every one of my brothers, engaging in small talk, when I should have been packing up and getting ready to leave. I'd taken too long, giving the enemy enough time to lay an ambush.

That was why I didn’t make a good leader, despite what the Chief had said.

Damn it.

“The numbers I’m seeing are mind-blowing,” Hijak continued. “Crabs and slugs on all sides, sprawled across every city street as far as the eye can see, some overflowing onto the rooftops in places. They’ve also got mechs, combat robots, tanks—you name it. I don’t think we’re going to be getting out of this one anytime soon. Not when each of us has enough jetpack fuel for only two or three jumps.”

I opened my mouth to tell him what to do, but no words came.

Because Hijak was absolutely right.

We wouldn’t be getting out of this one.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Tahoe

The shimmering wall of insects came toward us. It sealed the tight passage from floor to ceiling and blocked our retreat to the mechs.

"Uh," Fret said.

"Aft MOTHs," Facehopper said from beyond the payload behind me. "Open fire."

Ghost, Trace, Mauler, and I were the aforementioned "aft MOTHs," located as we were on that side of the nuclear device.

Ghost and Trace dropped so that they were out of the line of fire of Mauler and me, then all four of us shot our standard-issue rifles at the living wall. Because of the tight confines, the rest of the squad could do little more than watch from beyond the payload.

The gunfire didn't make an iota of difference. Individual insects were easy enough to pulverize, but more always flowed in to fill the gaps, and the wall rolled inexorably closer. Even grenades didn't really help, though the enhanced blast wave caused by the confined space certainly unbalanced us.

One of the grenades sent an insect flying toward our group. It landed upside down on its carapace in front of Trace. The creature reminded me of an oversized locust, minus the wings. Stunned, it wiggled its eight legs in the air and twisted its pincer-like mandibles back and forth.

Trace promptly squished it with the butt of his rifle, splattering his gloves with black goo.

"Cease firing!" Facehopper sent. "Cease firing." His voice sounded solemn. "Guess that decides it. No more ATLAS mechs. We move forward. Trace, you get to see your Observer Mind after all."

The four of us in the aft area swiftly crawled over the nuclear device in pairs and rejoined the rest of the squad.

The eight of us hurried onward at a crouch, eager to put as much

distance between the rolling wall of insects and ourselves as possible. My quad and back muscles were getting sore because of the hunched posture, but there was nothing I could do about that. Not even the strength-enhancement of the jumpsuit helped.

“You think those alien insects can chew through the nuke’s shielding?” Fret transmitted.

“Better hope not,” TJ replied. “Or else we’re all going to be feeling a little hot shortly.”

“We won’t feel a thing if it goes off,” I sent. “Instant vaporization isn’t something you’re consciously aware of.”

“I was being sarcastic,” TJ replied.

“Anyone else get the feeling we’re being herded?” Bomb transmitted. “I mean, why send those insects after us?”

“Maybe they’re the only things that can fit inside these tunnels?” Facehopper suggested.

“Other than Phants,” I sent.

“Other than Phants,” Facehopper agreed.

“Sixty meters to the Observer Mind,” TJ sent.

Immediately after TJ made the announcement, we reached a dead end. The cave terminated in a flat wall of rock. A small crawl space near the floor offered the only means forward. A horizontal cleft in the rock, really. A human body might be able to squeeze through, but—

“We’ll never fit in these bulky jumpsuits,” Fret sent, completing my thought.

“Well shit.” Facehopper turned around, shining his headlamp the way we’d come. There were no visible signs of the pursuing insects, not yet, though the distant crinkling I heard from my external mic told me they were still out there, and coming. “TJ, what’s the atmosphere like?”

“Surprisingly breathable,” TJ said. “I’m detecting trace amounts of methane and chlorine, however. Probably wouldn’t want to inhale the stuff for more than a day or so.”

“Rad levels?”

“Relatively low,” TJ said. “But the levels will get stronger the closer we move to the surface.”

We’d taken the precaution of having subdermal anti-rads—known as “the juice”—installed beneath our skin, but the radiation treatment was drip-fed at a relatively slow rate. If the rad levels increased substantially, the drip

feeds wouldn’t be able to compensate.

Facehopper stared at the hole in the rock by his feet. “Well, nothing for it, mates. Jumpsuits off. It’ll be just like the pipeline crawls we used to do under the bay back in training.”

“I hated those,” Fret said.

“We all did,” I agreed.

We stripped out of our jumpsuits, which was a bit difficult given the cramped quarters. Our helmets were too bulky to bring along, which meant we had to leave behind the built-in aReal visors. We kept only our cool vents undergarments and our boots: we looked like a bunch of divers clad in blue, skin-hugging wetsuits. The various body frames of the squad were now apparent, with myself, TJ, and Mauler on the more muscular end of the spectrum. Probably wouldn’t help us here. If anything, our builds would be a hindrance. If any of us got stuck in that hole . . . I looked away, shuddering.

We disconnected the headlamps from our helmets and loaded each one with a battery from our suits. We double-checked the safeties on our rifles and then tied the lamps to the undersides. We taped spare rounds and grenades to the stocks of the rifles, along with the rolls of the utility tape.

The insectile crinkling continued behind us, distant, though seeming to very gradually increase in volume. It felt strange to hear sound with my own ears again rather than via the filtered speakers of my helmet.

“Hurry up,” Facehopper said, glancing down the passage behind us.

Bomb was taping his complement of microexplosives to his rifle. “What’s the current thinking on the missing drones?”

Trace eyed the hole. “I’m not actually sure the drones would fit in there.”

“They’d fit,” I said. “Because if they didn’t, we’d be in a heap of trouble right now. Those drones are about the same size as a human head.”

Trace clasped his head with his hands in the front and back, as if measuring it, and then he knelt. Maintaining the distance between his palms, he moved his arms in front of the opening and compared its height to the separation of his hands. “Gonna be tight,” the Bengali said.

“Mauler,” Ghost said. “I thought you instructed your ASS to return if the tunnel dynamics changed?”

“I did,” Mauler answered.

“Then why didn’t it?” the albino pressed. “This certainly qualifies . . .”

Mauler shrugged. “Maybe I programmed it wrong.”

“A Phant probably got to it,” Bomb said.

“A Phant.” Crouching beside me, Fret eyed the line of jumpsuits distributed against the wall. “There has to be a way to bring along the EM emitters.”

“Maybe there is.” I grabbed the back plate of one of the abandoned torso assemblies and set it on the cave floor in front of me. I placed my knees on either side of the steel bar that housed the emission source, then I grabbed one end and yanked. I managed to rip the bar free.

I handed it to Fret. “One EM emitter, as ordered.”

“Follow Cyclone’s lead, mates,” Facehopper said. “Tear away your emission sources. We’re going to need them yet.”

And so we ripped away the steel bars from the remaining torso assemblies.

Facehopper crawled to the cleft and shone the headlamp on his rifle into the opening. “Bomb, care to do the honors?”

Bomb knelt and, shoving his rifle and emitter in ahead of himself, low-crawled into the crevice.

The rest of the squad followed in turn.

I watched in growing apprehension as my brothers vanished one by one into that dark orifice set amid the bowels of the alien-infested moon. Facehopper had assigned me as the drag man, and after everyone else had gone inside, I hesitated, staring uncertainly at the cleft.

How the hell did I get myself into these situations?

The spirits had abandoned me. But could I really blame them, given that I had abandoned them first?

I glanced over my shoulder one last time, shining the light back the way we had come, but I still couldn’t see the insects. Even so, that soft crinkling persisted, making the hairs on my nape stand on end.

I felt a sudden panic that I was going to be left behind.

I hastily shoved my rifle into the cleft, along with the EM emitter, and then low-crawled inside. Lying prostrate, I gripped the weapon with my left hand, the steel bar with my right, and wormed my way forward.

A thousand tonnes of rock surrounded me, scraping my sides, back, and belly. The lamp attached to my rifle lit the way forward. I saw the boots of my nearest squad brother, about two meters ahead. That’d be Mauler.

This was my reality now.

Rock. And boots.

“Are you in, Cyclone?” Mauler’s voice came from just ahead.

“Unfortunately,” I replied.

“Cyclone is in,” Mauler said, and from the slight muting of his voice I knew the words were directed at the man in front of him. I heard the phrase repeated in turn by those ahead of Mauler, the words becoming fainter each time until the meaning became unintelligible.

As I crawled, more muffled words came from far ahead, but I couldn’t discern what was said, nor even recognize who the speaker was. At least I didn’t hear the rustling of those insects anymore. That soft crinkling couldn’t compete with my own labored breathing in the confined space, nor the scrape of my body against the rock.

“Lucky bastard,” Mauler said over his shoulder to me. “You’re the only one without a beard to snag in these rocks. I swear I’ve pulled out half my facial hair by now.”

“So that’s who’s leaving behind all these patches of fur,” I joked halfheartedly. “And here I was, thinking they were your pubes.”

“Funny,” Mauler said. “When I signed up, if you had told me I’d find myself crawling like a worm twenty-five klicks beneath the surface of some moon in the heart of SK space, without a mech or a jumpsuit, retreating from alien insects toward some other, potentially deadlier alien, I would have punched you in the face for lying to me.”

Another retort came to mind, but I didn’t feel like joking, not anymore. My body was already aching from the tight confines and the hard rock. “We do what we have to do to complete the mission, Mauler. And we do whatever it takes to get out alive. If that means worming our way through a hellish tunnel barely bigger than a roadside culvert, then so be it. We’ve been through worse. We’ll get through this.”

“Sounds almost like you’re spouting something from one of the motivational manuals,” Mauler said. “What are you, an instructor now?”

Though he tried to hide it with humor, I could hear the anxiety in his voice. I knew he was thinking the same thing as I was. What happened if the crawlspace became so tight that none of us could advance any further?

There was no going back. Not with those alien insects behind us. Yes, the fear and tension in that cramped space was quite palpable. I could smell the blood, sweat, and tears of my brothers.

“Maybe *I am* quoting from a manual,” I said. “Because maybe the inspirational phrases from some textbook are all we have left at this point.

That, and the discipline forged into our being by the iron crucible of our training."

He didn't have anything to say to that.

There was some sporadic, muffled chatter up ahead, but for the most part the squad crawled on in silence.

I focused on the moment, blocking out all thoughts, concentrating on the task at hand.

Shove the rifle and EM emitter forward. Find hand and footholds. Pull with the arms, push with the legs.

Repeat.

I don't know how long I snaked my way forward like that. All I knew was that the crawlspace seemed to be getting tighter. Maybe it was an illusion but I could swear I had less room to move my elbows, less space to raise my head, less leeway to position my feet.

It wasn't an illusion. The crevice became so cramped that I had to keep my arms fully outstretched ahead of my body—there simply wasn't any space to retract my limbs. I literally *wormed* my way forward, swiveling my hips from side to side, shoving against the rock with my boots.

Muffled voices came from up ahead, growing louder as news was relayed down the line.

"TJ is stuck up ahead," Mauler finally said. "We have to wait."

Fantastic.

TJ was the most muscular among us; he had the biggest, widest body in the squad. I wasn't surprised he had gotten stuck.

Unfortunately, I was the second largest present. That meant the chances I would become hopelessly wedged, too, were very good.

Clear your mind, Tahoe. Don't think beyond the present moment. Therein lies the path to failure.

I managed to blank my thoughts, for a little while anyway. But then my mind wandered to the pursuing insects.

I held my breath, listening.

I didn't hear anything.

Even so, they had to be close. It was a wonder they weren't here already, given our incredibly slow advance. And, of course, I just had to be the one bringing up the rear. My body would be the first one those insects ravaged.

My heart was pounding in my chest and I felt a rising sense of panic.

The mind-clearing thing wasn't working. I needed to distract myself or I'd become paralyzed with fear.

"It's at times like this I wish I was a little scrawnier," I said, hoping Mauler felt like talking.

His boots shifted up ahead. "What, give up all that muscle?"

I was relieved he had answered. "Yeah."

"What about the girls? You really think your wife would like you as much if you lost all that brawn?"

"Of course she would," I said, not really caring what we talked about, as long as we *talked*. "She married me for my brain, not my arms. Besides, think about all the time we waste in the gym. The months and years of our lives spent eating and working out."

"We'd be dropped fairly quickly if we couldn't keep up in training," Mauler said.

"That's different. I'm talking going to the gym *in addition* to training."

Mauler didn't answer right away. "Don't know what I'd do without the gym. I get my focus there. Working out, being in the moment, helps me forget about everything else in my life. Helps train my mind to focus in times of need. To me, working out is almost like a form of meditation. I concentrate on the pain of the lactic acid buildup in my muscles, let that pain guide me through to the end of the workout, or the current set anyway. The gym is one of the greatest mentors of mind-body discipline I've ever known. Anyhow, I couldn't give up all that food. If I abandoned the gym, I'd become monumentally fat."

Ghost was in front of Mauler, and his voice floated back, muffled but understandable. "Hey, don't get me started on food, bros. All I've been thinking about for the past hour are cheeseburgers."

The time reference reminded me of the dual nuclear warhead countdowns, but since I didn't have my aReal I had no idea how long we had until detonation.

"You and your cheeseburgers," Mauler said. "I'll take a hard-boiled steak any day."

"You actually hard boil *eggs*, not steaks," Ghost said.

"Ever heard of *sous-vide*?" Mauler said. "It's where you evenly cook your meat on all sides, using a vacuum-sealed container and hot water. Works wonders. And technically, that's boiling."

"If you say so," Ghost said.

Muffled voices floated to us from up ahead.

“TJ’s through,” Mauler said.

And so we continued the advance.

It was slow going. My limbs felt extremely numb by that point, thanks to the enforced rest in that cramped space. My hands and feet tingled from the lack of circulation, but there was nothing I could do but worm my way forward.

Mauler’s boots slowly receded in front of me. I would have shouted at him to slow down, but I couldn’t bring myself to. I didn’t want him to wait for me. Didn’t want him to potentially die if the insects overcame our position. I tried to increase my pace, but the tunnel was simply too tight for me. I swore I’d cut back on the gym when this was through.

Eventually the crawlspace became so narrow that I was forced to turn my head to the side, pressing my ears into the rock floor and ceiling as I squeezed onward. That position kind of eliminated the need for the lamp on my rifle, since all I saw was the dark rock in front of my face. Mauler was gone as far as I was concerned. As was the rest of the squad. It was just me, my rifle, my emitter, and the rock. And I thought the feeling of claustrophobia had been bad before . . .

I pressed on.

I told myself this wasn’t so different from training. As Facehopper had said, back then we’d done pipeline crawls under the bay to prepare us for the claustrophobic confines of ATLAS 5s. The instructors had had the ability to constrict and loosen individual segments along the pipe. Of course, we students hadn’t known that at the time. I remember getting stuck. Rade and Alejandro talked me through it, helped me remain calm. That was the key. Hyperventilate, and I could deplete all the oxygen in the conduit. Eventually I made it through when the instructors slightly enlarged the pipe around me.

Unfortunately, if I got stuck, there would be no instructors to expand this crawlspace.

I shoved the EM emitter and rifle blindly forward. I scrabbled at the rock with my fingers, snaked my body left and right, pushed against the wall with my hips. I wished I’d taken off my boots because it was proving hard to find a foothold—I couldn’t feel the rock beneath my toes.

I wormed my way forward another fifty or so centimeters like this. Fifty hard-fought centimeters.

Wooyah.

Then I got stuck.

No matter how much I shoved and pressed and wormed the rest of my body, my wide shoulders simply wouldn't fit through the crawlspace. I don't know how the hell TJ and the others had gotten through this area, because I sure as hell couldn't. At least not alone.

"Mauler," I said, striving to keep my voice as calm as possible. "Need some help here."

No answer.

"Mauler?" I tried again. "I'm stuck, bro."

I held my breath and listened very carefully, but I heard nothing. No sound of scraping rock. No breathing. No voices.

Not a thing.

Somehow I had fallen excessively behind.

How could it be possible? Sure, Mauler's boots had been receding, but he would have waited for me. He *would have*.

Maybe I'd missed a side passage somewhere along the way and I'd crawled right past the others. It was possible.

I thought I heard a muffled voice then, but I couldn't tell how far away it was, nor even what direction it was coming from. It didn't help that my ears were wildly bent out of shape by the rock pressing into the cartilage on either side of my cranium. And I couldn't actually turn my head to look.

"Mauler!" I said.

I held my breath and listened again. I must have imagined the muffled voice because there was definitely no other sound out there—unless I included the frantic beating of my heart.

I thought of the lost drones, and I wondered if whatever had taken them had downed my brothers, too.

Spirits, help me through this.

I tried retreating, tried pushing backward with my hands and hips. No good.

Now I was really starting to worry. My breath began to come in frantic gasps.

Spirits, help me!

I attempted to move forward again, more desperately. Couldn't.

My hyperventilating became so bad that stars began to occlude my vision, but I couldn't calm down.

I was done. No one was going to get me out. I was going to die here,

deep within the rocky entrails of some moon, far away from home. I was never going to see my children again.

I forced myself to dismiss those thoughts. I had to.

What was that Winston Churchill quote Rade had told me?

Never, never, never give in. Keep going, even through hell.

I was Tahoe Eaglehide. I did not give up.

I swore I would get through this. I refused to allow my children to grow up fatherless.

I shoved and pressed and wormed.

No use.

Never give up.

An idea came to me then, in that moment of need. I don't know if the idea originated with the spirits or the desperate well of my own consciousness, but it did come, and it gave me a sliver of hope.

I exhaled all the air I could, shrinking my ribcage ever so slightly. Then I held my breath, found a foothold with the toes of my boots, and pushed with all my strength.

I slid forward a centimeter.

The idea had worked.

But now I was lodged even worse because when I tried to inhale, my rib cage had trouble expanding. It felt like I couldn't breathe.

You can breathe, Tahoe. You can. Your breaths are just shallower, that's all.

My self-talk didn't help. I was in sheer panic mode by then. I felt extremely lightheaded as my vision filled with even more stars.

Wait.

Was that a crinkling I heard behind me?

I held my breath again.

Yes, I heard it clearly, transmitted by vibrations in the rock directly to my skull and ear canals. It was the noise of countless antennae, legs, and mandibles rubbing together.

The alien insects had finally caught up with me.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Rade

I viewed the hospital rooftop via Hijak's vid feed. Though the signal was extremely weak, with rampant pixelization and frame freezing, I realized immediately that he wasn't exaggerating about our situation: crabs, slugs, and combat robots were sprawled across the landscape as far as I could see.

I spun toward Lui. "Get everyone up and ready, then meet me on the rooftop as soon as you can."

"Got it," Lui said.

Chief Bourbonjack jumped out of bed without any prodding. He started pulling on the lower assembly of his jumpsuit and winced as he bent over. A blood spot appeared in the center of the white bandage around his gut, but he continued suiting up.

I turned to go, but paused, realizing I wasn't in command anymore. I waited for the Chief to contravene my orders.

He glanced at me as he finished securing the lower assembly of his suit. "What the hell are you waiting for? Get your ass up there! We'll be right behind you."

"Famous last words," I said.

When I reached the rooftop, the shelling had already begun.

"Sitrep," I sent to Hijak and Manic, hurrying toward Black Widow. My unmanned ATLAS 5 returned fire from behind a superstructure.

"The Equestrians have entered firing range," Hijak sent. "We tried laying down a suppressive line of serpents, but there are too many units. Enemy Trench Coats instantly bring down our rockets. For the most part all we can do is take cover."

I reached Black Widow and leaped inside.

Ballistic shield in hand, I made a quick circumnavigation of the perimeter with the mech. The onboard AI alerted me to incoming shells,

overlaying yellow circles on the rooftop to indicate the impact and fragmentation zones I should avoid. When my ATLAS 5 was three-fourths of the way around the building, one of those yellow circles appeared right on top of Black Widow, and I narrowly maneuvered the mech away as the rooftop exploded beside it.

The enemy ranks stretched several city blocks in every direction. The closest rooftops already shimmered with combat robots and their gunfire. Like Hijak had said earlier, there really was no way we'd be jetting out of here, not with only two jumps each. One or two of us might make it out if we pooled the fuel. Then again, since none of the adjacent rooftops were clear, sending someone out there would be the same as throwing a larva onto the center of a riled-up anthill—basically a death sentence.

The hospital was only four stories tall and enemy Centurions in the forefront were already attaining the rooftop: they climbed the black substance, caking the first three stories, and then jetted the final distance to the top.

I held off the combat robots with the other two ATLAS 5s piloted by Manic and Hijak. We backed away from the edges, firing controlled Gatling bursts. Liquid Phants spilled onto the rooftop in droves from the disabled metal bodies. The shelling continued, and we were constantly evading the calculated impact zones overlaid onto the rooftop via our HUDs.

Black Widow's ammunition was almost out.

"We won't be able to hold them off much longer," Manic sent.

I tried to reach Chief Bourbonjack: "Chief, you should probably stay where you are. We're going to be evacuating the rooftop real quick here."

I got static in return, which told me that the Chief had already left the ward and was probably in the stairwell at this moment.

Sure enough, seconds later Chief Bourbonjack and the rest of the squad burst onto the rooftop.

Giger stayed back, huddling in the stairwell, hugging Tung close. The kid wore his aReal visor once more. Good. Giger was taking his guardian role seriously—Tung didn't need to see this.

"What the frick is going on here!" the Chief sent.

"We have to get off the roof, Chief," I returned.

Crabs began leaping onto the rooftop alongside the Centurions, and the shelling momentarily let up. The Equestrians didn't want to harm their brethren, apparently.

The crabs came in on us from every side and our ATLAS mechs were hard-pressed to hold them off. The small arms fire from the other squad members helped, but to be honest, I wished my brothers had remained inside. They had only just finished getting patched up and now were going to get hurt all over again.

An enemy ATLAS 5 jetted over the edge of the building and landed in our midst; I and the other two mech pilots concentrated Gatling fire on the thing and we broke through its ballistic shield, taking the mech down.

“Squad, fall back to the stairwell!” Chief Bourbonjack sent.

Those of us in ATLAS mechs provided cover for the rest of the squad. As the three of us neared the stairwell:

“Everyone, inside!” the Chief sent.

“What about the mechs?” Hijak transmitted.

“Leave ’em,” the Chief replied.

A shell struck the rightmost edge of the rooftop and debris launched through the air. I batted away pieces of concrete with my ballistic shield.

“And the nuke?” Manic sent.

“Forget it!” the Chief returned.

“Why not set it to blow?” Hijak suggested.

“We’d never escape the blast radius,” the Chief sent. “Plus we’re not authorized to nuke the city. Not when there might be refugees out there. Now get your asses in here, ATLAS operators! Disable the goddamn mechs on your way out.”

I mowed down a wave of incoming crabs and turned my weapons toward a group of Centurions.

Both of my Gatlings clicked at the same time.

Out of ammo.

I switched to serpent rockets and fired at the robots. Then I released the rest of the serpents in rapid succession into the horde on the street beyond.

“Black Widow, cockpit open,” I said as the resultant explosions rocked the rooftop.

The cockpit fell open. I pulled the 9-mil from my belt and aimed it into the small crack between the hatch and the hull, where the mech’s brain case was temporarily exposed. I fired, disabling the AI of the ATLAS so that no Phant could ever possess it, not that they would have been able to do much with the nearly weaponless mech anyway.

I leaped onto the roof as Black Widow crumpled behind me. I felt a

shred of remorse because there was a school of thought that believed advanced AIs were sentient. Still, there wasn't really anything else I could have done. Better to destroy the mech than allow it to fall into enemy hands.

The belt-whip hiss of incoming bullets filled the air around me. Manic and Hijak had already disabled their mechs and were ahead of me: I dove into the stairwell after them.

Behind me, four enemy ATLAS 5s landed on the rooftop at the same time, trailed by several Centurions.

I slammed the stairwell door closed and raced down the stairs as threads of Gatling fire tore over my head, easily perforating the steel door.

The three of us continued downward, zigzagging between each flight until we joined up with the rest of the squad; the stairwell rocked from the explosions of rockets above us.

Giger moved the slowest because he didn't have a jumpsuit and refused to allow anyone else to carry Tung. He hugged the kid close, acting as a human shield, fulfilling his role of custodian to a tee.

I could have sprinted past him, like Hijak and Manic had, but I refused. I made it my personal duty to see the SK refugees through this. We needed a properly trained drag man to bring up the rear anyway.

Enemy Centurions fired down into the rectangular gap that ran through the center of the stairwell, forcing our squad to keep close to the walls.

"Snakeoil!" the Chief said during the descent. "Pull up the hospital schematics. Find us a way out!"

Snakeoil answered a moment later. "Looks like the lower levels are linked to the underground pedway system. That should take us all the way to the downtown core."

"Good! Overlay the route and send it to the rest of us!"

We passed the exit to the ground floor and continued down toward the basement levels. The Centurion gunfire in the stairwell had ceased by then, though I could still hear the echo of metallic feet somewhere above: it was hard to discern through the more immediate din of our own footfalls.

As Giger and I fell farther and farther behind on the stairs, I realized something had to change.

"Give me the kid," I told Giger firmly.

"No!" Giger said.

"I have a strength-enhanced jumpsuit. You don't."

Giger seemed insulted. "I can handle him."

“I know I appointed you his guardian, Giger, but if you don’t give me the kid, at least for now, all three of us are going to die. We’re moving too slow.”

Giger hesitated, then finally relented and handed the child over.

I held Tung the same way Giger had, close to my chest, trying to shield him with my body. The kid remained immersed in his aReal the whole time.

I continued downward; Giger kept up much easier now that he didn’t have the extra burden of the child to handle. Still, he was visibly winded, and obviously struggled to match the speed of my jumpsuit.

Giger and I caught up to Manic as we passed the “sublevel two” exit.

Manic glanced over his shoulder at me. “There you guys are!”

At the exit to “sublevel three,” the flights of stairs ended and one by one my squad members burst through the door. Skullcracker waited at the bottom, and when the last of us were through he took up the drag position.

Most of the emergency lights were offline here, while those still intact flickered intermittently. As such, we relied on our headlamps more than anything else, which gave the basement hallway a gloomy, subterranean feel.

In moments the squad reached the glass entrance to the pedway system and we hurried through in single file. Skullcracker was the last to enter.

Shots sprayed the glass behind him.

Since the pedway ran perpendicular to the previous passage, Skullcracker was able to readily duck from the line of fire.

“Are you good?” I asked him.

“Move!” came his reply.

We had advanced maybe fifty meters into the pedway before a pond of glowing blue Phants blocked the way.

Snakeoil, our point man, started to slow.

“Don’t stop!” Chief Bourbonjack said.

Snakeoil raced into the blue Phants. The liquid entities immediately parted, flowing up the walls on either side so that the floor was clear. It was a relief our emitters still worked.

The rest of the squad followed. I kept Giger close—he didn’t possess an EM emitter, so the only protection he had was his proximity to the rest of us. The liquid entities glowed hypnotically upon the walls beside me.

“Don’t look at them for too long,” I told Giger, though I found it hard to obey my own advice.

In about thirty meters we emerged from the Phant-steeped walls.

Looking behind, I saw the glowing liquid flow back down to converge on the floor beyond Skullcracker.

I spotted movement past the pond: the pursuing Centurions had reached the far side of the Phants and splashed right over them.

Sporadic gunfire erupted from the combat robots in the forefront.

Skullcracker was hit in the upper arm.

Manic lobbed a grenade; Skullcracker fired his heavy gun.

“Rage, get those civilians closer to the middle of the line,” Manic said.

I wholeheartedly complied. My brothers let Giger and me pass, so that in moments Skullcracker, Manic, Hijak, and Lui stood between the pursuers and the two of us.

“Keep moving!” Chief Bourbonjack said.

And so we continued forward. Those in the rear of the squad were constantly turning back to fire at the Centurions, who harried us relentlessly.

We reached a fork and took the rightmost passage. The gunfire ebbed as we passed from the line of fire. The cessation didn’t last long. As soon as the Centurions rounded the bend, the salvos resumed.

“Faster, people!” the Chief said.

Without warning the entire corridor shook as if from some impact. Twenty meters ahead of our point man, Snakeoil, the pedway ceiling collapsed.

We were forced to halt.

As the dust cleared, I saw Centurions pile down onto the rubble through a gap torn in ceiling. They blocked our path. Gunfire came at us from both in front and behind.

We immediately flattened ourselves against the walls and floor. I returned Tung to Giger, and sandwiched the two civilians between Lui and myself so that the pair were protected on both sides.

Even so, it probably didn’t matter. Not anymore.

Given the number of enemies I’d seen on the surface, I knew there was no way out.

This was our last stand.

I aimed through my scope and fired.

The bullets came in mercilessly. There was really nowhere to take cover, not in that corridor. All we could do was lie as low as possible and hope the enemy missed.

They didn’t.

I gritted my teeth as I took a bullet in the calf. The suit absorbed much of the force, but that didn't prevent the projectile from passing clean through.

I ignored the burning pain and fought on.

Blood spurted at intervals down the line as my brothers were intermittently struck. But everyone kept firing. Sure, some of us would pause after taking a particularly nasty shot, but no matter how bad we got it we kept giving it back. You'd think seeing one of our brothers receive a blow would be demoralizing, but instead it had the opposite effect. When a stricken brother came roaring back, firing for all he was worth, it boosted the rest of us right up.

That was what it meant to be more than a man, right there, right then.

This is what it was to be a MOTH.

I glanced at the vitals of my brothers on my HUD. None had died, yet, though there was a lot of red intruding on life bars that ideally should have been green.

A few well-placed grenades, or some rockets fired directly into our midst, would be all it would take to end it. But until then we would hold on, fighting to the bitter conclusion.

And then, incredibly, the attack let up.

No more shots came in from either side.

I couldn't believe it.

Had we gotten them all?

I searched my scope, trying to find more enemy targets, but other than the fallen bodies of bullet-riddled Centurions, and the liquid Phants oozing from them, I spotted nothing in the murk.

Had we actually won?

"So we meet again," came Fan's voice in the dark.

Ah.

Fan. Well, at least I knew who was leading the enemy, then. This was our alien general. It had to be.

I scanned both flanks, intending to put a bullet in Fan's forehead, but I couldn't see the man in either darkened corridor. Some of our headlamps had shattered in the gunfight, which further reduced the visibility.

"Show yourself," Chief Bourbonjack said. He was of a like mind as me, I was sure.

I waited for Fan's head to appear in the murk, my finger ready on the trigger.

“I am not so careless of my host’s life,” Fan answered, still unseen.

“What do you want?” the Chief said.

“I extend an offer of great mercy. I will spare the lives of your squad.”

Chief Bourbonjack’s expression darkened. “In exchange for what?”

“You, great Chief.”

“Don’t do it, Chief,” I said, voice low. “You’re a high-value target to the enemy. The knowledge stored in your embedded ID is invaluable. Fan may spare our lives now, but he’ll use us to break you, torturing and killing us while you watch. You’ve taken the counter-interrogation course. You know that to break a CO the interrogator always uses his own men against him. The enemy understands this about us, too, by now, I’m sure.”

The Chief nodded slowly, though he still seemed hesitant.

“What is your answer?” Fan’s voice came, sounding strident in the quiet of the tunnel.

The Chief pursed his lips. “Here I come!” He freed a grenade from his belt and tossed it down the corridor.

The grenade detonated. I felt the blast wave even here, thanks to the cramped nature of the passage.

“An unfortunate decision,” Fan said some moments later.

I peered through my scope the whole time, waiting for a target to present itself, expecting grenades or rockets to come raging in on us at any second. That, or for the roof to come down over our heads.

None of that happened.

“What are you waiting for, Fan?” Chief Bourbonjack mocked. “Lost the stomach for the fight?”

No answer.

I kept scanning the forward flank along with the Chief, Snakeoil, and Lui, while the others watched our rear.

No targets were sighted on either side.

Had the enemy truly gone, or were they merely ratcheting up the tension?

The Chief signaled Snakeoil to scout ahead.

I watched our intrepid Tennesseean sneak forward, doing his best to mask a limp. The rest of us remained very still. We all knew Snakeoil risked his life by doing this.

He approached the cave-in, picking his way across the fallen slabs of concrete and twisted rebar. When he was close enough, he directed his heavy

gun toward the ceiling and scanned the gaping hole. He took a sudden step forward, ostensibly peering past some upper corner, and then he climbed onto one of the slabs for a better view.

Snakeoil moved the barrel of his heavy gun to and fro, making a complete three sixty as he searched the opening. Then he stepped down and glanced toward the rest of us.

"It's clear," he said over the comm. The disbelief was evident in his voice.

When Snakeoil returned, the Chief instructed Skullcracker to scout our rear in turn.

I watched the tattooed man limp into the murk behind us. Another of my brothers, bravely risking his life for the rest of us.

I returned my attention to the fore, along with Lui and Snakeoil. We had to guard our front flank.

The tense moments passed.

I spotted nothing through my scope. I had the zoom cranked way down because of the close quarters.

I kept my other eye open, and saw Tung trembling on the floor beside me; Giger rubbed his shoulder soothingly. The kid still wore his aReal, thankfully.

"You guys all right?" I whispered.

Giger nodded slowly.

A drop of condensation dripped from the ceiling. The "plink" of its impact echoed from the walls and floor.

Skullcracker was taking a long time. Too long.

The sound of concrete grating against concrete erupted from the forward flank, followed by a loud thud. I swiveled my aim downward. Dust rose from the floor.

"Just a loose slab," I said.

Bender shifted behind me. "Where in the *hell* is he?"

"Skullcracker," the Chief sent over the comm. "Do you read? Skullcracker, get your ass back here."

Only static came back.

"Goddammit," the Chief said. "Snakeoil, you—"

The Chief paused as distant footfalls echoed down the corridor. They seemed to be coming from the rear.

I pulled up the view from Bender's aReal and shrunk it, placing it in the

upper left of my vision so that I could still guard our front flank. From his viewpoint, I saw a headlamp emerge in the distance behind us. It bobbed up and down as if belonging to some damaged combat robot.

Bender zoomed in.

It was Skullcracker.

"The way back is clear all the way to the bend," Skullcracker sent through the static.

"What the hell took so long?" the Chief said when he arrived.

"Sorry," Skullcracker replied, limping. "I blacked out."

"Let's see the back of your head," I told him, worried that the Phants had installed one of those cybernetic grafts they used to take over people.

Skullcracker narrowed his eyes, but then shrugged. He removed his helmet and turned around.

There was no metal graft.

"On your feet, people," Chief Bourbonjack said.

I unlinked Bender's viewpoint from my aReal and clambered upright. My calf wound was starting to seriously hurt; I blamed it on adrenaline hangover.

Others slowly rose around me.

"I don't get it," Lui said. "Why pull out now? They had us."

"Maybe your ugly face scared them off," Bender said.

"Yeah, or your *shot-up* face," Snakeoil said. "You look like crap, bro."

Bender was missing an ear, and half his face was slick with blood, but he grinned through it. "Makes me more attainable to the ladies."

Manic seemed to be having trouble getting up. He made it as far as one knee before collapsing. His vitals flatlined.

"Manic!" I hurried over to him and lowered my medbag. Bender joined me, and together we did a rough job of patching him up. Both of his lungs had collapsed but we managed to stabilize one of them. Not the best meatball surgery I'd ever done, but he'd last a little while anyway.

"Blood is flooding his left and right lungs," I told the Chief. "We have to get him back to the Weavers. He won't live past the hour."

"I could use a session with the Weavers myself." Hijak approached with a noticeable limp; blood oozed from several punctures in his jumpsuit.

I patched the wounds on Hijak that were bleeding the most—bullets had severed main arteries in his leg and arm—and then I hooked him up to a plasma volume expander IV.

As I worked, the Chief said, “Rage and Bender will give everyone a quick exam. Once that’s done, we’re going to head back to the hospital.”

Snakeoil shook his head. “We’re going in circles. You know the enemy probably set a trap for us there, right?”

Chief Bourbonjack gave Snakeoil a grim look, but didn’t answer.

Bender and I performed quick medical evaluations on everyone and repaired the more urgent wounds. Only the two civilians remained entirely unharmed. I told Giger to make sure the kid kept wearing his aReal.

“Don’t worry, I have no intention of letting him take it off,” Giger said.

Lui was Manic’s crutch on the way back, while Bender helped Hijak along. Everyone else walked on his own two feet, though there were more than a few limps among our numbers.

We returned, battered and broken, to the fork in the pedway corridor. I kept waiting for the inevitable ambush. The whole situation screamed “ruse” to me. This was a tactic we ourselves had employed to great success in the past: pretend to abandon an entrenched opponent, then come back and take them later while their defenses were down.

Snakeoil, on point, paused at the bend.

I ignored the burning pain in my calf and joined him. Bringing my rifle scope to my eye, I peered past the edge and scanned both flanks.

“Nothing,” I said. “Even the Phants are gone.”

“Odd,” Snakeoil said.

Odd indeed.

We continued back the way we had come, passing the fallen bodies of some Centurions. No Phants seeped out of them.

“None of this makes any sense,” Lui said. “They had us.”

“Stay alert, people,” Chief Bourbonjack said. “Let me know if you see anything out of the ordinary. And I mean *anything*.”

We stepped through the pedway exit, our boots crunching on the shattered glass beside it. We crossed the hospital sublevel and then took the stairs back up to intensive care. We encountered absolutely no resistance along the way.

In the ward we gave Manic and Hijak to the Weavers first, and then the rest of us, myself included, removed portions of our jumpsuits and lay down on the beds to have treatment done. Only the uninjured Giger and Tung were excluded; the two of them sat in one corner and exchanged quiet words. Bender left his helmet by the door and set the aReal to act as a motion sensor.

Skullcracker and Snakeoil were the first on their feet; the Chief ordered the two of them to scout the rooftop. They left immediately and their positions froze on my HUD.

"Why would Fan offer to trade our lives for yours, Chief, and then when you refuse he lets us all go?" I asked the Chief while a Weaver removed the bullet from my calf muscle. "Like Lui said, he had us beat."

Not wearing his helmet, Chief Bourbonjack lay on the bed beside me. Another Weaver was doing something to his neck, where a bullet had nicked him. "No idea, Rage. Though I have a feeling it was some last-ditch gambit on Fan's part."

The Weaver finished up on my calf and I lay on the bed a moment longer, dwelling on the mystery of the enemy's retreat. The upper body of my jumpsuit was still in place, so I activated my MRE nozzle and took a sip.

I got up, reluctantly, feeling groggy. I pulled on the lower assembly of my jumpsuit. We were still in the heart of enemy territory, after all, and duty demanded that I remain prepared. Once dressed, I decided to personally watch the door.

As I moved to take up a guard position, the locations of Skullcracker and Snakeoil abruptly updated on my HUD: the markers placed them directly above us, on the rooftop, where the signal was just strong enough to claw its way down.

"You see them, Chief?" I said.

"I do." Chief Bourbonjack had just replaced his helmet—the Weaver was finished working on him. He tried the comm. "Skullcracker and Snakeoil, sitrep. Over."

Skullcracker's voice came back, but proved unintelligible over the static.

"Say again, Skullcracker," the Chief sent.

"Seem to be—" *Static*. "Overwhelming firepower." *Static*. "Indeterminable source." *Static*.

The Chief and I exchanged a worried glance. That didn't sound good.

"Skullcracker, you're cutting in and out," the Chief returned.

"Rage," Skullcracker sent. "You better—" *Static*. "Up here."

"Come again?" I said into the comm.

"Get up here, Rage," Skullcracker transmitted.

I was confused. "Only me?"

"The Chief, too."

“What exactly is going on up there?” the Chief said.

The line returned static.

Countless doomsday scenarios ran through my mind as the two of us took those stairs. Foremost was the notion that Skullcracker and Snakeoil had been captured, and that the Chief and I were walking headfirst into some trap.

Which is why, when we reached the top of the stairs, I went out onto the rooftop first, rifle at the ready, while the Chief stayed behind, waiting for my “all clear.”

The first thing I saw was the nuclear payload. The device remained precisely where we had left it, untouched. So the invaders didn’t care for our inferior warhead technology. That suited me just fine.

Snakeoil stood not far from the payload; he was positioned near the edge of the rooftop, and seemed to be staring into the streets.

I cast my eyes about, looking for Skullcracker. I didn’t see him, though various superstructures blocked my view of other areas of the rooftop from here. According to the HUD, he stood on the eastern side of the building. There was a blue dot beside him. One of our ATLAS mechs?

So far, this didn’t seem like a trap. But looks could be deceiving, as I well knew.

“Snakeoil,” I said.

He didn’t answer. Didn’t turn around. But he *did* beckon urgently with one hand, as if to say: “Come here. Now.”

I warily approached, keeping an eye on the nearby superstructures.

But then my gaze was inextricably drawn forward.

Beyond Snakeoil, plumes of smoke rose from the city. Molten shapes plunged through the sky, leaving behind wide, smoky trails. It was consistent with the debris pattern of a vessel that had broken apart in orbit. Bogey 2 was still ever-present on the far horizon, and my first instinct was that one of our own starships had crashed.

I prayed it wasn’t the *Gerald R. Ford*.

The sonic boom from those distant airborne fragments reached my ears then, sounding like incredibly loud firecrackers. I instinctively ducked.

Snakeoil didn’t move.

I forced myself to his side. When I reached the rooftop edge, I stared open-mouthed at the sight below.

“Chief, better get out here,” I sent.

A vessel of some kind had indeed crashed, judging from the flattened

buildings and metallic debris. Whether that craft was of alien or human make, I could not say. I had a tendency to believe it was alien, given the new developments unfolding below. I almost couldn't believe what I was witnessing. It was so unreal, so *bizarre*.

The enemy was in full retreat. Waves of some kind of mech I had never seen before swept through the enemy hordes, destroying all crabs, slugs, and robots in sight. Made of mirrorlike, white gold, these mechs were humanoid in form, with two arms, two legs, and a single head, though the burnished bodies were stretched and elongated to an alien degree. The head was an oblong, as were the shoulders; the arms and legs were long and lithe, without the bulges of servomotors, hydraulic joints, and the like. They were about as tall as ATLAS 6s, coming in at around twenty-five meters. On their backs were small protuberances, ostensibly jetpacks—though when these golden mechs jetted from building to building, I didn't see any of the usual signs of fuel expulsion. In their arms they wielded particle weapons, and it was these with which they routed the enemy so efficiently, disintegrating their opponents in broad sweeps.

Nothing the horde threw at them seemed to harm the golden beings. Claws bounced off chest pieces. Mandibles broke against gold arms. Gatling gunfire deflected easily, and not even rockets could dent those burnished hulls.

"I didn't know the UC had tech like this," I said, bewildered.

"We don't," the Chief said, coming up beside me. "Those aren't ours."

I felt my brow furrow. "SK, then?"

"Not a chance," the Chief told me.

So my initial assessment was correct. The ramifications of it all were only just hitting me.

"Aliens fighting aliens," Snakeoil said, giving voice to the thoughts still forming in my head. "Never thought I'd see the day."

I watched the horde continue to retreat before the onslaught. It looked to be a complete route. "What happens when they turn on us?"

"About that," Snakeoil said. "You might want to join Skullcracker." He gestured to his right, pointing across the rooftop.

I turned. From this angle, I saw something poking from beyond the rim of a collapsed superstructure. It looked suspiciously like the golden head of one of those alien mechs.

I remembered the blue dot I'd seen beside Skullcracker on the HUD. I

glanced at the overhead map again: the head matched the dot’s position.

I edged forward, past the superstructure, and the object was slowly revealed.

It was indeed an alien mech, looming there in all its golden majesty on the eastern perimeter of the rooftop. Its back was toward me as it stared into the streets below.

Skullcracker surveyed the battle space beside the mech. Even in his jumpsuit he was dwarfed by it, coming in at about one-sixth its size.

As if sensing my gaze, the shiny mech turned toward me. The only feature on its face was a single, glowing red bar across the forehead, probably some sort of visual sensor; otherwise I stared at a smooth, expressionless oblong of gold steel.

The alien mech remained motionless for several moments, as if unsure what to make of me, this battered and bruised human soldier who had come to call upon it.

And then the cockpit irised open.

Shaw stepped out.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Tahoe

My hyperventilating increased, despite my shallower lung capacity. "Help!" I managed to shout. I felt sick. "Help!"

I was inextricably lodged in a tight crawlspace beneath a billion tonnes of rock. There was no sign of the rest of the squad. I wore only my boots and cooling undergarment. My head was turned sideways so that the rock floor and ceiling pressed the cartilage of my ears painfully into my skull. My arms were extended in front of me. The rest of my body was squeezed so tightly by the rock that breathing was difficult.

But that wasn't the worst of it. No, that terrible superlative was reserved for the alien insects crawling inside the tunnel an unknown distance behind me at that very moment. I could hear the rustle of their tiny mandibles whenever I held my frantic breath. They sounded eager. Hungry.

I scrambled blindly for my rifle. The barrel faced forward, the wrong direction to shoot at the insects. There was no way I could possibly turn the weapon around in this confined space, but foolishly I tried anyway.

The rifle jarred against the rock and I heard the tinkle of breaking glass. The dark stone before my face became pitch black.

And I thought I'd been in hell before.

Damn you, spirits.

I'd just destroyed the lamp tied to my rifle. The helmet casings for the units were industrial grade, but when removed from that protective shell the lamp was no stronger than an ordinary LED.

I should have been more careful. But I was simply too frantic.

I held my breath. With the light gone, the rustling of the insects had grown louder, more fervent.

Abruptly it changed in timbre.

I felt the pressure of insectile limbs along the outside of my boots.

They had reached me.

The insects were probing, investigating this new and interesting obstacle that had appeared in their paths. Probably trying to decide if my boots were a tasty morsel or something inedible that needed to be ripped away first, like the wrapper of a candy bar.

That's right, I was one big chocolate bar to those things.

In the darkness, all of my senses were focused on touch and sound, so I readily felt when those probing limbs moved upward along either side of my boots. In moments some of the alien insects would skitter onto the more vulnerable sections of my legs, which were protected only by my cooling undergarment.

In a panic I slid my legs to the left and right, attempting to shake off the insects.

That caused a reaction. They began to hiss slightly, and in my mind I imagined agitated cobras.

I felt a sharp pain in my right toe. One of them had bitten straight through the boot. Opening up the candy wrapper.

I kicked my boot against the rock and heard a satisfying crunch above the hissing.

"Help!" I still felt nauseous, but strangely I wasn't hyperventilating as much. You'd think I'd be panicking even more, that I'd be overcome with the helplessness of the situation.

Not so.

The insects provided a focal point for my hopelessness. Gave me something I could actually fight.

The hypoxic stars of hyperventilation began to fade from my vision.

"Come on, you mothers," I wheezed. "Let's see what you've got!"

I scissored my legs back and forth, trying to grind them. I thought I felt the weight of squished insect bodies hanging from my boots, but that may have been wishful thinking.

"Come on, bitches, I can do this all day!"

And indeed I could. I had performed similar exercises in PT every morning for the past two years.

"That all you got?"

I actually laughed in malicious glee. A short, breathless laugh.

But then I felt another prick. And another. Both just above the rim of my boots, and extremely painful. I gritted my teeth as the mandibles tore past

my cooling undergarment and into the flesh below.

The pain brought me clarity and I realized swishing my legs back and forth like that was pointless. It would buy me time, sure, but I wasn't going to win that way, not in the long run.

I had to focus on moving forward.

The other members of my squad had gotten through.

I could do it, too.

I had to.

I flinched as more mandibles cut into my flesh above the boots, and I quickly scissored my legs, trying to mash them.

I felt a wetness beneath me, slowly flowing toward my chest. It had to be insect blood, probably mixed with some of my own. The fact that it trickled toward my upper body meant I was on a slight downward incline.

Another terrible bite came, this time above my right knee. One of the insects was advancing toward my crotch . . .

I moved my legs back and forth in the tight confines and knocked the latest round of them away, bathing the tunnel in more of their fluids. My entire underside felt wet now.

Wait a second.

Those fluids might act as a lubricant.

It was getting harder to move my feet as more of the insects crowded my lower extremities, but with some effort I forced the tips of my boots into the rock walls on either side. I had trouble obtaining a foothold because those walls seemed slippery, but I kept trying and finally found purchase.

Then I jammed my fingertips into the tiny crevices in the rock ahead of me and exhaled all the air in my lungs. When I was done exhaling, I exhaled some more.

I sucked in my stomach as far as it would go. I squeezed my shoulder blades together.

Ignoring the fresh bites the insects inflicted along my legs, I pushed with my feet and pulled with my fingers, giving it everything I had. I exerted myself so fully that my entire body shook from the effort, and the strain caused me to exhale yet another small gasp of air.

I slid forward a centimeter through the lubricated rock. The cartilage of my ears, already bent, was pinched further. However I hardly noticed the pain, not with all the other sensations I was experiencing right then.

Without taking a breath, without changing the muscles of my torso one

bit, I found purchase once more with my boots and fingertips, and pushed and pulled again.

I advanced another centimeter.

Again.

Another centimeter.

The rock seemed to loosen slightly around me.

I finally inhaled. I still couldn't expand my lungs completely, but I'd made progress.

Those insects were having a field day with my legs, biting through the cooling undergarment like piranhas. I scissored my thighs twice, killing as many of them as I could, then I exhaled everything and shoved forward again.

I advanced another centimeter.

I repeated the process, and in moments I'd moved forward an entire pace.

Incredible.

I was actually doing this.

The way was opening up around me—the enclosing walls definitely felt looser, and I could almost inhale to my normal lung capacity.

I advanced another pace.

A third.

I slid my rifle and EM emitter forward in the darkness, and scissored my feet, grinding up the newest batch of insects.

The ceiling no longer pressed so rigidly into my head, and my ears weren't deformed as much, nor was my breathing so frantic, so when Mauler's voice came I actually heard it.

"Cyclone, you all right?" he said. From the muffled quality of his voice, I guessed he was about eight meters ahead of me.

I hadn't been abandoned after all.

"Yup," I said, flush with relief.

"I heard you calling, why didn't you answer me?"

"Didn't hear," I said. "My ears were mashed to shit against the rock. All I heard was my own panicked breathing and the blood gushing past my ear canal. Not to mention the damn insects."

"Insects?"

"Yeah. They're here. Don't slow down, bro. Don't you dare."

I continued crawling forward in the dark. It wasn't pitch black anymore

—my eyes had adjusted, and some ambient light from Mauler's lamp reached me. Even so, I didn't need it, because I still couldn't turn my head. I proceeded forward by touch alone.

The alien insects kept harassing me, and I paused every so often to grind up the current lot before continuing.

The cave opened up bit by bit, at least horizontally, so that soon I was able to bend my arms and better use them to aid my motion. I still couldn't actually look forward, but I felt certain I'd be able to soon. Because of the extra room, the insects were reaching farther along on my body, and I had to involve my hips whenever I stopped to grind them. Luckily none of them had touched my crotch area yet, but it was only a matter of time. Already my buttocks throbbed where chunks of flesh had been ripped free.

The rifle and EM emitter were abruptly yanked from my grasp.

What the . . .

Hands clasped my own and dragged me forward.

My head was free.

Then my torso.

And finally the rest of my body.

Mauler hauled me upright.

I stood, or rather, *crouched*, in a chest-high chamber. The rest of the squad was here, hunched two abreast.

"The insects," I said, glancing down.

Mauler followed my gaze.

I stomped my feet, shaking several of the vaguely locust-like insects from my body. I brought my hands down, swiping and patting them from the front and back of my legs, wincing as their mandibles tore my flesh in the process. The insects landed with a gentle rattle on the floor and Mauler promptly ground them up beneath his boots.

More of them began flowing from the crevice behind me.

Mauler returned my rifle and EM emitter.

"Get back!" he said, forcing me away from the crevice with one arm.

I moved aside. Mauler ripped a grenade from where he had secured it to his rifle. Staying hunched, he cooked it for a few seconds and then lobbed it into the cleft of rock I'd just emerged from. "Frag out!"

Insects continued to spill from the hole so that for a moment I thought the grenade would be regurgitated, too. I was about to dive away when it detonated.

A plume of black dust and insects spewed from the crevice. I heard a rumbling a few seconds after the explosion, and when it ceased I realized the crawlspace had collapsed.

A few more insects emerged after the detonation, joining those already blasted into the chamber, and the squad swiftly stomped them to death.

“Well that was one of the shittiest low-crawls I’ve ever done,” Fret said. Like everyone else, his cool vents were covered in scrapes and nicks and chewed up entirely in places. The exposed flesh of his face and hands didn’t fare much better; pieces of his beard were torn away, and bloody gashes crisscrossed his fingers.

“I’ve had worse,” Trace sniffed from where he crouched beside him.

“Don’t think Cyclone has.” TJ grimaced at me. “You get the worst low-crawl of the year award, dude. Looks like you dragged your feet through a blender.”

“Not so far from the truth.” I glanced down. Those insects had done quite the number on me. Above my boots, the leg areas of my undergarment were steeped in blood, with chunks of flesh protruding in several spots.

The sight made me feel faint and I promptly sat down on the uncomfortable rock.

My brothers crouched there above me, seeming suddenly reluctant. About what?

Then I realized it: They wanted to treat my wounds, but from the looks on their faces they were convinced I was infected with some alien virus. You know, the gene-altering, shapeshifting kind that would turn me and anyone who touched me into a monster, just like in the science fiction novels. The Brass would definitely ensure I went through more than a few hours of decontamination if I ever returned to the ship.

Ghost, always the brave one, came forward. The albino seemed like some white-haired imp without his jumpsuit. He untaped a suit-rep kit from his rifle.

Facehopper joined him.

“I got this, boss,” Ghost told him.

Facehopper glanced at him uncertainly. “You sure?”

“Positive.”

Facehopper seemed relieved.

“Here, just give me the kit,” I told Ghost. “I’ll do it myself.”

“No way,” Ghost said. “I got this.”

I stared into his eerily red eyes. “I don’t want you to get infected with anything.” I snatched at his suit-rep kit.

Ghost knocked my hand aside. “You’re my brother. And if you’re infected, I want what you’ve got. Why should you get to have all the fun, flirting with the nurses in detox while the rest of us are stuck in training?”

Ah Ghost. More of a brother than any by blood.

“Too bad the only nurses in detox are robots,” I told him.

“All the more reason to flirt with them. They can’t give lip.” He opened up the kit and judiciously applied field bandages to my bloody legs. There weren’t enough, so he concentrated on the major wounds.

“Do you want me to give you something for the pain?” Ghost asked midway.

I shook my head, breathing hard from the agony. “Need to be alert.”

When he was done I sat back, wincing. This was going to be a long day.

By then the rest of the squad had removed the spare ammunition rounds taped to their rifles and attached them to their torsos instead. I did the same, not wanting to leave my weapon unbalanced.

“Let’s go,” Facehopper said.

I followed the squad down the tunnel at a crouch, the way lit by the ambient light of my brothers. I walked with a pronounced limp, of course, my legs throbbing the whole time.

There is no pain, I told myself. *Pain is an illusion of the mind. A fallacy.*

It was true. Pain was indeed an illusion. The only reason living things had pain receptors was because of the self-preservation mechanism: Any actions that inflicted pain were to be avoided, as pain meant tissue damage. Agitating a wound increased pain because said agitation might worsen the wound. Too bad the primitive mechanism couldn’t be shut off, because in this case avoiding pain meant staying here and dying beneath a billion tonnes of rock.

Yes, pain was indeed a fallacy.

At least it lets me know I’m alive.

I glanced back one last time at the collapsed cleft. I was just glad to be out of there. Because like Fret had said, that was one of the worst experiences of my life.

“You think the collapse will diminish the nuke’s blast radius?” Mauler said, noticing my gaze.

I shook my head. “We’re still within the vaporization radius. When you

have a weapon capable of matching the heat from a star's thermonuclear core, nothing can stand in its way. And I mean nothing: All the rock you see here will be vaporized and melted within the first few milliseconds after detonation, forming a 'melt cavity.' The ensuing steam and radiation will blast upward through the shafts and passageways, seeking the path of least resistance to the surface."

"Know-it-all," Mauler muttered.

"We're bringing nuclear steam heating to the warrens of Shangde City," Bomb said. "Gonna dine on cooked crab tonight, baby!"

"It's going to be messy," I said, unable to share Bomb's cheer. I just hoped we were able to find shelter before the steam and radiation obliterated our squad, too.

I kept the rifle close to my chest as I advanced. It was designed to be used while wearing the bulky gloves of a jumpsuit, and the grip on the stock felt a bit wide without them. The tip of my index finger barely reached the trigger. I could still fire it though, and that was the important part.

The ceiling slowly gave way until eventually we were able to stand to our full heights; however the width still limited us to two abreast.

The pain in my legs didn't abate. Ghost's bandages had started to feel uncomfortably tight and the whole region pulsed in time to my heartbeat.

Mauler kept glancing over his shoulder beside me, and I'd often follow his gaze; the lamp on his weapon revealed only the empty, dark murk behind us.

"Worried that the insects are tunneling their way through?" I asked him.

"No," Mauler said. "Just my drag man reflex. Always gotta cover our six."

He was right. I myself should have been more vigilant. Pain was no excuse.

The squad reached an opening shortly. There, we encountered the two ATLAS Support System drones we'd launched earlier.

The robots hovered on either side of the entrance like watch sentries. The glowing condensation of liquid Phants was readily visible and glistened orange-yellow above the metallic surfaces.

Orange-yellow: that was a color of Phant we'd never encountered before.

"Guess we know what happened to our drones now," Fret said underbreath.

“Ghost, Trace, take them out,” Facehopper ordered.

Those in the forefront crouched, allowing our resident snipers to take aim.

Ghost and Trace fired at the same time.

The drones were hit and went flying backwards, vanishing into the opening.

The two snipers exchanged a satisfied glance and then lowered their rifles.

“Let’s go,” Facehopper said.

The squad members passed through the opening in pairs, entering a broad chamber carved into the rock. We stood at the edge of a sunken floor, which was filled to the brim with orange-yellow Phants that formed a moat of sorts, impeding all access forward. I couldn’t tell how deep the moat was because the Phants were opaque. I caught a glimpse of one of the damaged ATLAS Support System drones as it sunk into the liquid—in half a second it was swallowed entirely.

At the center of the chamber, a lone pillar arose from the moat and extended five meters to the rock ceiling. It appeared wider at the top and bottom than the middle, and a circular shelf located just above the liquid surrounded the base. The pillar and shelf were either sheathed in, or composed of, those same pulsating, orange-yellow Phants.

“Welcome to the Observer Mind, mates,” Facehopper said.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Rade

I just stared at Shaw for the longest moment. I couldn't do anything else. I'd given up any hope of ever seeing her again, of ever holding her in my arms. And then there she was.

She leaped down from the cockpit of the alien mech—she was wearing a UC jumpsuit—and activated her jumpjets to pad the landing. She approached, moving neither fast nor slow, but at a moderate pace, like she, too, was unsure of what to make of this surprising reunion. Skullcracker remained at the mech's side.

I left behind Chief Bourbonjack and Snakeoil to go to her. As I grew nearer, I did everything I could to convince myself she wasn't real. I couldn't believe it was her. I just couldn't. Either my mind was playing tricks on me or this was some alien ruse. It was too good to be true. Shaw coming down, leading a squadron of alien mechs to rescue us at a time when we most needed saving?

Ridiculous.

She stopped two paces from me and took off her UC-issue helmet, letting it drop to the rooftop.

She looked so different. She'd only been gone eight months but it was like she'd aged five years. I could only imagine the hardships she'd endured.

Her face was pale, her tan having faded long ago. Her features were sunken, gaunt. Lines etched her forehead and creases marred the regions around her eyes and mouth where before there had been none. Her skin was clean, however, as if she'd recently bathed, and her dark hair—not as silky as it used to be—flowed down onto the shoulders of her jumpsuit.

As I stared into those brown eyes—eyes that used to be steely, defiant, and headstrong, but in that moment appeared red and moist—a part of me believed it was her.

But only a part of me.

She smiled as the battle raged on almost incongruously in the distant streets below.

“Hey,” she said. Her chin was quivering.

It was her voice. It had to be.

My hindbrain, the more primal, emotional part of my mind, wanted me to throw myself at her, wanted me to hold her in my arms and never let go, but my forebrain, my logical brain, still had a hard time believing it was her.

I remembered the simulated dream I’d endured at the hands of Lana, when she had been my Keeper and strove to pry away the password to my embedded ID. In that fantasy world, the memory of Shaw had been used against me.

And I had to wonder, what if I never actually left the dream? What if I was still aboard the enemy ship, living out my life in some sort of mind prison?

Those doubts ate away at me as I regarded Shaw, so that the only words I could manage, sadly enough, were: “Are you real?”

“Oh Rade.” She launched herself at me.

I instinctively wrapped my arms around her and squeezed tight. I let the scent of her engulf me through my open faceplate. The scent . . . I’d never *smelled* her in the simulation.

It was her.

I pushed her back for a moment to remove my own helmet, and I took off my gloves. Then I embraced her once more and ran my hand down her hair, feeling the smooth strands. Feeling the soft curve of her neck. Intoxicated by the smell.

“I thought I’d lost you,” I said. “I didn’t dare hope you were alive. I couldn’t give myself that hope. It would have driven me insane.”

The air shuddered; two streets away, an explosion sent a plume of smoke skyward. To me, the distant denotations and gunfire were fireworks celebrating our reunion.

“I’ve dreamed of this day for so long,” Shaw said, pulling back to look into my eyes. “So long. And now it’s finally here.” She rested her forehead against mine. “I never gave up. Not once. I remembered what you told me, about the resiliency of the human spirit. And I fought to find you, every day.”

“I never forgot what you told me either, Shaw,” I said. “To remember you in the dark nights, when I thought I couldn’t go on, when all hope

seemed lost. And I *remembered* you. I remembered. Through it all."

Shaw smiled fleetingly. "I have so many stories to tell you."

"Later," I leaned forward, kissing her as the city burned around us.

"What in the *hell*?" Chief Bourbonjack stormed to our side, causing me to break the kiss prematurely. Snakeoil stood beside him, and past him I saw Hijak, who had apparently come up to check on us.

"Nice to see you, too, Chief," she said.

"You're supposed to be *dead*."

"Am I?" She glanced down at her jumpsuit in mock surprise. "Seems intel was wrong. Yet again."

"I don't believe we've made the acquaintance," Hijak said, coming forward to extend a gloved hand.

"Shaw," she said, shaking it.

Hijak grinned widely. "Hijak."

I felt a surge of jealousy but Hijak defused it by sending a goofy thumbs-up my way.

The Chief glanced toward the alien mech looming at the rooftop's edge. Skullcracker remained beside it, as if standing guard. "Looks like you've made yourself some powerful friends while you were gone."

"A few," Shaw agreed.

"Can we trust them?" Chief Bourbonjack said.

"Yes."

The Chief frowned. "Never trust visitors bringing unexpected gifts. Especially when the cost of those gifts remains undisclosed."

"There is no cost," a voice boomed from across the rooftop.

The golden mech was approaching.

Chief Bourbonjack spun toward the giant robot and fumbled for his weapon.

I pulled away from Shaw, instinctively slipping my own rifle down by its straps from my shoulder. Because I'd taken off my bulky gloves, the weapon felt a bit too big for my hands. But it was definitely still usable.

Shaw pushed my barrel down. "Rade." She drew my gaze. "Azen is on our side."

I glanced toward the mech and couldn't help but feel awe. The robot moved with amazing grace for such a massive machine. There was no whir of servomotors, no hum of unseen hydraulics, only the thud of each unerring footfall.

Skullcracker kept pace beside it, unafraid.

“Azen?” I said.

“Yes.” Shaw turned toward Chief Bourbonjack. “Chief. Trust me.”

He didn’t respond, keeping his rifle aimed squarely at the alien mech.

“Trust me.” Shaw touched his barrel.

The Chief looked away from the gun sights to meet her eyes, and then reluctantly lowered the rifle.

The mech halted a few paces from us and I had to crane my neck to keep its head within view.

“Rade, Chief,” Shaw said. “Meet Azen. Azen, this is Rade, the one I told you about. And this is his Chief.”

I regarded the towering mech uncertainly. “Uh, hi?”

“Hello, Rade Galaal,” the mech intoned in perfect English. The head remained expressionless, though its red visual sensor slightly brightened in sync with each audible syllable. “I have heard much about you. And Chief Bourbonjack, you have been mentioned as well.” The voice didn’t sound muffled in any way, which made me wonder where the external speakers were.

“You are an advanced alien AI?” I said.

Shaw was the one who answered. “Azen is a Phant.”

“Well that’s just wonderful.” I felt suddenly nauseous. I knew an alien would pilot the mech but I had thought it would either be an AI, as I said, or some conquered subspecies that had rebelled against the Phants. Not the Phants themselves. “You’ve gone and allied with our enemy.”

“These particular Phants aren’t the enemy. Azen belongs to a completely different faction.”

“Faction?”

“The stealth tech your soldiers have put together is quite interesting,” Azen interceded, changing the subject. “I can sense your individual presences . . . it feels almost like you are host bodies of some kind, housing Phants. And yet, the signatures of the Phants supposedly possessing you are aberrant somehow. I suspect if I attempted to physically close with any of you in this dimension I would be repelled. A most surprising innovation for a species of your limited technology.”

“Why are you helping us, Phant?” Chief Bourbonjack said, obviously attempting to steer the conversation back down the previous path.

The golden mech cocked its head as if receiving some incoming

transmission to its internal AI. “I will explain everything later. We must evacuate the surface immediately.”

Chief Bourbonjack frowned. “Why?”

“There isn’t much time.” Azen gestured toward the streets below. “Already the enemy flees underground.”

Below, I could see the crabs, slugs, and robots retreating from the barrage of particle fire; they vanished within the geronium that caked the buildings, courtesy of the many holes drilled into the resin.

Many of the golden mechs pursued, diving into the pits after them.

“They’re fleeing because of you,” the Chief said.

“Not entirely,” Azen replied. “Look.” The mech pointed skyward.

In the distance, a wall of flame sheathed the sky, partially eclipsing Bogey 2 behind it. The Skull Ship seemed to be breaking away from the surface.

“The coronal weapon,” Hijak said, sounding stunned.

“Yes,” Azen agreed. “They hope to wipe out our ground units while expending as little resources as possible. The plasma travels slower in atmosphere, but it is no less deadly. We must hurry.” The golden mech turned its expressionless head toward me. “Shaw has maps of the subterranean warrens beneath the city. Exchange data with her. I’ve marked out a sinkhole that intrudes upon the pedway system in quadrant three. Proceed down that sinkhole, then rendezvous with me and my troops at the designated waypoint underground. Go!”

“What about our nuclear payload?” Hijak said.

“You won’t need it.” The alien mech leaped from the rooftop, vanishing from view.

Aware of that encroaching wall of destruction, I quickly gathered up my helmet and gloves. Shaw did likewise.

“Time to fly!” the Chief said.

I raced down the stairwell. Along the way, I offered Shaw the city blueprints via aReal. She rejected my request, explaining that Azen had given them to her already.

It was scary how much of our knowledge the Phants had.

An “incoming data” request from Shaw came up on my aReal in return. When I accepted, the warren of tunnels underneath the city filled out on my HUD, and a flashing waypoint appeared some distance within it. I forwarded the data to the Chief for retransmission to the rest of the squad.

Shaw also sent along an app called “shockwave impact simulation.”

“What’s this?” I asked her as I accepted.

“Just a little something I wrote during my downtime.”

The app overlaid the coronal discharge from Bogey 2 as an expanding circle on my HUD map, representing its position with respect to the city. A countdown timer appeared in the lower right corner of my HUD. *Ninety-nine seconds. Ninety-eight. Ninety-seven.* It appeared to be the time before the outskirts of the corona engulfed my position.

We reached the intensive care ward on the second floor and rejoined the rest of the squad. Everyone was up and about by then, including Manic. When Shaw entered the ward, the men greeted her with surprise and wonder. There wasn’t time for social niceties however, so we packed up and got the hell out of there. Shaw attached herself to Tung immediately, and scooped the kid over her shoulders, despite Giger’s protests that he was the one in charge of the child.

“Who do you want to carry you, Tung?” Giger asked, sounding utterly confident the child would pick him.

“Shaw!” Tung said.

Deflated, Giger bowed his head, agreeing to the child’s whim.

Shaw told Tung to wear his aReal visor. The kid did so, and then he clung to her chest as a boy would his mother.

The squad hurried from the ward. I let Shaw go in front of me because I wanted to keep her in my line of sight at all times.

Chief Bourbonjack distributed the new map data as well as the “shockwave impact” app to the others. He explained the situation as we moved, sharing the vid he’d recorded of the horde’s frenzied withdrawal.

“Alien mechs?” Lui said when the Chief was done. “I almost can’t believe it, even after viewing the footage.” He glanced at Shaw. “Though I suppose if *she’s* here, anything is possible.”

On my aReal, the expanding sphere representing the coronal weapon had reached the outskirts of the city. My countdown indicator read: Fifty seconds. Forty-nine. Forty-eight.

“The outer edges of the corona have struck,” Shaw said, confirming my interpretation of her app. “In those places, the surface temperature is nearing five hundred degrees Celsius. We have to get to that sinkhole. *Now*.”

We took the underground pedway toward the indicated “quadrant three.” As was the case earlier, most of the emergency lights had failed and

we proceeded almost entirely under the light of our headlamps.

We passed an underground subway station platform and the motionless escalators that came with it. We had to crawl over debris in places where portions of the pedway had collapsed.

Without a jumpsuit, Giger fared the worst among us. His shirt was soaking wet and he panted wildly, moving so slowly that I was obligated to help him. Because of that, I ended up in the drag position. Even so, I kept Shaw in sight. Tung remained in her arms, the child-sized aReal covering his eyes and keeping out the rest of the world.

The ground fell away up ahead, in the region corresponding to our target sinkhole. Judging from the fifteen-meter diameter, it had been tunneled by a very large slug. The descent was a steep seventy-five degrees.

On my HUD map, the circle representing the coronal discharge had almost reached our position. The countdown was down to the final seconds.

Three.

Two.

“Inside!” the Chief ordered.

One.

Ahead of me, my squad members leaped into the broad hole at almost the same time.

Giger faltered beside me.

I wrapped my arms tightly around him and took the plunge. The back of my suit collided with the sloping surface of the shaft almost immediately and I proceeded down into the murk.

Just in time, too, because above, flames from the coronal discharge swept through the former pedway passage.

The environment cooled as I descended into the bowels of the moon. My squad brothers slid at various points along the shaft below me. The light from our headlamps illuminated the smooth surface, which seemed a blur beneath us—it looked like we were the ones who were motionless, while the tunnel moved.

Checking my map, I discovered that the shaft continued for some time at this angle of descent, tunneling about two klicks into the bedrock beneath the city before leveling off.

My limited jumpjet capacity might have been able to slow me down for a moment, but otherwise I was committed: There was nothing I could do save surrender to the slide. I had to hope that when the tunnel finally bottomed

out, the squad wouldn't find itself neck-deep in crabs and slugs.

Giger clung tightly to me. I purposely kept him positioned on top of my suit, away from the surface, as I didn't want him to get any friction burns. Occasional bumps and dips jerked my body so that it wasn't the most enjoyable descent for either of us.

Still, some of my squad brothers liked it, apparently.

"Waahooooo!" Bender transmitted. Though our faceplates were open, it was far easier to communicate over the comm given the distance separating each individual squad member. "Anyone gone on the 'Wacky Wild' at the New Corona amusement park? This is like that, baby, except better!"

"This reminds me more of luging," Shaw sent. I couldn't actually see her, but according to my HUD map she was just in front of Bender. She would still be holding Tung, of course. The kid was in good hands.

"Luging?" Bender answered. "Never heard of it."

"Try watching the Winter Olympics sometime. Usually it's done with sleds and ice though, not jumpsuits and caves."

"That old-ass show?" Bender returned. "Ha! Wouldn't catch me dead watching brainfudge like that. *Winter Olympics*. Pah."

"That's right, you only watch porn," Shaw sent.

"Rage, I forgot how much of a riot this woman of yours is," Bender transmitted. "You gotta bring her along on missions more often."

"Cut the chatter, people," Chief Bourbonjack sent. "According to the data shared by Shaw, we're coming up on the end of the tunnel. I want you all on high alert. The horde has been forced underground, remember. We have to be ready for anything."

The tunnel leveled off and I slid to a halt. I spotted Shaw right away; she stood near the front of the squad with Tung.

She was safe.

I released Giger and sat up so that I could scan the tunnel ahead with my rifle scope. The cave proved empty, at least as far as I could tell in the murk.

Moving warily, we advanced toward the flashing rendezvous point indicated on the map one klick ahead. The tunnel possessed the same fifteen-meter-diameter dimensions as the shaft, and was obviously carved by the same behemoth. I just hoped we didn't wander into the slug that had created it.

I stuck close to Shaw. She was aware of my presence, and seemed to welcome it. Though I had the impression she wanted me near not so much so

that I could protect her, but rather that she could protect *me*. It was a strange sensation.

She had changed. How could she not? She'd been a prisoner of war of some kind, trapped on the far side of the galaxy. Who could say what terrible things had happened to her? When we were out of danger, I was going to get her to tell me everything.

As we proceeded onward through the dark, a sense of guilt arose inside me, one that I had trouble dousing.

My squad brothers and I had survived yet another calamity. And Shaw was alive. *Shaw*. The woman I thought I'd never see again. I had paid my last respects to her at the Gate to Geronimo, watching as it was dismantled deep within enemy territory. And now she was alive.

But back to my guilt. I should have been happy for all of us, right? We'd been spared while Hongleong City burned. Yet I couldn't help but think of those refugees, like Giger and Tung, who had survived the initial onslaught and remained hidden in the city above. Earlier I had estimated there might be around five thousand of them left.

Five thousand who were now dying horrible deaths. Roasted alive.

Why should we be spared and not them? Just because we had powerful friends?

The guilt was slowly replaced with anger. My desire for bloodshed had weakened earlier, but those five thousand fresh deaths stoked the fire of my vengeance.

Forget them, the rational part of my mind told me. *We have to make it home. That's all that matters now. Besides, Shaw is back. Do you really need vengeance anymore?*

Forget five thousand innocent lives? the vengeful part said. *And what about Alejandro? Lana? Can you forget them too? And what about the future of humanity?*

The vengeful part was right, unfortunately. Still, there was no way to enact that vengeance, not until we could return to the fleet and plan our next operation.

We approached two alien mechs, positioned on either side of the tunnel like giant, golden statues. Their hulls glowed gently, illuminating the area.

The Chief glanced at Shaw. "Friends?"

Shaw nodded. "Azen would have sent them. The tunnel is clear from this point forward. We can relax now."

We passed the golden mechs. Despite Shaw's words, most of my brothers were on edge because of the alien units. Gloves firmly gripped rifles, and though the weapons were lowered, fingers were definitely on triggers. The Chief had shared his vid feed earlier, true, but this was the first time most of my brothers were seeing these things in person.

When the rightmost sentry swiveled its oblong head toward us, directing that red cyclopean vision sensor our way, Manic got spooked and raised his rifle. It didn't help that the computers in our HUDs marked the mechs in red—enemies.

The Chief stepped toward him. "Stand down, Manic!"

"Sorry, Chief." Manic quickly lowered his weapon. It was a testament to our discipline that Manic obeyed the Chief without question, despite his obvious fear.

"They won't harm you," Shaw said.

Her voice didn't do much to reassure him—Manic kept looking over his shoulder until the mechs were far behind.

Shaw led the way, carrying Tung. She seemed entirely at ease. As for the rest of us, well, the tension in the group didn't really ebb. Sure, we felt safe from the crabs and slugs, but who would protect us from the golden mechs?

Giger came forward. "Girl," he said, extending his arms toward Tung, "give me the child."

For a moment I thought Shaw was going to resist, but then she handed the kid over. Giger hoisted Tung over his shoulder and whispered something into his ears. Tung lifted up his aReal visor and reached for Shaw, but Giger spun away, quietly scolding the child.

"Seems like a nice kid," Shaw said to me.

"Sure," I agreed.

"Where did you find him?"

"One of the apartments up in the city. I'm just surprised he survived on his own as long as he did."

Shaw looked at me with those intelligent yet troubled eyes. "I want to know everything that's happened since the last time we saw each other."

And so I told her. From the aborted Crimson Pipeline operation on Tau Ceti II-c, to the failed attempt at capturing the Guide, to my interrogation at the hands of Lana and subsequent escape, to the unsuccessful operation aboard Bogey 2, to our struggle on this moon. I expected to catch some flak

from the Chief on some points—for revealing classified details and whatnot when aliens could potentially be eavesdropping—but he didn't say a word. I guess he figured the Phants would know most of what I shared with her already, anyway. Maybe Shaw knew all of it, too, but just wanted to hear it from me.

When I was done, Shaw told me (and hence everyone else) how she had survived on Geronimo after crash-landing her shuttle. Eight months into her plight, she had met an SK named Fan. Together, they had retrieved one of the mechs left behind by Bravo platoon and used it to place an improvised explosive over what she thought was a teleportation device. The explosion failed to cause the damage she thought it would and the pair was captured. Fan was integrated as a Phant host while Shaw was rescued by Azen and brought to his homeworld.

"Why is this Azen helping us?" I said before she could say any more.

The Chief glanced our way, listening intently.

"Azen has taken an interest in humanity," Shaw said.

"What if we don't want his help?" I said.

"Don't be silly. We need his help."

"And what's the price, really?" I exchanged a dubious look with the Chief. "And don't tell me there's 'no hidden cost,' as Azen says."

Shaw sighed. "He says he wants to install an advisor in our government."

Chief Bourbonjack snorted. "That sounds like a cost to me."

"Maybe," Shaw said. "But if we can't win this war without Azen's help, then we have no choice really."

"Who says we can't win the war without his help?" the Chief said.

Shaw shrugged within her jumpsuit. "Maybe we can, maybe we can't. But even if our government allows Azen to install this advisor, that doesn't necessarily mean our political leaders have to do what the advisor says."

"I'm not so sure I like the idea of an alien entity tampering with our political system in any way," Chief Bourbonjack said. "Not even to the extent of allowing some 'advisor,' no matter how innocent the position sounds. The UC tried something similar a few years back in Mongolia, if you recall, and we all know how well that played out. One of the worst foreign policy initiatives ever attempted."

"I don't think this is about foreign policy," Shaw said. "I believe Azen sincerely wants to help us."

“Sure, that’s what all the nations say,” Chief Bourbonjack said. “Until they stab you in the back to protect their own interests.”

“At least listen to Azen’s proposal on the matter,” Shaw insisted.

“Oh I will, don’t you worry,” the Chief said.

I thought of something. “Shaw, you mentioned an SK, *Fan*. Let’s confirm it’s the same man my squad encountered.”

“All right.” Shaw transmitted some archival video.

I saw Fan’s familiar face appear on my aReal, pointing a rifle at her.

“Yeah,” I said, dismissing the vid. “That’s him.”

“He was a good man,” Shaw said.

“Of course.” I couldn’t hide the sarcasm. “From the way he pointed that rifle at you, he looks like a very good man.”

“If you watched more of the archive, you’d see.” Her eyes became sad. “I’m just sorry he had to end up that way. Possessed and robbed of his mental faculties. It’s my fault, really. I was the one who wanted to place the improvised explosive device.”

“If you hadn’t created that explosion you’d still be stuck on Geronimo. Fan’s sacrifice was entirely worth it, just for that.”

“Was it?” Shaw didn’t sound so sure. “How can we say one person’s life is worth more than another’s? Can the value be measured by how many people love and depend upon him or her? If so, then my life was definitely worth less than Fan’s, because he had a wife and four daughters. And how can you defend my actions when the possessed creature Fan has become ruined your own mission, and nearly cost all your lives? If I hadn’t allowed him to be captured, if I hadn’t detonated that explosive device in the first place, maybe you would have successfully destroyed the Skull Ship.”

“Or maybe we’d all be dead.” I crossed my arms. Fan was certainly a touchy subject for her. She was grappling with some of the same issues affecting me, but perhaps there was a way I could alleviate her conscience.

“What would you say if I told you we could still save him?” I said. “That Fan was not completely lost to us? That if we could capture him alive, we could force the Phant to leave him? I’ve done it before. With Lana.”

Shaw glanced at me, a glimmer of hope in her eyes. “That’s something we can certainly try. Assuming we ever see him again.” Her eyes moistened and her voice caught as she continued. “But there’s someone else I wish we could bring back even more, but can’t. I didn’t tell you this earlier, but I also had a pet back on Geronimo. A hybear I’d adopted. Queequeg died saving

my life during the final battle. So that makes two who sacrificed themselves for me. *Two*." She closed her eyes as she walked. "I want to say it was worth it. I really do."

I wrapped my gloved hand around hers, well aware that the eyes of every other squad member were upon us. "Then make it worth it. You owe it to them to live the best possible life. Otherwise their sacrifices were for nothing."

Her eyes shot open. "Why do I feel like you're regurgitating the very same words I told you when Alejandro died?"

I winced when she said his name but I refused to back down. "That's probably because I am. But they're good words, Shaw. Inspiring words. To live by."

She grinned sadly. How I'd missed the cute dimple that came with her smile.

I let her go and we continued onward.

"Shaw," the Chief said. "How did you and tinman actually get here?"

Shaw looked over her shoulder at him. "Tinman." She nodded to herself. "I like that. You saw the debris falling onto the city from orbit back there?"

The Chief nodded. "I did."

"That was our drop shuttle. Or what was left of it, anyway. It was destroyed by an airborne company of shock troops launched by the Skull Ship. We managed to take down that company, but not before losing the shuttle."

"Wait a second," the Chief said. "A drop shuttle needs a mothership, doesn't it?"

"Yes," Shaw agreed. "We have one in orbit. Azen will tell you everything."

Moments later the tunnel opened into a vast cavern. Two more of the alien mechs stood guard, lighting the entrance on either side of us with their radiant hulls. Beyond them, the walls, floor, and ceiling were made of crystals that reflected all the colors of the rainbow. Ordinarily I would have felt a sense of tranquility when entering a cavern like that, but instead my stomach was all knots. What if this Azen wasn't quite what Shaw believed he was?

After we had marched a short distance, a group of glowing, golden mechs approached from up ahead. I was struck once again at how incredibly

lithe they were, despite their size. My heart began to beat, and I resisted the urge to lower the rifle from my shoulder.

One of the mechs broke away from the others and came forward alone, presumably so that we wouldn't feel too alarmed. The towering things all looked the same, so I didn't know the mech was possessed by Azen until it spoke.

"Greetings, Chief Bourbonjack," Azen said, then shifted its head to encompass the rest of us within its cyclopean gaze. "MOTHs."

None of us answered.

"There is no reason for any of you to be afraid," Azen said.

"We ain't afraid." Bender seemed insulted.

"Your bodies exhibit all the classic fear symptoms. Elevated pulse and respiration. Elevated fluid secretions from the sweat glands. Elevated—"

"Your readings are bullshit," Bender said, though I could hear a very slight tremble in his voice.

Glancing at my companions, I realized Azen was right. Bender and I weren't the only ones who were spooked. Not surprising, given that the cluster of alien mechs before us was entirely invulnerable to our ballistic weaponry, and likely capable of disintegrating each and every one of us in only a few shots.

"I want to clear something up before we begin any negotiations," the Chief said.

"Negotiations?" The amusement was obvious in Azen's voice. "I had not indicated any negotiations would take place. Our help has no cost."

"Really?" The Chief smirked. "Shaw hinted that you wanted to install a political advisor of some kind in our government."

"An advisor?" Azen said. "No. Merely an observer. Perhaps myself. I have taken an interest in humanity."

"That's all you want?" Chief Bourbonjack said, sounding skeptical.

"That is all I want," Azen agreed.

I spoke up. "It still doesn't tell us why you're helping us. An interest in humanity is one thing, but betraying your entire race for us is a completely different matter."

Azen pivoted that blank face with its long, red eye toward me. "I am part of a rebel faction. Our goal is to halt the endless expansion of my species. Our empire has been conquering for so long that we have forgotten the reason we began the expansion in the first place."

“Which was?” the Chief said.

“For geronium, first and foremost. But we are explorers, too. Not just of space, but consciousness. We exist in the dark fluid between matter, where time has little meaning. But you organics, time-bound in every sense of the words, have always proven an endless source of fascination. Encountering new races, integrating them, experiencing their form, it is a novel thing for us, to say nothing of the exchange in knowledge such integration entails.

“At first our intentions were peaceful. We searched for natural deposits of geronium to fuel our appetites and our ships; any organics we encountered along the way were given the option of freely integrating with us. Some races refused to provide any volunteers; others wanted to learn about us as badly as we wanted to learn about them and gave us thousands. But we wanted to share the organic experience with all of our kind, not just a select few, and there were never enough volunteers for everyone, even if we hopped bodies. One of the organic races we encountered, known as the Masons, offered us a solution. They would construct artificial forms for us—what you would call robots—so that all of us could interact with this universe freely and fully. The evolved mechs you see before you have a basis in that ten-thousand-year-old Mason design, with several modifications borrowed from your own ATLAS units.

“In any case, we were happy for a time in these robot bodies, but soon became bored, desiring the pleasures and thrills of the flesh, something the robot bodies could not give us. We also craved more knowledge. There was always some species out there that had better technology in a particular industry: better starships, better weaponry, and so forth. We coveted it all. Our exploration of the galaxy soon turned to greed, and greed to conquest. We abandoned our robot bodies and no longer requested volunteers when we encountered a populated system: we took the hosts forcibly, usually to the last living being, despite any promises we had made to the system governments. Our expansion proved insatiable. We always wanted to attain the next organic species. The next phase of consciousness. The next technological advancement. Eventually we had the capability to build vast, unconquerable ships, and a means to convert planets into geronium. With these ships our expansion proved unchecked and we went forth into the galaxy, conquering all, glutting our desires for geronium, consciousness, and knowledge.”

Azen remained silent for a time. “It has to stop. We have far more

geronium now than we will ever need, enough to last an eternity. We do not need to subjugate humanity or any other species. We have expanded our empire enough. We have gone too far. We are stagnating as a species because of it. We have not encountered technology more advanced than our own in over a thousand years—mostly because we're not giving any of the nearby races a chance to develop. We're stifling technological innovation by preventing spacefaring cultures from proceeding through their natural evolution.

"Worse, we are damaging the very fabric of the universe. Just as humanity nearly destroyed its homeworld, Earth, by polluting the land, sea, and air, sending countless species into extinction, we are doing the same at the galactic level. Destroying too many worlds, sending too many races into oblivion, polluting the higher dimensions of space with the byproducts of geronium manufacture, wreaking havoc with the fusion process in neighboring stars.

"Already, thousands of suns near the galactic core have swelled and gone nova prematurely, casting off their outer layers and leaving behind inert, white dwarfs. Stars that once had more than a billion years of fuel left. If we stop now, there is a chance the galaxy will heal itself. But if we do not, the endless cycle of death and rebirth all galaxies undergo will cease, and there will be no more life, not here. This galaxy, this great 'Milky Way,' will grow dark."

Lui frowned. "I'm not sure I believe that."

"It's true," Shaw said. "I've seen the evidence with my own eyes. Coreward, there are white dwarfs everywhere. Humanity isn't the only civilization at stake here: the entire galaxy is at risk."

"Yeah well, I'd like to see the physics on that. Stars exhausting their fuel a billion years ahead of time? Ridiculous."

"Forget the physics for a second, damn it," the Chief said, not looking from Azen. "What I want to know is: How do you plan on stopping them?"

"War," Azen said unequivocally, as if that one word answered everything.

"War?"

"Yes. Our own ship battles the enemy in orbit around the gas giant even now. We had hoped to catch them entirely at unawares while they harvested geronium from the moons, but our surface assault has forewarned them. Even so, surprise is on our side. Once we eliminate the two ships we will depart

human space to continue the fight in our own region of the galaxy. We will collapse the Slipstream that leads to Tau Ceti, preventing any of our vessels from ever coming into your territory again."

"Your ships don't need Gates to traverse Slipstreams?" Lui said incredulously.

"That is correct."

"If that's true, then how do we know more Skull Ships other than yours haven't already come through the Slipstream to Tau Ceti?" Lui said. "We can't detect them until they're right above the worlds they've come to attack."

"Human vessels are unable to penetrate our stealth tech when active, yes, but we can do so. There are no other ships in this quadrant of the universe. I guarantee it. We have seven ships in total, including the one belonging to my faction. And when we are done here, only five will remain. The other four reside in different, farther quadrants of the galaxy, where they reap their fell harvest. When we return to our space, we will try to resolve this war diplomatically. If we fail, then we will fight. Either way, humanity will have no further part to play."

I had to shake my head. "Unless you lose the war."

"I concede the point," Azen said. "However, since the Slipstream to this region will be collapsed, you will have the time it takes my species to travel eight thousand lightyears at standard speed to prepare yourselves."

"And how long is that?" I said.

"Roughly seven hundred years."

"Your vessels travel faster than the speed of light?" Lui sounded doubtful.

"In a way. Once our ships pass beyond the heliopause and into the lifeless void between star systems, we are able to successively 'hop' through interstellar space, creating temporary mini-Slipstreams that allow us to cover the distance to the next system in a far shorter time. The tech is similar in functionality to the Acceptor devices, though the maximum range of each hop is much more restrictive."

Acceptors. That was the name of those alien teleporters. Shaw had apparently used one during her escape to travel to a different star system, with Azen's help.

The Chief took a step forward. "Destroying Bogeys 1 and 2 is great, and my boys in Fleet would mightily appreciate it if you did that, but I have a

question. I'm guessing a lot of Phants will survive the destruction, so what happens to them? We can't have alien entities floating around in the system, possessing our machinery and disintegrating human beings at will."

"Unfortunately, that is entirely in your hands," Azen said. "You will have to hunt them down and contain them. You will also have to destroy any remaining Acceptors, of course."

"Or rather, the SKs will," Hijak added dryly.

"We may share technology to assist in tracking down these aberrant Phants," Azen said. "I will leave that up to the political observer assigned to humanity. I can promise no more than that."

"What are the SKs supposed to do once they catch them?" Hijak said. "Put them in a Phant prison?"

"In a way, yes," Azen said. "By injecting them into the core of gravity wells such as suns or gas giants, humanity can effectively trap them. The physical representations in this universe, anyway. Without access to geronium, after several decades they will eventually die."

"I don't suppose you can leave behind a few of those golden mechs of yours before you go?" Lui said hopefully.

"That won't be possible, I'm afraid. We don't want to stifle the technological innovation of your species, nor influence the natural course of your evolution."

Lui crossed his arms. "By invading us, you've already influenced the natural course of our evolution, I'd say."

"Even so, the answer is no. I'm sorry."

"I'd like to hear more about this faction of yours," Snakeoil said.

Azen took a step backward. "Please, no more questions at the moment. Rest here in the sanctuary we have provided. Recoup your strength. It will be some time before the city cools. Once it is safe we will proceed to the surface and find a suitable means to dispatch a message to your fleet."

"I'm sure, given your advanced tech, you could send a message for us right now," Manic said.

"It may be possible," Azen agreed. "However, by doing so we broadcast our position to the enemy as well. It is better that they believe us neutralized, for now. Therefore, until the surface cools we must remain under a communications embargo. I will keep you apprised of the situation in orbit."

The mech that was Azen began to turn away.

"Wait," Chief Bourbonjack said.

Azen paused.

"We came here to fight," the Chief said. "And if that means joining one group of Phants against the other, then so be it. Let us help, and I'll put in a good word for you with the Brass. If I told them you were a good sort, Azen, someone we could trust, someone we had accompanied in battle, it would go a long way toward smoothing our relations. There's something about fighting alongside an ally, alien or no, that triggers the human bonding mechanism. But of course you know all that, given everything you've learned about us. Just as you know it would make our governments much more amenable to accepting any political 'observer.'"

The glowing red eye line on Azen's head seemed to appraise the Chief. "I'll consider your offer."

With that, Azen and the other mechs withdrew into the interior, leaving us.

"Wow," Manic said. "That was mind-blowing. Dying stars. Expanding empires. Rogue alien factions. And here we are, precisely in the middle of it."

"Too bad it sounds like we're not going to play any further part." Lui didn't seem too happy. "No offense, Chief. Those were some convincing words, but I don't think the alien bought into it."

"Hey, you know what?" Manic said. "We played our part already. We risked our lives. We've done enough, if you ask me. Let the aliens fight amongst themselves. Let the best faction win."

"Way to be a MOTH," Lui said. "You do know that if the wrong faction wins, humanity is doomed, right?"

"Lui's right," I said. "If we can tip the balance of power in some small way toward Azen's faction, then we can't sit back and watch. We have to fight."

Manic gave me a mocking glance. "You sure you're not just saying that because your girlfriend is here?"

I clenched my fist. The guy certainly knew how to get under my skin.

Sensing the aggression in the air, Shaw stepped in front of me and grabbed my hand. "Come on, Rade. We need to talk. In private."

She led me away. I scowled at Manic: If he had said another word, I probably would have erupted. Wisely, he kept his mouth shut.

I pulled ahead of Shaw and, choosing a random path, led the way into the cavern. Behind me, the others discussed and debated the latest turn of events—the focus seemed to be on whether or not we could trust this Azen. I

felt the Chief's eyes on me the whole time. He could have ordered me to stay but didn't say a word.

The voices of my brothers faded as Shaw and I moved deeper into the underground chamber. We eventually stopped in an isolated area behind a series of stalagmites.

"So beautiful," Shaw said quietly, staring up at the crystalline structures illuminated by our headlamps.

"It is." I wasn't even looking at the stalagmites. I had eyes only for her. Sure, she was gaunt, pale, and had a few new wrinkles around her eyes and mouth, but she was still ravishing, at least to me. And always would be.

When she met my gaze, she seemed to realize I had been staring at her the whole time. I would have expected her to look away shyly or something, but instead she stared back defiantly.

"I'm not going to have sex with you," she said. "Not here."

I was the one who looked away. I sat down, and took off my gloves and helmet, setting them down beside me. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't disappointed. But I couldn't tell her that. We hadn't seen each other in months. We couldn't just jump right back in where we left off.

Could we?

"I don't want to have sex with you," I lied. "I'm too tired. Not to mention I'm a sweaty, grimy mess. I'm glad you took me away back there, though. We needed to get in some quality Rade and Shaw time. The two of us, we have some catching up to do."

"We do." Shaw knelt beside me and removed her own helmet. She kept her gloves on, I noticed. She stared at the stalagmites. "I'm not even sure who you are anymore. Or who I am. It's been so long."

"Too long." I slid a loose strand of hair from her brow, combing it behind her ear. I wondered if I should kiss her.

She gave me an annoyed look, like she didn't want me touching her. She shifted sideways.

I smiled sadly, dropping my hand. So much for kissing her. "You know, Shaw, I tried to move on. I really did. I told myself that every moment I spent dwelling in the past was a moment spent in agony. But I couldn't forget you."

"Weren't there other women?"

I shook my head. "No. There was no one else."

And there never will be, I wanted to add, but didn't dare.

"You know I don't believe in love, Rade," Shaw said, apparently

reading my thoughts.

"I never said I believed in it." I stared into her eyes. I could see the flecks of green around her blue irises, drawing me in.

Shaw returned my gaze and the longing there was obvious. The desire. "Then what do you believe in?" Her voice sounded husky.

I touched the back of my index finger to her cheek. "I believe in us."

Shaw shivered at my touch, closing her eyes. Then she forced my hand aside. She slid off her gloves. Meeting my hungry gaze, she said: "I tried to forget you, too." The longing was gone from her voice, replaced by sadness. "I even succeeded for a little while. And it helped. Because I couldn't let the past, and what I had lost, bring me down. Couldn't let it send me spiraling into a depression I could never recover from. And so I forgot you, forgot everything. I became no more than an animal, fighting for survival on an alien world so far away from everything I'd ever known and loved. I knew that rescue would never come. But I couldn't think about that. Couldn't think about anything. I turned off everything that made me human and relied instead on primal instincts to survive. It was the only way."

"I can't even begin to imagine what it must have been like," I said.

"Earlier you told me you were captured?" Shaw asked. "And interrogated by agents of the enemy? That's not so different. The feelings of hopelessness and desperation, of being trapped, I'm sure they were much the same." She must have seen the humiliation and guilt her words brought me, because the sadness ebbed from her features, replaced instead by concern. "Poor Rade. Maybe it was even worse than what I went through." She rested a reassuring hand over mine.

I felt a tingling there, where she touched me. An electricity passing between us. A *want*.

She removed her hand all too soon.

"No," I said. "What I went through wasn't worse. My ordeal lasted only a week. Yours lasted eight months."

She grinned wistfully and reached toward my forehead. I felt her rearranging my hair. When she finished, she leaned back to survey her handiwork and forced another smile. "There we go. All cleaned up. Just as good as taking a shower."

I shifted, and the rank smell of my own sweat drifted up to me from my jumpsuit. I had to chuckle. "If only combing my hair was the same thing as showering." I was glad for the change in topic.

She laughed softly. “We make quite the pair, don’t we, Rade? Personal grooming issues aside.”

“What, you’re saying you haven’t showered in a while either? You smell pretty good to me.”

She ignored the comment, extending her fingers to pick something from my scruffy beard.

“How come you’re allowed to comb my hair and I can’t comb yours?” I said.

She continued picking away. “I don’t have a beard.”

I had to chortle at that. “I’m going to hire you as my battlefield grooming assistant. Everyone needs someone like you on hand during an operation.”

Shaw giggled. “What, so you can keep your hairy face looking good for the enemy?”

“Hey, it’s not just the enemy I have to worry about,” I said. “What about my platoon brothers?”

Shaw’s eyes twinkled mischievously. “Ooo of course. You all have to stay sexy for one another.”

“Well obviously. Big muscular men like us? Why do you think we joined the Navy in the first place? Being surrounded by all those manly men, it’s such a turn-on.”

She laughed, giving me a good-natured punch.

It felt like old times there for a moment, but then Shaw sat back, becoming suddenly distant. She gazed into the darkness.

“What’s wrong?” I said.

She didn’t answer for a long moment. “It seems too good to be true. I almost can’t believe it’s real. I waited so long for this moment, and now that it’s here, I’m terrified. I don’t know what to do. I’ve been socially isolated for eight months. I’m afraid I’ll make a mistake and push you away.”

I reached out, draped my arm assembly across her shoulder, and pulled her close. “You’ll never push me away.”

She didn’t answer. Didn’t look at me.

I gazed into the darkness, too, and then sighed. There was something I wanted to get off my chest. “You’re afraid you’ll push me away? It works both ways, you know.”

Could I tell her the image that had suddenly come into my mind? No, it was for me alone. But she had to know. She *deserved* to.

I swallowed. “I shot and killed a woman on the deployment before last. She was a privateer.”

Shaw finally glanced at me, but now it was my turn to avoid her gaze.

“I couldn’t fire, not at first. She reminded me too much of you. So I held back, letting the moments tick past while she shot at us. It almost cost Ghost his life.” I stared down at my hands. “I killed her, and by doing so, killed the memory of you. That’s when I truly gave up—that’s when I knew you were never coming back. And now you’re here.”

I closed my eyes, shaking my head. “I didn’t mention this earlier, either, but we came across thousands of Sino-Korean prisoners aboard Bogey 2. We left them. All of them. We could have done something. Should have, in retrospect, but we abandoned them, choosing instead to continue with our objective. I rationalized it by telling myself that you, Shaw, had made a sacrifice for humanity, so these people could, too. But you were alive the whole time. The rationalization I used was false. And those people are still going to die. It hurts, knowing that.”

I opened my eyes, at last looking at her. “I’ve made so many mistakes since you were gone, Shaw. So damn many. And I exploited your loss as a justification for those mistakes. Even when I was tortured by the enemy, I used you as an excuse for my weakness. You were gone. My squad was gone. I had nothing left. I gave up. I disclosed the password to my embedded ID. After a week. I’m so ashamed. I guess what I’m trying to say is, I’ve been broken, and I don’t think I’ll ever be made whole again. So I’ll understand if you don’t want me anymore.”

“I’ll always want you,” she said, smiling wanly. “These so-called mistakes? You made the right choice every time. You had to kill the woman privateer to save your squad mates. As for the prisoners on the Skull Ship, you didn’t know the mission was going to go south at the time. You did the best you could have under the circumstances. You can’t save everyone, Rade. You know that by now. And you say you gave the enemy your embedded ID password? You were tortured, Rade. *Tortured*. No one can hold out against SK interrogation methods. No one. If anything you should have given in earlier. You lasted a whole week. I’m so proud of you. Proud of everything you’ve done. You didn’t exploit my memory. You made the right choices. You always do. Always will.”

We huddled there, staring into the murky cave, basking in each other’s company. I basked, at least. Was she right about me? Had I made the best

choices? I didn’t know. But I was certainly glad that she accepted me for who I was.

“I told you that I shoved all memories of you, of *us*, aside when I was trapped on that planet,” Shaw said suddenly. “That I let the animal within me roam free. But what I didn’t tell you was, well, I dismissed you only during the day. The night . . . it was always yours. That was your time. Thinking about you in those dark nights kept me going, Rade. And I promised myself as I lay awake beneath those alien stars that you and I would be reunited, someday, and I’d see Earth again. Well I’ve finally achieved the former, at least. Though I never really thought it would happen. Sure, I dreamed that we’d be united, but it was always a distant dream, so far away, a yearning that I knew would remain unfulfilled.” Sighing contentedly, she rested her head on the shoulder assembly of my jumpsuit.

“Remember me,” I said. “In the deepest, darkest hours—”

She joined in, lifting her head to stare deeply into my eyes, and our voices rang out in unison:

“*When you think you can’t go on. Remember me in the storm, when all hope seems lost.*”

“Despite my mistakes and failings, those words, *your* words, kept me going, Shaw,” I said. “Throughout everything. If I hadn’t met you, if I hadn’t known you, I would have never made it this far. You, Shaw. All of this is because of you.”

“And I wouldn’t be here today, either, if it weren’t for you.” She wrapped her hand around mine. “You said you were broken? That you might not ever be whole again?” She squeezed my hand. “You *are* whole, Rade. You are.”

She was trembling.

I leaned forward and kissed her.

Somehow our jumpsuits ended up in a dismantled pile on the cave floor around us, cooling undergarments and everything.

Guess I wasn’t too tired to have sex after all.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Tahoe

I stood at the edge of a sunken pool filled with orange-yellow Phants. A lone pillar, set atop a circular shelf and sheathed in Phants of the same color, rose from the center of the pool.

Fret frowned. “How do you know this is the Observer Mind without an aReal to confirm our location?”

“Because it can’t be anything else.” Facehopper draped his rifle strap over one shoulder and stepped forward, holding the EM-emitting bar out with one hand.

The liquid Phants near the edge of the pool retreated.

Facehopper brought the emitter closer and the liquid withdrew further, revealing a concave depression in the floor—the bottom was about a meter down. “We can cross this. We have to. Form up in pairs. TJ and Bomb, lead the way. We’re going to that pillar, mates.”

Holding their EM emitters out front, Bomb and TJ lowered themselves to the bottom of the one-meter depression and into the space the Phants vacated. The glowing liquid formed swaying barriers that reached to the hips of Bomb and TJ on either side.

The rest of us followed in twos. Mauler and I were the last to lower ourselves over the concave edge and we brought up the rear. I hit the floor a little hard, sending a fresh jolt of pain coursing up my tattered legs.

“You all right?” Mauler said quietly. He must have seen me wince.

“Fine.”

The squad formed a tight line and proceeded forward. The liquid Phants parted before us, thanks to the EM-emitting metal bars we held.

The barrier of glowing Phants remained roughly one meter to my left at all times; behind me, the evil liquid slithered into the space I abandoned, again obeying the one-meter rule as the entities sealed our retreat vector.

By then, the squad was hemmed in on all sides by the flowing aliens. It felt like we resided within a fragile bubble: the emitters we held were all that stood between us and incineration.

“Glad we didn’t leave them behind.” Mauler nodded at the steel bar he clenched.

I didn’t say anything; I was too intent on keeping my own emitter firmly in hand. My knuckles were white from the grip, and my palms were sweating —I prayed the metal didn’t slip.

Finally we reached the shelf at the center of the Phant pool. At our approach, the Phants flowed away from the ledge, and the pillar too, revealing a metallic structure underneath.

“What now?” Bomb said from his position beside TJ at point. “Go around?”

“No, not yet.” Facehopper was staring at the pillar. “Let’s get up on that shelf. I want to take a closer look at this thing.”

We climbed onto the ledge in pairs, being careful not to drop our emitters. The shelf was barely wide enough to hold two men at a time, so we were forced to disperse, forming a circle around the pillar. The EM emitters caused the glowing liquid to flow up the metal on all sides, uncovering more of the structure. Fibonacci spirals were etched into the exposed regions.

“Look.” Trace, on the “two o’clock” position beside the pillar, pointed to a tunnel on the far side of the room. It lay beyond the pool. “A way out.”

Facehopper followed his gaze. “Good. We’ll take it shortly. But first . . .” He returned his attention to the exposed pillar and reached out, bringing his bare hand close. The metallic surface seemed to vibrate as his fingers grew near. I heard a humming sound.

“Boss,” Fret said. “Probably not a good idea to touch it.”

Facehopper froze, his fingers just centimeters away. “Probably not.” He withdrew his palm and shook his head as if breaking from a trance. The surface stabilized and the humming faded. “Any ideas on how we can sabotage it, mates?”

“Why bother?” Bomb said. “Like you said already, the nuke is going to vaporize this place anyway.”

“But if we sabotage the Observer Mind now,” Facehopper said, “we take out Bogey 1 all the sooner.”

“What if we stashed our emitters against the pillar?” I said. “Preventing the Phants from interfacing with it? That might be all we need to do.”

Facehopper nodded slowly. “That may just do it. We’d leave behind only a few emitters. Say four. One for each compass point. That should be enough to keep the Phants away from the entire middle region.”

“And what happens to the four of us left without emitters?” Fret said.

“Nothing. We only *need* four emitters to get out of here. We’ll just have to cram closer together when we cross the Phants, is all.”

“Let’s say we leave the four emitters like Cyclone wants,” Fret said. “That still doesn’t mean we’ll actually disrupt anything. We understand nothing about this alien tech. Don’t the Phants interact with it on a higher dimension or something? Who knows, maybe planting our emitters on the pillar might end up helping them rather than hindering.”

“You’re right, we know absolutely nothing about this tech,” Facehopper conceded. “But we have to try. I’m going to authorize it. Four emitters. Center of the pillar. Ghost, Mauler, TJ, Cyclone, give up your devices. The rest of us will watch your backs. Let’s do this.”

Mauler and I gave TJ a boost while he duct-taped his EM emitter vertically to the pillar. We repeated this three more times, edging past our brothers on the shelf, and had TJ tape an emitter to each compass point. He was careful never to touch the pillar with his bare skin, though he got close enough to make it vibrate quite loudly a few times.

Once finished, we paused to observe our handiwork. Because of the four emitters, the Phants avoided the entire central region of the pillar and instead crowded the upper portion; the displaced entities sagged in places there, forming blister-like lumps.

“I’m not sure we actually did anything other than force them upward,” Fret said.

“Time will tell,” Facehopper said. “Speaking of which, anyone have an idea on how long before the nukes go off? TJ, you have the best internal clock among us.”

TJ shrugged. “Maybe an hour.”

An hour. And we hadn’t even escaped the vaporization zone yet, let alone found a suitable side tunnel to block off.

I glanced at the microexplosives taped to Bomb’s torso. At least he still had them—without those we’d never seal ourselves off from the main blast wave.

Facehopper turned toward the far side of the room, where that smaller tunnel provided a way out. “We’re going to have to walk off this shelf

sideways. Form up along the edge, mates! Ass to nuts, just like we used to do in training to keep warm. You do remember ‘sea immersion,’ don’t you?”

“Fondly,” Fret said.

EM emitters distributed in pairs, we squeezed together along the edge of the shelf, forming a convex line four people wide by two deep. All of us faced to the right.

Mauler and I stood on the right hand side, which would be the “front.” I held our assigned emitter in my right hand, and beside me Mauler gripped it in his left.

“Tighter!” Facehopper said.

I brought my elbows in and moved closer to Mauler until our shoulders touched.

Behind and slightly to the left of me on the shelf, Bomb latched one arm around my midriff and pulled me in tight, while Ghost did the same to Mauler. Bomb pressed into my tattered legs, causing fresh jolts of pain.

“Good,” Facehopper said. “Now off the shelf, mates! Two at a time. Maintain the huddle at all costs. When you touch the bottom, let those behind you climb down in turn. Mauler, Cyclone, lead the way.”

Ghost and Bomb helped lower Mauler and me into the pool of orange-yellow Phants. The liquid parted before us, leaving far less room to spare than I would have liked: rather than a full meter, I had only a ruler’s length of space in front and beside my body. Maybe it hadn’t been the best idea to leave behind half our emitters.

Mauler and I waited at the bottom of the pool as Ghost and Bomb used our respective shoulders to support their weight while they descended behind us. When they touched the bottom and wrapped their arms around our midriffs again, we took a step forward and paused until the next rank came down. Then we took one more step and waited for the drag men to drop.

When everyone was down, Mauler and I turned toward the destination tunnel and proceeded through the parting Phants.

I kept both feet relatively close together and both arms tight to my side, barely staying within the ruler’s width of space the shared emitter provided.

“Maintain the huddle!” Facehopper said. “If you feel someone drifting away behind you, then slow down. If the mate in front of you starts to pull ahead, haul him right back. Ass to nuts!”

As I moved forward, my gaze drifted downward to the parting liquid. That orange-yellow glow seemed beautiful, somehow. It was hard to believe

that something so seemingly innocent could be so deadly. Maybe these Phants were different, and not like the others?

Maybe they were the spirits I had been seeking in vain for my entire life. The spirits I had tried to explain away with science and physics for as long as I could remember. Yes, they must be. The spirits. They would guide me. Set me free. Raise me to a higher level of consciousness. Enlightenment.

I had this incredible urge to leap into that mass and become one with the spirits.

To walk with the wind.

All I had to do was let go of the steel bar . . .

Bomb rudely shoved me from behind, breaking the trance.

"Don't look at them too long!" Facehopper said. "Keep your eyes forward, on the target tunnel. Eyes forward!"

Stunned, and somewhat ashamed of what I had nearly done, I lifted my gaze and stared resolutely ahead. If I had released the emitter and dived into the Phants, I might have drawn Bomb with me. And the only enlightenment either of us would have had was disintegration.

There are no spirits, I told myself determinedly. *There is no spirit world.*

I reached the far side of the cavern; the Phants at the edge of the pool parted, revealing the concave surface that delineated the area. Bomb let go of my waist and gave me a boost, while Ghost did likewise for Mauler beside me. With their help, the two of us pulled ourselves onto the solid ground by the exit without dropping the emitter. Switching hands on the metal bar between us, we turned around to aid Bomb and Ghost.

When everyone was out of the pool, I looked back at the pillar one last time, and at the orange-yellow Phants held at bay above it by our EM technology.

"*Nizhónígo Nee Ado'áá*ł," I said, in Navajo.

"What's that mean?" Ghost said. "May your death be slow and agonizing?"

"No. Have a nice day."

"Oh."

We approached the exit tunnel. It was three meters wide by two meters tall—at least none of us would have to duck in there, not even Fret, the tallest among us.

"Uh, guys," Mauler said, pointing behind us.

The orange-yellow Phants were spilling from the pool, following as closely as the emitters allowed.

“Not an issue,” Facehopper said. “Get into the passage.”

At first I thought he meant to collapse the opening with Bomb’s microexplosives. That would doom us in the long run because this area was still within the second nuke’s vaporization zone, and without more explosives, we’d have nothing to form a protective seal against the blast wave.

Instead, once we were in the tunnel Facehopper laid two of the EM emitters horizontally across the entrance; he separated them by one meter each, effectively forming a barrier that spanned the three meters of the entrance. He backed away, and when the Phants refused to advance, he nodded.

“Problem solved,” Facehopper said. “Let’s go. TJ, take point. Mauler, drag.”

We gave Mauler and TJ the last emitters and then sprinted down the tunnel. Without a jumpsuit, TJ was the poorest runner in the squad. By placing him at point, Facehopper ensured no one got too far ahead.

Surprisingly I was able to keep up, despite the insect lacerations I suffered. I favored my left foot, as the right was still excruciatingly tender. The pain faded somewhat as I jogged, replaced by a numb throbbing.

Side tunnels branched off now and again but we kept to the main path. I didn’t need a HUD map to know we were nowhere near the surface, and wouldn’t be any time soon. We were going to have to start looking for an alcove to seal off soon, though I had to wonder if the rock was thick enough to protect us from the burst of elementary particles. I was an astrophysicist not a nuclear physicist, damn it.

“Boss!” Mauler said from his drag position behind me.

We halted.

“What is it?” Facehopper shoved his way past me.

Mauler pointed his rifle, and the lamp tied to it, down the way we had come.

Behind us, a glowing purple liquid cast its own rays as it overflowed from a side passage. The liquid moved rapidly, trickling toward us with what seemed almost fervor.

A purple Phant. With only one emitter, Mauler wouldn’t be able to hold it back, not in the three-meter wide tunnel.

“TJ!” Facehopper said. “Your emitter!”

TJ brought the other metal bar over and Facehopper handed it to Mauler. The latter spread his arms wide, holding one emitter in each hand, spanning the width of the passage.

The Phant halted one meter away, unable to come any closer.

“Okay,” Facehopper said. “Okay. Let’s go, people. And Mauler, don’t fall behind. We may need you to pass that emitter forward again.”

We continued at a quick lope. Behind me Mauler kept both arms extended outward, reminding me of a medieval swordsman gripping two swords as he ran. The tips of the emitters scraped the walls on either side and issued sparks.

Mauler panted softly behind me.

“You’re doing good,” I told him as I ran. My voice came in ragged gasps, too: it wasn’t easy carrying around all that added muscular weight without a strength-enhanced exoskeleton. Like TJ, the two of us certainly weren’t long-distance runners. In Mauler’s case, it didn’t help that he had to carry those heavy emitters. I considered offering to hold them for a while, but I knew I’d just insult him if I did that.

“Don’t need your patronage, bro,” Mauler said, as if I’d made the offer anyway.

The Phant’s purple rays added to the ambient light of the lamps taped to our rifles and cast eerie shadows on the walls. Even though Mauler was positioned between me and the alien liquid, I couldn’t shake the feeling the Phant was directly behind me; whenever I glanced back, however, the flowing entity always remained exactly a meter beyond him, keeping pace.

“Stay alert, mates!” Facehopper said over his shoulder. “The tunnel seems to be widening.”

And so it was. As we ran, the passageway’s diameter increased bit by bit. So far, the purple Phant wasn’t able to slip past. But I noticed Mauler’s emitters were no longer scraping the rock on either side. If the tunnel kept widening, it was only a matter of time before the alien entity flowed by him and began incinerating the rest of us. We couldn’t hope to outrun it, not without jumpsuits.

Facehopper called a halt. We convened near Mauler.

The glowing liquid waited patiently behind us, staying one meter away.

“All right,” Facehopper said. “Give me some options, mates.”

“Collapse the cave with Bomb’s microexplosives?” Fret said. “Now is

as good a time as any to hole ourselves up."

Bomb shook his head. "Tunnel's too broad here. If we used all the explosives, we might get a partial collapse and that's about it. Even if we could achieve a full seal, this close to the source the blast wave has a good chance of drilling straight through. Plus, we need a dead-end tunnel. Otherwise, we seal one side and the blast wave snakes around and gets us from the other direction."

"Why not leave the two emitters here?" Trace said. "Space them half a meter apart. Block the Phant like we did to the others before it."

Ghost folded his arms. "We can't give up our last two emitters. You know how far we are from the surface? We're going to be encountering more Phants. It's inevitable. Not to mention crabs. And slugs."

"We've already blown our cover with the crabs and slugs," Fret said. "So the emitters won't be of any help there."

"But the emitters *will* be of help against the Phants," Ghost insisted.

Fret was gazing in the forward direction, away from the Phant. He shielded his eyes and squinted. "Is that side passage glowing up ahead?"

TJ, the closest to the indicated tunnel, moved forward. He paused beside the side passage.

His eyes abruptly widened.

"Guys," TJ said. "Run!"

The squad erupted in a sprint. As I raced past the offshoot tunnel, I saw a purple, glowing mass inside, one that consumed the view as far as I could see. It surged forward, literally carpeting the cave floor: hundreds and hundreds of Phants.

I ran a few more meters and glanced over my shoulder again. Beyond Mauler, who yet brought up our rear, the new Phants joined with the first, becoming a single liquid entity. It was like watching a purple river in full spate, swelling far past its boundaries.

Mauler steadfastly guarded our backs, holding the emitters on both sides of his body, keeping that river at bay.

The tunnel continued widening, unfortunately.

It wouldn't be long before that deadly river slipped past him.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Rade

The squad had gathered near the center of the cavern. It was an unusual spot for an assembly: The jagged teeth of stalagmites and stalactites surrounded us, making it feel like we stood in the maw of some alien life-form. The towering golden mech inhabited by Azen standing at our fore could have been the tongue of that maw, while the two mechs behind him might have been the tonsils.

I stood near Shaw but I was very careful not to look at her. I was trying to pretend, for the sake of my squad brothers, that nothing had happened between the two of us when we'd gone off together. I was doing a terrible job of it.

"I had hoped to give you good news," Azen said, commencing without preamble. "I had hoped to tell you our ship has completely obliterated the two vessels sent against humanity. But the truth is, we have fared poorly, despite the element of surprise. The ships, Bogey 1 and Bogey 2 as you call them, have abandoned each moon to fully engage our vessel in orbit. We are outgunned and losing."

"What about our fleet?" Lui said. "Is it still intact? I'm sure they'd help if you asked."

"Earth vessels are present, yes. Including the one you call the *Gerald R. Ford.* For the most part they are staying out of the way. Which is for the best, because there is no real aid the human ships can render us." Azen glanced at Chief Bourbonjack, who had been involved in a private debriefing of some kind with the alien earlier. "Your Chief has shared with me certain specific details regarding your mission, and the mission of your companion squad, Digger. If Digger manages to destroy the Tau Ceti II-c Observer Mind, disabling Bogey 1, that is one less threat for us to deal with. Unfortunately, given the damage our vessel has taken, the chances of success against the

remaining ship, though vastly increased, will still be minimal. And if Digger squad fails we have no chance whatsoever."

"They won't fail," I said.

Azen's mech swiveled its expressionless head toward my voice, focusing that cyclopean vision sensor on me. "Just as your own mission did not fail?"

I had nothing to say to that.

"Those of us marooned on this moon will not sit idly," Azen continued. "We have decided upon a contingency plan. A way to swing the odds in our favor. My faction has recently developed an experimental high-energy particle bomb, a weapon whose yield has the potential to take down an entire ship. One of these can vaporize a planetoid one-fourth the size of your Earth.

"Unfortunately, if we launch this weapon toward Bogey 2 using conventional means, the enemy coronal defenses will prematurely detonate it. And we cannot simply use an Acceptor on our own ship to access a teleporter on the target vessel, as we do not have the linkage codes—our embedded operatives have failed to secure them. This is why we had to use a drop shuttle to arrive on this planet, incidentally.

"However, the Acceptors installed on this moon are still linked to the source vessel, and with them we can teleport the weapon directly to Bogey 2. It is with this purpose in mind that we have brought along one of our experimental bombs."

"Didn't Shaw try something similar on Geronimo?" I said. "She placed a bomb on a teleporter but couldn't get it to go anywhere."

"Of course not," Azen said. "Triggering the Acceptor requires a modulation of the micro-Slipstream, something that Shaw could have never achieved on her own."

"Wait a second," Manic said. "Just wait. What exactly do you want *us* to do? You do want us to do something, right? Because you wouldn't be going into so much detail unless we had a part to play."

"You are correct," Azen said. "In an effort to improve our relationship, I have decided to allow your squad to join us on this mission."

I exchanged an eager glance with my brothers. So we'd be participating in a direct action operation after all.

Azen raised a lithe metallic hand. "I am transmitting the mission waypoints for integration into your HUD maps."

The Chief nodded toward Snakeoil. "Send it to Snakeoil. He's our

middleman.”

“Middleman?” Azen said, sounding puzzled. “You will have to trust us at some point.”

“We’ve been burned by so-called allies in the past,” the Chief said. “So you won’t mind if we use an intermediary for now.”

“As you wish.”

Snakeoil nodded a moment later. “The data seems clean. Relaying.”

Waypoints appeared on my HUD map.

Azen continued. “Within an ATLAS factory at the center of town there is a sinkhole.” On the map, I zoomed in on the specified factory, labeled Waypoint One. “At the bottom of this sinkhole lies the target Acceptor.” Waypoint Two, in the warrens. Seventy meters underground. “Once the surface temperature normalizes, we will take Waypoint One by storm and descend to Waypoint Two. We will place the particle warhead on the Acceptor, at which point I will arm the weapon, initiate the teleport, and eliminate Bogey 2.”

“Sounds easy enough,” Manic declared. “It’s our original mission on steroids.”

“These missions always sound easy at first,” Lui said. “I’m just waiting for Tinman here to tell us the kicker.”

Azen swiveled the expressionless head of his mech toward Lui. “It will *not* be easy. While Bogey 2 cannot strike at us with its coronal weapon—the ship is too far away now—we *will* face opposition. Once the enemy realizes the previous attack failed to wipe us out, Bogey 2 will dispatch shock troops, likely utilizing our target Acceptor at Waypoint Two for their transport. We must eliminate those troops before we can place the bomb.”

“What kind of troops are we talking here?” Bender said.

“Highly trained units, bred for fearlessness,” Azen answered. “You have seen them, I believe. They wear the standard jumpsuit exoskeletons supplied to the organics the empire has absorbed.”

“Jumpsuits topped by glass domes?” Lui said.

“The very same. We may also encounter enemy mechs. In both cases, their particle weapons will be capable of disintegrating our own units, as well as triggering the bomb.”

“Triggering the bomb?” Manic said in disbelief. “That doesn’t sound good.”

“Yes. If a particle weapon is fired into the core of the warhead, it will

detonate, taking out the entire city, along with a massive chunk of the moon. While it is unlikely the enemy will purposely target the bomb due to the significant investment they've made in the area, accidents can happen. We must be mindful of the warhead at all times."

Lui shook his head. "Like I was saying, dudes, always a kicker."

"By the way," Azen added, "your own weapons will be useless against the shock troops."

Lui threw up his hands in exasperation.

"Why the hell would you bring us along if our weapons are useless?" Bender said.

"Because," Azen answered, "you will pilot our mechs alongside us."

That came as a shock. I glanced at my brothers. The stunned looks were quickly replaced by guarded expressions, but I could see the gleams of excitement in their eyes. Like me, I'm sure they were all thinking the same thing.

Bring superpowerful alien mechs into battle? Hell yeah.

"How easy are these mechs to pilot?" Lui asked, trying to act casual, and failing. "What's the learning curve?"

"These particular mechs are based on your own ATLAS models," Azen answered. "It is part of the tech that was to be given to humanity once we absorbed more of your colonists—you would have piloted these mechs into battle against your homeworld. You will not need to be provisioned to operate them. Like your own ATLAS 5s, simply step into the cockpit, let the internal actuators envelop you, and the onboard AI will transfer command over to you."

Shaw grinned. "They're actually easier to pilot than ATLAS mechs. It'll be a breeze for you boys." She gave me a wink.

"Yes," Azen agreed. "Be that as it may, one thing I will tell all of you now, which you may or may not approve of, is that a member of my own race will be present in each mech, acting as overseer. As such, you will be required to physically remove the EM emitters from your jumpsuits before stepping into the cockpits."

"An alien overseer present in each mech?" Hijak said. "Somehow that last bit ruins the whole thing."

"It is a necessary precaution," Azen said. "We cannot have you running off with our technology when this is done."

"How do we know you won't incinerate us the moment we tear off our

EM emitters?" Hijak insisted.

"Why would we bother, when we could have disintegrated you on sight with our particle weapons?"

Hijak opened his mouth to answer but shut it immediately.

"Shaw Chopra can vouch for us," Azen continued. "She has ridden in this mech with me, and as you can see, she is entirely unharmed."

Hijak gave Shaw a sideways glance. "I still don't like it. Sharing a mech with a Phant? Gonna be creepy."

Shaw shrugged. "You get used to it."

I had my own reservations. "These onboard Phants aren't going to wrench control away from us during critical junctures, are they?"

Azen's head swiveled toward me. "The mechs are entirely yours to pilot and will remain so unless you become incapacitated, or otherwise do something that puts the mission at risk. The Phants are meant more as observers."

"And you complain that *we* have trust issues," Lui muttered.

"Better watch out, people," Manic said. "This sets a bad precedent. He says the onboard Phants are meant to be observers. Makes you wonder if the political observer he installs in our government will behave the same way—ready to take control in case our government fails or does something the Phants don't agree with."

"The political observer will have no such powers," Azen said. "I assure you."

"We're all recording this," Manic said. "Our leaders are going to see it. We'll let them draw their own conclusions."

"What's the chain of command supposed to look like?" Snakeoil said, steering the conversation back to the mission.

"I will be in command of the entire unit, the CO as it were. I plan to divide the group into three squads, which will be led by other members of my team. You will report to these members."

"What about Chief Bourbonjack?" Snakeoil said, ever the loyal one.

"I'm just another grunt on this one, boys," the Chief said. "And that suits me just fine."

"Step back for a second," I said. "To the Acceptors. The Chief told us earlier that nothing can teleport if the target Acceptor is blocked by something, like an object or a trooper."

"Your Chief is correct," Azen agreed. "The teleported shock troops

must move off the Acceptor before the next batch can teleport down."

"I'm more worried about the target Acceptor aboard Bogey 2," I said. "How are you going to guarantee the enemy won't block it, preventing us from sending the bomb? Maybe they might even do it unintentionally, as the next batch of 'shock troops' wait to teleport down."

"I have operatives in place aboard Bogey 2. At my signal, they will stage a surprise attack to clear the target Acceptor. They do this, knowing that their representations in this universe will cease to exist once the bomb detonates, and they will eventually starve to death."

Well, at least this Azen had planned ahead.

I realized something. "Your agents will attack at your signal . . . but it takes twenty Stanminutes to communicate between Phants. You'll have to notify your agents twenty minutes beforehand."

"Messages between Phants require twenty Stanminutes, yes. But I will be utilizing AI-to-AI communications, directly signaling the mechs my operatives inhabit on the ship. Thus my agents will receive the signal near instantaneously. This is something we can't always do with human technology, due to the EM interference caused by our mere presence."

"Why choose that specific Acceptor?" Manic said. "Why not use the one we arrived on? Seems to me it's closer. Not buried inside a sinkhole in some ATLAS factory, anyway."

"There are two types of Acceptors," Azen explained. "One is bidirectional. The other unidirectional. The Acceptor you used to arrive here is unidirectional. There's no way for us to send anything back. Also, if it was exposed on the surface, it likely suffered damage during the coronal attack."

"What's the range of these Acceptors?" Hijak said.

"Most Acceptors are limited in scope to the local system, but because of the Slipstream nature of the devices, the range can be extended galaxywide to any equivalent destination Acceptor—with the correct link codes. It is somewhat similar to the Gate technology you humans employ, except the Acceptors create micro-Slipstreams on the fly rather than building atop preexisting Slipstreams. These micro-Slipstreams are too small to transport any of our ships, of course, hence our use of 'hop' technology and our reliance upon established Slipstreams. Incidentally, I used a galaxywide Acceptor to bring Shaw Chopra away from her captors to my homeworld."

"That reminds me of something I've been itching to know," I said, glancing at Shaw. She purposely didn't meet my gaze. "Why did you save

her in particular?"

"I needed someone who could pass for a possessed human host," Azen answered. "Certain clandestine activities of mine required it. Also, I wanted somebody who could prove to the rest of humanity that our intentions were honorable. As she was the closest available unintegrated human, I chose her."

"So the right place at the right time, then," I said. "Guess I was hoping for a better reason."

Shaw finally met my eyes. "I wouldn't be here if it wasn't for Azen."

I nodded slowly. That wasn't something I would soon forget. I owed this Azen, whether I liked it or not, despite that he had picked her out of convenience.

Azen directed that red vision sensor across our ranks. "Any more questions?"

I cleared my throat. "Well, this is maybe only peripherally related to the mission, but since you're answering our questions so willingly: What's the difference between the Phant types? The red ones, the purple ones, the blue ones . . . Shaw tells me you're green, for example. Is that related to your particular faction?"

I caught Chief Bourbonjack looking at me and I realized he probably knew, either from the classified information extracted from Lana or from his private conversation with Azen.

Well the rest of us were about to learn, too, then.

Assuming Azen answered me.

The alien took its time. Finally: "Imagine a beehive. Blues and grays are the equivalent of worker bees, reliant on the Observer Mind for direction. Reds are specialized units, called the Learned. Consider them the scholars of my race—the scientists and engineers responsible for, among other things, probing captured tech and turning it into something my species can use. It was the Learned who built the original prototypes of these mechs, for example, integrating the Mason and human designs. The Learned are also given integration priority when new species are found, as they are the ones best equipped to use the information gleaned from fresh hosts.

"Purples comprise the fighting class, and it is they who devise the strategies, politically or martially, for conquering other species. Greens are amorphous, not bound to any particular hive or hierarchy, or any specific societal role. We greens often move from hive to hive, assuming the duties most of interest to us. There are other colors and classes, such as the orange-

yellow of those born into the Observer Mind hierarchy, but these comprise the majority."

Azen paused, as if considering whether or not to relate something else. "There was a movement to purge all greens some millennia ago, since we deviated so greatly from hive norms. In a campaign known as the Great Cleanse, greens were culled from the hives and tossed into prisons at the heart of gas giants and stars, where, deprived of geronium, they eventually died.

"Those of us who escaped the slaughter created a homeworld specifically for greens, where we lived in secret for many millennia. Ours was not a complete hive, and we created no offspring. Meanwhile, those greens born into other hives were systematically put to death. The practice ended when a botched invasion against a particularly warlike species managed to wipe out half our numbers. All classes were needed to rebuild, including the greens, who were suddenly prized for their role-shifting abilities.

"Ever since then we have maintained an uneasy alliance with the rest of our species. Greens born among other hives are allowed to depart after a set period, whereupon they make the journey to our homeworld. However, the rift between us never truly healed, and our mistrust of the other classes has impelled us to relocate our homeworld every few decades. It should come as no surprise that those of us involved with the splinter faction are composed entirely of greens."

Azen paused. "Does that answer your question, Rade Galaal?"

I raised an eyebrow. "It more than answers it."

"Good." Azen lifted its head to regard the rest of us. "The surface will cool to the appropriate temperature for our operation one hour from now, at 1400 human Stantime. We will have a prelaunch training session fifteen minutes before then to acclimate your squad to the new mechs."

"Fifteen minutes? Doesn't seem like a whole lot of time to acquaint ourselves with alien tech," Manic said.

"Trust me, it is more than enough time for ATLAS-trained operatives such as yourselves. Until then, rest, and mentally prepare yourselves for the battle that comes."



Shaw and I headed to our favorite spot behind the screen of stalagmites on the far side of the cavern, and there did our part to get ready for the upcoming operation. Forty-five minutes wasn't much time, but we made good use of it.

I'll say.

A few minutes after arriving I lay naked on the cave floor, holding Shaw in my arms, wrapped in the afterglow of sex.

"I still can't get over the fact you're alive," I said. "Wake me up from this dream."

"It's as real as it gets," Shaw said. "I know, because I've never felt what I just did."

"So I'm getting better?" I quipped.

She giggled softly. "A little." She rested her head on my chest.

We remained still, lying in each other's arms, basking in the warmth of our bodies.

There was a topic I wanted to broach with her. A sensitive one. And I wasn't sure how to raise it.

In the end, I decided to just put it out there.

"In the upcoming operation . . ." I said, feeling my resolve waver as I stared into her all-encompassing eyes.

She lifted her head, sensing the hesitation in my voice. "Yes?"

I swallowed. "In the coming op, I want you to, I mean, you should . . . well, stay here."

She blinked in surprise and then pushed away from me. "*What?*" Her features contorted in a mix of rage and shock.

Ah shit. "We're going to need someone to watch the civilians," I added hastily. "Tung's just a boy, after all." I tried to remember the other excuses I'd come up with, but I was drawing a blank under that shriveling stare.

"We'll leave one of Azen's mechs behind to guard the civvies," Shaw said, lifting her chin defiantly. "Manned by a green. That's good enough."

I wanted to tell her the real reason I needed her to stay behind, but I couldn't bring myself to. It was just too hard. So I continued down the path of the lie. "Look, Shaw, just leave the mission to the experts. This is work for battle-hardened MOTHs. Not some inexperienced astrogator."

"Some inexperienced astrogator?" she said, the hurt and disbelief obvious in her voice. "After everything I've been through, you think I'm just some doe-eyed astrogator?"

The disappointment in her eyes hurt me more than any blow ever could.

I swallowed. “Shaw—”

She got up and started dressing, keeping her back to me. “You’ve changed.” She glanced over her shoulder and sighed sadly. “The Rade I knew would have never told me to stay behind. He would have wanted me by his side to the very end, doing my part to save humanity. I’m the one who brought Azen here; you know that, don’t you? I convinced Azen to intervene early. He was hesitant, wanted to wait, but I persuaded him we had to stop the enemy here. In Tau Ceti. That we couldn’t afford to delay. I’m also the one who helped capture the original technology that Azen’s faction used as a basis for the golden mechs you see today.

“So no, Rade, I’m not staying behind. I’m instrumental to all of this, more a part of the operation than you, and I’m coming. I didn’t fight for all those months, survive through all those horrors, to be left behind now. You’re not my commanding officer. And neither is Chief Bourbonjack. This isn’t your team. This is Azen’s. And he’s told me I can come. And I will.”

She finished pulling on her cooling undergarment and moved on to the leg assemblies of her jumpsuit. She purposely didn’t face me.

This tack obviously wasn’t working. I decided I’d have to tell her the truth of the matter, no matter how hard it was for me. “Shaw—”

“Don’t talk to me until after the battle is over.”

“Let me explain,” I pleaded.

“I said don’t talk to me.”

“But there’s another reason I don’t want you to come. I—”

Again she cut me off. “I don’t care.”

I had to tell her while I had her alone.

But damn it, again I found myself hesitating.

Why was this so difficult?

I’d waded into rooms full of enemy combat robots. Piloted an ATLAS mech across battlefields swarming with alien entities. And I couldn’t do *this*? Couldn’t explain to the one woman I cared about more than anything why she mattered to me?

I took a deep breath.

I could do this.

“Shaw . . .” I began.

She spun around and opened her mouth to interrupt me, but I raised a hand to forestall her. She must have seen the pain etched into my features. The raw sincerity.

“Shaw. Here’s the truth. I already lost you once. And I can’t bear to lose you again. That’s why I don’t want you to go. That’s why I don’t want you to fight.”

“So that’s it?” She shook her head in wonder. “Silly man. You’re not going to lose me. Neither of us is going to die. We’ll watch each other’s backs. Together, you and I can’t lose. Especially not after everything we’ve been through. The universe won’t let us. Part of the checks and balances of the system. We’ve already gone through the bad shit. It’s about time the universe gave us a break, especially since we’re trying to save it.”

I wanted to tell her that I’d said almost those very same words to another woman. Lana. And that I’d watched her die in my arms shortly after.

Instead I extended my hands. “Come here.”

She practically leaped into my grasp.

I held her tight. So tight. Knowing full well that this might be the last time I ever held her again.

In my arms, she leaned back to look into my eyes. She wore a smile of forgiveness, and seemed to glow in that moment, more so than at any other point in her life, at least as long as I’d known her.

“If you’re going to fight with us, you’re going to need a callsign,” I said softly.

“My callsign is Shaw,” she murmured. “That’s the only one I’ll ever need.”

Moving with undisguised fervor, I pushed off her leg assemblies.

We made love again but I found myself distracted, because in that moment I remembered what RDC Bowden had tried to hammer into our heads back in Basic. The recruit division commander had suspected Shaw and I were involved in a secret liaison, and he’d told us a story about the Sacred Band of Thebes, implying that relationships between members of the service didn’t work, especially when those members had to fight side by side in battle.

If Shaw got hurt, I knew I’d fall shortly after her.

But worse, if it came down to it, I wasn’t sure whether I’d choose to sacrifice my brothers, and maybe even humanity itself, to save her.

What a terrible thought.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Tahoe

As we sprinted twenty-five klicks beneath the surface of the moon, wearing nothing but our cool vents undergarments, fleeing the pursuing wave of Phants, I wondered what would kill us first. The Phants? Or the nuclear detonation? There couldn't be more than fifteen minutes, maybe half an hour tops, remaining on the countdown.

Other Phants—the slower, blue variety—flowed into the main tunnel from side passageways along the way and joined with that pursuing river. Usually the new Phants appeared after we'd already passed, but sometimes they arrived at precisely the moment we ran by an offshoot corridor, forcing us to dodge or leap. It didn't help that the tunnel was slowly widening, which meant the trailing Phants would soon be able to edge past our drag man, Mauler, who carried an emitter in either hand to stave them off.

Up ahead a smaller crab exploded from a side passage, but my brothers quickly mowed it down. I vaulted over its corpse, which took up half the tunnel.

Another crab stuck out one of its heads from the same passage and I unleashed a burst of gunfire into its umbilical as I went by, killing the alien.

Mauler and I hurried after the others. Behind us the Phants flowed right over the bodies of the crabs.

More crabs intruded into the corridor from side passages along the way, forcing us to repeatedly spray our rifles at them.

This was getting ridiculous. Crabs. Purple Phants. Blue Phants. And all we had left were our rifles, some grenades, and our cooling undergarments.

The cave was rumbling and I realized a slug was coming from somewhere. Probably burrowing, from the sound of it.

When that slug came, our journey was likely at an end.

But I wouldn't stop fighting. Not until my very last breath.

“Stop!” TJ shouted from the forefront.

In the split second after TJ spoke, I realized the floor of the tunnel had fallen away up ahead, leaving a pitch-black abyss. TJ was balanced right on the edge.

Unfortunately, the rest of us couldn’t check our momentum fast enough and we piled into TJ, sending him hurtling over.

Except TJ didn’t fall.

He merely hovered there, floating over the dark pit as if he’d been caught by some invisible web or alien confinement beam.

The rest of us huddled near the ledge, defending our rear quarter, unsure of how to proceed.

The river of purple Phants bubbled and seethed just behind, staved off only by Mauler and the emitters he held. Farther back, crabs splashed through the glowing liquid, apparently immune to the incinerating effects of the interdimensional aliens, forcing us to fire past Mauler at them.

The cave continued to rumble.

“Jump, people!” Facehopper said.

And so we did. Taking the leap of faith, putting our lives on the line in the hope that we, too, would be caught by whatever held TJ.

Mauler and I leaped at the same time. I arced through the air for a second and then my motion abruptly ceased. It felt like something had grabbed onto me, rather rudely, maybe some giant spider’s web—my limbs were snagged and I could move only my head.

I glanced around nervously, not wanting to meet the spider. My brothers were snagged in various positions around me, but other than them I saw only the nearby rock face; the floor, ceiling, and other walls were hidden in the dark. This abyss was all too similar to the one we’d fallen down to reach the lower levels in the first place. If the hidden force that held us let up, we’d probably plunge several klicks to our deaths.

Purple Phants gushed into the abyss behind me. The liquid pooled, as if striking some unseen flat surface, and formed an ever-expanding mass that flowed toward us.

The force around me weakened slightly, and I was able to move my limbs, though none of my motions allowed me to move from the spot where I was suspended.

Crabs began jumping from the quaking tunnel.

I twisted my torso to fire at them, making use of my newfound freedom

of motion to aim for the cords. My brothers did the same around me and we severed those umbilicals so that by the time the invisible web caught the crabs, they were already dead. Lifeless alien bodies halted in place all around us, locked in various stages of contortion.

One corpse struck me a glancing blow before coming to a stop; the invisible force that held me yielded momentarily, and I slid backward a few paces before my motion was stemmed once more.

Starting with TJ, the squad began to slowly drift upward, one by one.

"What the hell?" Fret said when he was yanked up.

My turn came. The movement felt abrupt, like some giant hand plucking me. I rose in a straight line and there seemed no way to counter the motion, no matter how much I swiveled my body nor moved my limbs. I was at the mercy of the unseen force.

The liquid Phants receded below us.

We weren't trapped within an alien confinement beam or web after all. This was something entirely different. It seemed to me that it was some type of transportation corridor.

"It's a grav elevator of some kind," TJ said. "Too bad we have no idea how to control it."

"Maybe it has a 'default floor' setting," I said.

"Ain't ever seen an elevator with a 'default floor' setting," Bomb said.

"Yeah well, I have. And we *are* moving, even though we haven't pressed any buttons. Which is exactly how default floor settings work."

"Don't see any buttons, mate," Facehopper said. "But if we are headed to some default floor, that begs the question, what exactly waits for us there?"

"Forget about our destination for a second, guys," Bomb said. "And look down. Easy pickings!"

Bomb fired into the crabs that were continually leaping into the shaft below.

I unleashed my rifle, too, but paused as the rumbling crescendoed.

A huge, white-hot slug broke through the cave wall near the tunnel opening below and landed in the shaft. It froze, suspended in place.

The Phants had begun to ascend by then, but they moved far slower than us. I wasn't quite sure why. It shouldn't have mattered that they weighed less—when you dropped a feather and a rock at the same time on the moon, both fell at the same rate. Perhaps the grav elevator amplified the repulsive effects of the emitters Mauler held. Or maybe my elusive spirits were finally

helping.

Yeah, that'd be the day.

Though to be honest, it truly did feel like divine aid. After all, we had just stumbled upon a grav elevator. What were the odds? Either we were the luckiest bastards alive or some unknown force was helping us.

Maybe the spirits of Alejandro and Big Dog were somewhere out there, guiding us. I knew that if I died, I would do the same for my still-living brothers.

Below, the distant slug had begun squirming its body back and forth as it too very slowly began to rise, along with its linked crabs.

My brothers had stopped firing by then, since we were too far from the enemy. I hadn't noticed before but we were accelerating. Lit by the lamps attached to our rifles, the rock face to our left scrolled by faster and faster.

"Hang on, mates!" Facehopper shouted.

Soon the walls became a blur. It felt like we were falling *upward*.

I noticed during the ascent that we drifted subtly toward the blurry wall, the lot of us aligning so that our bodies formed a vertical stack. If we didn't slow down, the eight of us would be compressed like an accordion when we reached the ceiling.

We began to decelerate. I could feel the G forces shifting . . . my stomach felt like it was going to leap out of my chest. The rock surface beside me became more distinct with each passing second, changing from blurry gray to crawling, detailed outcrops.

The ceiling materialized out of the darkness above, and our vertical stack came to a halt.

Mauler floated just above me. He still carried the emitters, I noted. Good man.

I was able to move my limbs but it didn't help. I extended my arms, reaching for the rock face, but it proved just out of range. And no pumping of my arms or swaying of my feet would change that.

TJ was at the top of the stack. He shouted down: "There's a tunnel here! I think I can enter."

TJ extended his leg and stepped onto a ledge up there, passing from view.

"I'm in," came TJ's muffled voice. "And . . . I think I see the sky in the distance!"

Had the grav elevator already taken us the twenty-five klicks to the

surface? It was almost too much to hope for.

But even if that was true, we weren't out of the woods yet.

I glanced down and saw only the unending darkness below. Still, I knew the Phants were coming. And the slug with its crabs.

I felt myself drawn upward as the vertical queue of bodies moved up a man-length.

Trace stepped onto the ledge next and the line advanced yet again. This repeated as each of my brothers stepped off in turn.

I kept looking down, wishing the queue would move faster.

I heard Facehopper's muffled voice from above. "Bomb, plant the microexplosives. Ghost, help him. TJ and Trace, scout ahead. I want to know if that's really the surface."

Finally my turn came and I ascended to the opening. I spotted Bomb two meters inside the passage. He stood in the clasped hands of Ghost and was planting the last of the microexplosives in the ceiling.

I took a step onto the ledge in front of the opening, bringing my other leg in from empty space. It felt good to stand on solid ground again.

A glow from behind drew my attention back to the shaft and I peered over the edge.

The Phants had arrived. They had amassed into a glowing sphere of blue and purple about the size of an ATLAS mech, and slowly floated up as the grav elevator decelerated them.

"They're here!" I yelled.

I edged past Ghost and Bomb, toward a glimmer of light in the distance. The rest of the squad was already making for that spot.

"Done!" Bomb said.

Ghost lowered Bomb to the cave floor and the three of us ran.

Behind us, the Phant sphere became level with the tunnel. Liquid erupted from its side like a solar flare and Phants gushed into the tunnel at high speed.

The microexplosives detonated.

The shockwave hurled Ghost, Bomb, and me to the cave floor.

For a moment I didn't know where I was. A high-pitched frequency assailed my hearing.

I looked up. Dust filled the air. It smelled musty.

I shook my head, disoriented.

As my hearing returned, I remembered. The cave. The microexplosives.

“That was a bit nasty,” I said, crawling to my feet.

Bomb smirked. “Just the way I like it, baby.”

We helped Ghost to his feet and then turned around to survey the damage.

Through the clearing dust, I saw that the roof had collapsed, sealing the passage. Whether it would be enough to hold back the nuclear blast wave—or the Phants—was debatable.

“Let’s go, mates!” Facehopper shouted from ahead. “Give it your all!” Likely he shared the same doubts about the seal as me.

I hurried onward, leaving the dust behind. The glimmer grew in front of me until I could clearly make out the twilit sky and a portion of the gas giant that roofed it. I never thought I would be so glad to see those swirling blue and white clouds.

Trace stood outlined beside the opening, waving us forward.

“Come on!” Trace shouted. “It’s clear!”

And then it happened. One moment I was jogging within the darkness of the cave, and the next I emerged into the perpetual twilight of the open air.

I’d made it.

Actually made it.

I stood outside an unremarkable hole, one of many similar pits pocking the resin around me. Caking the bottom half of one of the former buildings of Shangde City, that resin sloped down to the street. The neighboring towers and complexes were similarly encrusted, but the buildings themselves appeared as hollowed-out skeletons of concrete and rebar—a consequence of the nuclear weapons Brass had dropped a week ago. Everything was covered in a thin layer of white ash. Local nuclear fallout.

The air smelled strongly of chlorine and I nearly gagged.

“Go!” Facehopper said.

TJ led the way and I barreled over the ash-covered resin after my brothers, half limping, half sliding down the slope toward the street. We wanted to put as much distance between the gaping holes and ourselves as possible.

We reached the asphalt.

“To the shack!” Facehopper shouted.

Shack? There. Nestled between two buildings, I spotted a small shed we could use for shelter. It was free of the black resin.

Before we reached it, the ground quaked terribly and I almost lost my

balance. From the holes in the substance that caked the buildings around us, pressure waves steamed forth like a thousand geysers blowing their tops at the same time. Plumes of black smoke gushed into the air.

One of the geysers tore right through the shed in front of us, ripping it apart.

“Drop!” Facehopper said.

We did. Right into the radioactive ash that sheathed the street.

I broke into a sweat as the air temperature rose dramatically around me, and I ducked my head as more ash rained down.

The eruptions of steam and heat continued from those holes for a full thirty seconds before ceasing as abruptly as they had begun.

When the ground stopped shaking, I hesitantly raised my head. The city looked much the same as it had before, except for the black radioactive cloud that now loomed over everything. The ash in the vicinity of the pits had dispersed.

We had detonated two subterranean nuclear bombs, taking out the Queen and the Observer Mind at the same time. We had succeeded in our mission.

And somehow we had survived.

Thank you, Wind Walkers.

As I lay there, panting, a few cheers went up.

“Brothers to the end!” Ghost said.

I wasn’t sure I was ready to cheer yet: We were all getting a triple-lethal dose of radiation right then. Though I didn’t feel any different yet, I knew invisible, deadly rays assailed my body. I had to wonder if the burning in my throat was from the exertion of the past few moments or the irradiated air.

If we didn’t get treatment within the next forty-eight hours or so, my squad mates and I would begin dying. The sudden radiation spike had almost certainly overwhelmed our existing subdermal anti-rads. We’d need many more such skin patches installed, and likely bone marrow and microvilli transplants. Doctor Banye was going to have a field day with us.

Jabbing the butt of my rifle into the asphalt for leverage, I stood up, feeling a surge of nausea and dizziness. The wave passed, though my head was pounding. The pain from my leg wounds also flared up and it was like I was experiencing the insect bites all over again.

I brushed radioactive ash away from my arms: the exposed skin was red and itchy underneath. Not good.

Trace vomited beside me.

“How’s everyone feeling?” Facehopper said as he stumbled drunkenly to his feet.

“Excellent, sir,” Bomb said. His teeth were covered in blood that oozed from his gums.

“Right.” Facehopper steadied himself. “I’m going to hear the same answer from each and every one of you, no matter how terrible you really feel, aren’t I? Well, bloody good, mates. I expected no less. We’ve survived this long. We’re not about to give up now.”

I heard a sound like hail behind me. I turned.

Glowing droplets rained down onto the remnants of the shed. A blue Phant. The explosion must have blasted it into the atmosphere.

“Uh, guys?” I said.

“I see it.” Facehopper gazed skyward, toward the ominous black cloud that mantled the city. “We need to start moving.”

I wondered how many more Phants were up there, waiting to recondense and rain down on us.

“Bogey 1 . . .” TJ said.

I followed TJ’s gaze. The Skull Ship was no longer attached to the moon; it appeared as a fist-sized object on the horizon, visible just beneath the eaves of the black cloud above.

“Fleet must have caused a helluva distraction in orbit,” Mauler said. He still held the two EM emitters.

“That’s not my point,” TJ said. “Look closely. It’s getting bigger. Coming towards us.”

TJ was right. As I watched, the Skull Ship indeed seemed to enlarge. I thought it was an optical illusion at first, caused by a thermal layer in the atmosphere, so I closed my eyes a few seconds and reopened them.

Bogey 1 had grown visibly, by at least two millimeters on all sides.

“Maybe it’s docking with the moon’s surface again?” Bomb suggested.

Fret clasped his hands together and tapped them against his chin. “No, Bomb. We’ve destroyed its Observer Mind. That means no one’s driving the thing. It’s going to crash into this moon. We’re talking about something worse than an extinction-level event, here. When the Skull Ship and the moon collide, both of them are going to shatter.”

I vomited in my mouth, not entirely from the rad sickness.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Rade

Azen had been right. Piloting one of the golden mechs wasn't so different from operating an ATLAS 5.

When my assigned unit knelt, I stepped into the cockpit and an inner cocoon deployed around my jumpsuit. I had been a bit doubtful that the alien tech would be able to integrate with our own, but the green Phants had done a fine job of copying our interface protocols. The connection request appeared immediately. I approved it and the unit fed audio and video from the outside world directly into my helmet aReal so that I observed the cavern from the height of the mech. I was a bit worried that some kind of digital virus might come along with the connection but the scanners said the feed was clean. Like Azen said, we had to start trusting them at some point.

The HUD overlaying my vision provided the tactical components I'd come to expect. In a scrollable column on the left, the callsigns of my brothers appeared alongside the names of the Phants assigned to their mechs, with one bar representing the health of the pilot, the other the condition of the mech. For those machines with only Phant operators, the mech health alone was displayed. On the upper right of the HUD was a map with the positions of all twenty-eight members of the company marked in green. Azen assured us that enemy targets would be indicated in red.

I controlled my mech exactly the same way I would an ATLAS 5—the internal actuators translated the movements of my body into the equivalent external motions on the mech. The only thing missing was the initial feeling of sluggishness, like wading through a swamp, that I ordinarily felt when trying to operate an ATLAS without my Implant for the first few minutes. With this alien technology, it was smooth sailing all the way.

The right arm possessed a single, fixed weapon in the form of a particle cannon; its beam was capable of dissolving matter at a touch. The left arm

harbored a device that could generate a hyperdimensional energy shield on demand, providing the only known defense against the particle weapons. Activated by squeezing the fist, the energy shield looked like a translucent, bluish ellipse with white bolts of electricity streaming from a central point. When properly positioned, the tall shield could protect the entire front side of the mech.

The particle weapon fired in half-second bursts, with a minimum of five seconds required to recharge. A status bar at the bottom of the HUD kept the pilot apprised of the weapon's state. After firing, the bar receded to the far left of the display and became dark red. As the seconds passed and the bar lengthened horizontally, it changed colors from orange, to blue, to yellow, finally becoming green when the weapon was ready to fire. The female AI also issued an audible alert at that point: "Particle weapon fully charged."

Similarly, the energy shield could be active for only up to three seconds before a mandatory recharge, and it had similar audio and visual cues integrated into the HUD. If the pilot used the shield for the entire three seconds, ten seconds were required to completely replenish its power. Unlike the particle cannon, the shield could be utilized before reaching its fully charged state. If the operator activated it while the status bar was at the halfway mark, for example, the shield would merely last one and a half seconds instead of the full three.

There were two main downsides to the armaments. The shield couldn't be triggered at the same time as the particle weapon, and if utilized too often, both the shield and the particle weapon could individually overheat, requiring five to ten Stanminutes of downtime depending on the internal and external temperatures.

The particle weapon also had the ability to disintegrate Phants. Azen explained it as "snipping" the alien entities from this universe—the loss of form didn't kill them, not right away. It was more like permanently chopping off an appendage. The given Phant would lose all contact with this universe and eventually starve to death. Lui remarked that killing Phants this way seemed far more effective than tossing them into gravity wells, and when he asked Azen why particle weapons hadn't been used to eliminate the greens during the Great Cleanse, Azen explained that the tech had still been in development at the time.

Jumpjet capability was also charge-based, and relied on some obscure principle of gravity to function. The recharge behaved the same as the shield

subsystem in that the operator could jump on a partial charge. A full charge allowed for a ten-second jump, a half charge five seconds, and so forth. It took thirty seconds to fully refresh once the charge reached zero.

Azen was deliberately vague when asked about the power source for all of this, saying “micro-Slipstreams.”

“Friggin’ micro-Slipstreams,” Bender had complained. “The alien explanation for everything.”

The twenty-eight members of the company climbed a tunnel toward the surface. Azen had chosen a series of moderately sloped sinkholes that would deposit us in the general vicinity of the ATLAS factory.

Around me, my squad brothers looked like limber knights decked in shining, golden armor. We didn’t have headlamps. The hulls glowed automatically, with an intensity that seemed dependent on the surrounding light levels as the alien mechs in the forefront and rear glowed brighter than those in the middle of the group.

We had taken to calling the mechs ZEUS units because we felt like Olympian gods inside them. The white gold coloration, combined with the glow, only enhanced the sensation. Plus the electrical pattern generated when the shields activated reminded us of lightning bolts, kind of like what Zeus would throw.

A lone mech had remained behind to guard the civilians, Giger and Tung, while two more had gone ahead to scout the target site. The positions of all three continued to update even though they were several klicks away: It was nice to finally have an HUD that worked again, as the alien tech was quite capable of transmitting data through the planetwide interference.

Two of the Phant-operated ZEUS units carried the particle bomb between them. Shaped like a torpedo half the size of the gold mechs, the bomb was apparently extremely heavy.

The universe had a strange sense of humor, because it seemed like our spec-ops squad was always being burdened with one heavy item or another. If it wasn’t a containment cage or a nuclear weapon, it was an alien bomb.

Shaw was here too, of course, and I kept close to her ZEUS. She didn’t share her mech with Azen this time, but rather some other green identified as Halios.

So far the tunnel had proven surprisingly devoid of life—apparently the crabs had burrowed deep to avoid the coronal storm.

“How are you holding up, Surus?” I said.

That was the green I shared my ZEUS unit with. The alien entity had taken control of the AI built into the mech and lurked somewhere unseen beneath my cockpit. I felt a little exposed without the EM emitter in my jumpsuit, knowing that the Phant could drift upward and reduce me to a charred organic mess at any time. But there was nothing I could do about that, not if I wanted to be a part of the mission. Well, other than stay on the Phant's good side.

"You are aware, I am sure," Surus said, via the internal speakers, "that I do not experience the same mental strain as a human being, linked as I am to the onboard AI, which has limited emotional capacity. Nor am I 'holding up' the physical structure of the mech in any way."

"Never mind. It's just an expression. Tell me, what's the temperature?"

"The air temperature in this tunnel is currently fifty-five degrees Celsius, and rising," Surus said. "Expected air temperature by the time we attain the surface: one hundred degrees Celsius, or two hundred twelve degrees Fahrenheit."

"You got to be kidding me."

"It is entirely within operational parameters."

"Well sure, but that means we're stuck inside these mechs." Which had marvelous thermal regulation by the way—it felt a comfortable twenty degrees Celsius in here.

"Extravehicular activity is not recommended," Surus agreed.

"Almost as bad as talking to an AI for real," I grumbled.

"We can have a philosophical discourse if you would prefer," Surus said.

"That's all right."

"But there is ample time for such a discussion," Surus insisted. "It is not often I have the chance to engage with a species not shackled by the developmental constraints of my race. Human beings are fascinating creatures. Your society is similar to other mature species we have encountered in the past, yet there are glaring differences. Take, for example, the fact that you have achieved spacefaring status, yet still rely upon sexual reproduction. Most other spacefaring races had long since given that up.

"Cloning is a far superior method. It guarantees that the species will not change genetically over time, and it also eliminates the need for redundant medical science. With clones, it is easier to back up and restore one's consciousness, because the brain structure and neurochemical layout is

entirely known and mapped. Other spacefaring races had taken advantage of this fact to essentially live forever, transferring their individual consciousnesses from clone to clone.

“And while on the topic of mind backups, I should mention that many races out there explored the galaxy by means of conscious machines, similar to the Builder ships you humans use to create Gates in remote star systems. I find it—”

“Surus. Enough.” When you got Surus going, the green could ramble on worse than Manic. I imagined my squad brother was having a field day with the Phant assigned to his own mech.

Twenty minutes later we emerged from the tunnel onto the streets of Hongleong City and were greeted by a truly barren landscape. The glass had melted from the windows of the surrounding buildings, solidifying into icy, uneven shells that oozed onto the bulbous resin engulfing the bottom halves of the structures. It reminded me of solidified glaze dripped onto black donuts. On the street itself were the melted remnants of abandoned vehicles and fallen robots. The asphalt had softened—with each step our ZEUS units sunk slightly, and we left footprints.

I passed what had once been a Centurion. Its body was half melted in a pool of synthetic plastic. The remaining upper torso was covered in rivulets of its own liquefied polycarbonate.

The only untouched mechanical forms belonged to the disabled ATLAS 5s, whose hulls were rated for operation on Mercury—pilotless mode, mind you, as such temperatures would bake any human operators.

“Look at how far away Bogey 2 is,” Bender transmitted.

I glanced at the horizon between the buildings: The Skull Ship had broken away from the surface and moved into a higher orbit. The faint object was about the size of my thumbnail.

“You’re sure the coronal weapon won’t reach us?” Lui sent.

“We are out of range of the coronal weapon,” Azen confirmed. “Even if the ship fired a concentrated burst, it would dissipate long before reaching the surface.”

I spotted another object near Bogey 2, about half its size and even fainter. “Is that your mothership?” I marked it, transmitting the position to Azen.

“It is.” Azen confirmed.

As I watched, Bogey 2 flared, launching its coronal weapon toward the

dimmer object.

“How much longer will they hold out?” I asked.

In answer, Azen merely continued the advance.

We picked our way across the debris on the street, making our way toward the ATLAS factory.

I could feel unseen eyes on us, watching from the holes drilled into the black resin caking the scorched buildings.

“Seems a bit quiet, doesn’t it?” Hijak transmitted.

“Increase speed,” Azen sent.

We switched to a jog. The two ZEUS units tasked with the bomb faltered at the outset but quickly steadied their heavy load and joined the rest of us.

Though our footfalls were somewhat muffled by the soft asphalt, the bulbous resin around us echoed and amplified the sound. If any unseen enemies lurking there hadn’t heard us before, they certainly did now.

Indeed, I spotted a crab peering from one of the holes in the resin above and to my right. The aliens hadn’t been driven as deep into the tunnels as I had thought.

Eager to try out my particle cannon against a live target, I turned the weapon toward the entity as I jogged. The thing immediately ducked from sight.

On the other side of the street I spotted a second crab, peeking past another pockmark in the resin.

Bender waved his particle weapon that way—the second alien vanished from view as well.

“Why aren’t the damn things engaging?” Bender transmitted.

“They got a good licking from these ZEUS mechs the last time around,” Chief Bourbonjack sent. “I think they’ve had their fill.”

“No,” Azen said over the comm. “That is not the reason. Look at the map.”

I glanced at my HUD. The two scouts had reached one of the buildings bordering the north side of the ATLAS factory, and from their overwatch site they transmitted the locations of fresh enemy units, whose red dots were appearing on the map at an alarming rate.

I switched to the POV of one of the scouts. The factory was a nondescript square building roughly four stories tall spanning half a city block. Taking up positions within and around the building were aliens similar

to those I had witnessed aboard Bogey 2. They wore oversized jumpsuits topped by glass domes and carried thin, swordlike particle rifles. When I zoomed in, I spotted the usual assortment of alien faces beneath those domes, running the gamut from reptilian to squid.

“The enemy has commenced the teleportation of shock troops to the surface,” Azen sent. “The ‘crabs’ do not attack, because there is no need. Not yet.”

I returned to my own POV.

As we neared the factory, Azen split us into three squads, placing two or three MOTHs on each squad.

I was part of S1 (Squad 1), led by a green named Lathos. I was grateful Azen had elected to keep Shaw and me together. Hijak was also with us, along with four other greens. Azen assigned the high-yield particle bomb to our squad and two of the greens ported it.

A green named Ravern led S2. Chief Bourbonjack, Bender, and Manic rounded out that squad, joining four other greens.

Azen himself led S3, to which he allocated Skullcracker, Lui, and Snakeoil, along with the remaining greens.

“Squads, I’ve marked your individual routes on the map,” Azen sent. “We will split up, take the indicated side streets, and converge on the factory from multiple flanks. S1, you will approach the factory from the south. S2, your advance will be from the west. S3, we’ll come to the factory from the east. Once you reach your respective waypoints, await further instructions. Disperse!”

Lathos led my squad at a jog through the designated side street and had us halt at the edge of an industrial complex to the south of the target. We crouched in single file, lining up against the geronium that caked said complex. None of us could see the factory from this position, but according to the map, it lay just around the bulging black corner ahead.

So far, on my HUD map, none of the red dots had moved outward from their positions within and around the factory. However, more dots kept appearing as the scouts spotted them. And that was only on their side of the factory.

“I’m having the scouts begin a diversionary attack,” Azen transmitted.

Several of the red dots abruptly broke free, converging toward the building north of the factory, where the scouts were positioned. The two green dots representing the scouts retreated, drawing roughly half the enemy

units with them.

"Attain the rooftops," Azen transmitted.

"With me," Lathos sent.

Lathos ran up the wall of geronium beside us and jetted skyward. The others and I followed, landing on the roof of the industrial complex. We dropped our mechs and low-crawled toward the edge of the rooftop terrace. I was amazed once more at the maneuverability of these things: Such a crawling motion would have been impossible in an ATLAS 5 but was a relatively easy task for a ZEUS. It felt more like I was inside a giant jumpsuit than a mech.

I reached the edge and peered over. The square building of the factory lay across from me. Its southern wall had partially caved, along with the resin that had caked it, affording a view of the inside from this angle. I saw the motionless assembly lines with their inert robotic arms and the half-built ATLAS units they had been working on before the power was cut.

I spotted shock troops crouched within and around the factory. Some were stationed in the upper windows, others the rooftop, others in the pits dug into the resin. A few of them were jetting over the building to join their brethren in pursuit of the scouts to the north.

The other members of S1 formed a line on either side of me. Shaw was to my right, Hijak my left. The particle bomb rested a few paces behind me, where the others had set it down. I was a little worried that the combined weight of our mechs and the bomb would cave the structure, but so far the roof held.

According to the HUD, S2 had successfully attained a position on the rooftop to the west of the factory, and S3 the rooftop to the east.

"Commence firing," Azen transmitted. "Eliminate all targets."

All three squads opened fire. Opponents vanished right and left. Or rather, parts of them did. A head or limb disappeared here, an upper body or half torso there. Portions of the factory itself vanished as we swept our weapons to and fro in deadly swaths.

I glanced at Shaw and was a little surprised to find her killing with just as much alacrity as the rest of us. When humanity was at stake, when our *very lives* were at stake, when it was kill or be killed, the survival instinct overrode all. She was a warrior in that moment, no different than Hijak or me.

Our opponents didn't appear to have the same shielding technology that

we did, at least not these units, and the enemy troops quickly withdrew inside the factory for cover.

Shaw and I fired in succession, developing a rhythm. She would unleash a burst, disintegrating any walls or objects the shock troops might be concealed behind, then while her weapon recharged I took the kill shot, disintegrating any exposed opponents. If there were no obvious enemies, I waited a few seconds and then targeted another section of wall so that she could take the kill shot instead.

The particle beams weren't apparent on the visible spectrum, but the alien tech displayed them on my HUD, allowing us to correct our aim. It was just like firing with tracer bullets.

Unfortunately, the enemy also possessed the ability to view the beams, and this introduced the same problem inherent to tracers: our opponents could readily follow the path of the beams to their source, allowing them to target us.

And they did just that.

A particle beam sliced toward us from the factory.

I activated my shield. "Shaw—"

But she had already engaged her own shield beside me.

The squad was forced to pull back from the edge as more beams came in. The entire northern-facing portion of the rooftop disintegrated before our eyes.

"Proximity alert," Surus said.

I glanced up.

A pitch-black ZEUS plunged from the sky, headed directly toward us. It swept a particle burst across the rooftop.

Most of us got our shields up in time but one of the slower greens was hit and its ZEUS dissolved down the middle. The Phant lodged within the brain area was disintegrated.

The squad returned fire.

The exposed enemy ZEUS activated a translucent shield similar to our own and jetted sideways. The pulsating screen absorbed every ray that struck it.

I followed the flight of the black ZEUS with my weapon, waiting for its shield to cut out, intending to unleash my own particle beam exactly when that happened. I counted down the three seconds the energy screen should last and I was about to pull the trigger when the black ZEUS vanished behind

an adjacent building.

“Damn it. Shaw, Hijak, with me.” I hurried across the rooftop, resisting the temptation to jet toward the enemy. I would be fully exposed to the attackers from the factory if I did that. A bad idea, considering I wanted to save my shield for the black ZEUS.

“Watch my back,” I told Shaw and Hijak as I leaped from the southern edge of the industrial complex, away from the factory, and landed on the geronium resin below. I hurried down the bulbous substance to the soft asphalt of the street, using my jets to increase my bounding speed. Shaw and Hijak were close behind.

I reached the building where the black ZEUS had taken cover and I approached the eastern side. Given its previous trajectory, the enemy mech should be hiding somewhere in the alley.

“Careful, Rade Galaal,” Surus said via the cockpit speakers.

“Shut it!” I started shifting the mech to gaze past the building when Surus spoke again.

“The cockpit is already shut, if that is to what you are referring. But if __”

“I said shut it!”

I waited a moment and, when I was satisfied that Surus would keep quiet, I cautiously peered past the resin-caked edge. I kept the fingers of my left hand partially closed, like a claw, ready to squeeze them into a fist and activate the shield at a moment’s notice.

The black ZEUS was standing there in the alley with its weapon aimed right at me.

I raised the energy screen just in time to block the incoming particle beam and I reflexively retreated; the geronium-caked corner dissolved behind me.

Shaw and Hijak waited a few meters away, ready to shoot the enemy if it pursued.

The black ZEUS wisely did not.

I had about three seconds until it could fire again. I hurried back to the building’s edge and peered past.

No sign of the enemy. I shouldn’t have been so quick to retreat.

“Where did it go?” Hijak said when I pulled back.

“Dunno.”

“Be alert,” Azen said over the comm. “More enemy mechs are

emerging.”

On my HUD I saw red dots moving away from the factory, traveling on erratic flight paths, which told me they were likely dodging our incoming energy beams. Black ZEUS mechs with jetpacks, no doubt.

I pondered the problem of our missing enemy mech. Obviously it had moved to a different location. If I were that mech, where would I go?

“The rooftop!” I swiveled my arm upward and activated the shield just in time to deflect an incoming particle beam.

The enemy ZEUS abruptly toppled over the edge of the building. It hit the resin and slid to the street, grinding to a halt beside me. A circular hole had been drilled clean through its black chest.

“You’re welcome,” Shaw transmitted.

The three of us jetted to the top of the nearby building. Across the street, five black ZEUS units assailed the industrial complex beside us, where the remainder of S1 struggled to protect the particle bomb. Both sides were busy darting between the superstructures of the roof, alternately firing and shielding themselves. Half the rooftop terrace had collapsed around the giant fighters, thanks to the profusion of particle beams. Teeth-like frames of warped rebar jutted into the air like claws, threatening to swallow the bomb at the center of the roof.

Hijak, Shaw, and I opened fire at the five ZEUS assailants. Since the enemy mechs had their backs and sides exposed to us, most of them couldn’t bring their shields to bear in time and we ended up disintegrating three of the attackers. The remaining two jetted into the air, exposing themselves, allowing Lathos and the others to take them down.

“Thank you,” Lathos transmitted.

S1 had lost another member, I noticed, so that there were now only three other greens with Lathos.

We wanted to join them, but more incoming particle fire erupted from the factory. It came from the upper levels and was aimed directly at our rooftop. I repressed the urge to drop and instead activated my shield, as did Shaw and Hijak beside me. Together, the three of us retreated at a sprint toward the southern side of our building and leaped over the edge. We landed on the geronium caking the lower half.

We were safe. For the moment.

Above, the rising concrete dust told me that a portion of the rooftop had collapsed. When the building continued to rumble thereafter, with more dust

spewing into the air, I realized the shock troops hadn't ceased firing: they were attempting to eliminate the structure entirely.

"Not liking this," I sent as we raced down the resin to the street.

"Kind of makes you nostalgic for bullets, doesn't it?" Hijak transmitted. "Let's rejoin Lathos."

Lathos and the rest of S1 had ported the bomb to street level and taken cover behind the industrial complex to our left. Their building was systematically disintegrating as well.

"They're in the same boat as us," I sent, pausing to consider our options. "There's something I want to try. Hijak, do you remember the mobile machine gun bunker strategy we employed on the way to the hospital?"

Hijak was silent for a moment. "It just might work."

"The mobile machine gun bunker strategy?" Shaw sent.

"Hijak and I will activate and interlock our energy screens," I returned. "And then step into full view of the enemy. Since our cannons are too bulky to fire over the interlocked shields, we'll have to rely on you, Shaw, to come in from behind and launch your particle weapon."

"An interesting tactic," Surus commented. "Albeit a risky one, because the enemy can very easily eliminate her particle weapon when she exposes it to fire. But since the shields of those of you in the forefront are translucent, she may have time to rescind the weapon if she spots enemy units targeting her."

"Shaw, you think you can do it?" I said.

"Obviously." She sounded miffed that I'd even doubt it.

"Good." I switched to the S1 comm line: "Lathos, can you spare us another ZEUS over here?"

Lathos dispatched a mech. The friendly ZEUS activated its shield as it darted across the street to join us. It drew several incoming particle beams along the way but otherwise arrived unscathed.

"You—" I told the green. "Watch our rear, and the top of the building." I turned toward Hijak. "With me, bro. Let's do this."

Hijak and I approached the gaping wound cut into the resin at the building's edge. We raised our left forearms, preparing to shield ourselves. I glanced at Shaw. She was right behind us.

"On three," I told them. "One. Two. Three."

Hijak and I activated our shields, stepped out, and crouched slightly.

The factory was in plain view ahead of us. It seemed a fortress, with particle beams launching all over the place, from the windows dotting the uppermost levels to the pits pocking the resin below.

The barrel of Shaw's particle cannon swung into the small notch where our shields overlapped and she fired. The resultant energy beam cut a swath through the upper level of the factory.

Incoming particle beams instantly homed in—Shaw pulled back and ducked behind our energy screens.

The three of us retreated; the shields lasted just long enough to reach the cover of the geronium caking the building. More of that black resin dissolved behind us.

"That actually worked somewhat decently," Hijak transmitted.

The instant my shield was fully charged, we performed the maneuver a second time, again taking out a good chunk of the enemy. We repeated the tactic over and over, with good results. Our building continued to take a beating between attacks: First the nearby geronium shell was blasted away entirely, and then the frame of the building itself began to disintegrate. Eventually enough of the structure was eaten away that the whole thing collapsed. We used the resultant pile of debris as cover and continued the assault.

Sometimes black mechs jetted through the air toward us, or the jumpsuit aliens made a sally into the streets, but we always had enough warning to take them out thanks to our coordination with the other squads.

When Shaw had no targets, she fired at the resin caking the factory or the upper walls. Huge chunks of geronium and steel girders broke away, crushing enemies who'd taken refuge beneath the holes in the resin.

We were taking out the enemy faster than they could replenish their ranks. Soon the incoming fire reduced to a trickle.

"Rade!" Shaw said.

Fresh red dots had appeared on the HUD map. Not within the factory, but on the streets behind us.

"Enemy reinforcements have arrived," Surus said.

Turning around, I saw the hordes with my own eyes. Crabs. Slugs. ATLAS mechs. Equestrians. Centurions.

The other squads transmitted the locations of horde members crowding into their own areas—the HUD map filled with a ring of red dots bearing down on the factory from all sides.

“Disperse the horde,” Azen said. “We don’t need them attacking us from behind!”

Remembering how easily the golden mechs had routed the horde the first time, I turned around in anticipation.

Shaw was already firing into the closest entities, leaving behind a mess of dismembered mandibles and carapaces.

I unleashed my particle weapon into the source slug some distance back and drilled a black, bubbling hole into its side.

The slug howled in pain and outrage, turning toward me to advance at a rampage.

The particle beams from Hijak and the other green with us quickly deterred the thing, and it dove behind a building for cover.

A serpent rocket struck me. There was no missile alarm. The detonation sent me reeling backward.

I landed on my knees, disoriented, one hand on the asphalt. I shook my head a few times, trying to clear it.

“Surus, damage report?”

“No damage,” Surus said.

Amazing. I used to be so afraid of those missiles. But now . . . the moment I clambered to my feet, I laughed. I turned toward the ATLAS 5 that just shot me.

“Is that all you got?” I activated my particle weapon, cutting the unit in half down the middle.

We joined up with the remainder of S1 and focused our fire on the horde. We took a few missiles here and there but always got to our feet again. I kept waiting for the enemy to break but no matter how terribly we gave it to them, the horde just kept coming. They weren’t backing down this time. Something overrode their instinct to flee and told them to fight to the death.

“The factory!” Chief Bourbonjack transmitted. “Watch your sixes!”

More shock troops had appeared inside the factory and were slowly creeping into attack positions behind us.

I had moved away from the cover of the building and was exposed.

I spun around and activated my shield, narrowly deflecting an incoming beam. Members of S2 and S3 weren’t as lucky because I saw two green dots vanish from our sister squads on the map.

I ducked for cover behind a building alongside the survivors of S1, and then I checked the roster: I was relieved to find that none of my MOTH

brothers had been lost.

“Advance!” Azen sent. “Forget the horde! The enemy is using them as a diversion, buying time to dispatch more shock troops.”

“Make up your mind!” Hijak sent.

We moved toward the factory at a run, leaving behind the horde. The small number of shock troops put up a good defense and beams cut through the air around me. I intermittently activated my shield, firing at the source of those beams when I could.

Shaw and I positioned ourselves near the bomb as we sprinted, and we did our best to cover the two greens that ported the device.

Shells from pursuing Equestrians began to detonate. I ignored those shells, concentrating on the enemy before me.

With the combined fire of all three squads, we managed to eliminate the latest round of shock troops, which included black ZEUS mechs, and in moments we converged on the factory.

Two more of the company had fallen in the advance so that our numbers were reduced to sixteen by then. Again all MOTHs had survived unscathed. As had Azen and the squad leaders. I attributed our higher survival rate to the fact that the ZEUS units were designed for human operators, not to mention all of us had logged far more hours piloting mechs than the Phants.

We clambered over the debris, making our way toward the factory floor. Shaw disintegrated a shock troop that lay in concealment near the opening.

Behind us, the crabs, slugs, and ATLAS 5s scaled the ruins in hot pursuit. Threads of Gatling fire ricocheted from our golden hulls.

I paused to unleash a deadly swath of energy at the horde for good measure and took out the whole front rank.

Inside the factory, the half-built components of ATLAS 5s lay scattered across the floor between the toppled robotic arms of the former assembly line. Joining the useless mechs were the mangled body parts of shock troops we’d just eliminated.

In the middle of the floor, a smooth-walled sinkhole descended into darkness.

Our destination.

We jetted forward, soaring across the ATLAS pieces and alien body parts, and landed near the rim. A scout warily approached, then waved the rest of us forward.

“I just received word,” Azen sent. “Bogey 1 has ceased its attack and is

experiencing orbital decay. It appears your sister squad was successful."

"Right on!" Lui sent.

I couldn't help but smile.

Good job, Tahoe. I knew you wouldn't let us down.

It was up to us, now.

Metallic footfalls emanated from the sinkhole, snapping me back to the present moment. I exchanged a glance with the other expressionless ZEUS units, and then all of us dropped and waited. Most of us watched the sinkhole while a few guarded the rear. Shaw and I were part of the former group and we had our cannons fixed squarely on the dark hole.

The footfalls grew in volume . . .

Fifteen aliens in jumpsuits suddenly flowed out, packed three abreast and five deep.

We opened fire. Because the aliens were grouped so tightly together, we took out two or three with each shot, slicing through the surprised troops in a matter of seconds.

After they had fallen, Azen sent one of his greens forward to scout the pit. The assigned ZEUS entered the sinkhole and moments later signaled us forward.

Behind us, crabs and ATLAS mechs attained the broken entrance to the factory and leaped inside.

We launched ourselves into the sinkhole with alacrity and sprinted down the forty-five-degree incline. Our hulls glowed, dimly lighting the way as we joined the scout.

I felt righteous. We were piloting golden mechs for the forces of good, descending into the dark depths of hell to take out humanity's greatest foe. The time of my vengeance was at hand.

The tunnel was roomy enough for us to sprint three units abreast; those in the forefront preemptively unleashed their particle weapons, not waiting for shock troops to appear from the murk ahead. At Azen's order, the first two ranks activated their energy shields; the forward mechs separated to allow the next group forward, and once in position the second rank disengaged their shields and fired into the darkness in turn. The process repeated so that always there were three of us alternately shielding the company or launching particle beams down the tunnel. The only mechs not participating were those carrying the alien bomb.

The range of those cannons was one thousand meters, apparently far

enough to easily hit any opponents lurking in the dark. And the strategy seemed to be working. We passed remnants of our handiwork along the way: the arms and legs of disintegrated black mechs and the pitted bodies of alien jumpsuits. Long runnels carved the ceiling, indicating where our beams had missed.

Sometimes we took return fire and had to momentarily dig in. We used the rank-swapping strategy to ensure our front line was always protected, and we usually overcame any resistance in under thirty seconds.

Behind us I heard the persistent clatter of mandibles and claws. The horde wasn't going to give up so easily. Occasionally we fired blindly into the murk at our rear, hoping to temporarily stem the enemy pursuit.

The tunnel eventually leveled out and we reached a vault. It was similar to the teleportation area of Bogey 2 that had brought us to this moon in the first place, except it was bigger. Concave ribs divided the room into segments, with multiple tunnels branching off between them. On a dais at the center of the chamber lay a wide circular disc, its metal engraved with Fibonacci spirals.

The Acceptor.

A platoon of fifteen jumpsuited aliens immediately materialized on the disc.

We started disintegrating them.

One of the aliens turned its particle weapon down toward the Acceptor, as if intending to destroy it.

I aimed and fired. Got the unit in time. My golden companions had taken out the remaining shock troops by then and alien body parts scattered the disc. With those dismembered pieces blocking the Acceptor, more shock troops wouldn't be able to arrive.

The aliens aboard Bogey 2 couldn't simply destroy the source Acceptor to stop us because Azen intended to teleport the bomb to a random one: This Acceptor had link codes to all the teleporters on Bogey 2. The only way to stop us now would be for the Phants to destroy every last Acceptor on their vessel. That, or block each teleporter. The latter was the expected course of action, which is why Azen had agents aboard who were ready to clear the target.

"We've halted them. For now." Azen turned toward the porters. "Place the bomb—this ends here!"

Before the ZEUS porters could move, crabs of different sizes swarmed

into the chamber from every entrance except the one we had come in. Perhaps that continuous clatter of mandibles and claws I'd heard all the way here hadn't been from behind after all, but rather *ahead*.

The bigger crabs came in at half the height of our ZEUS mechs and had trailing cords as thick as tree trunks.

Because of our twenty-five meter heights, there wasn't enough room to use our jetpacks—the ceiling was just overhead. There'd be no leaping over the enemy. We'd have to fight our way through.

"Clear a path to the Acceptor!" Azen sent.

We fired our particle cannons, taking down many of the alien entities. But the crabs were fast, and as we waited the requisite five-second-recharge interval between shots, many of the horde members closed the gap. We were forced to engage them physically, punching and kicking. I tried using my shield to disintegrate the things, but the energy screen had no effect.

"What are you doing?" Surus said from the cockpit. "The shield cannot be used as an offensive weapon."

"Yeah," I returned. "Thanks for telling me that *now*."

Crab pieces flew everywhere. We fired our weapons when the charge returned, taking care not to harm each other in the crossfire. As we fought our way forward, some of the crabs ahead of us swarmed onto the Acceptor, joining the shock troop body parts, apparently oblivious to the fact that they were blocking the transport of fresh units.

"Move!" Azen said.

Unfortunately, right then the crabs from the horde outside reached the chamber so that everywhere around us the alien entities swarmed, pressing in.

A slug abruptly burst into the cave from one of the side corridors, and we were forced to concentrate our particle fire on it. We dissolved most of the large creature in short order, killing it and its linked crabs, but as the corpse faded from this dimension, more crabs merely piled in after it.

"Can't fire!" Bender sent suddenly.

"Me too!" Manic sent.

"Stay calm," Azen transmitted. "Your weapons have merely overheated. They will function again after the five to ten minute cooldown period."

Because we'd been shooting those beams non-stop for the past twenty minutes, Bender and Manic weren't the only ones whose cannons began to shut down. Around me, ZEUS mechs stopped firing left and right. My allies were reduced to using their advanced weaponry as clubs.

Shaw's weapon failed. I unleashed my beam at a crab that was coming for her, splitting it in half, and then I stepped in front of her, intending to fend off the next few enemies.

Shaw stepped past me without a word and walloped the next crab that came her way.

When next I tried to fire, a message flashed on my display:

Weapon Overheated.

Time to bash and stomp.

The crabs surrounded us on all sides but we managed to move, bit by bit, toward the Acceptor. None of us were firing anymore.

We made a strange team. Humans and Phants piloting super-high-tech mechs, reduced to walloping our way forward through a roomful of alien entities.

The light levels faded as the inky blood of our enemies coated our hulls. And that blood flowed freely. The floors were slick with it. The ceiling dripped with it.

"Surus, can the lot of you leave our mechs and disintegrate us a path through the crabs?" I asked the green who shared the ZEUS with me.

"No," Surus returned. "Unfortunately, the entities you refer to as crabs are immune to our interdimensional effects."

"Damn."

The "weapon overheated" indicator kept flashing on my HUD. I tried firing my weapon a few times anyway. Didn't work.

"The weapon will not activate when overheated," Surus said.

I would have rolled my eyes if I weren't in the thick of combat. "Thanks, bro, but I figured that out."

Somehow Shaw and I ended up at the forefront of the group, leading the charge. Before we reached the Acceptor, a figure emerged from a passageway on the far side of the chamber, at the head of a squad of Centurions. It looked like a man in a typical UC or SK jumpsuit.

I zoomed in on the helmet, and as the crabs separating us milled about, I made out a face.

It was Fan, of all people.

"Fan!" Shaw said, using the equivalent of external speakers on her ZEUS. "It's me. Shaw."

Fan ignored her. His group looked so tiny to me. My sense of scale was skewed of course, given the size of the mech I piloted and the alien crabs I

fought, making the newcomers appear like rodents.

And those rodents opened fire with their small arms.

I almost laughed.

But the bullets weren't meant for us. Fan was firing at the crabs on the Acceptor. Apparently the alien entities seemed to finally understand that they weren't supposed to be loitering there, because the things immediately vacated the disc.

Fan and his combat robots rushed forward, weaving between the legs of the intervening crabs, and then leaped onto the Acceptor. They began clearing away the debris.

"Stop him!" I said.

I fought more fervently, coming within two crab ranks of the Acceptor. But Fan and his combat robots finished momentarily and then leaped from the unobstructed teleporter in triumph.

A trio of black ZEUS mechs materialized on the disc.

All three had their particle cannons aimed down at the Acceptor.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Tahoe

A black cloud of radioactive particles consumed the sky directly above. But it wasn't that dark smear that most concerned me at the moment, nor even the potentially lethal dose of radiation penetrating my body. All my attention was focused instead beyond the eaves of that cloud, past the cairn-like shells of the buildings underneath, toward the ever-enlarging Skull Ship on the horizon. The alien vessel was going to smash into Tau Ceti II-c and break this moon apart within the hour.

And there was nothing I could do about it.

Feeling doomed, I wrenched my eyes away, finding no comfort in the defeated faces of my brothers.

Motion drew my gaze to the right, where, five meters away, a blue Phant was leisurely flowing toward the squad from the remnants of a razed shed.

"Move out!" Facehopper said. "TJ, lead."

Our Italian drone operator hesitated. "Which direction?"

"Any! Just as long as it's *away* from the Phant!"

Wearing nothing but our rifles, boots, and cool vents undergarments, we jogged down the ashy street. I naturally fell into the drag man position, thanks to my limp. Ahead of me, my fellow squad members left eerie footprints in the fallout.

I glanced over my shoulder. The liquid Phant pursued, but we gradually outdistanced it. At least the alien entity wasn't one of the faster purple types.

"Who remembers the layout of this bloody city?" Facehopper shouted as we ran. "We need to reach the port."

"It's downtown," Fret said.

That wasn't much help. Ports were usually situated downtown, especially on colony moons and worlds, where a central distribution point for

delivery drones was preferred.

“Yes, but *where* downtown?” Facehopper said.

Fret didn’t have an answer.

“Why don’t we contact the two companies of Marines?” Trace said.

I’d nearly forgotten about the Marines who’d been sent down with us to stage diversionary attacks every six hours.

“Probably long gone.” Facehopper eyed a deserted side street as our squad passed. “And even if the Marines were still here, and we had a way to let them know we were on the way, I doubt we’d reach their operating base on the city outskirts in time: Look to the horizon. That bloody bogey has already grown by another two centimeters. I’m afraid we’re on our own, mates. The port is our best and only option.”

None of us said a word to contradict him, though I was fairly certain everyone knew the chances of finding an intact spacecraft at the port were virtually nonexistent. But like the leading petty officer said, it was our only option.

Facehopper paused to draw something in the radioactive ash: “Keep your eyes peeled for this symbol.” He had written the Korean-Chinese characters for spaceport: 航天站.

The squad resumed its quick lope.

I glanced over my shoulder, wary of pursuit. I couldn’t see the blue Phant—we should have easily outdistanced it by now.

I felt mucus drip from my nose as I jogged, and I wiped it away. I glanced at my finger. Not mucus. Blood.

As I continued forward, I had this odd, dissociative feeling, like I was merely an observer to the events transpiring around me. Like I had become my own Spirit Guide, watching myself from afar.

I knew all about radiation poisoning. Knew it reduced the platelet count in the blood, made clotting difficult, made things like nosebleeds common. Knew that radiation altered consciousness: those random, penetrating rays caused neurons to misfire in the brain. I knew all this and countless other effects, but I pushed the facts from my mind, because knowing wouldn’t make dealing with it any easier. If anything, the knowledge would only hinder me.

All I could do was clear my mind and focus on the brother in front of me. That, and run on.

We encountered a group of Centurions on patrol shortly thereafter.

Either the pursuing Phant had alerted them or sheer luck had led them our way. In any case, we heard the metallic footfalls well before we saw the enemy and it was a simple matter to duck into a side street.

When the patrol was gone, we picked our way forward a bit more carefully, since it was all too apparent we weren't the only ones who had escaped the blast. And in our conditions, we definitely couldn't afford to tangle with combat robots. I had hoped all the Phants and possessed units would fall dead after we vaporized the Observer Mind. That was how it worked in the movies after all: kill the boss alien and every invader conveniently died with it.

Too bad this wasn't the movies.

On the horizon, the Skull Ship continued its relentless approach, becoming bigger with every passing moment.

TJ spotted the Korean-Chinese symbol for "port" on the ruined side of a building. The sign was blast-damaged and covered in soot, but the characters were recognizable enough.

The squad proceeded down the indicated street. The building beside us appeared relatively intact above the resin that caked it, at least compared to the blast-damaged shells of the other structures. I spotted a towering skyscraper beyond that had likely acted as a blast shield, sparing this building and the adjacent one from the nuclear bombardment launched by the Brass last week.

Gunfire erupted from up ahead.

The eight of us immediately dropped behind the ash-covered resin that coated the nearest building, taking cover between the bulbous mounds.

Bomb had been hit. I saw the blood dripping from his hand.

He tore a piece of fabric from the lower section of his cool vents undergarment and wrapped it around his forearm. Luckily he hadn't been hit with a sniper round. Without a jumpsuit, such a bullet would have blown his arm right off.

Trace and Ghost directed their barrels past the edge of the resin and let off some shots.

Ghost glanced askance. "Too many of them."

"Time for a tactical retrograde," Facehopper said.

But before Facehopper could assign a group to lay down covering fire, more shots rang out from behind. Another company of Centurions blocked our retreat vector.

Pieces of resin broke away all around us as gunshots slammed into the area from both sides.

We were pinned.

“Bloody hell,” Facehopper said.

I glanced upward, following the contour of the resin with my eyes. Where the black substance ended two stories above, I spotted a row of empty windows.

“Facehopper.” I indicated the windows.

He nodded. “Lead the way. TJ, go with him.”

The two of us sprinted up the resin as my brothers laid down suppressive fire on either flank. Shots ricocheted from the black surface around me; I felt naked and defenseless without my jumpsuit.

I reached the apex of the resin and dove through an open window; the glass had presumably melted away in the heat of last week’s nuclear strike.

I landed in an ash-covered bedroom containing broken mattresses and toppled dressers. TJ piled in beside me and the two of us promptly got up and thrust our rifle barrels outside, adding to the covering fire while our comrades made their way up in twos.

When everyone was inside, Trace calmly sat against one wall. He tore some cloth from the bedsheets and wrapped it around a fresh gunshot wound in his calf.

“Everyone okay?” Facehopper said.

Of course everybody said yes.

We jogged through the ash toward the front of the apartment. Trace opened the front door, which used an old-style handle interface, gazed past the doorframe, and gave the all clear.

We ran into the shared hallway.

Two Centurions appeared at the end of the hall. Trace and Ghost took them down.

Several more Centurions rounded the bend.

“Back back back!” Facehopper said.

The eight of us piled inside the foyer of the apartment we had just left as the gunshots rang out. TJ slammed the door behind him.

“Get that door buttressed,” Facehopper said.

My brothers piled furniture against the doorway.

When it was done, Fret leaned momentarily against the wall of the foyer. Blood dripped from his hip. He didn’t say a word of complaint. It

looked like a flesh wound, but, even so, when he met my gaze I could see the pain in his eyes.

I blinked away a round of dizziness and started toward Fret. I wanted to help him dress his wound.

Before I reached him a loud thud came from the direction of the front door.

I exchanged a nervous glance with Facehopper.

The thud came again; the furniture piled against the door shook.

“To the bedroom, mates!” Facehopper said, wiping blood from one nostril.

We retreated to the bedroom. Ghost went to the window, but immediately pulled back. Sniper fire from outside gouged the window frame.

I heard the sound of shattering furniture behind us and I knew the front door had been breached. The ominous clank of steel feet echoed from the apartment hall outside.

I helped stash the bedroom furniture against the doorway and window. Before we had finished, the Centurions began pounding away at the blockages. The piled objects shifted.

“Guess we won’t be making the port after all,” Bomb said with a sickly, blood-soaked grin.

“We’ll make it.” I directed my rifle toward the ceiling and began firing in full automatic mode. I swiveled the aim so that the bullets formed the outline of a circle in the plaster, which I traced again and again. I paused to untape a fresh clip from my torso and reloaded. That was my last clip.

I fired again.

A thick piece broke away above me and plunged to the floor, sending up a plume of radioactive ash. A ragged, manhole-sized opening remained in the ceiling.

“Gotta love armor piercers,” I said.

My brothers watched the two entrances to the bedroom as Facehopper and Bomb gave me a boost to the floor above. The furniture continued to shift under the blows of the Centurions.

I heaved myself up through the hole and scrambled to my feet. I stood in another bedroom that looked identical to the one below, replete with ash and toppled furniture.

I helped the other squad members through the opening as Bomb and Facehopper boosted them one by one. Facehopper went last, even though the

LPO wasn't supposed to put himself at risk. In the heat of the moment we'd somehow let him get away with it.

Bomb and I reached down to grab him just as Centurions broke through the blocked doorway and stormed the bedroom.

We hoisted Facehopper up, but not before a bullet got him in the foot.

Facehopper gritted his teeth as I dragged him from the opening.

Other squad members immediately dashed forward to seal the hole. Ghost and Trace slammed a mattress over the opening and the others began stacking furniture on top of that.

Even without jetpacks, combat robots could easily jump that height. Unsurprisingly, thuds already erupted from the floor, and the heaped furniture shook.

I heard gunfire; armor piercers thrust through the top of the furniture mound. Ghost took a glancing shot to the arm.

We abandoned the room, dashing toward the front door.

Facehopper let me act as his crutch. He seemed incapable of putting any pressure on his wounded foot. My own limp actually lessened in that moment: Knowing I had the LPO's well-being in my hands helped distract me from the pain of the insect bites I'd suffered. We'd had our differences in the past, yes, but I refused to let him down in that moment. He was, in the end, my commanding officer. And my brother.

The squad burst through the front door and into the shared hallway.

It was clear.

For now.

We ran toward the stairwell. I kept expecting Centurions to emerge at any moment. Though it was only a short distance, mentally it was one of the longest runs of my life.

We reached the doorway, and Bomb and Fret burst in first. Bomb went high; Fret low.

"Clear!" Bomb shouted.

As the rest of us hurried inside, I heard the metallic clank of robotic feet coming from below. We were forced to take the upward flight. I wished we had some grenades left to slow down our pursuers.

Facehopper seemed heavier as I helped him surmount those stairs. He was definitely putting more of his weight on me. That, or I was already becoming exhausted.

I forced myself to plow on.

At the top of the stairwell, Bomb fired a breach round into the old-style door, breaking it open. He and Fret went first, high and low again.

“Clear!”

We poured onto the rooftop. The area was steeped in nuclear fallout.

Facehopper quickly scanned the four edges of the roof. His gaze lingered on the southern quadrant, where another intact building resided in the shadow of the blast-damaged skyscraper. “This way!”

I brought the wounded Facehopper to the southern edge. The rooftop of the adjacent building, a small hotel of some kind, was precariously linked to this one via a collapsed neon sign: the lattice-like framework provided a bridge.

“Everyone, across. Go!” Facehopper said.

Mauler set down the EM emitters so he could equip his rifle. Then he watched the stairwell through his scope. Ghost and Trace joined him, as did Facehopper and I.

The other squad members began to hurry over the metal framework. The men moved in single file, balancing on the lower bars and using the uppermost ones for handholds.

Centurions raced onto the rooftop from the stairwell. Those of us with standard-issue rifles fired in rapid bursts, taking them out. Ghost and Trace meanwhile released single shots from their sniper rifles with deadly accuracy.

I was a little worried that combat robots might jet up the apartment and come at me from behind, but I knew my brothers crossing to the other building would watch my six.

“Ghost, Trace, go!” Facehopper said.

Our resident snipers obeyed as the rest of us continued covering the rear.

Facehopper glanced at me. “I’m going to have to do this alone.”

“You go first,” I told him. Then my weapon clicked.

I thought for a moment that Facehopper was going to order me to go instead, but then he tossed me a clip.

I bowed my head in thanks, and then reloaded to resume firing into the emerging Centurions.

Beside me, Facehopper clambered to his feet with a savage grunt of pain. He hop-limped toward the metallic framework connecting the two buildings, wrapped both arms around the upper bars, and pulled himself along.

I had to trust that he would make it; I concentrated on taking out the enemy with Mauler, wanting to do my best to ensure that Facehopper had the best chance.

In a few moments the leading petty officer's voice drifted to me. "I'm across!"

I exhaled in relief and glanced over my shoulder. Facehopper had taken cover behind a superstructure on the opposite building. Near him, Ghost and Trace were providing suppressive fire from other positions.

"Go!" I told Mauler as I continued to lay down cover fire.

Mauler scooped up the two EM emitters and tucked them under one armpit, then hurried onto the lattice-like framework joining the buildings.

From the corner of my eye I saw him suddenly spin backwards, likely from the momentum imparted by a powerful bullet strike. He landed on his back, dangerously balanced on one of the sign's narrow metal beams, four stories above the street. The emitters lay across his chest.

He didn't get up.

I turned fully toward Mauler and saw the blood pumping from his shoulder, darkening his cooling undergarment.

"Mauler!" I was about to go to him when he finally stirred.

"I'm all right," he said, hauling himself up with one arm.

I turned back toward the stairwell and fired rapidly, doing my best to cover him, well aware that I would soon exhaust my ammo.

"I'm across!" Mauler called moments later from the opposite building.

He was crouched behind the base of the toppled sign, where he had exchanged the emitters for his rifle once more. The rest of the squad remained in cover behind other superstructures, laying down suppressive fire.

I might as well get this done.

I slid the rifle strap over my shoulder, got up, ran to the edge, and leaped onto the metal framework spanning the two buildings. Occasionally latching onto the uppermost segments for balance, I sidestepped along the narrow lower bars. I didn't look down, because I never really liked heights. Dropping from shuttles in orbit, jumpjetting across buildings, climbing collapsed metallic frameworks four stories high, those were things other MOTHs might enjoy, but not me.

Gunfire whizzed past, coming from the stairwell and the streets. Dressed only in my cooling vest, I felt completely vulnerable up there.

A stab of pain told me when a bullet struck the side of my neck. I felt

the blood trickle down. That meant a glancing blow. If I'd felt a *gush*, on the other hand, I would have been in big trouble. Of course, a direct impact to the neck probably would have knocked me unconscious, if not killed me outright.

Unfortunately more bullets struck shortly thereafter. One hit my upper back just above my right shoulder blade. Another lodged in my buttocks.

They weren't armor piercing rounds, luckily, otherwise the bullets would have passed clean through my unarmored flesh and sent my body reeling. The blast damage would have ruptured nearby bones and organs.

I ignored the burning pain in my ass and upper back and crossed the rest of the way, pulling myself onto the opposite roof and ducking behind the base of the sign for cover.

Mauler was there beside me and he lowered his rifle to look my way. "Man, what a mess." He was staring at my neck. It probably seemed grisly.

"Just a flesh wound," I said.

"Lucky son of a bitch." He returned his attention to the Centurions on the adjacent building and let off a burst.

I glanced at the Skull Ship in the distance. Beneath the radioactive black cloud that hovered over the city, Bogey 1 ate up nearly half the horizon by then. If we didn't get out of there in the next thirty minutes, we were dead.

"Tactical retrograde to the stairwell, mates!" Facehopper shouted.

My brothers and I continued firing as we pulled back in turns toward the stairwell on the hotel rooftop. Despite the wound in his hip, Fret acted as Facehopper's crutch this time. Trace couldn't walk on his own anymore, either, so Ghost helped him.

Bomb fired a breach round into the stairwell door and we piled inside. The sound of gunfire abated, replaced by the noise of our heavy footfalls as, battered and beaten, we made our way down. We kept our guns raised as we zigzagged from landing to landing: there could be a squad of combat robots waiting around every flight, and the other robots would soon be in pursuit from above.

Just in front of me, Trace coughed up blood. Rad poisoning or lung injury? Either way, Ghost kept him propped up, despite the grisly gunshot wound in the albino's own hip. Not only that but Ghost's nose bled, as did his eyes of all things. I didn't know what was getting him through this other than sheer will and adrenaline.

I offered to take the Bengali off his hands but Ghost flat-out refused. "Don't insult me, bro."

Sheer will, indeed.

I concentrated on the stairwell, doing my best to ignore my own injuries. It wasn't easy. Each step down brought with it fresh jolts of pain.

We reached the closed doorway to the hotel lobby. The stairs continued down to the basement but Facehopper raised a fist, indicating a halt.

Facehopper motioned me forward since I was the closest to the door at that point. I set my ear against the steel and listened.

No sounds came from the lobby beyond. That meant one of two things. Behind the door awaited either an empty lobby, or a roomful of combat robots lying in ambush with their fully loaded rifles aimed squarely at the doorway.

I glanced at Facehopper and shook my head, gesturing at my ear as if to say, "Didn't hear a thing."

Facehopper gave the "back away from the door" hand signal. We did so, positioning ourselves at various points along the downward flight and out of the doorway's line of fire.

I glanced at the Korean-Chinese symbols painted on the sloping ceiling just above the current run.

"Facehopper," I said quietly, yet urgently, nodding toward the symbols.

"Pedway," Facehopper said, interpreting the symbols. He sounded relieved. "Thank you, Tahoe."

"Why do we care if these stairs lead to the pedway?" Fret asked.

I glanced at the tall man. "The entire downtown core of Shangde City is linked by the underground pedway system. It will lead us straight to the port."

"If the pedway is still intact, you mean," Fret said. "We did just detonate two underground nukes . . ."

I heard the muffled clang of metallic feet from beyond the closed door. Either the Centurions had just reached the lobby or they had grown tired of waiting for us. I also heard more footsteps coming down from the flights above.

"Move, mates!" Facehopper said.

We hurried down the stairs, limping and dragging each other along. Behind us the lobby door blew right off its hinges, judging from the sound. However, it was two flights from view by then so I couldn't be sure. The echo of metallic feet resounding from the concrete walls told me all I needed to know.

We reached the pedway system. Unlike in the stairwell, the emergency lights weren't operational. We activated the lamps taped to our rifles and sprinted forward.

Sections of the ceiling had collapsed, forcing us to slow in places as we picked our way past broken concrete and exposed rebar. Sometimes debris obscured the symbols labeling the street exits but eventually we always found the port symbol, if not at the current underground intersection, then the next one.

Never far behind us, the metallic footfalls echoed from the walls in constant accompaniment, reminding us of our deadly pursuers.

Finally we reached a wide concourse where half the roof had collapsed. On the far side, the port symbol was plastered above an unpowered escalator that led to the surface.

Aiding our wounded brothers, we limped up that escalator, the ominous clangs of the enemy still some distance behind us. We all had rad-induced nosebleeds by then. The intense radiation affected the robots too, I was sure, because a group of fully powered Centurions would have easily overtaken us by then.

We emerged into the ash-covered terminal area of the port and hurried past the smashed, unmanned kiosks. It was unnerving that we never once encountered any human bodies. I supposed those uncaptured refugees whom the Phants didn't incinerate had been vaporized by the nukes of the Brass instead. That, or fed to the Queen.

We passed through the unmanned security checkpoints and inactive scanners and burst onto the tarmac outside.

Everything was destroyed.

And I mean literally *everything*.

Blast craters littered the runways. Pieces of what must have been spacecraft strewed the asphalt. Some spaceliners were partially recognizable as such, though invariably had missing wings or broken fuselages. I spotted a large shuttle nearby, torn in half. On it were written the words "Juneyao Spacelines" in English beneath the Korean-Chinese equivalent.

Radioactive fallout sheathed the broken craft in a thin film of white ash so that the entire runway appeared a graveyard filled with giant, prehistoric bones. A ribcage here, a thigh there. Bones, bones, and more bones.

Of course any intact liners would have long ago left this moon. What the hell were we thinking by coming here?

There was nothing for us at this port. Not a thing.

We wouldn't be getting off the moon after all.

Despite everything we'd been through, our journey would end there.

It hardly seemed right.

The spirits certainly had an odd sense of humor.

The spirits . . . I'd be joining them, soon.

The only regret I had was that my children would be growing up without a father.

I used to worry that without an aReal I wouldn't be able to remember their faces before I died. The worry proved unfounded, because I could see them as vividly as if they were there right beside me. I even saw Tepin: she looked down at me, smiling proudly, eyes wet with tears.

Forgive me, Tepin.

A wave of dizziness overcame me and I collapsed on the tarmac, sending up small particles of white ash. The rad poisoning was getting to me. That, or the hopelessness of it all.

Beside me, other members of the squad exhibited similar signs of defeat: Bomb sat down with a huff; TJ uttered a quiet prayer.

I gazed skyward at our coming doom.

The Skull Ship filled the entire horizon.

So this was what it was like to know you had only a few minutes left to live. To be lying on your deathbed with the respirator disconnected and fully aware of your last moments. Knowing that there were so many things you still wanted to do in your life. So many things left unfinished.

And yet you were out of time.

I pushed away the thoughts of hopelessness and self-pity. Those things didn't matter anyway. What mattered was that I spent my last few minutes fighting.

With my brothers.

Mauler helped me to my feet.

"Let me go," Facehopper told Fret, who had been acting as his crutch the whole while.

Fret complied, letting Facehopper stand on his own.

Our leading petty officer passed his gaze from face to face. "It was a pleasure fighting with you all. The greatest pleasure. I know some of us have had our disagreements"—I suspected those words were for me—"but we've always been there for each other, in the end. Always. Just as we're here for

each other now.” Facehopper limped to a nearby blast crater and dropped. He trained his rifle on the terminal behind us. “Let’s show the enemy what it means to be MOTHs, mates!”

“Brothers to the end,” I said.

“*Brothers to the end.*”

We all followed Facehopper’s example and assumed firing positions inside the shallow blast crater, sending ash into the air as we dropped. We aimed our rifles at the terminal: when the Centurions came, they’d step headfirst into facefuls of lead.

Beside me, Mauler tossed aside the two EM emitters. We had no need of those anymore.

I ran my gaze across my brothers, wanting to see them all one last time before I died.

Ghost. Trace. Mauler. TJ. Bomb. Fret. Facehopper.

The incoming gunfire began.

Brothers to the end.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Rade

The three alien mechs stood on the Acceptor with their weapons pointed down at the teleportation device. They intended to destroy our only means of harming Bogey 2. We couldn't just shoot them down—all of our own weapons had overheated. Nor could we tackle them, because two ranks of crabs stood between the mechs and us.

But we weren't helpless.

Not by a long shot.

Acting on instinct and a sense of determination that spat in the face of all despair, I unleashed a horizontal jumpjet burst and broke through the crab ranks. I smashed into the first mech and on impact I redirected its cannon up and to the side.

The ZEUS activated its weapon and the ensuing particle beam cut the closely spaced second and third mechs in half, disintegrating the Phants inside.

I got lucky, and not just because of the shot: The alien operators aboard had likely been disoriented, and hadn't noticed that their mechs had teleported. If I had reached them just an instant later, the mechs probably would have succeeded in destroying the Acceptor.

I landed on that first ZEUS, pinning the enemy beneath my mech. I forced its weapon arm upward, keeping the cannon pointed away from the Acceptor and my allies.

Before the black mech could fire again, a particle beam activated from somewhere behind me and disintegrated most of the enemy's weapon, rendering it useless. One of my allies had a working particle cannon again.

The enemy mech shifted beneath me and managed to plant a metallic foot firmly against my chest. Before I could do anything I was rudely shoved backward.

The ZEUS rose.

I got up, too, expecting a fight.

But the black mech turned around and barged through the crabs that thronged the Acceptor. It was running away, apparently afraid of the working particle weapon one of my companions possessed.

That particle beam activated again. Azen himself was firing.

Two crabs between the black mech and Azen were cut in half; Azen steered the beam toward the fleeing enemy, but the black ZEUS had time to activate its energy shield and deflected the blow. The mech seemed headed for Fan and his team, and probably intended to reinforce them.

I remained on the Acceptor. I wanted to block other shock troops from teleporting down. The two dismembered black mechs were still on the disc, but the crabs, taking a cue from the combat robots before them, were already trying to drag the parts away. I fought off those alien entities, refusing to allow the damn things to gain a foothold.

I glanced toward the intact black mech in time to watch it reach Fan. The weaponless ZEUS knelt and, incredibly, opened its cockpit to allow Fan inside.

“Azen, shoot down that mech!” I transmitted.

“I am sorry, Rade,” Azen returned. “My cannon has already overheated again.”

So much for the vaunted alien weaponry.

I heard a racket of clattering pincers and mandibles behind me. Turning around, I watched as a thick mass of crabs surged from a side passage, cutting me off from the rest of the squad.

Something tackled me from behind and I landed facedown on the Acceptor. Before my aggressor could pin me, I slithered from its grasp and spun to face it; expecting a large crab, instead I found myself opposite the black mech, now piloted by Fan. That red, cyclopean sensor glowed in malevolent anticipation.

I swung my useless particle weapon into the black ZEUS like a club and the mech fell backward. I hit the giant form again and again, as hard as I could, but I didn’t make a dent. I kept glancing at the “overheated” indicator on my HUD, hoping the weapon would become available.

Eventually I had to take a step back—I was tiring myself out. Inside the cockpit sweat trickled down my face and along my ribs, and my breath came in ragged gasps.

Fan's mech lay prostrate before me at the edge of the Acceptor. One of its dark arms fumbled for something beyond the rim of the disc. I couldn't see what he was reaching for from here—maybe a crab body part to use as a club?

"Fan," I said, using the external speakers. "If you're still in there somewhere, the human part of you, resist. Fight against your possessor. We can still save you."

Nearby crabs attempted to haul me off the Acceptor and I repelled them before turning back to Fan.

And then I saw what he had been fumbling for: His mech had retrieved a swordlike particle weapon from the severed arm of a shock troop my company had taken down earlier. And though somewhat small for the mech's large metal hands, Fan managed to wield the weapon like a pistol. He sat up and immediately pointed it down at the Acceptor.

I moved forward and kicked his arm upward just in time. The particle beam narrowly missed my head, cutting a runnel into the ceiling.

Fan rose, barreling his mech into me. I stumbled backward but managed to stay on the Acceptor as he walloped my ZEUS several times. Evidently he was waiting for his newfound weapon's recharge period to pass. The inside of my cockpit rang with the blows.

He stepped backward abruptly and pointed the swordlike object right at my chest.

My arm unexpectedly shifted upward of its own accord and my energy shield activated.

Fan fired a millisecond later—the shield absorbed the blow.

"You're welcome," Surus said via the cockpit speakers.

"Don't ever take control without my permission again." I dashed forward and pummeled into the black ZEUS, forcing it to the ground.

"*Humans*," Surus said as I fought. "Your species is so unappreciative."

I dug my knees into the chest area of the enemy ZEUS and struck the head a few times with my makeshift club. Then I folded the cannon away and, covering the mech's cyclopean vision sensor with one hand, I reached for Fan's swordlike particle weapon, intending to wrench it free.

A crab decided to latch onto my leg just then and I was unceremoniously hauled from the mech.

Before I could escape from the crab, the black ZEUS lifted its swordlike particle weapon toward me—

I rolled to the side, bringing the crab with me, and activated my shield.

Those pincers abruptly lost their grip. They had been severed from the rest of the crab's body, which didn't exist anymore.

Thanks, Fan.

I kicked the pincers toward Fan's mech but the ZEUS was already running at me. Fan struck my body just as I stood up and, before I could react, he lifted my mech over his head and smashed me down on one knee. The crook of my lower back landed squarely against the metal, and the internal cockpit cocoon bent my body backward to match the outer posture of the mech. The alien tech seemed to be missing the injury-prevention safeguards found in regular ATLAS 5s, because the actuators bent me so far backward it felt like my lower back was going to break.

The black ZEUS released me and I landed flat on the Acceptor. My back throbbed.

I tried to get up, but I moved sluggishly because of the searing pain.

Fan lifted his swordlike particle weapon toward me . . .

Shaw's mech thrust into him from the side. She had finally broken through the thickened alien ranks.

Two crabs abruptly latched onto my ankles, one on either leg, and began dragging my ZEUS from the Acceptor.

I still couldn't get up. My back hurt too much.

"Do you need assistance, Rade Galaal?" Surus said, maybe remembering my previous reprimand.

Exhausted and in pain, I felt like telling Surus to pilot the mech, but I wondered whether I'd actually get control back if I did that. Besides, my pride wouldn't let me.

"I'm good," I told the green.

"Are you certain?"

"Yeah, I got this, damn it." I'd just have to fight through the hurt. I was used to doing that, after all.

I struggled against the pull of the crabs and managed to remain on the Acceptor. But I still couldn't get up. I watched helplessly as Fan and Shaw wrestled. Fan appeared to be winning. His ZEUS repeatedly slammed hers into the disc.

"Give me control," Surus said. "When you have recovered, I will return command of the mech to you."

"I said I got this!" My gaze was focused on Fan. He was battering

Shaw. *My* Shaw.

Anger bubbled inside me, though it was quickly quenched when I tried to sit up and the pain stabbed me anew.

I glanced through the crab ranks, desperately looking for my squad brothers, but I saw only a thick, seething mass of mandibles and claws.

“Guys, we could use some help here,” I transmitted through gritted teeth.

“Doing our best, Rage,” Chief Bourbonjack returned. “Damn things keep trying to drag the bomb away.”

Translation: No help was coming from that quarter.

“Obviously you do not ‘have this,’ as you say,” Surus persisted, “if you have to ask your squadmates for help.”

Surus was right. I might have to let the green take charge after all.

No. You can do this, I told myself.

Fan continued to pound Shaw’s ZEUS.

My limbs began moving of their own accord, and I knew Surus was wrenching control of the mech away from me again.

The anger arose once more, stronger this time, fed as much by Surus’s disobedience as my outrage at seeing Shaw beaten.

No one pummels my girl.

Ignoring the throbbing pain in my back, I broke free of my crab captors and hauled myself upright, tearing control of the ZEUS away from Surus.

Fan aimed the particle weapon at Shaw’s cockpit—

I plowed into his mech, knocking the swordlike weapon away. The two of us fell onto the Acceptor.

“You will ask your squadmates for help, and yet you won’t accept mine,” Surus said peevishly as I pounded Fan’s mech.

“Quit whining.” I barely blocked a return punch from Fan’s ZEUS.

“Rade, my cannon has power again!” Shaw sent.

I wrapped my hands around the hips of Fan’s mech and I swung around so that he was on top of me. Straining against the pain, I lifted the torso of his ZEUS to give Shaw a clear line of fire.

She unleashed her particle cannon.

The upper half of Fan’s mech disintegrated. Inside the cockpit, all that remained of the pilot were two severed feet.

Shaw’s blood-soaked ZEUS came to my side. She gazed down at him.

“I had to do it,” she sent, sounding contrite. “I had to.”

“There was nothing you could do,” I agreed, clambering to my feet. The pain in my back had diminished somewhat, thanks in no small part to the adrenaline I was sure. That, or some analgesic administered by my mech’s cockpit.

Worried that some Phant might still possess the brain case of the enemy unit, I latched onto the metallic shell of the damaged ZEUS and swung it over the heads of the crabs. The thing landed out of view in their midst.

I retrieved the swordlike particle weapon and used it to hold the crabs at bay. Shaw fought by my side, though she was careful not to use her cannon, apparently worried it would overheat.

Other particle beams sporadically swept through the horde, so I knew firing capability had intermittently begun to return to my brothers; unfortunately, those cannons quickly overheated again. Even so, in a few moments the remainder of the company had joined us on the Acceptor and the bomb was placed.

“Time to finish this thing,” I said.

“Move off the Acceptor!” Azen sent. “Unless you care to teleport with the bomb! Form a ring around the disc—keep those crabs at bay!”

We fought our way off the disc, forming a “ring” with our mechs as Azen had requested. Shaw was on one side of me, Hijak the other. I wouldn’t have preferred it any other way.

The crabs continued their assault, joined occasionally by ATLAS mechs and Centurions, which we either had to wrestle or disintegrate, depending on our weapon status.

I lost the swordlike weapon shortly after stepping from the Acceptor, no thanks to Surus. A crab had moved into my path, and Surus immediately overrode control of my arms and torso, swinging the weapon toward the creature. But I’d already spotted another crab approaching from the side, and by pivoting our torso like that, Surus had effectively placed the weapon in the second crab’s claws. The creature promptly accepted the gift, wrenching the swordlike object from my grasp and tossing it over the horde so that it landed somewhere on the far side of the chamber.

“Sorry,” Surus said sheepishly.

My main particle cannon was still overheated, so it was back to battling claws and mandibles with punches and kicks, then.

I bashed aside the two crabs and glanced over my shoulder. Everyone had evacuated the Acceptor so that only the bomb remained.

“Now would be a good time to send up our little parting gift, Azen,” Chief Bourbonjack sent.

No answer. I glanced at Azen’s blood-splattered mech. I knew it was his because of the label my HUD placed above the unit. Like the rest of us, Azen defended the disc, helping prevent the crabs from reaching the bomb and hauling it away.

A claw struck me hard in the face and I tumbled backward onto the Acceptor. The crab tried to pin me down. I struggled, worried that I would be teleported up to the ship with the bomb.

In that moment the “overheated” indicator vanished from my HUD; I mounted the particle cannon.

“Wait—” Surus said.

But I had already depressed the trigger, and the particle beam rended the crab in two. The “overheated” indicator reappeared immediately thereafter.

“You should have let it cool a few minutes more,” Surus finished.

I felt a surge of anger. “Bit late to tell me that now, isn’t it?” I stood up, moving off the Acceptor, swinging the cannon like an oversized baseball bat at the crabs before me.

“Azen!” Chief Bourbonjack sent. “Whenever you’re ready . . .”

“Something’s wrong,” Azen returned. “The bomb isn’t responding to my commands. The crabs must have damaged the arming mechanism.”

I felt a sinking feeling in my stomach. The kind I got when a mission was about to fail. Were we going to mess up this one, too?

“What the hell are you saying, Azen?” Chief Bourbonjack transmitted.

“Someone will have to teleport up with the bomb,” Azen replied. “And manually fire a particle weapon into its core.”

Damn it. Nothing was ever easy, of course. But I had come to expect that in my line of work.

I turned around and stepped onto the Acceptor. “I’ll go.”

“Rade, no,” Shaw sent.

Chief Bourbonjack moved onto the Acceptor beside me. “Stand down, Rage. I got this.”

I advanced toward the bomb. “Sorry Chief, I don’t have to follow your orders. You’re just a grunt this time round, remember? I’m going.”

The Chief positioned his mech in front of mine. “Can’t let you do it, Rage.”

“Neither of you can go,” Azen transmitted while bashing aside a crab.

“Both of your particle cannons are overheated. Someone else must do it. And unfortunately, according to the team roster it appears only one of us has a weapon that’s currently active.”

“That’d be mine,” Shaw sent, climbing her mech onto the Acceptor. “I knew I was saving it for something. Rade, Chief, get off the Acceptor.”

“Stand down, Shaw,” I told her severely, punching a crab that had sneaked onto the Acceptor with her. “You of all people can’t do this.”

Shaw opened a private vid call so that I could see her face in the corner of my HUD. “Good-bye, Rade.” She smiled sadly on the feed. “I’ll miss you. We had a good run.”

A glowing green liquid began flowing from her mech, emerging from beneath her cockpit as if the ZEUS had sprung a leak.

I took a step toward her, dodging a swipe from another crab that had breached our defensive ring. The Chief immediately leaped onto the entity and wrestled it.

“It has to be me who does this,” Shaw continued. “You know that. It always had to be. This is my lot in life. My destiny. I’m here to save others.”

“This isn’t your lot at all,” I said. The last of the glowing liquid trickled from her mech, and the puddle that had formed began to flow off the Acceptor. “What is this?”

“I instructed Halios to leave the mech. It seemed needless for him to die, too.”

“Always thinking of others before yourself, huh Shaw? Let someone else make the sacrifice this time. Anyone but you.” I had a vague notion of drawing this conversation out until another team member’s particle weapon cooled. If I could have taken her weapon, I would have, but the cannons were locked to their respective units.

“You’re just stalling,” Shaw said, seeing right through me as always. “Putting us all at risk.”

Around us, the company continued to defend the Acceptor from the horde.

“Are you ready, Shaw?” Azen sent over the main comm.

“I am,” Shaw returned. “Tell your agents to clear the target Acceptor.”

“Belay that,” I told Azen. “Shaw’s not going. We’ll just have to wait until someone else can fire.”

Shaw still had the vid call open and she spoke over the private line: “Please Rade, let me go. You know we could have never been together

anyway.” She was referring to our Naval ratings; we’d always have to perform our jobs worlds apart. “It’s better this way.”

But I refused to listen. I knew she’d say anything right then to make sure I stayed behind. She had done the same thing to me before, the first time I’d lost her, and I wasn’t going to buy her arguments again.

I decided in that moment if she was going to die, then damn it, I wouldn’t let her do it alone.

“You always have to be the hero, don’t you?” I said over the main comm so that everybody could hear. “Always have to sacrifice yourself. Well, not this time. I won’t go through the pain of losing you again. I refuse. You go, I go. Azen, if you send her up, you’re going to damn well send me, too.”

“Wait, don’t I have a say in this?” Surus interrupted.

And then my stalling tactics backfired. Before any of us could react, a massive slug swept into the room at high speed from one of the side corridors. Its body was about the same height as our mechs, though it was twenty times longer.

The thing crushed any crabs that lay in its path and pummeled through our ring formation onto the Acceptor, smashing the bomb aside.

The blow sent me hurtling backward through several ranks of crabs. Body parts broke off or were shoved away all around me. Eventually I landed and a thick cluster of the aliens basically pounced on me. Even though crabs couldn’t harm my mech, the sheer weight of them all pinned me down. It was only after much effort I tore free.

My vid call with Shaw had cut out when the slug hit me, so the first thing I did was to try to reach her.

“Shaw, are you all right?” I sent.

No answer.

I cleared a space around me and scanned the immediate area. I had been hurtled to the far side of the chamber. My brothers and our allies had suffered similar fates, and battled in small groups at various points throughout the chamber, mostly against the crabs. The slug blocked the Acceptor. Chief Bourbonjack and Azen were trying to draw it away.

I couldn’t see Shaw in all that mess, but according to the HUD map she was in one of the side tunnels. She’d probably been flung there when the slug impacted the Acceptor.

“Shaw, are you all right?” I sent again, taking down more crabs.

Still no answer. Her green dot wasn't moving.

I was about to go to her when I spotted the particle bomb; three crabs were methodically dragging the heavy device into a nearby corridor.

"Someone get the device," Azen sent.

"We are the closest," Surus said privately.

The green was right. Additionally, the crab ranks were relatively thin between the bomb and our ZEUS. We had a small window of opportunity, and if we didn't act while that window was available, we might irretrievably lose the device.

But what about Shaw?

Choose, Rade.

I had wondered earlier what decision I would make, given the choice of saving Shaw or humanity.

It was all crystal clear to me now.

This was my fault. I had taken too long arguing with Shaw, and because of that the mission was quickly unraveling.

I had to set things right.

I steered toward the particle bomb.

"Hang in there, Shaw," I sent her.

She would have wanted this, I knew. Besides, she was a grown woman, inside the cockpit of a superpowerful alien mech. She could fend for herself, at least for a while.

My path quickly became clogged with members of the horde. I fought my way forward, stepping over one of the large architectural ribs in the floor, and dove into the side corridor where the aliens had dragged the bomb.

I batted the crabs away from the device in moments, but when I attempted to lift it I was stymied. The damn thing was far too heavy.

A shadow fell upon me; I turned around, wondering what evil I had to face next, only to discover Bender's golden mech.

The two of us folded away our overheated cannons and hoisted the incredibly heavy payload between us.

"Particle bomb secured," Bender sent over the comm.

We slowly made our way back into the main vault, kicking and stomping any crabs that got in the way. When the fighting became too intense, we lowered the device and bashed with our fists.

I wasn't sure how we'd get it onto the Acceptor because the slug was still blocking half of the disc with its body. Maybe we could sneak the bomb

onto the far side or something.

On my map, the dot representing Shaw still hadn't moved, nor did she answer my comms. I was seriously starting to worry, as these ZEUS units didn't seem to have the inherent safety mechanisms of ATLAS mechs, and it was possible she might have broken her neck when the slug had bashed her aside. Her vitals were still indicated in green, but even so I had to wonder if the aliens had gotten that part of our tech right, given the other shortcomings.

Most of the other members of the company converged on the slug and seemed intent on removing it from the Acceptor. Good.

Hijak joined Bender and me, and positioned himself in front to help clear the way.

"Hijak!" I sent him. "Take over!"

He took my spot on the heavy device, and together Hijak and Bender carried the load forward.

I had done what I set out to do. Hijak and Bender could handle things from here.

I turned around.

"Wait, where you going, Rage?" Hijak sent.

I was already bashing my way toward a side corridor. "To find Shaw!"

I spotted a swordlike particle weapon lying on the cave floor—probably the very same one that had been knocked from my grasp earlier.

I scooped up the weapon and fired into the seething masses.

According to my HUD, Shaw was on the move in the side passage, except she wasn't coming toward this chamber but rather *away* from it.

I dove into the tunnel, shooting and bashing my way forward. I refrained from using the particle weapon as I grew closer, not wanting to accidentally hit her ZEUS.

Finally I spotted her mech up ahead, located amid a knot of crabs. Her once-golden hull was steeped in black blood and barely glowed. The crabs dragged the lifeless ZEUS toward a host slug that lurked farther down the tunnel, seemingly waiting for her. I didn't know what the slug planned to do with Shaw but I wasn't about to wait and find out.

I felt a sudden surge of rage as I approached.

"Get your claws off her!" With the swordlike particle weapon I severed the umbilicals of the crabs in one smooth sweep, and then I plowed through the corpses to stand at her side.

I glanced at her ZEUS, making a quick survey for any abnormal limb

positions.

I forced back the next wave of crabs, firing a warning shot toward the host slug, and then I knelt beside the mech.

“Shaw, are you all right?”

She didn’t answer.

Abruptly my left arm shot sideways on its own, connecting with a crab and sending its body hurtling into the wall. The creature had evaded my notice entirely.

“Thanks,” I told Surus, watching as the crab’s fissured carapace slid lifelessly to the floor.

I waited the requisite five-second cooldown period, fired off another shot against the incoming crabs, then tucked the swordlike weapon beneath one arm, lifted her ZEUS, and made my way back toward the chamber. I seriously hoped I wasn’t aggravating any injury she might have.

My movements were slow and plodding thanks to the weight of her mech. Crabs assailed me and I was forced to repeatedly set down Shaw to deal with them. I used the swordlike particle weapon with impunity, striking at the distant source slug whenever possible. Eventually the larger entity faded from this dimension in the way that only slugs could. Its linked crabs unfortunately remained to harass me.

As I was lifting Shaw’s ZEUS into my arms for my latest drive toward the Acceptor chamber, she stirred. “Whoa. What the heck?”

“There you are,” I sent, lowering her. “Anything broken?” I smacked a crab’s claw from my face and lashed out with the particle weapon.

“No,” she returned. “Last thing I remember was that slug ramming into the Acceptor. I must have blacked out somewhere along the way.”

“Yeah, doesn’t surprise me. These ZEUS mechs seem to be missing the usual pilot safety mechanisms.”

She scrambled to her feet, bashing aside a claw that came at me from behind. “I appreciate your coming back for me, but what’s the status on the bomb? I hope you didn’t put the mission at risk to save me.”

“Not at all.” I unleashed the swordlike particle weapon at an incoming wave of crabs. “I left the device in the capable hands of Hijak and Bender.”

“Azen, is the bomb away?” she sent over the main comm.

Chief Bourbonjack was the one who answered. “We’re working on it!”

Together we bashed our way past another rank of crabs.

“Why didn’t your mech’s AI take over when you were under?” I asked

her.

“Another difference from ATLAS 5s,” Shaw returned, “is that the AIs of these mechs won’t automatically seize control if a Phant isn’t aboard when the human pilot becomes incapacitated.”

“Nice.”

Side by side, Shaw and I finally fought our way into the Acceptor chamber.

The place was a mess. Crabs continued to swarm in from the tunnels, along with Centurions and ATLAS mechs. The previous slug was gone, but another slug had appeared for the company to fight, this one white hot—in burrowing mode. That would explain the new, large sinkhole that had been drilled into the floor beside the Acceptor. The slug had likely been aiming for the teleportation disc itself, probably hoping to melt it, but the creature had fortunately missed. Incidentally, more crabs flooded into the vault from that sinkhole, further reinforcing the horde.

Azen and the others stood on the Acceptor; they appeared thoroughly occupied defending the teleportation disc.

The particle bomb wasn’t there.

I scanned the room, searching for it. I spotted Hijak and Bender, who should have carried the payload to the teleporter by then. The Chief was with them. All three had been separated from the bomb by several ranks of crabs—a group of the alien entities were dragging the device away at that moment.

“What the hell happened?” I sent Bender as I ripped a crab apart in front of me.

“Hey, our cannons are overheated, okay?” Bender returned. “Without you to clear our way like you were supposed to, we had to keep lowering the bomb. Then that new slug came, and the damn crabs overwhelmed us. If the Chief hadn’t come to our aid, the bomb would be long gone by now.”

Shaw and I fought our way toward them.

“I thought you said you didn’t put the mission at risk to save me, Rade?” Shaw sent.

I ignored the jibe.

Puddles of blue Phants roved the chamber floor here and there, sourced from the smashed combat robots scattered throughout the room. Without the emitter installed in my jumpsuit, I knew those Phants could easily seep inside my ZEUS and incinerate me, so I either avoided them or “snipped” them from this universe with the particle weapon.

Finally we reached Bender, Hijak, and the Chief, and together made a coordinated push for the bomb.

We reached it.

“Catch!” I sent Hijak as I hurled the swordlike weapon toward him.

I wrapped both hands of my ZEUS around the provided handles on this side of the bomb, while Shaw did the same on the other. I would have preferred that Bender or Chief Bourbonjack had grabbed it instead, but there wasn’t time to argue.

We hoisted the heavy device between us and proceeded forward. Hijak and Bender kept our fore clear, while the Chief guarded our rear.

About half of the surviving ZEUS mechs made a sudden sally from the disc, forcing the white-hot slug to one side of the chamber. The trailing cords yanked several of the linked crabs sideways, and the things were pulled right from our paths.

The other golden mechs stayed on the Acceptor to keep the remaining crabs at bay. Sometimes our allies fired their particle cannons at the enemy during cooldown periods, which caused their weapons to overheat again, but for the most part the company relied upon the tried-and-true bashing method.

Pincers and mandibles continuously scraped our mech’s hulls, as did bullets from the occasional ATLAS Gatling, but Shaw and I kept moving forward, staying close to Hijak and Bender. We carried the device over the riblike projections in the floor, and after several grueling moments we finally brought the bomb around the sinkhole and onto the Acceptor.

We lowered it near the center of the teleporter.

I was just about to order Hijak to return the swordlike weapon when Surus informed me: “Our particle cannon is ready to fire.”

“Perfect timing.” I unfolded my cannon and remounted it, then spun toward Azen. “I’m going up. Check your roster, Azen. My cannon is good. No arguing this time. Get that destination Acceptor clear for me!”

I didn’t glance at Shaw’s mech but I could almost feel her cyclopean eye on me.

“I have relayed the order to my agents on the Ship,” Azen sent. “I will apprise you when the destination is clear. Be ready.” Azen turned to go, then paused. “You have my thanks, Rade Galaal. Humanity, and all my kind, will remember this day.”

Azen hurried from the Acceptor along with the others who were guarding it, and stepped into the thick of the horde.

Chief Bourbonjack lingered on the teleporter alongside Shaw.

I spoke first, preempting him. “I know what you’re going to say, Chief. But there’s no time. Another slug could come burrowing up through the Acceptor at any moment and end this mission once and for all. I have to go now, while there’s still a chance.”

His mech nodded, resting a golden hand upon my shoulder. “Give ’em hell.”

He turned around, dashed to the edge of the disc, and leaped into the horde.

Unsurprisingly, Shaw remained on the teleporter beside me. She was the only one left.

I initiated a vid call, wanting to see her face before I died. “Get off the Acceptor, Shaw.”

She ignored the command, staying to strike down a crab that had managed to slip by the defenders. On the vid, she bit her lip as she ripped the creature apart in a stream of gore.

“You go, I go,” she said.

“It’s my turn this time around, Shaw.”

“*You go, I go,*” she insisted.

I gazed at her features on the vid stream one last time. I longed to see that dimple of joy in her cheek, but there would be no smiling, no happiness, not then.

“I was afraid you’d say that,” I sent. “I’m sorry, Shaw.”

I ended the vid call and hit her ZEUS squarely in the chest, hard enough to knock it off the platform and into a cluster of crabs. The alien entities swarmed over her. I knew it wouldn’t be long before she fought them off. I didn’t have much time.

“Come on, Azen!” I sent.

“My agents are almost done,” Azen returned. “Prepare yourself.”

“Surus, you should leave too,” I told my onboard Phant.

“Unfortunately, I feel it is my duty to go with you and ensure that you properly complete the mission.”

“Whatever you want.” I said it like I didn’t care, but in truth I was glad for the company. At least I wouldn’t die alone. “Never thought I’d consider a Phant heroic.”

“And I never believed I would feel the same way about a human.”

I didn’t get any messages of farewell. My brothers were probably too

shocked to say anything, not to mention occupied. Good-byes were always the hardest thing for the brotherhood. Especially good-byes of the permanent kind. They probably fought with tears in their eyes at that very moment. Lui. Bender. Manic. All of them. Too proud to admit it. Too proud to say good-bye and risk having me hear their sobs.

Good-bye, my brothers.

"My agents have cleared the destination Acceptor," Azen sent.

I aimed my particle cannon at the bomb's core. "Send me up."

"No Rade!" I heard Shaw's voice over the comm.

Farewell, universe.

Before I could teleport, something hit me hard in the back of the knees and I fell.

Shaw.

She hit me again and I toppled entirely.

She swung me off the Acceptor, taking my place. She must have told Azen to initiate the teleport, or perhaps Azen had only then completed my initial transport request, because in that moment her ZEUS, the bomb, and all the other debris on the Acceptor blinked from existence.

Shaw was gone.

"No!" I pulled myself onto the Acceptor after her. "Send me up Azen! Do it now! Before the bomb detonates!"

I didn't teleport.

"Damn it, Azen!" I swung my particle cannon toward the green's mech below. "Send me up! I *will* shoot you!"

"Rade," Azen transmitted, fending off a crab. "I can't. If it hasn't already detonated, the bomb is most likely blocking the destination Acceptor. The teleporter won't respond to my commands."

"Find a way!" I was forced to beat aside a crab myself. "*Make* it respond. Get me up there!"

I kept my particle cannon aimed at Azen, and I watched him fight. When he answered a few moments later, his voice sounded sorrowful. "Rade, I can no longer send you. I just received word: It's done."

The phrase didn't register. Not right away. "What do you mean, it's done?"

"There is no ship to teleport *to*. We have succeeded. The bomb has detonated. Bogey 2 is no more."

That sinking feeling I got when one of my brothers died? Well it hit me

right in the gut, stronger than ever before, and I fell to my knees on the Acceptor.

I felt suddenly claustrophobic inside that mech. I had to get out. I didn't care if one of those crabs rushed me and tore my head off. I didn't care about anything anymore. I just wanted out. Now.

I forced the cockpit to iris open and I stumbled forth in my jumpsuit. My legs failed me and I collapsed onto the disc. I wanted to take my helmet off, too, but I didn't have the strength. I did manage to open my faceplate, however, and the rank smell of alien blood and ripped entrails flooded my nostrils.

Suited my mood.

And so I lay there, prostrate, while the battle raged around me. The mission was won, but the surviving hordes continued to fight, as we expected them to.

Surus was compelled to protect me as crabs spilled onto the disc.

I hardly noticed. Like I said, I didn't care anymore.

Shaw.

I'd lost her again.

For good this time.

She wasn't coming back.

I just wanted to die.

How could the story end this way? How could it?

Around me the sounds of battle diminished as the world seemed to fall away.

Shaw. My Shaw.

Why did everyone I cared for always have to die?

And why did it always have to be my fault?

I was vaguely aware as another ZEUS mounted the Acceptor beside me, striding past Surus.

I purposely didn't glance at the newcomer. It was one of my brothers, of course. Coming to comfort me. Maybe the Chief.

I hoped whoever it was went away soon.

I didn't want anyone's pity.

Not then.

Pity. The thought made me snarl.

I hated all of them.

Brothers? These were no brothers to me.

How could they let Shaw die?

No brother of mine would have allowed that.

Worst of all, how could *I* have allowed it?

“I’m sorry, Rade,” a woman’s voice came over my helmet speakers.

It was impossible.

Startled, I looked up and found myself gazing into the cyclopean vision sensor of the newcomer, whose mech had knelt beside me. I couldn’t believe the label my HUD displayed above that golden head.

“Shaw?”

“Yes,” Shaw said.

Immense joy filled me. I wanted to reach out and hug her. I wanted to dance with her ZEUS and kiss it. I wanted to take her away from all this blood and death, and hold her and never let go.

But then I realized something, and my joy faded.

“If it wasn’t you, then who—” In the heat of the moment, I hadn’t actually noticed the callsign of the mech that had replaced mine.

Using my aReal, I quickly scanned the row of names assigned to the vitals of my squad mates.

“Where’s Hijak?” I said.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Tahoe

Trapped there on the surface of that doomed moon, making our last stand in the ruins of the spaceport, I heard a voice at the back of my mind.

A voice of hope.

I dismissed it and continued firing over the rim of the blast crater at the Centurions as they breached the terminal. There was no hope, not then, nor any way out. I would die with my brothers.

The voice came back, stronger this time.

Never give up, Tahoe. Never never never.

I realized the voice didn't belong to me, but to Alejandro.

Motion drew my eyes away from the terminal and I saw something unexpected in the distance.

A white buffalo stood amid the ruins. It lifted its head to gaze at me.

I met its blue eyes. I had never seen an animal of such beauty in all my life. I was reminded immediately of Alejandro as I remembered him in my near death experience. It was him. It had to be. He was trying to give me a message of some kind. Trying to tell me something.

Never give up, Tahoe.

I told myself I wasn't giving up. That I was going down in a blaze of glory with my brothers.

Yet a part of me knew it was a lie. I *was* giving up in a way, by believing there was nothing I could do to get out of this, and by choosing to die fighting when instead I should have chosen to fight dying.

But what could I do? This was the end. Bogey 1 would soon impact the moon. There was no way out.

Never give up, Tahoe.

Alejandro was right. I had to at least *try* to find a way out. All of us did.

Because we weren't trying, right then. We were just sitting there, resigned to our fate, waiting for death to take us.

There had to be at least one craft still working among the many hangars. Something the refugees had overlooked.

I knew we were tired. Wounded. Exhausted. Suffering from radiation sickness.

But *we could not give up*.

I blinked. The white buffalo was gone. In its place remained the broken fuselage of the "Juneyao Spacelines" craft.

Alejandro wouldn't have chosen that spot randomly. But why appear there, in front of a vessel damaged beyond all repair?

Wait a moment. Perhaps we didn't need an entire *spaceliner* . . .

"What about a lifeboat?" I said as the gunfire ricocheted from the asphalt around me.

"What are you mumbling about, Cyclone?" Bomb said.

"A lifeboat!" I shouted. "We can use a lifeboat to get out of here!"

Facehopper shot me a look. "He's right. All the major spaceliners come standard with emergency lifeboats."

"Yeah, but without booster rockets a lifeboat is useless," TJ said, not looking from his gun sights. "It'll never reach escape velocity."

I glanced at the damaged hangars around us; in seconds I spotted what I was looking for. "Lifeboats have the same booster interface as shuttles, don't they?"

TJ finally looked my way. His brow was furrowed. "They do."

I nodded toward the hangar bay I'd picked out. One wall was blasted clear away, revealing a stack of booster rockets and the robotic loading arm beside them.

"TJ, with Cyclone!" Facehopper said above the gunfire. "Get us a lifeboat!"

"Follow me," I told TJ. "I know exactly where to find one." I blinked away a wave of pain and dizziness as I stood.

While the rest of the squad covered us, TJ and I raced across the tarmac to the broken fuselage of the Juneyao spaceliner.

The two of us emerged from the wreckage moments later, housed within the cockpit of a lifeboat.

Thank you, Alejandro.

"Get the squad first," I told TJ, who piloted.

“I plan to.”

We skimmed across the runway; as the lifeboat approached the squad, gunfire drilled into the metallic bulkheads with loud raps. A crater appeared in the glass window.

“Fuckers,” TJ said.

He landed the craft near the squad and opened the side airlock. Yes, an *airlock*, rather than the typical ramp you’d find on a military drop craft. We were flying in a civilian vessel now, with a pressurized interior—it was assumed the occupants wouldn’t be wearing jumpsuits. Even so, there were two emergency suits in a closet situated beside the airlock. Probably not strength-enhanced. And I didn’t see any jetpacks. Nor proper utility belts.

I went to the open airlock and knelt to issue covering fire while my six remaining brothers hurried inside. Gunfire ricocheted from the hull beside me but I let the enemy have it.

Ghost, helping Trace, was hit yet again. Blood gushed from his upper thigh but he didn’t falter as he carried Trace inside.

Once everyone was aboard, TJ gunned the throttle, leaving the airlock open. The craft roared across the runway, weaving between the bones of the other crafts in our way. A missile slammed into a broken fuselage beside us, barely missing the lifeboat.

In moments we were out of range of the attackers.

About thirty seconds later we reached the booster rocket hangar and TJ landed the lifeboat inside.

Fret and I leaped from the airlock. I went to the stack of booster rockets and confirmed that the top two were full, and then I joined Fret beside the robotic loading arm bolted into the ground nearby. The arm still had power, courtesy of the onboard magnesium-ion batteries, and the trickiest part was figuring out how to engage it. Fret and I were able to decipher the Korean-Chinese symbology between us, and the robot arm set to work.

The loading process was automated so the two of us returned to the lifeboat.

Once inside, we waited impatiently with the rest of the squad, but before the boosters were fully attached the gunfire from the Centurions resumed.

TJ began sealing the inner and outer doors of the airlock.

“Keep it open!” the injured Ghost said with surprising vehemence. “We have to protect the boosters!” He still bled from his nose and eyes.

TJ cut the power to the airlock, leaving the hatches half open.

Blue undergarments soaked red with blood, Ghost and Trace assumed sniping positions on either side of the inner airlock, and began firing into the Centurions, buying us precious time. I waited for a missile to come in, but one never did: Ghost and Trace must have taken out any enemy rocketeers before they could fire.

“Boosters attached,” the lifeboat’s male AI announced.

TJ lifted the craft, spun it around, and throttled forward. The bulky lifeboat burst from the hangar, knocking over several Centurions.

TJ shut the airlock as he zigzagged the vessel between the broken spacecraft on the runway.

There was no separation between the cockpit and passenger areas of the lifeboat, allowing everyone aboard to see through the main window. I stared through the glass at the Skull Ship ahead. It devoured the entire horizon, and I knew it would strike the moon momentarily.

“Don’t launch yet, TJ,” Facehopper said. “Not until we’re out of range of the enemy serpents.”

TJ continued thrusting forward. The ride smoothed out as we left behind most of the debris.

Beside the airlock, Ghost and Trace lay back, closing their eyes. For a second I thought they might die—I wished I had an aReal to check their vitals.

Ignoring my own injuries, I unbuckled myself and helped each of them into a free seat. Both of my brothers left trails of blood in their wake. Not good.

I began opening up the floor panels—I wanted to find a medkit before we launched.

“That’s good enough, TJ,” Facehopper said. “Prepare to launch.”

I glanced toward the cockpit. The lifeboat cleared the far end of the runway and continued on into the unpaved land beyond.

“TJ?”

The pilot ignored Facehopper and kept applying thrust. TJ stared mindlessly at the all-consuming Skull Ship ahead of us.

“TJ!” Facehopper said.

“Sorry.” TJ shook his head like he was snapping out of some kind of trance. The radiation poisoning was affecting him, obviously. He brought the lifeboat to a halt.

“Cyclone.” Facehopper turned toward me. “Get yourself buckled in. You can scavenge for a medkit later.”

I gave him a defiant look but then reluctantly slid the floor panels closed. I stood, blinking away a fresh wave of dizziness, and buckled myself in as ordered. I shifted uncomfortably, unable to find a position that didn’t aggravate the gunshot wound and insect bites in my butt.

“What about the city’s automated air defenses?” Mauler said.

“The nukes dropped on Shangde last week took care of those,” Facehopper said.

“We hope,” Bomb said.

“We hope,” Facehopper agreed.

Because if those reprogrammed air defenses remained active, we’d be shot down before getting anywhere near orbit.

TJ repositioned the lifeboat for launch, pointing the cockpit toward the heavens. Then he waited for Facehopper to give the command.

“Gun it,” Facehopper said.

TJ activated the booster rockets.

We were slammed into our seat backs by the G forces. A fresh outpouring of blood flowed from my nostrils and I blinked as my headache intensified. All of my wounds throbbed painfully in time to my heartbeat.

Through a side portal I watched as we ripped through the radioactive black cloud that sheathed the city, leaving it far behind.

No air defenses fired.

Beyond the edges of the cloud I saw the Skull Ship. A wave of debris erupted from the ship then, and I realized the impossibly large vessel had finally slammed into the moon’s surface.

As our lifeboat rose higher and higher, the scene below became increasingly surreal.

The Skull Ship crumpled against the surface as the flying debris consumed the bogey. The ground itself seemed to recede as if the impact had shoved it forcibly away, but then the surface rebounded and, without any further warning, the entire moon broke apart.

Large shards of rock and metal rose skyward, pursuing our mad flight.

Not something I saw every day.

Not something I hoped to ever see again.

In moments, the booster rockets cut out and weightlessness took over. There was no artificial grav, not on these crafts.

I wiped the blood from my beneath my nostrils. The sanguine fluid flowed and lingered around my finger because of the surface tension.

I couldn't remember the nausea associated with weightlessness ever being this bad. I had to swallow at least four times before the urge to vomit passed.

"No sign of the pickup shuttle," TJ said. "Looks like we're on our own."

I glanced down through the side portal. While the momentum continued to carry us away from the calamity below, those grinding fragments of rock and metal seemed to be gaining on us.

I heard some odd clicks coming from the left side of the hull.

"Bit of a problem here," TJ said. "We must have taken damage to the left booster rocket before launch. It won't break away."

"What's that mean for us, exactly?" Facehopper said.

"The lifeboat's left and rear thrusters are blocked by the booster, and won't engage. We can't move without them. If someone doesn't spacewalk out there and disconnect the booster manually, the incoming fragments are going to smash right into us. We'll be torn apart."

There was a slight issue with what TJ was suggesting, because to manually separate a booster rocket you had to be on the rocket itself, as that was where the control panel resided. Which meant that when the rocket separated, you went with it. And since the two jumpsuits provided with this civvie lifeboat didn't have jetpack assemblies, there was no way to get back. Nor did the suits have proper UC-issue utility belts, which contained three-meter-long cords packed into tiny canisters at the front that could have been used as tethers.

Fret got up and, fighting the weightlessness, cracked open the lifeboat survival kit. It was supposed to include a tethering line for emergency spacewalks, but in typical Sino-Korean fashion, most of the contents of the kit had been pilfered. Probably shortly after the lifeboat had been installed.

Fret looked up in disbelief. He, along with everyone else, must have realized that going out there was a classic one-way trip to hell.

"I'll do it," I said, opening my buckle. I immediately floated upward.

"Get back in your seat, Cyclone," Facehopper said. "You too, Fret."

Fret dutifully obeyed but I ignored Facehopper and pushed off from the bulkhead. Battling dizziness, I floated toward the jumpsuit closet.

"I said back to your seat!" Facehopper grabbed my leg as I went by and

he hauled me toward him. Waves of pain passed up and down my body from the aggravated insect bites.

Facehopper's voice softened. "It has to be me, Cyclone. You know it does. I'm the leading petty officer. I'm the one who takes the hit for the team."

Fighting the pain, I wriggled from his grasp. "You've got it the wrong way around, Facehopper. We're the ones who are supposed to take the hits for *you*."

"No." Facehopper unbuckled and floated toward me. "I won't order anyone to stay behind. I won't live with the guilt. Not this time."

I smiled sadly. "You don't have to order me. I'm *volunteering*."

"No, you're not."

I met his eyes defiantly. "Yes I am."

"You always were the insubordinate one." Facehopper positioned himself between the closet and me. "But I can't let you do it. You have a wife and kids, mate. *Kids*. You have to live. For them. I have no dependents. It should be me."

"*Merda*!" TJ glanced over his shoulder at us. "That debris cloud isn't getting any slower. We have maybe a minute, max. Let's all pick straws or something, because we have to choose someone. *Now*."

As much as I wanted to live for my kids, there were some things worth dying for. Like one's brothers. And I knew if I didn't do this, if I let Facehopper walk to his death, I wouldn't be able to look my kids in the eyes ever again.

"Gotta do it." I shoved off from the deck, moving past Facehopper toward the jumpsuit closet. "I'm sorry."

Maybe I was just feeling the emotion of the moment. Maybe I wasn't thinking clearly because of the rad sickness. Whatever the case, I'd made up my mind, and there was nothing Facehopper or anyone else could do to stop me.

Or so I believed.

Because before I reached the jumpsuit closet something knocked into me.

Or rather, someone.

In the zero G, I was sent hurtling into the far bulkhead.

I turned about to face my attacker.

It was Facehopper, of course.

He pushed off from me and launched toward the closet.

I caught him by the arm and yanked him back.

“I knew I should have court-martialed your ass after Crimson Pipeline.” Facehopper twisted his body around and put me in a headlock. “You insubordinate little shit. Always want to fight, do you? Well let’s bloody fight!”

I shoved off at an angle from the bulkhead and slammed him into the ceiling, breaking free of the headlock.

Facehopper clocked me a good one in the face with his free hand.

I got him back and then kicked him in the boot near his gunshot wound. He curled up in pain.

I spun around and pushed off from the ceiling, toward the closet. No one else interfered. The rest of my brothers were probably too exhausted to do anything other than watch.

Facehopper grabbed one of my legs and hauled me backward. Pain sparked up and down the area but adrenaline made it easy to ignore.

“Damn it, Facehopper!” I began kicking him with my free boot. “Let—me—do—this!” I got in several good hits, including a glancing blow to the underside of his chin, but he refused to release me.

We both froze when we heard the airlock seal with a loud thud behind us.

I glanced at the closet. One of the jumpsuits was missing.

“Who went outside?” Facehopper said. “Who—”

A quick scan of the ranks told me a certain albino was missing.

Facehopper released me and floated to the intercom. He pressed the send button. “Ghost, do you copy, over? Ghost?”

“I’m living up to my name, boss,” Ghost said over the lifeboat comm. He sounded weary.

“Get back in here right now.”

“Has to be me, boss,” Ghost returned. “There isn’t time to send someone else and you know it.”

Facehopper glanced at TJ in the cockpit. Our pilot shook his head sadly.

Our leading petty officer hauled himself to the closet anyway and began suiting up. He left the lifeboat comm line open. “I’m coming to get you.”

“Won’t matter, boss,” Ghost sent. “I lost a lot of blood down there. Too much. I’m not going to make it anyway.”

“We’ll get you patched up!” Facehopper said.

Ghost's chuckle sounded eerie over the comm. "If the blood loss doesn't kill me, the rad poisoning will. I'm built differently than you guys. Albinos don't handle radiation all that well. Especially not at the dosage I was hit with down there. I won't live to see tomorrow, even with treatment."

"You don't know that," Facehopper pleaded. He shoved on the jumpsuit chest assembly. "Ghost, please. What about your four-year-old kid?"

I could feel Facehopper's agony. Literally feel it. It should have been me out there. I was perfectly willing to give up my life for my brothers. To die so that they might live.

And that's when I realized everyone here was ready to make the same sacrifice. In a heartbeat. If Ghost hadn't reached the airlock first, then someone else would be out there at that moment.

Facehopper had to know this was one thing he simply couldn't order. Telling a MOTH to sit back while his brothers died? It just wasn't possible.

"My kid?" Ghost sent. I could hear the sadness in his voice. "My kid will turn out well, don't you worry. It's better this way. I don't want to influence him. Don't want him to become a soldier. I'd prefer that he lived a long, carefree life. A normal life. That's what we're all fighting for, isn't it? To end this invasion so that our sons and daughters can grow up in safety. In peace. If I die in the line of duty, my wife and kid's residency status will automatically be upgraded to full citizenship. My kid won't have to enlist. He'll be free."

Fully suited, Facehopper sealed his helmet and went to the airlock.

I propelled myself from the bulkhead and grabbed his arm assembly. "Let him go, Facehopper."

"Maybe I can reach him," Facehopper said. "Bring him back in time."

I shook my head. "No one's reaching him now. You go out there, you die, too."

"Don't grieve," Ghost said over the comm. "Don't shed a tear. Don't you dare. I couldn't have wished for a better way to go. Serving my brothers to the end. When you look back on my life, on everything I did, I hope you can say, 'He conducted himself with honor, courage, commitment, and above all integrity. He conducted himself like a MOTH.'"

The lifeboat shuddered. Through the portal, I watched the booster rocket fall away. Ghost's jumpsuit floated beside it. He shoved off toward us but there was no way he was going to reach the craft in time.

The all-consuming debris was almost upon us.

“TJ, can you get him?” Facehopper said. But he must have known, he must have seen, the lifeboat couldn’t go back there. Not into *that*.

TJ shook his head. “I’m sorry.”

Facehopper collapsed in his suit. “Punch it.”

TJ applied the left and right rear thrusters at the same time.

The lifeboat jerked forward, riding the crest of the debris.

Beyond the portal, the booster rocket and the jumpsuit that contained Ghost were swallowed by the meat grinder of rock and steel behind us.

The comm filled with static.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Rade

Apparently the repairs had gone extremely well on Azen's mothership, because in less than a week's time the green's Skull Ship was ready to depart.

Azen had promised to collapse the Slipstream that led to Geronimo, eight thousand lightyears away, and thus prevent more of his kind from ever coming through again. To that end, Azen set a course for the Slipstream outside Tau Ceti. Apparently there was still damage to his vessel's main drive, which temporarily prevented the ship from creating mini-Slipstreams to "hop" through space. That suited the Navy Brass just fine: they wanted to escort the Skull Ship all the way to the Slipstream anyway to ensure that Azen lived up to his word. After all, the appearance of the third Skull Ship had caught them off guard, even more so when it started attacking its own vessels, and the surprised members of the Brass still weren't sure how far they could trust the newcomers.

Half the fleet began the long journey of chaperoning the colossal vessel to the Slipstream, while the remainder began the voyage home. My battle-weary platoon was part of the latter group and we hitched a ride aboard the *Royal Fortune*.

We dropped off Giger and Tung at the orbital processing station above one of the Tau Cetian colony worlds. There, refugees from the conflict were sorted and categorized by need. The resettlement process would take several weeks, apparently. I wished there was something more we could have done for the two of them, but when it came down to it, they were the responsibility of the SK government. Shaw talked about adopting Tung but even if Giger allowed it, the childcare costs on her part would be prohibitive. She couldn't afford a robot sitter, and saddling her folks with another child at their age wasn't an option. In the end she decided that Giger was the best custodian for

the boy.

We exchanged embedded ID numbers with Giger and Tung and said our good-byes, promising to stay in touch. I hoped life treated them well. They deserved it.

Shaw kept me company on the *Royal Fortune* through the long weeks home. She helped me come to terms with the deaths of Hijak and Ghost. Tahoe helped, too. As did the rest of the platoon. We all visited the convalescent ward often, where the former members of Digger Squad were being treated for radiation sickness.

Tahoe told me about his near death experience, and how Alejandro had guided him in the end. It gave me hope that my brothers weren't really dead. That they were out there, somewhere, watching over us. It was a nice thought.

Still, despite all the comforting words, and the caring, loyal friends around me, I felt such terrible guilt, especially over Hijak's death. Because though I grieved his passing, I was glad it was him who had died and not Shaw. Him.

Hijak, I hope you can forgive me.

It was funny. I had wanted vengeance so badly before, and once I'd finally achieved it, I felt hollower than ever. Killing all those Phants, destroying those Skull Ships, it hadn't brought Alejandro back and never would. Instead, it had caused more of my brothers to die.

We'd won in the end, but so many good people had given up their lives to achieve that victory that sometimes it felt like we'd lost.



Some months later I watched the prerecorded footage transmitted from the *Gerald R. Ford* as Azen's Skull Ship passed through the Slipstream. Captain Linder was on the bridge and apparently in command of the *Ford*—I asked around later and according to the rumor mill Commodore Hanson had stepped down for undisclosed reasons.

On the footage, the fleet lined up on either side of the Slipstream, which didn't have a Gate built in front of it. The Skull Ship proceeded to float between the human vessels, approaching the invisible rift in spacetime alone. Bit by bit the cranial vessel was consumed, seeming to pass behind some

starry veil.

When the ship was gone entirely, the moments dragged out. Nothing more of import transpired: as far as I could tell it was just an ordinary Slipstream traversal, minus the Gate.

But then a bright flash filled the remote viewscreen.

That was new.

Someone reported: “The quantum emissions have ceased, Captain. The Slipstream is gone.”

So it was done. The Phants and their ships were cut off from humanity.

Still, like Azen had said, there was nothing to prevent the enemy from crossing those eight thousand lightyears to our space using their “hop” technology. Seven hundred years was all it would take, a tiny span of time for interdimensional entities such as Phants. If Azen couldn’t persuade his brethren to stand down, humanity might face this threat all over again. I could only hope that we’d be ready for them the next time.

The green, Surus, had remained behind to fulfill the role of “political observer” to our species, or to the SK government anyway—currently Surus resided in Tau Ceti, where he supervised the Phant cleanup effort. There were many of the vaporous entities still floating around the system, not to mention the crabs, slugs, possessed robots, and Acceptors on the intact Tau Ceti II moon. It would take years to hunt down all the alien assets, especially considering that so far Surus had refused to share any technology.

I’m sure there was a senior Navy officer somewhere out there who was patting himself on the back, feeling he’d scored a coup for the UC by saddling the SKs with the Phant advisor. But I suspected we’d be seeing a lot more of Surus when the cleanup effort in Tau Ceti was complete.

The green certainly had his work cut out for him. The current climate of friendly relations between the UC and the SK governments wouldn’t last: Our two nations were far too competitive, far too greedy, for that. In a year, maybe two, we’d probably be right back where we started, at war once more over geronium-rich Mongolia, with privateers cruising our respective space lanes and causing either side to divert precious naval resources.

Remember, too, that thanks to the invaders we had a new source of geronium to fight over: the remnants of Tau Ceti II-c, which would eventually form a nice ring belt around the gas giant, and the partially converted moon Tau Ceti II-b.

The SK government had already taken steps to safeguard this new fuel

source by restricting incoming traffic through the system Gates—under the pretense of safety, only SK military vessels, or SK and FI emergency resupply ships, were allowed past customs.

Hoarding all that geronium would shift the balance of naval power far in favor of the SKs. You could fly only as many starships as you had the fuel to power them by, after all.

There were going to be some big wars fought over the remnants of those moons.

Maybe I was wrong.

Maybe I wasn't giving humanity enough credit.

I hoped so.



The bright, cloudless blue of the sky. The brilliant, blinding disc of the sun. The dazzling, glittering waters of the fountain.

The swallows singing in the willows. The honeybees buzzing in the daisies. The dachshunds barking in the kennels.

Green grass. Green pines. Green hedges.

All of it, almost surreal.

Finally, I had returned to Earth.

I never thought I'd feel the warm rays of my homeworld's sun on my face again. Never thought I'd inhale the crisp, clean air. Not in this life.

And yet here I was.

I almost couldn't believe it.

I was sure Shaw felt just as overwhelmed by it all as me.

No one on this planet would ever know how close we had come to annihilation. To the citizens of Earth, the invasion must have seemed like such a distant conflict, so far away, with no chance of ever affecting them. They had continued their daily lives, oblivious, the cogs of society grinding ever onward, providing them with the comforts they so took for granted.

The actions of the MOTHs would go entirely unsung. No one would ever know the full extent of what we had done that day, nor the sacrifices we had made. The Brass merely informed the media that a Special Forces team had contributed to the destruction of the Skull Ships. That was it. Revealing any more than that would be a breach of national security, and we couldn't

allow that.

Not that any of my brothers cared in the least about what the colonized worlds were told. We didn't want the glory. We weren't in it for that. As far as we were concerned, we were just doing our jobs.

And two of us had died. How could we dare take any glory for what had happened, knowing that Ghost and Hijak had paid the ultimate price for the victory? How could we profit from their deaths in any way?

We couldn't, of course.

There would be no glory for us. No medals, no handshakes with the Commander-in-Chief, no photo ops with schoolkids, no starring roles in films.

The details of what we did that day to save humanity would remain forever in our hearts and the hearts of those closest to us.

My fallen brothers, I will never forget you.

I glanced at the woman beside me. Dark hair. Tanned skin. Sparkling eyes.

It was partially because of her I was here today. She had filled the hollow space inside me where vengeance had taken hold, replacing it with hope and life.

During the last leg of the voyage I had seriously considered leaving the Teams. I would have been deported, of course, but that didn't matter to me. I could have married Shaw and moved to France, her homeland. And there we could have lived out the rest of our days in peace.

But Shaw had persuaded me to stay. She told me I wouldn't be happy if I left. That I'd be miserable. That if I quit, I'd feel like I was abandoning my brothers.

She was right.

But the deciding factor for me was her own choice to remain in Big Navy. Knowing that she'd be out in space while I was back on Earth tending to the vineyards and maybe our children didn't sit right with me. What was the point of leaving the Teams if I couldn't be with her? If instead I felt only envy whenever I looked up at the stars?

So I had stayed on the Teams. I'd be reporting back to base shortly.

However, I had something to take care of first.

There I was, seated in that extensive driveway with its large central fountain, in one of the richest neighborhoods in New Santa Monica. In trepidation I stared up at the mansion looming before me.

“Are you ready?” Shaw rested her palm reassuringly in mine.

I looked into her eyes. “No.”

She sighed gently. “It’ll be over soon.”

“I know.” I lowered my gaze. “It’s just that . . . ah hell.”

Slipping from her grasp, I got out of the vehicle. Shaw joined me.

The mansion was so damn tall and imposing. Could I really do this?

I had wanted rivers of blood.

Hijak had given those rivers to me.

But I would take all that blood back again if it meant he could live.

Rest in peace my dear, dear brother.

I took a hesitant step forward, then another, slowly approaching the mansion and its ominous front doors with their carvings of roses and thorns. My eyes fixated on the thorns especially: With anything of beauty in this life, there was always pain. Always.

I didn’t want to do this. Not at all.

But I had to.

Beyond those doors awaited Hijak’s—Dyson Xang’s—parents. I came to tell them the truth. That their son had loved them. That he had died to save us all.

I knew I shouldn’t be ashamed of the tears. It would show his parents how much I cared. How much he meant to me.

Yet I *was* ashamed. I shouldn’t be the one crying.

I had to be strong. For them. For Shaw.

I stopped.

This was the hardest thing by far I had ever done in my life. Harder than my training. Harder than the torture I’d endured while captured. Harder than any damn war.

“Rade . . .” Shaw said.

“Just a second.” I wiped away the tears and steeled myself. I could do this.

I once said I wasn’t the same person I was when I joined the Navy.

That was true.

I was a *better* person now.

Thanks to people like Hijak and Ghost. Big Dog. Lana. Alejandro.

And those of my brothers who yet lived.

But most of all, thanks to Shaw.

Gripping her hand tightly, I strode toward the front doors.

I could do this.

EPILOGUE

Lieutenant Commander Braggs sat at his desk, where he reviewed the leaked footage one more time.

Sixteen months ago, before the war with species X25910 had ever begun, Builder ship D-72, the *Prospectus*, had been sent through a newly constructed Gate leading from Arcturus system, located at the periphery of UC territory.

The Slipstream associated with the new Gate led to unexplored space. Fleet scientists calculated that it opened onto the 11-Aquarii system, one hundred lightyears from Arcturus (though only eighty-six lightyears from Earth).

A typical Gate took around two months for a Builder to construct. However, when the eight weeks came and went, no one worried since various factors could delay construction. But after five months had passed and still not a word had been heard from the *Prospectus*, the operation was considered a scrub. Failure scenarios were examined, running the gamut from mechanical problems to alien attack. Unfortunately there was no way to know for certain, because if the robot-manned Builder sent a distress call, it wouldn't be received until it reached Earth eighty-six years later.

Eventually Builder ship D-79, the *Destinus*, was dispatched in place of D-72, this time with the supercarrier *John A. McDonald* acting as escort. The *John A. McDonald* was one of the new line of Decatur class supercarriers, the most powerful in the UC; it had faster drives, three times the armaments, and twice the starfighter capacity than the Rickover class of carriers, which included the *Gerald R. Ford*.

The *Destinus* and her escort had been sent through the outgoing Gate over a year ago; neither had returned. Humanity had encountered species X25910 in the interim and the *Destinus* had promptly been forgotten.

But now that the war had been won, the Brass once again focused its attention on the more pressing local matters such as the mystery of the lost

Builders.

Fleet scientists in multiple systems trained their most powerful telescopes on 11-Aquarii, to no avail. Detecting planets in orbit around a star was one thing, but discerning actual ships and Gates in solar systems located a hundred lightyears away was another entirely.

But never tell that to the armchair astronomers. A few days earlier, footage was sent to senior intelligence officials from billionaire amateur astronomer Reys Motabi, from Arcturus. He had been studying 11-Aquarii with an experimental telescope he had personally designed and built that used the Slipstream itself as a lens. He had recorded what looked like a Decatur class starship passing in front of the distant sun—a dark outline whose profile matched the *John A. McDonald*.

But it wasn't the supercarrier sighting alone that had everyone on edge.

Lieutenant Commander Braggs stared at the footage on his aReal and watched the contour of the *John A. McDonald* limp across the G-class star for the fifth time.

Behind it, another object slowly passed in front of the sun. Though it was a mere silhouette, it proved entirely unlike anything the UC had ever encountered before. It appeared to be some sort of black dodecahedron, about twice as big as the *John A. McDonald*.

The Lieutenant Commander paused the feed at the thirty-four-second mark and skipped forward several frames. There.

He zoomed in.

The outline of an explosion appeared along the uppermost edge of the supercarrier.

One theory was that a coronal discharge from the sun just so happened to erupt at the right time and place to impart the illusion of a projectile impact. The plasma outburst would have caused no damage to the supercarrier due to the vast distances separating the sun from the ship.

But Braggs doubted he was looking at a coronal discharge.

That was an explosion, despite what the most optimistic members of the Brass might think. The alien vessel was attacking, and the *John A. McDonald*, most powerful supercarrier in the fleet, was fleeing.

Braggs wondered if the alien crew belonged to a species the Phants included in their repertoire of conquered races. Somehow he didn't believe it. The heart of Phant territory was eight thousand lightyears from here. No, this was a new, local threat.

Lieutenant Commander Braggs bit his lower lip, feeling both dread and anticipation at the same time.

He had a hunch the Teams were going to be called in.

Real soon now.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Isaac Hooke's experimental novel, *The Forever Gate*, achieved Amazon #1 bestseller status in both the science fiction and fantasy categories when it was released in 2013, and was recognized as Indie Book of the Day.

He holds a degree in engineering physics, though his more unusual inventions remain fictive at this time.

He is an avid blogger, cyclist, and photographer who resides in Edmonton, Alberta.

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