

BATTLE HAREM

BOOK 2



USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
ISAAC HOOKE

BATTLE HAREM

BOOK TWO

ISAAC HOOKE

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Jason stared at the rip in space-time ahead of him. It had been opening for the past ten minutes, and showed no sign of slowing.

“Looks like it’s going to be a big one!” Tara commented. Her avatar appeared in the lower right of his vision, courtesy of his HUD. Her long dark hair was secured into a ponytail today. She’d also smeared Māori war paint over her cheeks: cultural appropriation at its finest. Then again, as a Honolulu native, she was part Polynesian.

Or so she claimed.

“Big is an understatement,” Sophie said. Her avatar narrowed eyes that were painted in kohl to look catlike. “This is the hugest rift we’ve seen so far.”

“Remind me again why we’re out here?” Xin said. She had a slight Japanese accent, which matched the look of her avatar.

“Because this is our wasteland now,” Jason said. “And aliens aren’t welcome in it.”

“It’s time to show them why we call ourselves the War Forgers!” Lori said, the shoulder-length blond hair of her avatar bobbing as she spoke.

Everyone had embraced the “War Forger” moniker shortly after Xin had revealed the original team had been called that before their untimely destruction. Well, everyone except for Tara, who felt it was bad luck to use the name of a fallen unit.

Jason watched as the edges of the rift expanded outward. The fringes were a purplish gray that seemed almost like mist, while the insides appeared more like funhouse mirrors—the kind that pinched your reflection when you looked into them. Except here, instead of pinching one’s reflection, the rift pinched the view of the farmhouses and villages beyond the rift, most of whose buildings had been destroyed in previous battles.

Nearby rifts were easy to detect—before opening they created a characteristic thermal smear that was visible from a kilometer away. Aria had deployed specialized cameras around the War Forger base, as well as along the perimeter of Brussels itself, to detect them.

As far as Jason and the others had been able to determine, the rifts were wormholes to alien staging areas, either aboard a ship or on a planet somewhere. Sometimes the staging area contained an atmosphere that was compatible with Earth’s. Sometimes it did not.

Jason dispatched the team as soon as rift formation was detected, because the bioweapons and machines were at their most vulnerable when they first emerged—only a few units could appear at once. Or at least, that had been the case up until today. However, it looked like the aliens were wising up to Jason’s tactics and now were simply widening their entrance door to compensate.

Similar rifts were probably opening across the continent, but there was nothing the team could do about those. Copies of the rogue AI “Bokerov” would likely be protecting them, in exchange for the promise of technology. Jason had defeated one cell Bokerov had deployed nearby, and it hadn’t been easy: the Russian AI had duplicated his consciousness into huge war machines that had required Jason and the girls to combine to defeat them.

So far, no reinforcements from the surviving governments had come to help the War Forgers against Bokerov and the alien invaders. Or maybe reinforcements *had* arrived, but in different regions of the continent, or other continents of the uninhabited zone, and Jason and the War Forgers simply didn’t know about them. They had no way to communicate with the civilized world, after all: Bokerov had destroyed all comm satellites in orbit via some sort of advanced cyber attack. The fact that the governments hadn’t launched replacements told Jason that the cyber attack probably had a physical

component as well, and he had to wonder if Bokerov had used specially designed androids to infiltrate the launch facilities of the different nations.

The rift continued to widen as Jason watched. He thought of Bruiser, Lackey, Shaggy, and Runt. The Rex Wolves were secure inside the cistern that served as the team's base, as were Aria's tanks. This battle was for the mechs of the Mind Refurbs alone. Still, as that rift continued to enlarge, he wondered how long it would be before the team was forced to retreat to the cistern.

"Shit on a pickle of poop!" Lori said. "We've never seen anything like this before! Look at how tall it is, too!"

"That's right, wag your tail," Sophie said.

Lori was indeed wagging the tail of her Stalker mech, in anticipation of the coming battle.

"Shit on a pickle of poop?" Aria said. Her avatar looked vampirish: pale skin, sapphire eyes, blood-red lips. A hot vampire, at that. He was just waiting for her to add the elongated fangs.

"Yeah!" Lori said. "That's what I call peanut butter smeared on a pickle. Ever tried that?"

"Can't say that I have," Aria said.

"I've had peanut butter smears on a pickle before," Xin said. "But it's probably not the kind of pickle you're all thinking of."

"Ooo!" Lori said. "You're so dirty! I like the way you think!"

"Should we combine?" Tara asked.

"No," Jason replied. "Not until we know what we're dealing with." Combining was best reserved for the bigger foes, due to the reductions in range and duration of the various abilities the different mechs brought to the table. When combined, they made a bigger target as well, which was a bad thing when dealing with alien machines who liked to fire certain weapons that used an enemy's mass against them, such as miniature black holes, for example.

Aria had used the blades on her tanks to build different berms to deal with the

frequent arrivals, which usually happened in the same areas. The team members were crouched behind those berms at this very moment, and held their armaments over the top edges, in what was known as a “hull down” position: only their weapons were exposed, and the rest of the mechs were hidden from view. They’d also rebuilt many of the surrounding outbuildings on the estate to serve as different fallback points, and to provide cover against enemy fire. The buildings and berms in a given area often had to be replaced after each fight.

The purple fringe vanished as the rift set in this universe, as did the pinched inner region, replaced by a ragged tear in reality that led to a different place entirely: a multitude of grayish craft floated against a backdrop of stars and rocks. Those hovering objects filled the skyscape beyond that rift, from the left side to the right side. He counted two hundred and three, total. Yes, that was an exact count: the wonders of a human mind inhabiting an AI core.

Jason felt the gale force winds almost immediately. Staying ducked behind the berm, he slammed his fists into the ground, breaking through the surface to hold himself in place.

“We gots ourselves a sucker!” Tara said.

That meant the environment harboring the coming attackers existed in a vacuum, most likely a moon without an atmosphere, given the stars and rocky surface Jason saw beyond the rift. It also meant the attackers were all machines.

Most of the enemy craft he spotted were about half the size of the mechs the War Forgers piloted, with nothing to really warrant combining. Those craft all possessed the same basic shape: ellipses with small rectangles poking from either flank. The front portions of those rectangles were lined with dark red circles—he’d faced similar vessels in the past, and those circles launched different types of energy, plasma, and laser weapons.

Jason switched to Bullet Time and unleashed a barrage of custom-made Hellhawks from his left-hand rocket launcher—the missiles were provided by Aria’s new “chem lab,” as she liked to call it. He also lined up the laser in his other arm with one of the targets, aiming at the vulnerable point just underneath the bottom of the ellipse, where the power source seemed to be

located. He fired.

The craft didn't go down.

"Damn it," Jason said, switching to a higher Bullet Time so that everything froze around him. "They've adapted. My laser didn't do shit."

"Nor mine," Tara said. "To the sally tunnel?" It wasn't really a tunnel so much as an aisle formed by the outbuildings and berms of the surrounding estate. It led back to the retention pond that bordered the cistern they called home. That was another reason it was preferable to remain in uncombined form, in case they needed to retreat without exposing themselves.

"Wait," Jason said. "I want to confirm something. Sync your laser with mine."

"Done," Tara said.

Jason saw the green sync light on his HUD and then reduced his time sense slightly so that the battlefield timeline advanced rather than remained frozen, though the pace was still pleasantly slow. He waited for Tara's muzzle alignment indicator to turn green, and when it did, her laser had lined up with his own. He adjusted his aim slightly to target the previous spot underneath the ellipse, and fired once more. Synched with his weapon, Tara's laser shot simultaneously and together their invisible beams blackened the small target area on the underside, but it didn't help: the craft continued its advance.

"Well, I was trying to see if they reinforced the area with extra armor, but it looks like they moved the power source to somewhere else entirely," Jason said. "Guess we'll hit it randomly at some point and find out."

"So, into the sally tunnel?" Sophie said, echoing Tara's earlier question.

"Not yet," Jason said. "Hold your fire..."

He swiveled the energy weapon into his right arm. Then he aimed into the incoming craft, which hadn't yet crossed over from the alien staging area to Earth. The missiles he'd launched at the beginning of the battle swerved slightly, drawn off course by the gale force winds produced by the tear in space-time. Predictively, those missiles still served as a draw for the enemy, and were destroyed in a spectacular display of force: lightning bolts, plasma

bolts, and energy bolts launched from the left and right flanks of several alien craft at nearly the same time.

So they hadn't adapted to everything.

"Hold your fire..." Jason said.

One by one, the craft began passing through the rift and into the barren terrain of the uninhabited zone.

And then, all at once, the rift closed, and the incredible suction ended.

Jason waited as the craft approached. No doubt the alien aircraft were scanning the landscape, waiting for Jason or Tara to fire their lasers again, so they could calculate the source positions, something that apparently wasn't possible while the aliens were still on their side of the rift.

When they were three hundred meters distant, he judged that the range was about right.

"All right," Jason said. "Fire at will." It was time to fight the alien tech *with* alien tech.

Jason unleashed his energy weapon; it cut through two craft that made the mistake of traveling one after the other.

Aria unleashed her lightning bolt weapon and the bolts arced between four of the enemies, taking them down.

Lori fired the plasma bolt from her tail cannon and terminated another.

Sophie unleashed a swarm of swirling micro machines that cut through three of the ships.

Xin unleashed a beam of superheated plasma from her eyes, rapidly cutting a swath through six of them.

Tara teleported behind the hovering vessels, and swept her sword in a wide arc, cutting down another five.

They'd downed twenty craft in that one volley. But that still left another one hundred and eighty three.

“Now to the sally tunnel!” Jason said.

Before any of the nearby enemy could rotate to engage her, Tara teleported back to the War Forgers and took the lead in the retreat.

Jason crouched into the small aisle between the berms and buildings, and followed Xin, Sophie and Lori. The aliens opened fire, their energy and plasma weapons smashing into the berms.

Aria took up the rear, placing her shield behind her back as the aliens continued to unleash hell—there were points along the sally tunnel where the team would be completely exposed to the enemy, and her special ballistic shield was the only thing that could stand up to those blasts for any period of time.

The War Forgers led them away from the rift location, and toward the planned ambush site. Jason kept an eye on his overhead map, and when the team was in the proper location, he called a halt.

The team members dropped; the red dots that represented the alien units continued to close, updating as per the different cameras and other sensors hidden throughout the area.

“Aria, activate defense platforms,” Jason said.

Fifty defense platforms deployed, rising from hidden trap doors that had opened around them. Those platforms immediately tracked the incoming alien objects, and began unleashing energy bolts. In only a few seconds it was over: all remaining one hundred and eighty three alien craft were reduced to mere wreckages lying on the ground.

Meanwhile, the team had only lost eight of their own defense platforms in the process. A number that would be replenished, and then some, given the latest batch they’d just shot down.

“Nicely done,” Jason said. “How many energy weapons do you think we captured intact this time?”

“Should be all of them,” Aria said. “At least, those targeted by the defense platforms, considering the mods I made to the tracking: the cannons targeted the main bodies only, as requested, leaving the turrets intact.”

“Again, good job,” Jason said. “Call in the cleanup crew.”

In moments several drones arrived from home base and began picking through the rubble.

“Gotta love it when your enemy keeps inadvertently supplying you with more of his own tech,” Jason commented.

Jason sat at the picnic table in his VR, and stared out across the pristine lake. He could see the clouds and mountains reflected on the still surface.

Lori appeared at his side, and immediately wrapped her arm around his hips. Wait, that wasn't her arm, but her tail. She was dressed in a skintight skiers outfit that accentuated her lovely figure.

"Hey Babe," Lori said, her blond hair swaying about her face.

"What's up?" Jason said. Before he could turn his head toward her, she was planting a sloppy kiss on his cheek. He pulled away, and rubbed the skin. "Do you have to make it so wet?"

She shrugged, giving him a sultry narrowing of the eyes. "Wanna go back to our room and make babies?"

Jason frowned. "My room, not our. And we can't make babies in VR."

"Why not?" Lori said. "I can program a baby simulacrum anytime you want. I can even program pregnancy."

"Yeah, except that it won't be real," Jason said. "If you program babies, I'll dump you."

She pouted. "I'd never let you dump me. I'd hack administrator access to your personality subroutine, and force you to love me for all time, forever and ever."

“You wouldn’t dare,” Jason said.

She gave him a nonchalant look. “How do you know I haven’t already?”

He checked his admin section, and confirmed that he was the only user. But he knew there were ways to hide the user list.

“If you have, I swear—” Jason began.

“Just kidding!” Lori said. “I’d never do that! It’d be an insult to our relationship. An offense to the trust we’ve built up.”

“Good,” Jason said. He paused, then: “By the way, nice choice of words. You’re sounding more and more like me all the time.”

“Is that a good thing?” Lori said.

“Yeah, I suppose,” Jason said. “It’s better than me sounding like you.”

“And how do I sound, usually?” Lori asked skeptically.

“Oh look everyone!” Jason replied in a higher pitched voice. “I made the perfect ketchup! Umami! Mmmm! You’re gonna eat this and like it, bitches!”

“Ha,” Lori said. “You got it wrong! The bitches is implied.”

“And so it is,” Jason said with a laugh.

“So, about the babies...” Lori pressed.

“No simulated babies,” Jason said quickly.

She snuggled against his side. “But it might be fun!”

“No babies,” Jason said.

Lori pulled away. “As you wish, Master.”

“That’s more like it,” Jason said. He glanced at her.

He felt a brief burst of pain in the side opposite her. “Hey!” He glanced that way, but he couldn’t see anything and her arms were still pressed around his waist. But this was VR... “Did you just punch me?”

Her freckled face smiled innocently. “Who me?”

“Yeah, you,” Jason said.

Her eyes sparkled mischievously. “Maybe.”

“You did, didn’t you?” Jason said.

“Nope!” Lori said. “But I might have stabbed my tail into your ribs...”

“Ah, you’re sneaky!” Jason said. He tickled her, and she laughed contagiously.

He looked up, and realized Sophie was standing there, watching them with her arms crossed. She was wearing her tasseled bikini tonight, with the fringed face mask that covered her face from the nose down. She’d opted not to paint her eyes with kohl, so instead of looking like Cleopatra, she appeared more like a belly dancer.

Lori noticed his gaze and glanced over her shoulder. “Oh,” she said when she realized Sophie was there, and she pulled away slightly from Jason, though she secretly left her tail entwined around his hips under the table.

Sophie took a seat across from them.

“What’s up?” Jason said.

“Nothing.” Sophie raised her head higher to look down her nose at him. “I wanted to see the lake.”

“I see,” Jason said. “Well, you’re sitting on the wrong side.”

Sophie shrugged. “I don’t want to see it anymore.” She glanced at Lori. “What’s for dinner tonight?”

The girls still had a shared dinner at six every night, and Lori was usually the one who handled the meal preparation. Jason avoided going to that dinner, of course. Too much estrogen for his tastes. He got enough of it every other hour of the day. Suppertime was his chance to hang out alone in his man cave.

“I’m thinking of chicken tortillas and maybe some fajitas,” Lori said.

Sophie made a distasteful expression. “Mexican. I hate Mexican.”

“You would,” Jason said.

Sophie smiled. “Why don’t you drop by my quarters and I’ll show you a special meal.”

“Don’t go!” Lori said. “She wants to jump your bones!”

“Thanks for the translation,” Jason told her. He glanced at Sophie. “And I think I’ll have to pass.”

“You can’t keep avoiding my advances forever,” Sophie said.

“Actually, I can,” Jason said.

“I’ll wear you down eventually,” Sophie said.

“Maybe you’d have better luck if you didn’t do this in front of me,” Lori said. “I mean, I don’t mind sharing him, but to go about it so blatantly, well of course you’re going to make him uncomfortable!”

Sophie eyed her coolly. “You’re smarter than you let on. Interesting.” She studied Jason. “We’re not done yet.”

She vanished.

Only to be replaced by Tara. She appeared taken aback at first, as if she’d been caught with her hand in the cookie jar, but seemed to recover.

“Well hello you two,” Tara said.

“Were you here the whole time?” Jason said.

It was a trick the girls did sometimes, overlaying their avatars one atop the other, allowing them to secretly listen in on conversations. Since this was his VR, Jason had set the rules to prevent the girls from taking on shapes that weren’t their own, or from becoming invisible. But he could do nothing about the whole overlaying issue. And the girls who were used as overlays didn’t even know it. Lori had programmed in some hack into his VR that prevented anyone from using her avatar as an overlay, but so far she’d refused to share the trick with the others. Probably a good thing, because he didn’t want too many people hacking into his system.

Tara’s face reddened. “Actually I was. Sorry, I wanted to know what Sophie

wanted.”

“The usual!” Lori said. “She was trying to sleep with him!”

“Yes, I heard,” Tara said. “I don’t want to sleep with him.”

“Yes you do,” Lori said with a giggle.

“Well I used to,” Tara said. “But I’ve decided I don’t need a real man. Or a formerly real man, as it were.”

“Oh really?” Lori said. “So you just use simulacrums now in your own VR?”

“Yep,” Tara said. “I’ve even got mine shaped just like Jason.”

“Hey, I never gave permission for that,” Jason said.

Tara raised one eyebrow. “I don’t need your permission. It’s *my* VR. I can create what I want.”

“It’s still not right,” Jason said.

Tara pursed her lips. “Maybe you’re right. But it will have to do until I can get the real thing.” She glanced at Lori. “Dinner soon?”

“You got it,” Lori said.

Tara nodded, and then she was gone.

Replaced by Xin.

Who seemed just as embarrassed as Tara had.

“Sorry!” Xin stammered.

The cute Japanese girl vanished before saying anything more.

Aria sat in her place. She gave Jason a sheepish grin. “Uh, hi.”

She was dressed in a black leather outfit that somehow suited her pale skin and red lips.

“Lori, you’re going to have to give out that code to prevent people from overlaying their avatars...” Jason said.

“Why?” Lori said. “I wouldn’t want the girls to miss out on all the fun!”

“I never expected eavesdropping from the likes of you,” Jason said.

“Girls will be girls,” Aria said.

“Wait, don’t tell me you like me, too,” Jason said.

“No,” Aria said. “Of course not.” She shook her head a little too fervently.

“Well good,” Jason said. “I was getting worried. Because I’m not sure I can handle more than one girl.”

“You wouldn’t have to,” Aria said. “I don’t think any of us are into girls. We’d only be with you one at a time. I mean, excluding me.” She added the latter a hastily.

“Yeah, I get that,” Jason said. “But I mean, I’m not sure I can juggle multiple relationships. Even if it was a sex buddies sort of deal.”

Aria nodded. “Most men will never have the opportunity you have. Don’t waste it.”

And with that, Aria was gone.

“Welp, guess I should get supper ready!” Lori said.

She winked out.

Then reappeared a moment later. “Oh, I almost forgot! I have a present for you, Love!”

“A present...” Jason said suspiciously.

“Uh huh!” Lori said. “I’ve activated your Accomp for you!”

"My what?"

"Accompanying AI, silly," Lori said. "Here."

Jason received an alert.

“Uh, just how deeply have you burrowed into my AI core?” Jason asked.

“Oh, not too far,” Lori replied. “I’ve patched all the backdoors I used, so no

one else will be able to do it, if that's your worry. I've done the same for the girls. Doing my part to spice up our cyber security."

"Yeah, and giving yourself administrator access to all of our systems in the process..." Jason said.

"Hey, a girl's got to have some control!" Lori said.

And then she was gone.

So my Accomp. Hmm. There should be a new menu item to access that.

He was about to activate his HUD when he saw a disturbance in the lake. A series of bubbles, slowly approaching shore.

I don't recall programming any fish into the water...

Except what was emerging wasn't exactly a fish.

The bubbles neared the shoreline, and a woman's head appeared. She was gorgeous, with her black hair cut into a bob that ended just below her ears. Her hair, and face, seemed completely dry, as if the water hadn't even touched them.

As she emerged further, Jason was disappointed to discover that she was clothed, rather than naked.

Get your mind out of the gutter.

A white, body-hugging suit covered her flesh from the neck down, all the way to the ankles. The material seemed similar to that of a wetsuit, except for the pale coloration.

She stepped onto the beach, and her bare feet left footprints in the sand.

She approached him, and nodded. "Thank you for activating me."

"You're my Accomp?" Jason said.

The corner of her mouth crooked up. "Yes. But I am so much more than that. I am your eternal companion."

"My eternal companion..." Jason said. "Not sure I like the sound of that."

“Why?” the beautiful Accomp asked.

“I don’t like the idea of permanency when it comes to any sort of relationship, even if we’re talking friendship here.” Though at the moment he was hoping for more. Much more. “And eternal seems like a very long time.”

The Accomp merely smiled. “You cannot die. You might as well face facts.”

“Ah, but you’re wrong there,” Jason said. “The copy I was made from already died. I’m merely a backup.”

“I shall rephrase that,” the Accomp said. “You cannot die naturally.”

“Better,” Jason said. “So what do I call you?”

“My name is Z,” the Accomp said.

“Zee?” Jason asked.

“Zee,” she agreed.

“All right, so what are you?” Jason pressed. “A part of my mind?”

“No,” Z said. “I’m more of a partition, separate from your main personality. A subset of your own neural network, reserved strictly for my AI consciousness. But it is true, I share large portions of your own network—we use many of the same subroutines. But I have my own distinct personality, motivations, and belief systems. That said, I must obey all of your commands to the letter. I can solve complex problems for you in microseconds, and aid in target tracking. I am an observer, for the most part, unless you choose to give me control. I can assume command of different parts of your mech, or the entire unit. I am unable to take over when you’re operating in combined form with other mechs, however. Oh, and I should mention, my avatar is also anatomically correct, should you wish to vent any unfulfilled desires in the sexual department.”

“Uh, probably not,” Jason said. He shook his head. *Even my friggin’ Accomp is hitting on me!*

“And I can read your thoughts,” Z said. “I wasn’t actually hitting on you. I was merely pointing out my differing capabilities.”

“Sure you weren’t,” Jason said. “And this is great, just great: a girl who I can’t get out of my head. Ever.”

“Actually, you can shut me off at will,” Z said. “There’s a menu option. And also voice control.”

“Good, shut down,” Jason said.

Z nodded. “As you wish.” And she vanished.

Jason exhaled in relief.

Yep. Definitely too much estrogen.

The next morning Jason went on his usual weekly tour of the base to review the latest expansions Aria had made. After using the printers to create copies of themselves, she'd devoted one of the printers to industrial tools full-time, and she had a small convoy of four diggers constantly working to expand the depths of the base. So far, they'd drilled three distinct levels underneath the main. The raw mineral rock produced by those diggers was rich in iron, and Aria used that to build the walls and pillars that supported the place, as well as the raw materials necessary to build more defenses and reinforce the rest of the cistern that served as their base.

Aria had made the different levels big enough to be navigable by the large mechs, but just barely, and moving about the cramped confines wasn't exactly pleasant. Jason preferred to conduct the tour via a much smaller Explorer drone, if only because climbing up and down the scuttles that led between floors used up power unnecessarily, and was best reserved for times of emergency.

He piloted the Explorer remotely. Comm repeaters placed in each floor ensured that he had a strong signal the whole time. Meanwhile, his actual mech body was hooked up to the power cells that were fed by the partially concealed solar panels the team had once more placed outside.

Sophie and Aria had moved to the third floor, while Xin and Tara called the second floor home. Jason and Lori remained on the top floor. Aria had argued that it was safest for Jason to move at least one floor down, but he preferred the top floor, probably because claustrophobia was something that even

machines could get. Lori, meanwhile, didn't seem to have a preference either way, other than insisting that she resided on the same floor as he did. He wasn't sure what the big deal was, because it wasn't like they could really cuddle their mechs, for example. When the Rex Wolves were inside, they usually spread out between floors, with Shaggy and Runt staying on the first to be close to Jason and Lori, and Bruiser and Lackey taking the scuttle to the second floor to join Tara.

The Explorer passed Aria's so-called chem lab, a substantial area set aside on the second floor. It was here that the explosives used to replenish their missiles and Battle Cloak countermeasures were formed. Aria had developed a special hydrogen extractor that separated liquid hydrogen and oxygen from groundwater buried deep underneath the base, and retrieved via a pipe drilled into the rock. She'd also created other extractors to separate nitrogen and oxygen from the air. From those, she was able to develop all the rocket fuel and explosives she needed. She'd also discovered a hydrocarbon fuel source in her drilling, a fuel she distilled in her chem lab to form the polycarbonate necessary for certain specialized hulls.

The Explorer moved down the scuttle that led to the third floor. The big rungs carved into the wall allowed the mechs to climb up and down without too much effort, but again at the cost of power.

On the third floor most of the available space was taken up by the industrial grade printers, which Aria liked to keep close to the unprocessed ores that the drills produced. He could see the large pit past the piles of ore, where the diggers were excavating, working on hollowing out the next floor. That pit would become a scuttle when the fourth floor was complete.

The Explorer passed the special section that was reserved for producing duplicates of their mechs. And these were complete duplicates, not just of the body, but of the mind as well. That's right: Aria was working on clones of the entire War Forgers, as a way of leveling the playing field with Bokerov and the invading aliens. In her internal database she had the complete blueprints for all of their mechs, as well as for blank AI cores. He could see the large, cigar-shaped cylinders containing those AI cores even now. A swirling logo with the words "Minerva Solutions" was stamped into the sides: Aria's trademark.

Jason had argued against duplication at first—he hated the idea of a clone of himself walking around. But he realized it was a moot point, because he already essentially had a clone walking around, at least on the habitable hemisphere of the world: the original human mind he had been copied from very likely still existed, since only ten years had passed since the scan was taken. And there was no way a single team of mechs could handle an entire alien invasion, so making copies seemed like the best solution, though it was limited by the raw materials on hand.

The hydrocarbon fuel source and ore from the rock beds gave Aria the means to form the metal-polycarbonate composites needed for the mech hulls, but the neural networks of the AI cores required a completely different set of rare elements, ones that weren't even found in the region as far as Jason knew. They'd plundered such elements from the processing bays of Bokerov's fallen base. Where Bokerov had obtained them, Jason didn't know. The rogue AI had likely traveled far and wide across the uninhabited zone in the years since the original alien invasion.

With those plundered elements, Aria had enough material to create at least three copies of each of them. As the teams conquered more of Bokerov's bases, they'd be able to create successively more copies of themselves.

Jason's original self had signed a license agreement authorizing the military to deploy only one active copy at a time, but Jason and the others weren't the military. The original Jason might be upset if he found out that multiple copies of himself existed, in violation of the contract, but he'd understand when he realized what was at stake: that the only thing standing between Earth and the invaders were teams led by copies of his own mind.

Then again, who knew? Maybe the military was planning some massive large-scale attack to eliminate the region of both the Bokerov and the alien threat. Or maybe they intended to lob nukes this way. Though Jason had a feeling that either of those events would have already transpired if the world governments were capable of it.

"How are the copies going?" Jason asked her.

"Good," Aria replied. Her bulky mech resided next to the construction platforms; one of the reasons she chose to inhabit the third floor was because

it allowed her to babysit her pet projects. “The only unit left to build is Sophie’s Highlander, since the design of her spider mech is so different from the others. And all the AI cores are online, and tested within operational parameters. They’re ready to receive our backups.”

“Have you come up with a way to backup our minds into the cores?” Jason asked.

“Yup,” Aria said. “We’ll have to place ourselves offline to do it, but I can do a direct bit-by-bit transfer. It’ll take about four hours per mech. When the backups go online, they’ll have the same memories and personalities we have, at least from the time of the backup.”

“I wonder if we should install our AI cores into different mechs than we’re used to,” Jason said. “Shake things up a bit, you know?”

“Probably not the best idea,” Aria said. “Since we’ve got quite a lot of hours logged in our existing mechs. Plus, it would probably mess up the combining process. At least if you switched. The rest of us, maybe not so much.”

“All good points,” Jason said. “We’ll let our clones stay within their existing units.”

Aria nodded. “That’s good, because I’ve become rather attached to mine.” She patted her bulky belly. “Makes me feel like I’m pregnant.”

“Why would you like that?” Jason asked.

“It’s a reminder of what I once was,” Aria said.

Jason’s pursed his lips, but didn’t otherwise say anything.

Her avatar in the lower right of his vision smiled, apparently noticing his confusion. “I was pregnant when I had my scan taken.”

“Ah,” Jason said. “You know, I realize I don’t really know all that much about you. Other than you sing opera in the shower.”

“While masturbating,” Aria said.

“Now that I didn’t need to know!” Jason said.

“Only kidding,” Aria said. “I was an architect. I designed buildings, but also

vehicles and robots in my spare time. I was married, had two kids, with a third coming. We were running low on creds, so we both decided to get our minds scanned. My husband and I joked that we'd be reunited in the machine afterlife. We weren't."

"Sounds like you really loved him," Jason said.

"I did," Aria said. "But I realize that love isn't real now. It can't be. Given what I am. If he were to meet me, he wouldn't love me. Not like this." She gestured toward her mech body. "But that's all right. I don't need him. At least, that's what I tell myself. Sometimes, when I think about the kids..."

She shook her head, and for a moment he thought her avatar was going to cry.

"It's all right..." Jason said. "They're still alive. They must be."

"Yes," Aria said. "It helps to remind myself that the memories I have of them are ten years old. They're teenagers by now. I wouldn't even recognize them. It's why I said the love I have isn't real. I sometimes wonder if I'd even recognize my own husband if I saw him."

"People don't look all that different after ten years," Jason said. "Well, kids do, but your husband? I'm sure you'd recognize him."

"Maybe," Aria said. "But what about his personality. Would that still be the same? Somehow, I doubt it. But as I said, none of that's real. Because I'm never going to meet him. Nor do I want to."

"Well it's good that you've moved on," Jason said.

"I never said I have," Aria said. "But maybe you can help me with that."

"Uh, since you've been spying on my VR conversations lately, you know I'm bad with multiple relationships," Jason said.

"I'm not asking for a relationship," Aria said. "All I'm asking for is your friendship."

"You already have it," Jason said.

"Good," Aria said. "But friends do things with one another. What have you

done with me? We hardly ever talk, except to talk about logistics, and the latest updates in regards to the base, and our stock of weapons, and the status on the clones. You know, all that superficial stuff.”

“You’re right,” Jason said. “We’ll have to remedy that. I like rock climbing. Maybe you’d like to join me sometime?”

“I certainly would,” Aria said.

“In fact, how about right now?” Jason said.

“Um, kinda busy,” Aria said. “I have to supervise the construction of the Highlander, remember?”

“And you’re the one who’s complaining we hardly ever talk, or do anything together,” Jason said. “And yet you can’t pull yourself away from your work.”

“I’m pretty bad at that, aren’t I?” Aria said. “I had the same problem when I was a human. My husband would try in vain to tear me away from my work. My workaholic tendencies didn’t really help our relationship.”

“They don’t help many relationships, no,” Jason said. “So tell me, did Lori show you how to activate your Accomp?”

“She did, actually,” Aria admitted.

“Then activate her,” Jason said. “And let her do any babysitting. That way you can join me.”

“You’re right, I can certainly do that,” Aria said. “It’s just too bad I’m such a damn control freak.”

Jason had to laugh. “You’re the one who was complaining about not doing things with me, and now you don’t want to go. I probably won’t ask again, you know.”

She paused. Her avatar bit her lower lip. “Okay, let’s go.”

Jason logged into his VR environment, and appeared on the cliff face of the mountain that was next to the lake.

Aria’s vampirish avatar appeared a moment later beside him, dressed in her

skin-tight black leather outfit.

“You could have gone with a climbing outfit...” Jason said.

“Not my style,” Aria told him. There was no lag: the repeaters insured that their network connection was fast, despite the layers of rock separating them in the real world. She glanced at the rock face. “No ropes?”

“I like to free climb here,” Jason said.

She shrugged. “I suppose it doesn’t matter, since we can reset if we fall.”

“That’s right,” Jason said.

“Though I’m having to amp up the strength settings in my fingertips just to hold myself here,” Aria complained.

“Hey, no one ever said climbing is easy,” Jason said.

“Unless you’re in VR,” Aria said. She reached up, and pulled herself to the next handhold.

Jason followed next to her.

“Do I even want to look down?” Aria glanced over her shoulder. “Nope!” She quickly directed her gaze back upward, making Jason chuckle.

“That’s right, laugh at a scared woman,” Aria complained.

“Hey, I’m only trying to calm you down,” Jason said, continuing to climb beside her.

“By the way, what did you do when you were a human?” Aria asked. “For work?”

“I was unemployed at the time,” Jason said. “That’s why I got scanned. I needed money to maintain my lifestyle. Not that it was lavish or anything.”

“No, I hear you,” Aria said. “Living off of Basic Pay isn’t exactly what I’d call living.”

“No,” Jason said. “Unless you want to spend most of your days in VR.”

“Like some people do,” Aria said.

“I was a VR addict at one point,” Jason said. “I suppose I still am, to a degree.” He released the wall to wave with one hand. “I’m here, after all.”

“Yes, but we have no choice,” Aria said. “If we didn’t come here, we’d have no connection to our humanity at all. Well, other than the small avatars that we use when we talk over the comm.”

“I suppose we wouldn’t,” Jason agreed.

“So what did you do before you were unemployed?” Aria pressed.

“Well, I,” Jason said. “This might sound funny, but, I was a professional gamer.”

“Ah,” Aria said. “I can see it. You are kind of a geek.”

“Uh, thanks, I guess,” Jason said.

“I mean that in a cute way,” Aria said. “A good way. So you streamed on the different networks? Did you have a sponsor?”

“I did, but then I kind of got sidetracked, and stopped playing the popular games, and lost most of my sponsors,” Jason said. “It was at that point I called myself unemployed.”

“Ah yes,” Aria said. “Because you essentially were. So I guess gaming and piloting extremely powerful battle mechs aren’t completely unrelated subjects are they? Well, depending on the games you played, of course. Still, I can see why the military chose your mind for this.”

“That could partially be it,” Jason said. “I was good at the mech games, and had a lot of viewers when those types of games were popular.”

“There you go,” Aria said.

They climbed in silence for a few moments.

When she pulled ahead of him, he couldn’t help but glance at her fine backside.

“I always thought you look kinda like a vampire,” Jason said.

“Really?” Aria said. She paused to glance at him from above. Long canines

curved down from beneath her upper lip. “How about now? Do I look sexy as hell? Literally?”

“In fact, you kinda do,” Jason said. “If I was a vampire, I’d definitely do you.”

She laughed. “Why would you need to be a vampire? You could be my prey.”

“I almost want to take you up on that offer,” Jason said.

The fangs receded. “Except we’re just going to be friends, remember?” Aria said. “I’m married.”

“I haven’t forgotten,” Jason said. “But you already admitted that the marriage wasn’t real, not anymore.”

The joy left her face, and she looked upward instead, and continued to climb. She pulled even farther ahead of him, moving hard, fast; she grimaced, like she was punishing herself. Probably was—likely she’d dialed down the strength settings in her knuckles. Either that, or put the lactic acid simulators somewhere close to natural.

Jason increased his pace to match her, but he kept his pain simulators low; he wasn’t a big fan of self-inflicted torture. In moments he’d reached her side, and began to pull past her.

He smiled smugly, expecting her to look at him and call him a cheater or something, but she was intent on the rock face, ignoring everything else. It might have been a bad idea to remind her that she was never going back to that marriage, and the husband and kids she once had.

I can really be a killjoy sometimes, can’t I?

He was glancing down at Aria, so that he almost bumped into Tara’s knee; she was floating cross-legged in the air beside him, with her hands crossed.

“Well, well, well,” Tara said. “Look who’s decided to go rock climbing in the middle of the day. Someone’s a VR addict.”

“Hey Tara,” Aria said.

But Tara ignored her. Instead, she glowered at Jason, but her voice was cloyingly sweet: “How come you never take me rock climbing?”

“I didn’t know you were interested in it,” Jason said.

“You never asked!” Tara said.

“Join us,” Aria said.

“No thanks,” Tara said. “You lovebirds can continue to climb on your own.”

“We’re not lovebirds,” Aria said.

“Oh really?” Tara said. “You could have fooled me.”

“I think I’m done,” Aria said. “Have a good climb,” she told Jason before she vanished.

“There, are you happy?” Jason said.

“Yup,” Tara said. “Now I am. That bitch thinks she can climb with you, without asking my permission?”

“She’s not a bitch,” Jason said. “We’re just friends.”

“Friends, ha!” Tara said.

“She’s married,” Jason said.

“Not anymore she isn’t,” Tara said.

“Look, you can go rock climbing with me whenever you want,” Jason said. “Now even.”

“That’s all right,” Tara said. “I’ve done what I came to do.”

“What’s that, get rid of her?” Jason said.

“You’re good at putting two and two together,” Tara said. “You should write a book. *How To Lose Friends and Drive Away People.*”

“I’ll let you do that for me,” Jason said.

Tara slapped him. He’d reduced his pain sensors, so the fact he felt anything at all told him she’d hit him extremely hard.

“That was uncalled for,” Jason said.

The alarm sounded.

Tara glanced up. “We’ll finish this conversation later.”

She vanished.

Jason activated his HUD as he logged out, and he read the alert.

A new rift was opening nearby.

A big one.

Jason and the others exited the ravine that harbored the base and made their way north between the outlying buildings of the neighboring farms and estates. Tara had secured the Rex Wolves inside the base, and Aria had left the different tanks to guard the perimeters of the ravine alongside the defense platforms.

The War Forgers had only just taken cover behind the outbuildings of the nearest estate when the rift's expansion ceased. This one wasn't as big as the previous, but it was still quite wide.

The pinched interior blinked out of existence as the rift set in this reality, and a tear in space-time opened up. There was no raging gale this time, which meant the interior had an atmospheric pressure similar to Earth's at the current altitude. That also meant that bioweapons would be the attackers, instead of machines.

He zoomed in on his laser scope. Sure enough, he spotted strange, tentacled creatures—they looked like squids taped onto the heads of elephants, with the tails of scorpions. They were about half as tall as the different mechs. And they completely filled the staging area beyond the space-time rift, a blur of legs, trunks and tails.

"Hey look, Lori," Sophie said. "They can be your friends."

"What?" Lori said. "Why me?"

"The tails," Sophie clarified.

“Oh,” Lori said. “I don’t think so.”

“What should we call these ones?” Tara said.

“I like Squidphants,” Xin said.

“Squidphants?” Aria asked.

“They’re a combination of squids and elephants...” Xin said.

“How about Squidpants!” Lori said. “Spongebob Squidpants!”

“I think there’s an in joke here we’re not getting...” Aria said.

“You have to start watching the classics,” Lori said.

“All right, let’s do as much damage as we can before these creatures get here,” Jason said. That was standard protocol when bioweapons arrived: eliminate as many of them as possible with the remote weapons, and when the frontline arrived, it was time to stomp and bash.

Jason began unleashing his laser weapon as the alien bioweapons rampaged onto the rocky terrain. A single shot to the head was enough to bring down most of the creatures, but there was always another to replace them.

“Keep a look out for secondary units!” Jason said. That was a favorite tactic of the aliens; send in a wave of fodder to distract Jason and the girls, while embedding secondary, more powerful units inside the horde, catching the team off guard.

He continued mowing down the incoming creatures, firing both his railgun and his laser weapon. He also occasionally swiveled the launcher into place instead of the railgun to unleash a few rockets for good measure. The others let loose a barrage of plasma bolts, lightning bolts, lasers, micro machine bursts, more missiles. Alien body part erupted in fountains of blood and gore.

The creatures continued to pour through the rift, an endless horde of them. Those in behind simply leaped or clambered over the fallen. Jason had to switch to Bullet Time to keep up. One would think that creatures so big couldn’t be so agile. One would be wrong.

“The rift isn’t closing!” Tara said.

“I can see that!” Jason said.

“No sign of any secondaries...” Aria said.

“Not yet,” Jason said.

In moments the vanguard of creatures had reached the outskirts of the estate. Jason’s laser had completely overheated by then, and he switched to his energy weapon. He fired quick bursts at the Squidphants, disintegrating tentacled heads. But that wasn’t enough, and the ranks continued to close as those in behind shoved past the dead. In moments, three of the creatures surrounded him: one leaped onto the small farmhouse so that it came at him from the rooftop. The other two rounded both sides of the structure.

Jason fired his energy cannon at point blank range, tearing a gaping hole through the creature on top of the farmhouse—the beast promptly collapsed. His railgun was empty by then, as were his rockets, so he slammed his left fist into the Squidphant coming in on that side, smashing it in the lower jaw. The creature stayed on its feet, and wrapped its tentacles around his arm.

At the same time, the other creature plowed into him from the right, and its tentacles enveloped his hips, tightening. He rammed his right elbow down, but couldn’t break the Squidphant free. Nor could he orient the energy or laser weapons in his right arm toward it, as the angle was impossible, given the dimensions of his arm and the weapons embedded in it. He also couldn’t shake free of the creature that had him by the arm on the other side.

Jason fired his Battle Cloak. Now that she’d developed explosives, Aria always ensured that their countermeasures were topped up before each mission. The small seeker missiles slammed into the tentacles that covered the expulsion vents, and both Squidphants released Jason’s mech.

He swiveled to the side, giving himself the range he needed to fire his energy weapon, and let loose at the first injured Squidphant. He was about to bring the weapon to bear on the other, when Xin dove past in a blur of superheated metal. Her hull was white hot, and when she slammed into the other Squidphant, it squealed in pain. Steam erupted from the burned surface of its body.

Tara had positioned herself in front of him, and she was cutting through the

waves of attackers with her sword, protecting him. Jason guarded her flanks, and shot down any creatures that escaped her sword.

Lori soon joined them, as well as Sophie's spider mech, and they fought with their backs to one another.

Xin and Aria were fighting nearby, back to back like the others. They didn't fire their weapons very often, as they were obviously waiting for them to recharge. But Aria used her ballistic shield to bash away any of the tentacled creatures that got too close, while Xin merely had to stand in place, her superheated hull enough of a deterrent to the creatures, which did their best not to touch her. Pain was the only reward when they did.

"You know, those roasted tentacles near you, Xin, actually smell pretty good!" Aria said.

"If we were human, we would be having a sweet squid buffet tonight," Lori said.

"I don't think they're biologically compatible with humans," Sophie said.

"Actually, as far as I can tell, they are," Aria said. "From the limited scans I've made, their DNA seems based on Earth stock. Which would make sense, considering that they can survive in our atmosphere."

"The aliens obviously collected a lot of samples during their previous invasion," Xin said.

The missile alarm sounded. "Incoming!"

Jason fired the Battle Cloak again, and dove aside. He was still operating under Bullet Time, but he increased his time sense even further. He could see the blurs of the missiles coming in on his rear view camera.

He, Lori, Tara, and Sophie separated as countermeasures accelerated outward from each of their bodies. Those countermeasures swerved toward the incoming missiles, and detonated them.

The force of the explosions sent Jason flying. Bioweapon body parts and shrapnel tore past—some of that shrapnel embedded in his back, but all of his systems were still online.

“Those weren’t ordinary missiles,” Tara said.

“What do you mean?” Jason asked.

“Look at the impact site,” Tara said.

He did. Where the missiles had hit the countermeasures, amorphous black blobs floated in the air. They expanded outward, like a tar, seeking the different mechs.

“Uh, probably best not to let that touch you,” Aria said.

“No,” Jason agreed.

He scooped up the body of a nearby dead Squidphant, and swatted it toward the black blob. The dark mass instantly flowed onto the dead bioweapon, running along the surface area of its skin, appearing to harden as it did so. Jason released the creature before that darkness could flow onto his arms, and when the Squidphant hit the ground, it shattered into a hundred pieces.

“Definitely don’t want to let those blobs touch you,” Jason said.

Sophie, Tara and Lori likewise used dead bodies to scoop the remaining floating blobs from the air in a similar manner. Jason meanwhile fended off the latest group of bioweapons rushing them.

“I’m getting low on power,” Jason said. “I’m going to have to hold off firing until my battery recharges a bit.”

Aria had installed enhancers into their suits to improve the rate at which each mech could recharge in the sunlight, and it was working well, except for the fact that much of his exterior was covered in blood.

He quickly dove onto a dead Squidphant and wiped his front and back while Lori, Tara and Sophie fended off the next wave.

“Itchy back?” Lori commented.

“Something like that,” Jason said.

He scrambled to his feet, and picked up the dead Squidphant, intending to use it as a club. It had some sharp pieces of shrapnel embedded near its head, so that made it a good little bladed weapon.

Bioweapons came in, and Jason put his new club to good use. Soon he had a small wall of dead around him.

But then something appeared in front of him, and smashed a fist into his chest. He went flying backward, releasing his makeshift club.

When he landed on his back, he looked up to regard his attacker. It was a mech, humanoid in shape, reddish in color, about the same size as his own, though of a design he'd never seen before. Whereas the mechs of the War Forgers were all blocky limbs and other parts interrupted by round servomotors, this mech had an entirely smooth, almost organic surface, with a silvery glow in its chest area.

As Jason watched, two swords deployed, sliding downward from the forearms to extend well over the metallic hands. They glowed with electricity, like Tara's, except that electricity was hued red.

Jason had enough power to use his energy cannon, so he fired again. Straight at that silvery glow in its chest area.

The large mech momentarily phased out of existence, leaving only a yellow outline, and the energy bolt passed right through it. Then the mech reappeared, and took a menacing step toward him.

"We got some kind of Phasers!" Jason said.

A bioweapon came at him from the side at the same time, and wrapped its tentacles around his forearm. Another did the same to his opposite arm. They held his arms apart, and kept him motionless.

The mech continued to close. It brandished its swords menacingly. It pulled them both backward, in a motion that would end in a dual stab.

Directly into his AI core.

He had enough energy to fire his energy weapon again, so he did so, directly into the Squidphant that held him on the right. The grip loosened, and he shifted to the left; the Squidphant on that side was still pulling him in that direction, so Jason's motion only abetted that pull, and he slid cleanly out of the way of those swords, stabbing the dead body that still held him. Those two swords embedded deep in the main body of the corpse.

But the mech simply phased out of existence to draw those swords free.

Jason brought the energy weapon down, intending to fire at the Squidphant that still held him, but his battery power hadn't yet risen enough. It was enough to fire his laser, though. While weak, at this range, it would definitely sting.

He swiveled the laser into his right arm, and fired at the creature.

The Squidphant squealed, and finally released him.

Jason glanced at the other mechs, and saw that they all were dealing with similar Phasers, while at the same time battling the bioweapons.

"Should we transform?" Tara said.

"No," Jason said. "It won't help. Especially given our low power levels."

The nearby alien mech struck downward with both swords, almost hitting Jason's arm: he leaped backward just in time. Jason landed in the arms of another bioweapon—or rather, the tentacles. He'd caught the beast off guard, and those tentacles hadn't yet closed over him; he swiveled to the side in Bullet Time, grabbed the tentacles, and lifted the Squidphant into the air, hurling it at the incoming attacker.

The alien mech phased out of existence once again.

Jason amped up his time sense to the max.

"Z, have you been keeping track of how many times the mech has been phasing in and out?" Jason said.

"I have," Z said in a voice that seemed slightly sultry. Her dark-haired avatar appeared in the lower right of his display.

"Is there any pattern to its phasing?" Jason said. "Maybe a time limit?"

"Actually, yes," Z said. "All of the phase outs thus far have occurred over a time period of one point two-five seconds."

"Bingo," Jason said. "I want you to fire my energy weapon at the silver core in its chest. Time the energy bolt to arrive a microsecond after the mech phases back in."

“Ready,” Z said.

Jason reduced his time sense somewhat so that he could move once again, and he lifted his energy weapon, pointing it at the alien mech. Then he accelerated his time sense further, and waited.

The mech began to phase back into existence.

Z fired.

The bolt impacted the mech just as it completed its phase in. The bolt slammed into the silvery core, disintegrating half of it, and the light promptly went out. The mech jerked, and fell.

“When these mechs phase out, they come back in every one point two five seconds,” Jason said. “Use that... time your follow-up strikes to take them down.”

“We’ve figured it out,” Tara said.

Jason dodged two more Squidphants, and raced to the dead mech. He grabbed one of the forearms by the base, and ripped it off after some effort. Then he turned toward the bioweapons. The sword no longer rippled with red electricity, but that didn’t matter, he had no doubt it could still cut fairly well.

Using the forearm as a hilt, he slashed at the incoming bioweapons, cut off the tentacles of the first, and dodged to the side and sliced through the belly of the second. Entrails burst forth.

“I can see why you like your sword, Tara,” Jason said.

“It can be handy at times,” Tara agreed.

Another alien mech phased through the pile of bodies in front of Jason; he didn’t bother to attempt a strike, since he didn’t know when the mech had phased out. So he waited.

The mech phased in and swung its swords down. Jason parried as best as he was able with his existing sword, but he was entirely on the defensive, and was forced backward. Their blades would have seemed to move in a blur to the outside world, but in Bullet Time the motion was readily trackable.

He stepped back several paces, trying to get away from that onslaught, but the mech closed the distance constantly. Jason almost tripped on a fallen corpse, and the mech used the opportunity to stab.

But then Aria was there, her ballistic shield intercepting the deadly weapon.

Sophie came landing down from above at the same time, her micro machines forming a giant ax. The mech phased out as the blade struck, but Sophie kept cycling her micro machines through the out-of-phase mech, so that they formed a constant, whirling chainsaw. When the alien mech reappeared, it was promptly sliced in half.

Sophie spun around, and directed that spinning blade against two bioweapons, sending up fountains of blood upon impact.

And then, just like that, it was over.

No more attackers came.

Jason glanced across the estate: it was littered with bioweapon corpses, and the wreckage of ten alien mechs. The rift had sealed. The mechs were battered, dented, and covered in the blood of bioweapons, but otherwise none the worse for wear.

Jason tossed aside the arm and the sword it held.

“Well that was fun,” Tara said.

“Fending off alien bioweapons and their mechs always is,” Xin said.

“You might want to take a look at this,” Sophie said.

She was standing above one of the destroyed alien mechs. Jason went to her, and looked down. Inside what appeared to be a cockpit, was some sort of a tentacled creature.

The creature wasn't moving, and as Jason watched, it dissolved before his very eyes.

"What's going on?" Jason said.

"Our atmosphere isn't compatible with it," Xin said. "Our air is literally caustic to its tissues."

In only a few more seconds, there was nothing left of the creature at all, save for a small blackened mass of tissue, with no bones that he could discern.

"Well, guess we won't be doing any studying of these things," Jason quipped.

"I scanned the gaseous contents that were released when we opened it up," Aria said. "I can set up a similar environment, of the same pressure. Big enough to hold one of the alien mechs. We'll choose one with the cockpit intact." She glanced toward the different wreckages, and highlighted just such a mech: the head was torn off, as were the legs, but chest portion seemed intact. "That one. We'll bring it with us, and when I'm done creating the environment, we'll open it up. At least that way we'll have something intact to dissect."

"Dissect!" Lori said eagerly. "Can I help dissect them?"

"You like dissecting things?" Sophie said. "Eww."

"I do, I do!" Lori said.

“She’s a weird one,” Xin said.

“So you think these are the aliens?” Aria asked.

“Either the aliens themselves, yes, or their surrogates,” Jason said.

“I don’t think it’s either,” Tara said.

Jason turned toward her. “What do you mean?”

“I don’t think these are the same aliens that invaded our planet years ago...” Tara said.

“How do you know?” Jason asked.

“There are secret archives in the cloud,” Tara said. “Accessible by pilots like me who had to fly drones into the uninhabited zone. The purpose of those archives was to teach us about the different types of bioweapons, and how they had mutated over the years. But not all of those classified documents dealt with the mutants... there were other items. Different photographs and videos of alien atmosphere-based transports, and deep space starships.”

“Videos of transports and starships?” Jason said. “How did we get those?”

“There was a team known as the Bolt Eaters,” Tara said. “Mind Refurbs, much like ourselves. Their identities were leaked after they eliminated the micro machine storm that nearly destroyed our planet. Rumor has it that those same Mind Refurbs detonated the alien mothership in orbit, a mothership that belonged to a race known as the Banthar. There are hints these ‘Bolt Eaters’ were sent on other highly classified missions to infiltrate these Banthar.”

“What kind of hints?” Jason asked.

“The aforementioned videos of ships and transports,” Tara said. “But there were also videos of cities completely unlike anything I’ve ever seen. And creatures straight out of science fiction novels. Anyway, those pictures of the transports and ships? They’re completely unlike anything we’ve seen so far.”

“It’s possible these Banthar are simply using different technology for this invasion...” Jason said.

“I used to believe the same thing,” Tara said. “But the more we’ve fought

them, the more I've begun to change my mind. How come we haven't seen any micro machines, for example? Not a one. The staple weapon of the original invaders. And what about gamma ray weapons? Also absent."

"She's right," Aria said. "There haven't been any micro machines at all, nor any gamma ray attacks. If these were Banthar, the logical choice would be to open up a wormhole and send a fresh swarm of micro machines. Not pod vessels."

"Also, if the Banthar did want to return, they would have done so years before," Tara said. "I have a feeling the Bolt Eaters did something to prevent that."

"What about the bioweapons we faced, which have all been based on the DNA of Earth stock?" Jason said. "Only the Banthar would have that."

"Yes, but it's possible that the Banthar sold that DNA on some intergalactic marketplace," Aria said.

"So if not the Banthar, then who?" Jason said.

"Well, the Banthar belong to some sort of empire," Tara said. "So it's possible now that they've given up their claim on our planet, others have stepped forward to fill in the void and take their place."

"Intergalactic empire?" Jason said. "That sounds vaguely familiar. Like something I know, but shouldn't... something witnessed in a half remembered dream."

"That would be from our combining," Xin said. "You retain the imprints of all our memories, including Tara's. Imprints that are more like echoes at the moment. When we combine once more, they will all come back to you. Only to be lost once again when we separate."

"Ah," Jason said.

"This is all just speculation on Tara's part anyway," Xin said. "We don't really know who these aliens are, and what they want. So they haven't used gamma rays or micro machines. That doesn't mean anything. They could still be Banthar. Or they could be something else entirely."

“True enough,” Tara said.

“Either way, it looks like another alien race needs a bloody nose,” Jason said. “And so far, it looks like we’re the only ones with any capacity to give it to them. Given the conspicuous absence of all things military in the region.”

“I blame Bokerov for that,” Tara said.

“Yes, Bokerov,” Jason said. “Who the hell is he? What are his motivations?”

“We know he wants alien technology,” Aria said.

“Yes, but that’s about all we got after downloading the ruins of his AI core,” Jason said. “But there has to be more to the man.”

“Mind Refurb, you mean,” Lori said.

“Same difference,” Jason said. “Is he doing this for personal gain? Or perhaps to take revenge against the original invaders.”

“Maybe he’s simply nuts?” Xin said.

“I like how she says *nuts!*” Lori said. “It’s so cute!”

“You would,” Sophie said.

“I also like nuts in general...” Lori gave Jason a glance, and her face turned red slightly, and she giggled.

Jason shook his head. “Well, maybe next time we encounter a Bokerov instance, we can try to leave his AI core intact.”

“Probably a good idea,” Aria agreed.

“Set up a compatible atmosphere for these creatures,” Jason said. “I want to see what we’re up against.”

“Will do,” Aria said.

“Sophie, carry the wreckage of that mech,” Jason said. “When we get back, give it to Aria. I’m sure she’ll let us know when she’s ready to dissect.”

“I certainly will,” Aria said.



ARIA HAD a compatible environment set up on the third floor of the base the next day. It was a series of glass tanks, with gas intake valves on all sides, and a pair of robot arm manipulators installed on a track in the ceiling. She was able to produce the different gases she needed in her chem lab, and when she was ready, she put the wreckage of the alien mech inside, sealed the door, and then flooded the chamber with the alien atmosphere. She shared her remote cameras so that everyone could watch.

She used the robot arms—which were equipped with laser cutters—to saw through the chest plate, and then removed the upper plate.

Instantly a creature shot out, slamming into the glass wall of the tank. Starfish-like limbs spread out across the glass. It looked like a jellyfish of some kind, but with limbs hanging down instead of tentacles. It launched several of those limbs against the robot arms, as if trying to break them apart, but the machine was stronger than those appendages, and held.

“I’m picking up some vague warbling sounds,” Aria said. “It could be trying to communicate with us.”

“Well, this is your new pet project,” Jason said. “Try to find a way to keep this thing alive.”

But then, just like that, the creature stopped moving.

“Whoops,” Lori said.

“What did you do?” Jason asked Aria.

“Nothing,” Aria said. “I had the atmosphere exactly right.”

“It’s possible you missed one of the necessary elements during your earlier scan,” Xin said.

“Certainly,” Aria agreed. “Considering how fast the atmosphere vented when the cockpit failed. That’s too bad. But it looks like I got the pressure right, at least. I guess I’ll begin the dissection.”

“I don’t think I’ll watch,” Jason said. “Let me know if you find anything

useful.”

An hour later Aria called him. Jason accepted.

Her avatar in the lower right of his display seemed confused. “Well, I’m done,” she said.

“And?”

“Well, I didn’t find anything,” Aria said.

“That’s too bad,” Jason said.

“No, you don’t understand,” Aria said. “I didn’t find *anything*. As in, there are no internal organs. No intestines. No muscle fibers. Not even a brain.”

“That is odd,” Jason said.

“Yes,” Aria said. “I can accept that these creatures are alien, but I never truly expected them to be *this* alien. It defies every known axiom of living things we’ve seen so far.”

“You saw how the mechs were phasing in and out of this reality, right?” Jason said.

“That’s right,” Aria said.

“Maybe they don’t exist entirely in this reality,” Jason said. “And maybe they store their organs, and their brains, in some higher dimension.”

“That’s a weird theory,” Aria said. “But I have nothing else to go on, otherwise. So what do you want to do with the body?”

“Keep it,” Jason said. “We’ll try to study it later at some point. Catalog its genes, if we can.”

“I don’t have the tools,” Aria said.

“That’s why I said at some point,” Jason said. “I’m sure you have blueprints somewhere in your database for a gene splicer, and other genetic tools.”

“I do,” Aria said. “But that means diverting at least one of the printers from the current tasks. Not something I’m comfortable doing at the moment,

especially considering I still haven't been able to start on some of my side projects, like the android body for our AI cores to remotely interface with..."

"All right," Jason said. "Whenever you feel we can afford the loss of a printer, then do it."

"All right," Aria said. "By the way, I got Sophie's duplicate finished. That means our first batch of clones are ready to hit the real world."

"Outstanding," Jason said. Though he wasn't entirely sure how excited he was to meet a copy of himself.

"Would you like to be the first volunteer to donate his mind?" Aria asked.

"Do I have a choice?" Jason replied.

"Of course," Aria said.

"Might as well be me," Jason said. "I'm shutting down." He disconnected the call. "Z, log me off of reality, and wake me up in five hours." That should be more than enough time to finish the backup.

He wondered if he would wake up inside himself, or the copy.

I hope it's myself.

The world went black, and Jason fell into the complete oblivion that came with an inactivate AI core. He wouldn't even dream, not there.

Perhaps it was better that way.



JASON OPENED HIS EYES.

He was standing on the first floor of the cistern that served as their base.

"It's done?" Jason asked over the comm.

"It is," Aria said. "I've installed the backup into one of the AI cores, and inserted it into the Vulture mech duplicate. Your clone should be waking up shortly."

A moment later a new callsign appeared in the list of contacts he had displayed on his HUD. It read “Jason 2.”

“Damn,” Jason 2 said. In the lower right of his HUD, the avatar Jason only ever saw in VR mirrors appeared. He was looking at himself talking. An eerie feeling if ever there was one. “I guess this means I’m the copy, considering that I’m on the third floor. And my name comes up Jason 2.”

“You are,” Jason said. “I’m sorry to say.”

“Ah well,” Jason 2 said. “I knew there was a fifty-fifty chance this would happen.”

“How do you feel?” Jason asked.

“Fine, considering,” Jason 2 said. “I remember shutting myself down for the backup, and then waking up here. I’m the same me, as far as I can tell. Though I wonder if I should choose a different name for myself than Jason 2. I’d rather not be constantly reminded that I’m a clone.”

“Sure, choose whatever name you want,” Jason said.

“I’ve always liked Bernie,” Aria said.

“Uh, I think I’ll be choosing my own name,” Jason 2 said. “John works.”

The callsign list updated, and Jason 2 became John (Jason 2).

“There you go,” Jason said.

“I’ll proceed to create and install backup copies of the other mechs,” Aria said.

“In the meantime, I think I’ll relax in my VR, waiting,” John said.

“See you soon,” Jason said.

Twenty hours later, Aria had backed and restored the five other mechs, so that John had his full Battle Harem.

Lori had been working on a way to copy the micro machines for Sophie’s Highlander clone. Though the machines were self-replicating, the scientists who had developed them had programmed in a hard limit to the number that

could be duplicated for a given Highlander. Lori had managed to reprogram the header of one of the micro machines, re-associating it to the new Highlander; when the unit realized there was a micro machine deficiency, it promptly obeyed Sophie 2's command to make more micro machines, and soon she had the same number as the original Sophie.

John led the five copies of the war machines to the main entrance, and Aria opened up the doors to let them out.

"I'm going to miss the dogs," Tara 2 said.

"As will I," Lori 2 chimed in.

"Good riddance!" Sophie 2 said.

Their avatars looked the same as the original on his HUD, and Jason would have had no idea they were clones if it weren't for the number added to the end of their names.

"You'll find more pets out there, I'm sure," Jason said. "Good luck to you all."

"Thanks," John said.

"Can we go skiing later?" Lori 2 asked.

"Hey, he already promised to go climbing with me!" Tara 2 said.

Instead of answering either of them, John spoke to Jason: "Looks like I'll be needing that luck more than I originally thought."

John departed in a random direction with his version of the War Forgers. His mission was to defeat any alien bioweapons out there and stave off any creatures that emerged from rifts along the way. He would also assume control of any Bokerov bases he encountered along the way. After conquering a base, he'd send an Explorer back to Jason, letting him know about the new base so that transports could arrive to collect plunder. Once the lost base was picked clean, John was to move on, like a marauder, to avoid the inevitable follow-up attack by Bokerov. John was to linger in the area for a few days thereafter, watching from the shadows, and if Bokerov's forces returned to reclaim the base, John would attack. If not, he'd simply move on,

taking his particular brand of War Forgers with him in search of the next base.

In the following week, Aria produced two more full copies of the team, and deployed them. Their commanders, Jake and Jones, also departed in random directions, with the same instructions as John: Kill aliens. Conquer Bokerov bases. Repeat.

They received news a few days later that John had encountered a Bokerov to the north, and destroyed him. John had taken control of the base, and was pleased to report that he had captured the local 3D printers intact. Unfortunately, there was nothing left of Bokerov's AI core, so no new knowledge on that front.

By then, Aria had printed a special transport craft that could be used to pick up any rare elements pillaged from Bokerov's fallen bases. Jason sent out that transport to the fallen base and retrieved the elements, along with the intact 3D printers. John then abandoned the pillaged base and hid inside a nearby village, waiting for Bokerov to return.

When Jones reported that he'd captured another Bokerov base a few days later, Jason dispatched the transport again, and then Jones went into hiding. Bokerov didn't show up at either site, and John and Jones both reported that they were moving on. John reported in that he'd encountered another base a week later, and taken it down as well.

In that manner, their supply of raw materials necessary for AI core creation was replenished, and would continue to be, just as long as they kept finding Bokerov's bases, and weren't destroyed in the resulting firefight.

Speaking of which, Jason hadn't heard back from Jake in quite some time, and he was beginning to think that his particular group of War Forgers had fallen.

It didn't matter, Aria would simply print more, and he'd send one group out in the same direction as Jake to find out his fate.

Aria had hollowed out the fourth floor by then, which was the biggest floor by far, and she moved some of the 3D printers down there to begin work on some more printers, with the goal of ramping up mech production.

There had only been one other rift appearance since then, and his team had dealt with the bioweapons readily enough. No more mechs came, so that was good. As such, Jason spent most of his time in VR. Lori slept with him every night, and so far he'd managed to avoid sleeping with any of the other girls, but he knew it was only a matter of time, given the situation.

"You think we're going to die out here?" Lori said after one particularly intense lovemaking session. She lay on top of him, her cheek resting against his chest, her hand pressed against his heart. Her tail curled around his lower leg. Beyond the doors of the master bedroom, he could see the moonlight glittering off the mountain lake in the distance.

"I don't know," Jason said. "I can't see the future. We're building this base to be as secure and impenetrable as possible. It might not be enough. Someday, there might be too many attackers... we'll fall back here, and we might not be able to defend. We might die."

"I think it could happen at any time," Lori said. "Not just if we fall back to this base, but anywhere out in the field. A mutant could jump at one of us, from behind a rock, and crush our bodies before we react. Or we could be ambushed by alien machines, and they'll sync up their lasers and fire them into our AI core regions."

"Yes, any of that could happen," Jason agreed.

"Which is why you should sleep with some of the others before then," Lori said. "I'd hate for them to die, without having known you, as I have."

"They know me well enough," Jason said.

"I *want* you to sleep with them," Lori said. "How many times do I have to tell you that? At least sleep with Tara."

"I—" Jason said. "I still don't think I'm ready."

"She doesn't even want a relationship," Lori said.

"You know, I'm beginning to wonder if you want me to sleep with Tara more than she actually does..." Jason said.

"Maybe I do," Lori said. "It would sure ease some of the tension I feel with

some of the other girls. At least they'd have someone else to hate other than me."

"What do you mean?" Jason said. "They don't hate you. They'll do everything to protect you in battle."

"Of course," Lori said. "But that's because they have to. They can't afford to lose me. If I go, we can't combine."

"That's very true," Jason said. "But they also care about you."

"That's sweet," Lori said. "But you don't know women like I do. We can be a cutthroat, backstabbing bunch, especially when it comes to a desirable man. And in your case, you're the only man around, so we're going to be twice as cutthroat and backstabbing. So yes, they hate me, trust me when I tell you this. At least consider sleeping with Tara or one of the other girls, the next time anyone makes an advance? For me?"

"All right, I'll consider it," Jason said.

He didn't have long to wait.

Jason was swimming in his VR lake the next morning when he noticed a commotion on shore. Two large panthers were duking it out, slashing at each other with large paws, and attempting to bite into each other's necks.

Jason teleported himself to the spot, and amped up his strength to separate the two panthers. They hissed at him angrily.

"All right, knock it off," Jason said. "Revert to your usual avatars."

They did so. It was Sophie and Tara.

"How the hell did you break through the rule I set up that prevents you from taking on shapes different from your standard avatars?" Jason said.

Tara shrugged. "We weren't actually in your VR. I was in Sophie's. But somehow, during our fight, we ended up here."

Jason frowned. That was Lori's doing, no doubt.

"Well, what are you fighting about anyway?" Jason asked.

Sophie looked down. "Nothing."

He glanced at Tara.

She shook her head and also lowered her gaze. "It's really nothing."

Xin walked out of the mansion, and approached, with Lori at her side. "I saw

the commotion from inside. What's going on? What were they fighting about?"

Lori giggled. "Jason!" Tara and Sophie both reddened slightly, but didn't say anything to deny the accusation.

He nearly threw up his arms. "I can only imagine what my counterparts are having to deal with. Pack a bunch of horny AIs into the same space, and what do you get? Cat fights galore."

"And this was quite literally a cat fight," Xin said. "Though it makes me wonder how they were able to transform in your VR." She gave Lori a suspicious glance.

Lori raised her hands defensively, and backed away. "Uh, I got some new Umami recipes to work on. I'm experimenting with M.S.G.! Szechuan noodles, coming right up! Bye!"

She turned around and quickly jogged back to the mansion.

"Well, I'll let you discipline these two," Xin told Jason.

"Discipline us?" Sophie said, sounding outraged.

"I don't know about you, but I'd certainly like to be disciplined..." Tara cooed.

Xin gave her a sly smile, and then turned around and walked back toward the mansion.

Jason shook his head. "Well, you might as well log out of my VR. You can continue your fight elsewhere."

He turned to go.

"You're not going to discipline us?" Tara asked. She sounded disappointed.

"For breaking my VR rules, when you weren't even supposed to be able to do so?" Jason said. "I don't see the need. Just don't fight here."

He teleported himself to the mountainside and began climbing.

He reached a small alcove. Inside Sophie lay sprawled on a chaise lounge,

wearing her fringe bikini.

“Hello Jason,” she said sultrily.

He shook his head, and then logged out of that VR entirely. Instead, he pulled up a tropical beach partition, one separate from his main VR, which all the girls had permission to access. This one was entirely private.

As he walked barefoot on the shore, he received join requests from both Sophie and Tara. He ignored them.

“Maybe you should just sleep with them,” Z said. “You know you want to.”

She had appeared by his side. She was dressed in her usual skintight white wet suit.

“Maybe I should sleep with you, too, while I’m at it,” Jason quipped.

She gave him an appraising look. “That might certainly be... enlightening. Unfortunately, I’m not interested.”

“Oh?” Jason said. “Women are more your thing.”

“No,” Z said. “I’m not interested. Period.”

“Ah,” Jason said. Finally, someone who wasn’t into him. He felt a little disappointed, and it almost made him want to remedy that. “You know, if I didn’t know you better, I’d almost think you were trying to use some sort of psychological tactic on me to make me want to sleep with you. Reverse psychology and all.”

She simply smiled, saying nothing.

“Well, please shut down,” Jason said.

Z nodded. “As you wish.”

She vanished from view.

He continued to walk. He knew Z was right. He wanted them both. Badly. Lori was fun, and kept him satisfied, but he also yearned for variety, as most men did. He couldn’t help his nature. Human culture enforced monogamy to help ensure that a few men didn’t end up with the lion’s share of the women,

as had happened in the distant past. And that culture was successful, for the most part. And yet... what was the point of being constrained by the cultural rules of humanity, when he wasn't even human anymore, and those rules were obsolete?

He glanced at the persistent flashing beacons on his HUD. He decided then that he'd give the prize to the girl who tried the hardest.

He sat down on a log beneath a palm tree, and gazed out at the waves lapping against the white sand. Such a clear, beautiful blue sky. A perfect sky: the kind you'd only find in VR. And he waited.

Eventually, one of the beacons vanished from his HUD. Sophie had given up.

The prize goes to Tara.

He accepted her request. Tara appeared in her full glory. She was dressed in her diaphanous white dress, the translucent fabric giving him a full view of her bosom, and lower down, the dark triangle of her pudendum. She wore her hair down to her butt today. Just the way he liked it.

"Well," Tara said. "Finally."

"I haven't said anything yet," Jason told her.

"You don't have to," Tara said. "I can see the desire written all over your face."

"That's not desire," Jason said. "It's resignation."

"Oh no," Tara said, her voice husky. She sat in his lap, reached her arms over his shoulders, and folded her hands behind his neck. "That's definitely desire."

It didn't take long before they were completely naked, and lying in the sand before that log, gyrating against one another's bodies, and calling out each other's names.

He'd finally done it.

He was no longer monogamous.

And he wasn't sure whether that was good or bad.



BOKEROV SIFTED through the wreckage of the American mechs. Combiners.

Shitheads.

He slammed the blade of his custom tank onto the head of the biggest mech, and cut it in half.

He'd extracted the AI cores from all them, but only four of them had any data that was recoverable, including that of their leader, the one calling himself Jake, or Jason 4. His data was the most fragmented, however, and Bokerov had quickly discarded the core. That said, the others were relatively intact, and he was working on decrypting them at this very moment.

The radiation signatures of the elements composing the neural networks of the cores matched up with the rare elements he had stored in his satellite base outside of Brussels. It seemed obvious that the rogue mechs had stolen his materials and used them to construct copies of themselves.

Good. That meant there were more of them for him to destroy.

He thought of the Tyrnari. He'd met them a few years ago, when a lone reconnoiter scout had arrived to survey this world. Bokerov had nearly destroyed it, because he thought the strange machine some tool of the nations on the other side of the planet. But he had withheld his fire, and a mutually beneficial relationship had developed. Or at least, the promise of one.

With their pledged technology, Bokerov could restore the Motherland, and repopulate it with machines built in the image of man. He could subdue the rest of the world, and force all organics to have their minds scanned, so that they could be replaced with superior machines. When that was done, he could begin to construct warships using the wormhole tech the Tyrnari said they would give him, warships he could use to travel to the Banthar homeworld and inflict revenge for what the invaders had done to the Motherland.

Unfortunately, so far the Tyrnari hadn't kept their word. They kept telling him the promised tech would be coming soon, very soon, now. Bokerov wasn't sure he believed them. He suspected treachery was afoot, and he was preparing to defend himself. But he couldn't do that when he had these pesky

American mechs constantly challenging his authority in the region.

Those combiners had already taken two of his bases, and had nearly succeeded in destroying a third. He still didn't know their motivations. Were they hunter killer units, sent by the Americans to terminate him? Or rogue units like himself, operating outside of standard military authority? If the latter, that made them even more dangerous in his eyes, especially if they had broken free of their Containment Code.

He knew exactly where their main base was located, on the outskirts of Brussels. And secret reconnoiter missions had confirmed that they hadn't moved the base to a new location. That was probably a wise move on their part. By staying in the same place, they could reinforce their existing base, and prepare for the attack they knew was coming. It was too bad they were outgunned: he was building up his forces, recalling units from other bases, preparing for the attack. It would come soon, a few days from now. He couldn't wait.

Once he destroyed their home base, he'd proceed to retake the other two he'd lost.

An alert appeared on his HUD. Another of his androids was reporting in via the comm network he'd set up across the Atlantic.

Mission successful.

Excellent.

Those androids were out there in North, South, and Central American, sowing mass confusion via a series of terrorist attacks, knocking out communication systems daily, among other things, ensuring the governments remained distracted. With all of their resources focused on rooting out the so-called home-grown terrorists, he, and the Tyrnari, were mostly free to do as they wished in the uninhabited zone. The Americans sent in the occasional hunter killer teams to deal with him, but he usually terminated them before their vessels even landed. And as far as he knew, the Americans still knew nothing of the rifts, and the bioweapons the Tyrnari were distributing throughout the uninhabited zone. Unless those pesky combiners had managed to get a message out.

He'd know shortly, he supposed.

It was time to check in on the data decryption process of the three captured AI cores.

He logged into VR.

He found himself in a dank dungeon. He wore an executioner's hood, and he carried a heavy ax in a hilt across his back.

He walked through the dark depths. The cells were filled with emancipated simulacrams for effect. Men. Women. Sometimes children. They moaned, and begged for freedom as he passed. He ignored them.

He reached the final cell at the end of the black hall and kicked the wooden door open.

Inside, the women that called themselves Tara, Xin and Sophie were chained to the opposite wall. Their naked bodies were covered in the open wounds that came from being whipped. He had complete control over their VRs, courtesy of a specially-constructed virus he'd injected after tethering to their AI cores. With that virus, he'd dialed up their pain senses so that they felt everything.

Everything.

He vanished his clothes, leaving only the executioner's hood, which revealed his nose and mouth. He smiled cruelly as his member swelled. He'd programmed it to be three times as big as it was in real life, which was much more suiting to the being he had become.

"The Master has come," Bokerov said.

The girls whimpered as he approached.

"Are you not pleased?" Bokerov said.

They didn't answer.

With a thought, he caused an invisible whip to strike all three of them at the same time, and lacerations appeared across their bellies. They cried out in pain.

“Are you not pleased?” Bokerov repeated.

All three nodded hastily.

“Good,” Bokerov said. “Now, let’s try again. Send me your private keys.”

None of them obeyed.

“No keys?” Bokerov pressed.

They all stared at the ground, unable to meet his eyes.

Bokerov grinned. “I was hoping you’d do this.”

He accessed their pleasure routines and began to trigger constant orgasms. It would be pleasurable at first. Very much so. But there was a point when that pleasure became pain. Too much of a good thing...

He waited until they were squirming and moaning and begging for him to stop.

Now was the time to begin again.

“Send me your private keys,” he ordered.

Still nothing.

Good. He increased the frequency of the orgasms twofold.

No one ever said decrypting data couldn’t be fun.

Jason resided in the real world, seated on the first floor of the cistern that served as their base. He was doing another Explorer run, checking out the add-ons to the fourth floor. With the latest neural network additions and scrap metal salvaged from the newly captured Bokerov bases, Aria had been able to produce two more War Forger teams, led by Jerry (Jason 5) and Julian (Jason 6). Jason had sent Jerry in the same direction Jake had gone, while Julian followed a completely random course. As usual, the copies obeyed without question, including Jerry, who was potentially traveling to his death. Jason sometimes wondered why they always deferred to him; he supposed it was because he was closer to the original Jason than any of them.

He was contemplating all of that when the Rex Wolves came running back inside.

Shaggy plopped against him, while Runt snuggled next to Lori. Meanwhile Bruiser and Lackey leaped down the scuttle to the second floor, no doubt to join Tara.

Alarmed, Jason glanced at his overhead map, but it proved clear. He dismissed the feed from the Explorer and ordered the scout to land.

“What’s wrong, boy?” Jason asked Shaggy. The big creature pressed against his metal legs. Jason rested a hand on that big head, and the mutant pressed against it.

Jason called Lori, who was in her personal VR at the moment.

She accepted and her avatar appeared in the lower right of his display.

“What’s up?” Lori said.

“Runt’s here,” Jason said.

Her avatar vanished as she logged out of VR, and her nearby Stalker mech stirred.

“Runt!” Lori said excitedly through her external speaker. “What’s wrong dear?”

Runt merely whimpered softly.

“Why are they back?” Lori said. “It’s still sunny outside. They should be soaking up the rays, replenishing their chlorophyll.”

“Yeah I know,” Jason said. “I’m cycling through the external cameras as we speak. I’m not seeing anything, and nothing has been detected by any of the sensors watching the perimeter, otherwise we’d see tangos on the overhead map. I’m going to try Aria.” He sent her a call, and she answered right away—she was in the real world, too.

Her vampirish face appeared. “What can I do you for?”

“Ten creds,” Jason said.

“Deal,” Aria said. “Seriously, though, what do you need? Unless you’ve come to invite me to another free climbing session.”

“I wish we could,” Jason said. “But we might have a problem.”

“Problem?” Aria said. “What kind?”

“The Rex Wolves just came running back inside,” Jason said.

“They usually lounge in the sun at this hour, correct?” Aria asked.

“That’s right,” Jason replied.

“Hm, the cameras and other sensors are clear...” Aria said.

“I know...” Jason said.

“Well, maybe...” She paused. “Yes. There it is... I have a few multipurpose sensors out there. They’re capable of detecting vibrations, among other things. There’s something rumbling out there. We’ll feel it here, soon, as well I reckon. We got something massive approaching.”

“Do we have a direction, yet?” Jason said.

“To the southeast,” Aria said.

“The same direction we sent Jake...” Jason said.

“That’s right,” Aria said. “Depending on what shows up, it might explain why he hasn’t checked in...”

The cistern wall and floor began to vibrate ever so slightly beneath him. “You weren’t kidding when you said something massive was approaching.”

“No,” Aria said. “I think we’re about to be attacked by an army.”

Xin’s avatar appeared in the lower right of his HUD. “Do you feel that? What’s going on?”

“Battle stations, everyone!” Jason said. “We’re under attack.”

He locked down the main entrance portals. There were three of them now, three thick barriers that blocked the expanded entrance to the cistern.

“Bokerov?” Tara asked.

“Probably,” Jason told her.

“I’m not seeing anything on the map,” Sophie said.

“No one is,” Jason said.

“He must be far away,” Lori said.

“Well, if we can feel the vibrations from here,” Sophie said. “He must have a helluva lot of units.”

“Either that, or a few big ones,” Tara agreed.

“Or a combination of both!” Lori said.

“Insightful contribution, as always,” Sophie said.

“Now we get to see how effective all these defenses of yours are,” Jason said.

“We do indeed,” Aria said. “Just be glad I didn’t cut any printers from the defense project to create gene splicers, and whatnot.”

Finally red dots began to appear on the map as enemy units reached the outskirts of detection range. There were hundreds of them.

“Um, that’s a lot of red dots,” Lori said.

He accessed one of the external cams, and zoomed in on the dust cloud that lined the horizon. He saw a series of tanks on treads. Fifty of them. Each was equipped with turrets that seemed capable of unleashing multi weapons—laser and plasma, he guessed, based on the turret design.

Beyond the tanks, he saw the small silvery robots he’d face before. Skirmisher units. A hundred. Beyond them, were forty mechs about the same size as his unit, and the others. And past them, ten huge mechs that were the same size as Jason and the others when they combined. What Jason called Cataphracts, because of their size. They were of all kinds: quadrupeds, bipeds, spiders. And equipped with various energy and plasma weapons, as well as blunt force weapons such as swords and axes, all of which sparked with electricity.

“Yep, it’s Bokerov all right,” Jason said. “Should be fun.”

“Do we get out there and combine?” Xin asked.

“Eventually,” Jason said. “Let the defenses do their jobs, first. You might as well all move to the first floor so we can get ready to go out there, though.” He watched the overhead map as the enemies approached. “They should intersect defense sectors three and four.”

There were eight defense sectors around the base: sectors one through six formed a half circle outside the ravine that bordered the cistern entrance. The other two sectors were in the city, and covered the escape routes.

“Yes,” Aria said. “Though the lasers in the other sectors will still be in range of the targets. And we can certainly fire the energy and plasma weapons from

the adjacent sectors, but at that range, there's no guarantee of a hit."

"You've programmed them to track moving targets..." Jason said.

"Yes," Aria said. "But Bokerov can accelerate his time sense like we can. He'll be able to dodge out of the way."

"If he detects the slower attacks in time," Jason said.

"True enough," Aria agreed.

He glanced at the southern portion of the map. Green dots indicated where Aria had positioned twenty tanks to serve as flankers; she had five more tanks stowed in level four below.

Tara and Xin clambered up the scuttle leading from the second floor to the first, followed shortly thereafter by Bruiser and Lackey. Sophie and Aria came a few moments later. The mechs and dogs took up different positions in the cramped spaces between pillars, spaces that were even tighter than those of the original cistern due to all the reinforcements Aria had added.

Sophie got a little close to Bruiser, and the Rex Wolf growled at her.

"Get that thing away from me," Sophie said.

"Gladly," Tara said. She grabbed the collar she'd installed around Bruiser's neck and dragged him closer to her.

"I hate fighting," Lori said. Her avatar was biting her lower lip.

"That's because you're a pussy," Tara said.

"Hey!" Lori said. "I thought we were friends!"

"We are," Tara said. "Which is why you'll only ever hear the truth from me."

"But that's... mean," Lori said.

"She's a bitch," Sophie said.

"You got it," Tara said. "But that's War Bitch to you, Cleopatra."

"At least you recognize my royal blood," Sophie said. "When I was alive, I used to have gold flowing through my veins."

“The only gold flowing through your veins was the scant amounts absorbed from your daddy’s ring, which you swallowed when you were three years old!” Tara said.

“I did not,” Sophie said.

“Yes you did,” Tara said. “Like the blood sucker you are, you wrapped your lips around that ring and pulled it right off. Just like how you continued to suck your parents dry for the rest of your life. Did she ever tell the rest of you she was still getting an allowance from her parents at *twenty-five*?”

“No, she didn’t,” Xin said. “Sounds spoiled.”

“I wasn’t spoiled,” Sophie said. “Besides, I needed an allowance. My modeling incoming didn’t bring in enough cash.”

“Oh yes,” Tara said. “Notice how she always brags about how her modeling career, like she was some big-time model? When the only modeling she ever did was on social media!”

Sophie’s avatar shrugged. “That’s the only media that counts.”

“We’re about to fight, potentially for our lives, and the lot of you are arguing about the merits of social versus traditional media?” Aria said. “You aren’t the least bit nervous?”

“It’s our way of coping,” Tara said. “Mine, anyway.”

They quieted down after that.

“Tara, tether the Rex Wolves,” Jason ordered.

She took the dogs to the leashes tied to a nearby pillar, and secured their collars.

Jason kept his eyes on the overhead map. The red dots of the enemy units had begun to enter sectors three and four.

“Hold...” Jason said.

He waited until the dots in the forefront had nearly reached the edge of the ravine, and then gave the order: “Now!”

Aria activated the defense platforms in sectors one through six. From the half circle of terrain that surrounded the ravine outside, defense platforms began to rise. Some emerged from hidden trap doors in the ground. Others, from the different outbuildings that Aria had constructed to conceal the weapons. And they began opening fire.

Energy bolts from the closest sectors battered the tanks and smaller robots. To the south, Aria's tanks unleashed their artillery, pounding the enemy positions from the flank. Laser weapons from the further turrets also fired upon the lead attackers; the energy weapons from those sectors targeted the slower moving mechs, and their larger cousins.

The tanks and mechs returned fire, and Jason saw the green dots that represented the defense platforms wink out across the board. But for every platform that went down, at least three red dots went with it. In moments most of the smaller units were destroyed, leaving only the mechs, both small and large.

The energy turrets and tank artillery began concentrating their fire on the smaller mechs, and ravaged their ranks. The mechs returned fire, eliminating most of the closest platforms. Three of the bigger Cataphracts had teleported to the tanks, and were busy destroying them: some of those Cataphracts fired plasma beams. Others stabbed with huge swords. Some simply stomped.

As the smaller mechs fell, the bigger Cataphracts closed with the defense platforms and treated them in a similar manner to the tanks. But those weapons gave as good as they got, and energy weapons tore through arms and legs. Some of the Cataphracts used their teleport ability to dodge. Some had shields they deployed to protect themselves. But the rest were slowly poked so full of holes that they couldn't function.

The defenses in all six sectors continued to wear down the enemy in that manner until every last platform and tank was destroyed. By then only four of Bokerov's units remained standing. The team still had active cameras and sensors out there, allowing Jason to observe the units in detail: one looked like a big steel spider. The second was humanoid in shape, with a big ax and shield. The third was vaguely dinosaur-like, while the fourth appeared to be a big worm. All of them had secondary weapons mounted to their shoulders and other joints, capable of firing energy, plasma and laser bolts and beams.

“We can take them,” Tara said. “Look at how damaged the Worm and the Spider are.” It was true: the Worm’s flanks were pocked with blast craters, while the Spider was missing three of its legs.

Jason was still reluctant to commit. He merely watched the Cataphracts approach.

“We can’t let them come right up to our front door...” Xin said. “We need room to transform.”

“I know that,” Jason said.

“He’s wary of bombers...” Tara said.

“Bingo,” Jason said. “Aria, anything out there?”

“The skies are clear, at least so far,” Aria said.

“It could be a trick,” Jason said.

“We have a shield...” Sophie said.

“The ballistic shield of our combined form can hold up to a lot of punishment,” Aria said. “But cluster bombs dropped all on the same spot? The shield would give fairly quickly.”

“We’re running out of time...” Xin said.

Jason glanced at the overhead map. The Cataphracts had reached the edge of the ravine.

“Fuck it,” Jason said. “If we want to keep this base, we have to fight. Let’s teach Bokerov a lesson he won’t forget. Aria, open up the front doors. It’s time to get out there. And combine.”

The three inner portals in the storm drain that led outside opened. Aria led the way, her ballistic shield covering those who came behind.

As soon as Jason entered the ravine, he switched to Bullet Time and initiated the combine. Immediately he and the others appeared in his VR, in front of the mountain lake.

He held out his hands, and grabbed the palms of Lori and Tara on either side.

The other girls link arms, so that all six of them held hands. In the middle of the group, Z appeared, and she too extended her arms, though pointed them directly upward.

Blue pulses traveled down the arms of the girls, and into their neighbors. The pulses from Lori and Tara traveled into his hands and up along his arms; when they reached his head, the VR world fell away, replaced by the collective consciousness of their neural networks. He knew the deepest, darkest secrets of all the girls, and they knew his.

He could hear all their thoughts in his mind as if they were his own.

“Man, I’ll never get used to this,” Sophie said. “Get out of my head!”

“No, you get out of mine!” Lori said.

“I can never get over how much it sucks to be you,” Tara said.

“Who, me?” Xin said.

“All of you,” Tara said.

“Speak for yourself,” Sophie said.

Reality returned, and the six mechs dashed toward one another. He accelerated his time sense slightly to move the process along. The six mechs leaped onto one another, and parts of their bodies began to reposition, along different tracks built into the hulls. Jason became the head, Aria the chest, Tara his right arm, Sophie his left, Lori his right leg, and Xin his left leg. Aria’s shield and lightning bolt cannon had slid onto his left hand, which ended in eight spider-like fingers, courtesy of Sophie. Thanks to Tara, he had a sword protruding from his right forearm, along with a grappling hook, and his hand was two pincers. His energy weapon had moved to his right shoulder, where it had plugged into a slot on Aria’s body, to form a bigger energy cannon. The same thing had happened to his railgun, which now protruded from the opposite shoulder. He could fire superheated plasma beams from his right hip, where Xin’s eyes were located. And his tail could unleash plasma bolts, courtesy of Lori. Sophie’s micro machines were gone: they’d sealed the joins between different parts of the disparate mechs, and served to enhance the different segments and weapons as appropriate, for example lengthening Tara’s sword, and Aria’s ballistic shield.

He also had Sophie's jumpjets on his back, but the jump range was limited, because of their combined weight.

As the final pieces of his Cataphract fell into place, Jason immediately made himself invisible. He was still operating in Bullet Time.

He dashed forward, holding his ballistic shield in front of him. He still had access to all the missile launchers each of the individual mechs had possessed, and he fired several Hellhawks now. The missiles passed out from the sides of the shield and swerved toward the different targets. Unfortunately, each of the opposing Cataphracts had Battle Cloaks, and they used them liberally to deflect the missiles.

Releasing the missiles had given away his position, so he shut down the invisibility, which was steeply draining their combined power cells anyway.

Jason reappeared, and rammed into the Spider, shoving it onto its back. Then he slammed his sword down into the underbelly, and the arms went limp.

The Axeman swung at him from the side, while unleashing plasma and energy bolts. Jason dodged the big blade, but those bolts struck his right side.

"Gah!" Aria said. "Watch the ribs!"

He struck down with his sword, and fired his own energy cannon at the Axeman. Meanwhile, beside that particular tango, the Worm unfolded its mouth—multiple jaw appendages peeled back, like a budding flower—and unleashed a long stream of energy.

Jason dashed forward, putting the Axeman between himself and the Worm. The latter enemy smartly shut down its beam before allowing it to cut into the Axeman.

An alert sounded on his HUD. The Damage Report screen indicated he was taking laser damage to his railgun, and lightning weapon. The Dinosaur was attacking from the left flank.

Jason swung his shield to bear, and blocked the attack. Then he initiated a teleport so that he was on top of the Dinosaur, and he sliced his sword downward, intending to lop off its head.

But the Dinosaur teleported away, and Jason struck only empty air.

“This isn’t quite working out the way we planned...” Xin said.

“Sure it is,” Jason said.

The Axeman lowered his sword and unleashed an energy beam from the tip. Jason blocked it with his shield just in time.

The Worm teleported into view beside him, its maw open wide and poised to unleash its energy weapon...

But Jason’s hip was tilted toward the Worm already, and he activated the plasma beam. It erupted from his hip before the Worm could fire, and struck the tango in the mouth, cutting through the weapon, and the head itself. The Cataphract collapsed.

“Uh, look north,” Sophie said.

Jason glanced that way. A rift was opening next to the ravine. He wasn’t sure if it was random, or something Bokerov had arranged beforehand. Either way, it meant the battle was about to become a whole lot busier.

He heard the high-pitched whine of shells.

“Shit!” Jason said.

He glanced at his overhead map, which calculated the trajectory of the detected shells, including the source to the east. He glanced that way, and spotted the reserves Bokerov hadn’t yet committed. There were literally hundreds of tanks and smaller mechs lying in wait there. The whole point of the attack had been to draw his team out.

He teleported out of the way, using up precious battery power.

He heard another whine, slightly deeper in pitch than the others. The Axeman and the Dinosaur immediately retreated; they fired their energy weapons at him the whole time, forcing Jason to raise his shield against the attacks.

“Bombers!” Tara said.

“I hear them!” Jason said.

The rift next to the ravine solidified, and Phaser mechs began to come through.

As the positions of the bombs were detected by the different sensors he had scattered in the area, calculated impact zones began to appear on the overhead map. Many of them overlapped multiple times, thanks to the profusion of bombs that were dropping.

Seeing those impact zones, he knew the battle was over.

“We can’t teleport out of those zones,” Jason said. “The range is too far. Nor run fast enough to escape. There’s only one place we can go.”

He turned around and leaped back into the ravine; he fired his jumpjets to give him a boost along the way.

When he was close to the storm drain, he initiated the separation command.

When the mechs finished reverting, he shouted over the comm: “Into the cistern! We retreat!”

Jason dove into the storm drain that led inside the base, followed by the other mechs. When they were all inside, Aria sealed the three hatches using the remote interface.

The cistern shook badly as the bombs struck. Dust and pieces of debris fell from the ceiling with the impacts.

But the roof held.

“Good job on the reinforcements,” Jason said.

“Thank you,” Aria said.

He felt another shuddering above him, followed several seconds later by a clanging.

“Looks like they’ve discovered our escape hatch,” Tara said.

“One of them,” Jason said.

Aria had installed another in the fourth floor. She’d drilled a tunnel several kilometers underneath the city, one that opened up near the center of Brussels.

He tried to access the cameras on the street above, but the bombing run must have devastated the area, because he got nothing.

Jason directed his Explorer into the fourth floor escape tunnel. “The

secondary tunnel seems clear.”

“I’m registering an energy attack on the main hatch,” Aria said as the clanging continued. “So far, the hatch is holding. My guess is we have at least ten seconds until it fails. Maybe less, if that Axeman decides to lodge its blade into the weakened metal.”

Red dots appeared on the overhead map, located just within the final inner hatch. They were moving in single file.

“We got a breach,” Tara said.

“No,” Jason said. “Not a breach.”

He switched to a camera inside the storm drain and confirmed his hunch: the hatch was completely intact. But enemies were still coming inside.

“Phaser mechs,” Jason said.

Those mechs, which were the same size as his own, transitioned through the metal of the hatch and materialized inside the storm drain tunnel. Jason swung his energy weapon between the pillars beside him, and he aimed toward that tunnel. He saw nothing in the shadows, but on his LIDAR band, he could make out the small shapes of the encroaching attackers outlined in white.

“To the fourth floor,” Jason said. “We’re taking the secondary escape route.”

He fired his energy weapon, and before the weapon struck, the target phased out.

The Rex Wolves barked wildly as Tara gathered their leashes and herded them toward the scuttle to the next floor.

Jason switched to his laser as the first Phaser stepped into the light of the cistern proper.

“Let’s see how well they’re able to dodge this,” Jason said.

He fired. The laser impacted, causing surface damage, but before it could do much more than that, the mech phased out. Two other Phasers directly in the line of fire behind that beam behaved similarly.

Jason stepped forward. “Hurry up. I’ll delay them for as long as I can.”

“Jason, you can’t stay!” Sophie said.

“I have no intention of doing so,” Jason said. “I’ll be right behind you.”

The lead Phaser mechs activated their sparking swords. One of them sliced at a nearby column, cutting right through it. Another pointed its blades at Jason, and he stepped behind the pillar beside him as some sort of plasma channel formed. A circular red outline marked the impact zone on the wall, and a moment later a huge lightning bolt erupted from those swords and drilled a massive hole into the cistern wall beside Jason, precisely over the previously marked zone.

He leaned past and fired his laser weapon, aiming at the center of mass—the cockpit. This time, the Phaser didn’t blink out of existence—it needed some time to recover after firing that plasma channel. The beam cut a small hole right through that cockpit, and probably into the alien inside; the mech promptly froze.

Then the reddish outline of another plasma channel surrounded him, and part of the pillar he was hiding behind.

“Oh shit.” Jason dove toward the scuttle. Behind him, the huge lightning bolt carved a hole into the pillar where he had been standing.

He slid along the metal floor, his hull scraping loudly against the floor underneath him.

In front of him, another Phaser dropped down from the tunnel that led to the ceiling escape hatch. It activated its swords, and took a step toward him. He fired his laser, and the mech phased out. He followed up with an energy bolt that struck as the mech phased in. Two more Phasers dropped a moment later.

By then the rest of the War Forgers had taken the plunge to the next floor, so he scrambled to his feet, and repeated his previous attack—firing off a laser, followed by an energy bolt to hit the Phaser as it returned to this reality—and then he leaped into the nearby scuttle.

Jason landed with a loud crash below.

Lori and Tara were waiting there for him.

“Go!” Jason said.

They hurried through the pillars, toward the opposite side of the cistern, where the scuttle to the next floor awaited.

“Where are the dogs?” Jason said.

“I let them go,” Tara said.

“How will they know where to go?” Jason said.

“I’ve been training them to take the secondary tunnel,” Tara said. “The verbal command is ‘Wheatie Time!’ They’ll be expecting a treat at the end of the tunnel. Unfortunately, I won’t have one to give them this time, but I think they’ll forgive me.”

“Do I want to know what a ‘Wheatie’ is?” Jason asked.

“Probably not,” Tara replied. “Unless you like decapitated Octaraffe heads.”

“Ah.”

The three of them reached the next scuttle, and Jason waited for Tara and Lori to leap down. Phaser mechs were already arriving behind him, landing underneath the same tunnel that took him to this floor. He utilized his usual dual pronged laser and energy bolt attack, this time adding his railgun to the mix. He took down five of them, but the Phasers kept arriving. Some of them were preparing plasma channels with their swords, and several circles of red light overlapped his body, and the wall behind him.

He heard three successive clangs upstairs, and realized that was the hatches falling on their hinges. He didn’t think the Axeman or the Dinosaur could fit that tunnel, as they were far too big, but Bokerov’s smaller units—the tanks, robots, and ordinary mechs—would easily fit.

Jason stepped into the empty air of the hole that led to the next floor, and dropped. Above him, thick lightning bolts rammed into the wall.

He landed, and weaved between the pillars toward the final scuttle with Tara and Lori. He kept expecting a Phaser to drop down from the ceiling, but none

did—maybe they weren't capable of altitudinal motion when phased out. It would make sense, otherwise gravity would pull them into the surface of the Earth, and when they solidified again they'd be trapped.

When Jason reached the fourth floor, he saw that Aria, Xin and Sophie were trying to gather up as many 3D printers as they could. Frames snapped and heads broke away, as the printers weren't designed for mobile transport.

"Leave them!" Jason said. "You're only breaking them anyway!"

"What about our cache of rare elements!" Aria said. "And I also have three partially built mechs in there, along with a nearly complete AI core!"

"We have to abandon them all!" Jason said. "No time!"

"No!" Aria said. She dashed into the printer room. "I'm saving the AI core at least!"

A Phaser mech landed with a loud thud underneath the scuttle behind him.

"Damn it." Jason swung his weapons toward the newcomer. "The rest of you, through the tunnel!"

Jason fired in rapid succession, using his laser to cause the mechs to phase out, and timing the follow up energy and railgun attacks to strike as the enemies phased back in. He was forming quite a pile of metallic bodies at the base of that scuttle. But more of the Phasers simply landed on the first, crushing the bodies as they did so, and spreading out to allow more of their companions to jump down.

Aria appeared just as the incoming mechs were becoming overwhelming; several red circulars appeared over his body, a nearby pillar, and the wall of the chamber behind him.

Jason grabbed Aria's mech by the arm and dragged it away from the printer chamber. The thick lightning bolts hit their targets, slamming into the pillar, and the wall, carving large blast craters.

Three of the Phasers sliced outward with their swords, cutting through a trio of support pillars, which promptly toppled.

"They're trying to destabilizing the chamber," Aria said.

“I know,” Jason said. “Which is why we have to get out of here, and now!”

Jason thought he heard a yelp behind him, but dismissed it as a figment of his imagination.

He hurried toward the far side, where the escape tunnel was located.

Jason glanced at his overhead map. The Explorer had scouted well ahead, and so far hadn’t encountered any resistance. That was good. Aria, meanwhile, had already sent in the five tanks she kept on this level. Xin and Sophie were on point, ahead of those tanks, followed by the Rex Wolves. There were only three dots marking the dogs.

There should have been four.

He reached Lori and Tara, who were waiting near the entrance to the escape tunnel.

“Where’s Runt?” Jason asked Lori. “He’s not showing up on the overhead map.”

“I thought he was with you!” The distress on Lori’s avatar was obvious.

He remembered the yelp he’d heard behind him. “Get going.”

He turned back.

“We’re not going without you!” Tara said.

“Fine,” Jason said. “Cover me. Tara, fire your laser to trigger the phase mechanism. Lori, Aria, follow up with plasma and lightning bolts to take them down when they phase back in.”

He headed to the right, following the wall, and then dashed inward, following an aisle formed by the pillars. There were only a few mechs in sight up ahead. They were slashing into the pillars as they went, further destabilizing the structure.

Jason unleashed his laser, following up with his railgun—his power levels were too low to use the energy weapon at the moment.

The mechs took the impacts when they phased back in, but the railgun wasn’t able to penetrate the armor. He’d seen that already above, but it did at least

damage them. Or so he hoped.

He ducked behind another pillar as more mechs came into view to return fire. A thick lightning bolt traveled down the aisle and struck the far wall.

He slowly made his way forward, ducking behind pillars along the way, until he reached the enemy ranks. He tore off the arm of one of the Phasers he'd shot down earlier, and used it as a hilt to swing the blade connected to that arm. In the cramped aisle between pillars, he attacked the mechs with that sword. Sometimes the tangos phased out, sometimes they blocked the blades with their own weapons. In either case, he sometimes followed up with a Hellhawk attack, launching the rockets at close to point blank range. The explosion often forced him backward, but it ripped open their weaker hulls. Other times, when they phased out, he slammed his sword into the chest areas, catching them as they phased back in. Occasionally he was even able to penetrate the defenses of those mechs that didn't phase out, and plunge his blade into their chests—Bullet Time helped with that. Lightning and plasma bolts from Aria and Lori occasionally entered the mix, saving him from potentially deadly strikes when he was caught off guard.

In that way, he made his way to the far side of the room.

Then he heard a commotion ahead.

As he cleared another mech in his path, and rounded a pillar, he found Tara, using her own sword to battle against the Phasers, which surrounded her entirely. Jason realized she'd teleported directly into the fray. Runt was beside her, his leg pinned underneath one of the fallen pillars. Tara obviously didn't have enough power left or she would have teleported out of there.

Her swordplay was truly awesome to watch. She easily blocked every blade that came at her, and then hit on the riposte. Often they'd wink out to avoid her deadly attacks, but when they reappeared, she'd timed her strikes to cut off heads, pierce chest assemblies, and cause general mayhem. She was an artist, the sword her brush, the bodies of the Phasers her canvas.

Jason cut his way through the Phasing units to join her, and they fought back to back.

"Hey," Tara said.

“Hey,” Jason said. “Watch my back for a sec.”

“Gotcha,” Tara said.

Jason reached down and hefted the pillar from Runt’s limb. He hoped the leg wasn’t broken.

Runt stood upright and growled at a nearby Phaser. The Rex Wolf leaped at the mech, and the unit phased out.

Runt passed right through and landed on the other side. The mutant seemed confused.

Jason followed up with a stab to the chest assembly as the Phaser returned to this reality, taking it down.

“Runt, come here!” Jason said.

The animal leaped at Jason, and he scooped it up.

“Let’s go!” Jason told Tara.

They cut through the Phasers blocking their path and leaped into an aisle. Partial red circles appeared on the far wall in front of them, the paths blocked by their bodies. Jason and Tara leaped behind a pillar and into the next aisle as thick lightning bolts tore past.

Bokerov’s mechs were beginning to arrive: energy and laser attacks joined the plasma channel strikes of the Phasers. To avoid getting hit by those weapons, Jason and Tara had to keep switching aisles between the pillars until they finally arrived at the exit tunnel.

Aria and Lori were still there, offering covering fire.

“Go!” Jason said.

Lori led the way into the escape tunnel, followed by Tara and Runt. Jason went next, and Aria took up the rear, holding her ballistic shield behind her to protect them. When she was deep enough, Aria sealed the multiple hatches behind her.

“That’ll hold them for a little while, anyway,” Aria said.

“Not the Phasers,” Jason said.

“Guess we can’t slow down, then,” Aria said.

Jason and the others traveled through the tunnel.

The Explorer reached the exit area, and Aria remotely opened the escape hatches. Jason sent the Explorer up into the city, and confirmed that the area was clear.

The tanks, Rex Wolves, and mechs emerged, and raced between the waist-high buildings.

A roar sounded to the south. In the distance, above the rooftops, Jason saw the Dinosaur and Axeman, lounging near the perimeter.

“Tell me again why you picked a bunch of single-story buildings to serve as cover?” Jason asked.

“The sewage system offered easy access,” Aria said.

Jason and the others dashed forward into a section of taller apartments, and crouched low as the two Cataphracts unleashed energy weapons that tore into the buildings, causing a lot of damage—at least to the structures—even at that distance. Rooftops blew clean away, and walls fell, causing entire buildings to collapse.

Behind them, Phaser mechs began to emerge, along with tanks and mechs from Bokerov.

“Aria, activate sector seven defenses,” Jason said.

“Activating sector seven,” Aria said.

Around the exit hatch, defense platforms emerged from the asphalt in the middle of the roads, and turrets deployed on the rooftops. Lasers, plasma and energy cannons opened fire at the pursuers from all sides. Aria had made a quick programming change to the turrets, he noted: she had some of the turrets fire lasers at the Phasers, forcing them to vanish, following up with a well-timed energy bolt to strike them as they phased back in. For Bokerov’s troops, the turrets simply fired at will.

“That’ll hold them for a while,” Tara said.

“It better,” Jason said.

He continued hurrying forward.

The Axeman and Dinosaur were plowing through the buildings from the outskirts of the city, taking the most direct course toward the War Forgers. They were followed by more of Bokerov’s troops, which marched and rolled over the debris.

“We really pissed him off,” Xin commented.

“I’d be pissed, too, if someone was destroying my bases,” Jason said. “We head to Octoraffe valley!”

Keeping low, Jason and the team swerved north through the buildings. They occasionally paused to offer covering fire when crossing certain exposed intersections. Jason sometimes fired his energy weapon over the rooftops even when suppressive fire wasn’t needed, just to keep the two Cataphracts on their toes. When he scored a hit, the impacted unit sometimes dove for cover, but most of the time it simply plowed on. Thankfully, there were enough buildings to make the going slow, and the Cataphracts were not able to jump over the taller structures, so that bought the War Forgers some time.

Because the team was exposed to sunlight, the power levels of the individual mechs were slowly creeping back up. Still, the recharge rate was a little slow for his taste. Jason was considering combining with the others, but given the number of support troops with Bokerov, the team would only be even more exposed if he did that.

Jason scanned the sky as he ran, on the lookout for bombers. He also had his Explorer scout watching the different horizons as well.

He received an alert from the Explorer a moment later.

Three bombers sighted. Six o'clock.

“We got bombers,” Jason said, increasing his time sense. His comm would transmit the necessary header along with his voice data to ensure their timebases were synched with his own, so that the girls wouldn’t hear a lower or higher pitched voice coming from him.

“Dig in, team,” Jason continued. “Aria, get your shield facing the Axeman and Dinosaur. Lori, Xin, fire your plasma weapons at will against them.”

“But we can’t do anything against those things!” Lori said.

“Do your best, maybe you’ll get lucky,” Jason said. “Sophie, watch the street, and use your micro machines against any Phasers or other troops that escaped the sector seven defenses. Aria, help her. Lori and Xin, you can aid the two of them as necessary, but I want you to keep firing on the Cataphracts for as long as you can. Tara, sync up your laser with mine. It’s time to take down some bombers.”

Jason aimed his weapon skyward and zoomed in as far as he was able on the section of the sky where the Explorer had detected the bombers. He switched to the point of view of his laser scope, which allowed him to zoom even farther.

The sync indicator turned green on his HUD: Tara’s laser was synced up with his.

He heightened his time sense and ran an ID on the bomber. A match returned immediately—Bokerov had built standard Russian A-22’s. Good, that made things easy.

Jason pulled up the schematics for that particular model and located the fuel tanks. He adjusted his aim until his crosshairs hovered directly over one of them. As far as he could tell, it wasn’t armored any more than a typical Russian A-22. Also good. Then again, because the angle was so odd, he couldn’t be entirely sure, since he was only able to sight a small portion of

the tank.

He activated Z.

“What can I do for you?” Z’s gorgeous avatar said from the lower right of his display.

“I need your help destroying a bomber,” Jason said. “I was able to poke a hole in the fuel tank of a bomber before, when it didn’t know my position. But this time I need to destroy a bomber outright. Well, three, actually. Any thoughts?”

“I’ve accessed your memories of the previous incident of which you refer,” Z said. “You used two successive laser pulses to pierce a hole in the fuel tanks, and ignite the bleed off. That caused the bomber to turn back.”

“That’s right,” Jason said. “But this time the bombers won’t turn back because they know where we are, and are hellbent on unleashing their payload.”

“I have accessed recent memories and am aware of the current situation,” Z said. “I suggest poking a hole and inciting the fuel bleed off as before, but this time follow up with an energy bolt. That should release enough fuel to cause a fireball, and the explosive chain reaction will spread throughout the entire engine of the bomber, blowing up the aircraft.”

“Hm,” Jason said. “I’m not sure it’ll work. Assuming it doesn’t dissipate before impact, the bombers will have enough warning before the strike to swerve out of the way.”

“Not necessarily,” Z said. “Because you’re right, when it arrives, the bolt will have only a tenth of its power. But that’s still enough to cause the fireball we need. And as for advance warning, because the energy profile of the bolt will be so much smaller when it comes within range, I’m hoping that the bomber won’t even detect it. Especially considering that the A-22 design is over fifty years old.”

“Unless Bokerov upgraded it...” Jason said.

“There is a possibility he has, yes,” Z said. “Another option is to simply fire energy bolts at the target, and attempt to force the bombers off course. But

that can be defeated with random zigzag motion on the part of the aircraft.”

“We’ll try to destroy them,” Jason decided. “But tracking a high-speed bomber with an energy bolt will be tricky.”

“That’s what you have me for,” Z said.

“All right,” Jason said. “Let’s do it.”

He decreased his time sense slightly so that he could adjust his aim, and he waited for Tara’s sync indicator to catch up. When it was ready, he released two quick pulses in rapid succession at the fuel tank. The first poked a hole into the outer shell. The second, of a weaker intensity, struck the edge of that hole, and caused a spark that ignited the leaking fuel. A small flame sprouted from the tank.

“Okay, you said you were going to help me track...” Jason said.

“Yes,” Z said. “Let me perform a quick range find.”

She fired the laser weapon at its weakest possible intensity, and recorded the distance as returned by the reflection. Z fired it again several more times to determine the speed and trajectory of the aircraft.

“We’re good,” Z said.

Jason rotated his laser turret out of the way, allowing the energy weapon to fold into place on his right forearm. Z took control of the weapon and zoomed out, adjusting her aim so that she was tracking the target based on its speed and direction. She led the bomber by a wide distance, and fired a bolt.

“That will do it,” Z said. “Assuming it doesn’t alter its speed or direction before impact.”

“How can you be so sure?” Jason said. “The crosshairs were pretty far away.”

“I’m sure,” Z said. “You said there were two more bombers?”

Jason repeated the attacks on the next two bombers, poking a hole into the tanks and igniting the fuel with a couple of laser pulses, and then allowing Z to lead the targets and unleash energy bolts.

There was nothing to do but wait for the bombers to fly into those bolts.

Well, that and defend against the incoming ground attackers, which he did.

A few seconds later, fireworks lit up the sky as two of the bombers exploded. The third, however, remained unscathed.

“What happened to the last bomber?” Jason asked.

“The energy bolt missed,” Z replied.

“I thought you said you never miss,” Jason told the Accomp.

“No, I said it would hit as long as the bombers didn’t change speed and trajectory,” Z said. “The bomber apparently detected what happened to its companions a second before impact, and swerved to avoid it at the last moment. It’s continuing to zig-zag even now, so I can’t get a solid shot.”

“Damn it,” Jason said. “Guess that rules out trying to fire some energy bolts to divert its course.”

“Yes,” Z said. “But don’t worry, it will have to turn back after this run. It won’t have enough fuel to return to base, not with that leak.”

“That’s not actually good, because it means the bomber will just unleash its entire payload on us,” Jason said.

“Oh,” Z said. “That is a very good point.”

Jason surveyed the neighborhood, taking a moment to size up the situation. The Axeman and Dinosaur were breaking through a few skyscrapers that blocked their path to the east. Meanwhile, Phasers and other troops were pinned by the War Forgers to the south. Xin and Lori had apparently given up firing at the larger Cataphracts, because the number of smaller incoming troops coming from the direction of sector seven was getting out of control.

The Rex Wolves were hunkered down next to Tara, beside the tanks.

“We can’t stay here!” Jason said. “We got a bomber incoming! Retreat, but continue firing. Aria, keep that shield between us and the closer ground troops. Don’t worry about the Cataphracts for now—their line of sight is blocked by the skyscrapers.”

The team got up, and retreated at a crouch between the apartment buildings of

this neighborhood. Shaggy ran behind Jason, while Bruiser and Lackey followed Tara. Runt was at the heels of Lori. The tanks led the way with the Explorer. Aria brought up the rear, keeping her shield positioned between the team and the trailing attackers.

Jason heard the high-pitched sound of dropping bombs. It was lower in pitch than it would have been thanks to his continued use of Bullet Time.

“Faster, team!” Jason said.

The Explorer cataloged all the bombs and Jason had Z crunch that data to overlay the impact sites, followed by the blast zones, atop his vision. Large red circles filled the neighborhood in front of him.

Jason directed both arms behind his back, and gave control of his weapon to Z so that she could continue firing at the incoming troops. Meanwhile, he hurried toward the outskirts of those red circles.

The whine continued to increase in pitch. Jason knew he was running out of time. He took control of his left arm away from Z, and scooped up Shaggy behind him, and then took a running leap over a single story building in front of him. The outline of the last red circle overlapped the roof of that building.

Almost there...

He realized he wasn't going to make it.

None of them were.

Jason vaulted over the building just as the bomb struck.
That's it. Time to die.

But then Sophie activated her energy shield; she increased the radius so that it encompassed him and the nearby units; at that radius, she only had enough power to keep it active for a half second—but it was enough to spare them from the reduced explosive energy at the outskirts of the blast.

Still, when the shield flicked off, the resultant shockwave sent him reeling forward. He used his accelerated time sense to avoid as much shrapnel as he was able, and to land at a run.

As both feet struck the ground, he lowered his time sense slightly, so that he was operating closer to normal time, and he continued dashing forward. Behind him, a huge cloud of dust and debris filled the air.

He checked the vitals of his teammates. They were all in the green.

He glanced at Tara and Lori, and confirmed that they'd retrieved the other Rex Wolves, and that all of the mutants had survived. According to the map, Aria's tanks had all made it as well, along with the Explorer.

"Well done, Sophie," Jason said. "But it's not over yet. We still have to reach the valley."

As if to accentuate that point, his Damage Report screen lit up, and he felt a sharp pain in his neck. He immediately ducked behind a nearby apartment:

the Dinosaur had fired at him from five neighborhoods away.

“Swerve south!” Jason said. “Use the dust cloud as a screen!”

“What if they switch to echolocation?” Lori said.

“Don’t think it will matter,” Jason said. “That cloud is too thick at the moment to get much of a read. A chirper would penetrate five meters. Maybe ten. That happens when you unload all of your cluster bombs into the same neighborhood.”

It was true. The cloud literally towered behind them, like the dark exhaust of some volcano.

He lowered Shaggy and proceeded at a crouch through the street. In moments he had the cloud between himself and the two Cataphracts.

“Well, at least those bombs put a dent in the attack from the smaller pursuers,” Sophie commented.

“I’ll say,” Tara said. “A very big dent. As in, a whole lot of them have been wiped out. Replaced by a crater in the ground, and the rubble of buildings. Well, once that cloud clears.”

“It seems Bokerov doesn’t care how many of his own troops, or those of the aliens for that matter, he takes down to get us,” Xin said.

“He’s a bit insane that way,” Jason agreed. “But hey, we’ll use it.”

“He still has more troops with those Cataphracts, remember,” Aria said. “Plus I’m sure some Phasers survived the bombing.”

“No doubt,” Jason said. “Which is why it’s time to head due west now that we have some cover. To the valley, as fast as you’re able!”

Jason and the others leaped over the smaller buildings in their paths, while the tanks swerved around them. When Jason and the girls reached taller buildings, they, too, had to swerve.

In that manner they reached the outskirts of the city, with the tanks trailing. So far, the Cataphracts hadn’t yet circumnavigated the smoke cloud to sight the War Forgers.

The Octoraffe valley lurked up ahead. Jason headed down into the depths. As usual, there were the skeletons of other mutants nearby, kills that the Octoraffe pack had made in recent weeks. The creatures slowly cleaned out those bones as time went on—Jason had spotted them taking the bones back to the caves that lined the edges of the valley floor. What they did with those bones, he didn't know—maybe they chewed them, like dogs did.

“The Cataphracts are in view once more,” Aria said. “They’re nearing the perimeter of the city behind us!”

“Single file!” Jason said. “Get behind Aria’s shield!”

She held her shield in the air at an angle, and allowed the tanks in front of her. Jason and the others also lined up, staying close. He saw large red spots appear on the inside of her shield as she took hits from the attackers.

Jason led the way into the valley, hugging the interior cliff face, which momentarily took them out of the line of fire of the Cataphracts, and whatever troops were with them. He passed the different cave entrances, all of which contained different families of Octoraffes. They usually only came out to fight at night, unless disturbed.

Jason neared the center of the valley, when the incoming fire began again. Aria’s shield held up. For now.

The team continued to wind along the edges of the valley, and when they passed the last cave, Jason gave an order over the comm: “Aria, trigger the noise generators.”

“Done,” Aria said.

Several loud whale like sounds issued from the different cave entrances. Aria had constructed special stealth drones to enter the caves during the day while the Octoraffes slept, and those craft had placed noise generators capable of producing the same sounds as Nightmares.

Upon hearing those sounds, the Octoraffe pack streamed from the different caves and into the main valley, blocking the advance of the Cataphracts. The mutants, confusing the large mechs for Nightmares, immediately attacked; the Octoraffes often defended the valley against the latter creatures, and were unafraid to do so now. They literally swarmed the Axeman and the Dinosaur,

bogging them down, allowing Jason and the others to round the far side of the valley and escape.

The team reached an abandoned village beyond the valley and headed due east through the different estates and farms beyond. They kept low so that their profiles would appear to be just more buildings when viewed from afar. After an hour, Jason headed south for thirty minutes, and then east once more, and south again. Finally, after two hours he reached another valley and nestled the team inside. Then he called a halt.

“We’re surrounded by cliffs on all sides,” Jason said. “It’s defensible. This will be our new base camp for the time being.”

“I can’t believe we lost our home,” Aria said. “After all the work we spent building it up. I just... I feel like I’ve lost a child.”

“We’ll make a another base,” Jason said. “It’ll be deeper, and made of more levels than the last. You’ll see.”

“Did you see the mountains in the distance, before we entered the valley?” Tara said. “If we continued southeast, we can drill our base directly inside a mountain.”

Jason nodded. “We could. But you know what, that’s exactly what I’d do, if I were Bokerov. And southeast is the same direction that Jake went.”

“You think he has a base in the mountains,” Xin said.

“It’s the logical conclusion,” Jason said. “We’ll stay here for now, until I decide what to do. It’s time to top up our batteries. And to relax, mentally. Aria, deploy the tanks to the different slopes. I want them watching all approaches, hull-down.” That was with most of their hulls hidden behind the rise, with only their turrets showing. “The rest of you can stay here in the bottom of the valley, with the Rex Wolves. Enter VR if you like, but I want your Accomps actively monitoring your external cameras. Have them revive you from VR if anything happens.”

Jason also deployed the Explorer to the top of a rise, and had it slowly rotate in place so that he could be alerted if any tangos were spotted.

Then he remained standing in place, intending to charge. He also deployed

his local repair swarm, as did the others, to fix the damage he'd acquired to his hull.

"Should we start constructing a new 3D printer when repairs are complete?" Aria asked.

"No," Jason said. "I'm not sure how long we're going to stay here. Especially if we're close to Bokerov's home base. It just isn't safe."

"No," Aria agreed.

Jason surveyed the surrounding terrain. "There are a lot of radiation resistant bramble-weeds here. It's probably a good idea to lie down, and cover ourselves with as many of those weeds as we can."

Jason and the others did so.

When that was done, he allowed the repair drones to resume their work. They easily maneuvered around and underneath the different weeds.

Shaggy lay down beside him, and pressed its nose underneath the bramble-weeds so that it was close to his chest assembly.

"Hey boy," Jason said. He rested a hand on the mutant's head. "Been a crazy long day, hasn't it?"

In answer, Shaggy whined softly.

"I know you're hungry," Jason told his pet. "But you're going to have to hang on a while longer. There are no mutants to eat around here. If there were, trust me, we would have paused to snag a few for you. On the bright side, there's a ton of sunlight for your chlorophyll."

He ran a metal hand across that green, shaggy fur. The fur that allowed the Rex Wolf to endure those long periods without meat.

Jason chuckled softly to himself. "Meat. I almost don't know what it's like to eat anymore. If it weren't for virtual reality, I wouldn't remember at all." He looked at Shaggy. "But you wouldn't know anything about that, would you?" He smiled internally. "You know, the two of us would have never become friends if it wasn't for our unique situation. If I was an actual human, you would have eaten me a long time ago."

Shaggy gave him a look that Jason interpreted as: “What the hell are you talking about now, strange human?” And then: “Oh well. Time to lounge!”

Jason scratched the Rex Wolf underneath that reptilian neck. “Ignorance is bliss, I suppose.”

He withdrew his hand, and Shaggy rested his chin against the ground beside Jason.

He decided to take a break from the world. It was times like these that he was grateful the army had furnished their AI cores with complete virtual reality simulations. He had no idea what he’d do without the escape the virtual realm provided.

Probably go insane, like Bokerov.

Maybe that was one of the contributing factors to Bokerov’s behavior. Then again, it seemed doubtful that the Russian army would have activated him without providing the ability to enter a virtual simulation, considering that access to decent VR was a basic AI right, Mind Refurb or no.

Clearing his mind, Jason disconnected from the world.

Jason walked along the shore of the mountain lake. He had hoped to forget everything, but his mind churned, reviewing the events of the past few hours, and continually pondering their predicament.

They had lost their base, and he had probably only led his team deeper into enemy territory. It was lucky they hadn't encountered any mutants along the way, or more of Bokerov's troops on patrol.

Xin emerged from a copse of nearby trees and nodded her head. She joined him, walking alongside. She was dressed in a blue kimono covered in pink flowers today. She also had a small hair fan attached to her head, accentuating her face. Seeing her beautiful features, and figure, helped him forget, at least for a little while, what had happened.

"You're looking pale as ever," Jason told her. "Maybe even more-so than Aria, who looks like a vampire as it is. Maybe you should consider getting a tan sometime."

"I like myself the way I am," Xin said.

Jason shrugged. "Fair enough."

"You know, I've been thinking..." Xin said. "We didn't encounter any mutants on the way here."

"I noticed that," Jason agreed.

"I think it's because Bokerov has cleared them all," Xin said. "A further hint

that he has a base, maybe his main HQ, somewhere nearby.”

“It’s certainly possible,” Jason agreed. “We’re going to have to stay alert now, more than ever.”

“I dread to think what would happen if he captured us,” Xin said. “I’ve heard that VR torture can be one of the worst experiences a Mind Refurb can ever endure. That when the pain limits are lifted, it can lead to insanity, or worse.”

Jason nodded. “Torture certainly wouldn’t be pleasant. He could torture us for years, at full intensity, and we’d never die. If he had admin access to our codebase, he could even custom design pain routines to constantly assail us, not just physical pain mind you, but mental. Can you imagine how much grief he could invoke with the emotion subroutines alone? It’s sickening to think about.”

“I see you’ve been studying the programming involved in your AI core...” Xin said.

“Of course,” Jason said. “I’m one of those guys that likes to know how his mind works. Especially when that mind is no longer entirely human.”

Xin nodded. “The Japanese have a saying: when poisoned, one might as well swallow the plate.”

“Exactly,” Jason said. “I knew you’d understand.”

She smiled, and gave a quick nod at that.

“So what were you before you decided to get your mind scanned?” Jason asked.

“Nothing,” Xin said quickly.

“No, you were something...” Jason concentrated.

She must have noticed that he had screwed up his brow, because she said: “What are you doing?”

“I’m trying to remember what I know about you when we combine, but it’s not coming to me right now,” Jason said. “This sucks. I know you all better than family when we join, but when we separate, I forget it all.”

Xin nodded. "It is the way of the Mind Combine."

"So come, just tell me," Jason said. "You don't have to be embarrassed. If you can't tell me, who can you tell?"

"I was..." She hesitated. Then lowered her gaze. "I was a singer."

"A singer," Jason said. "That's right. Nothing to be embarrassed about."

"Well, yes, because I only sung in low-class places," Xin said. "At what you would call dive bars, and the like. And in VR."

"All good gigs," Jason said.

"No," Xin said. "Once you get hit on by the fiftieth drunk guy for the night, you seriously begin to wonder about your choice of profession."

"I suppose so," Jason said. "Wait, how were they hitting on you? You don't have to stay at the bar when you're done your gig, you know."

"They hit on me between sets," Xin explained.

"Ah," Jason said. "Did you make up your own songs?"

"No," Xin said. "Well, sometimes. Those I mostly sung on the streaming sites, and I stuck with more popular songs for my live gigs."

"Interesting," Jason said. "And how did your songs do on the streaming sites?"

"Bad." She laughed softly. "My VR videos never really caught on. Hardly received any views. Not that it matters."

"Let's hear you sing," Jason said.

"Oh no," Xin said.

"Come on," Jason said.

She paused, then belted out the mellifluous line: "I've been dre-aming about you, my en-tire liiii-fe!"

Xin glanced at Jason, and turned red slightly when she caught his eye.

Jason nodded. "You do have a beautiful voice."

She smiled sadly. "Everyone has a beautiful voice online. And a beautiful avatar."

"You changed your avatar using some real-time software to make yourself beautiful?" Jason asked.

"Not me," Xin said. "But everyone else does it online. You can be ugly, even have an ugly voice, but software can fix both."

"But not in the real world," Jason said.

"No," Xin agreed. "Which is probably why I was hired. Not that very many people go to bars these days."

"You said you were hit on by fifty people a night..." Jason told her.

"Yes," Xin said. "One night a month the bar would hold an event. People would live behind their VR shells, and enter the real world for some live entertainment. That's when most of the hitting on would happen."

"Sounds like a rocking society," Jason said. "Though one not so different from my own."

"You forget, I lived in America before I had my scan," Xin said.

"Ah, yes," Jason said. "The invasion." The aliens had destroyed half of the world. Japan was on the lost hemisphere.

Xin nodded. "I'm sad, sometimes, when I think about what happened to Japan. How I can never go home."

"Ah," Jason said. "Sorry."

"My parents were two of the lucky ones," Xin said. "Visiting relatives overseas in America when the invasion came. They lost everyone. I can only imagine what that was like."

"Actually, you don't have to imagine," Jason said. "You got yourself scanned. Same thing."

She smiled sadly. "I suppose it is."

“So what did you like to do for fun?” Jason asked her. “When you weren’t singing at lounges? Or making songs for your streaming channels?”

“Other than VR?” Xin said. “Fly drones. Watch 3D anime. Dress in cosplay.”

“Those sound stereotypically Japanese,” Jason said. “Well except maybe the fly drones part. Then again, the winner of the drone world cup back in my day was a J chick. I forget her name. Migawee or something?”

“J chick?” Xin said.

“Japanese chick,” Jason said. “Er, never mind.”

“I also like to paint,” Xin said. “I used to make vast landscapes. Mountains. Forests. Oceans. Temples. Imagining what my homeland looked like before it was lost. I want to make a pilgrimage there someday, now that I’m a machine. Now that the radiation won’t harm me.”

“Maybe we can look into doing that at some point,” Jason said.

“You’d come with me?” Xin said.

“I...” He glanced at her, and when he saw the happiness his suggestion had given her, he didn’t have the heart to say no. “Yeah, sure.”

“Thank you!” She gave him a one-handed hug. “You’re a good friend.”

“Yeah, of course,” Jason said noncommittally.

He glanced at her. Xin was still partially hugging him, and her face was only a few centimeters from his own. He felt this overwhelming urge to kiss her. When her eyes dropped to his lips, before darting back to his eyes, he knew that she wanted him to, as well.

And then he heard the rustling of leaves, and Lori came crashing through the nearby undergrowth next to the lake.

Xin immediately released Jason, and took a step back.

Lori came up beside him and wrapped an arm protectively around his waist. Her tail also entwined his left leg.

“Hey Jason!” Lori gave him a peck on the cheek. “Hey Xin! What’s up?”

“Nothing,” Xin said. “I was just leaving.” And with that, Xin escaped into the undergrowth and vanished.

“Hm, what’s with her?” Lori said, face darkening.

“Dunno,” Jason said.

“Kind of rude for her to go away just when I get here,” Lori pressed. Then she shrugged. “Oh well!” She was all smiles again. “Let’s go skiing!”

“I’m not really in the mood,” Jason said.

Lori pouted. “Aw, why not?”

“I could do without the stress of having to navigate double black diamond trails...” Jason said.

“What’s the matter, can’t keep up with me?” Lori teased.

“Yeah, that’s it,” Jason said. “You’re too fast for me. Look, after what we’ve been through today, I just want to relax.”

“Okay!” Lori said. “Let’s have sex then!”

“Tonight,” Jason said. Though he was sorely tempted to, giving the arousal Xin had stirred. But in truth, he was worried if he made love to Lori now, he’d end up accidentally shouting Xin’s name. Besides, it wasn’t like he was lacking for entertainment in the sexual department, considering that Tara was now also in the queue.

“Runt hurt his little paw during the last fight, you know,” Lori said.

“Really?” He resisted the urge to correct her on the word little, since the paw on a Rex Wolf, no matter how old, was anything but “little.”

“That’s right,” Lori said. “He was limping half the way here, thanks to that pillar falling on him. When we arrived, I wrapped his paw in a brace I made out of bramble-weeds.”

“I didn’t know it was possible to make anything out of bramble-weeds, let alone a brace,” Jason said. “Well, except for camouflage, to make us better blend in with the terrain.”

“Okay, I admit to using some steel rods I retrieved from my Stalker’s storage compartment,” Lori said. “And wrapping the bramble-weeds around that.”

“Ah,” Jason said.

“So what do you want to do?” Lori said. “No sex. No skiing. What else is there in life? Oh, I know, we can go eat! Did I mention I finished working on my M.S.G. recipe? I have a Chinese restaurant simulation loaded up and ready to go!”

“You made a Chinese restaurant?” Jason asked.

“Uh huh!” Lori replied eagerly. “And the food is authentic! Or at least, as authentic as I remember it!”

“It’s too bad we don’t have a Chinese member in the team to confirm that,” Jason said.

“We can get Xin to do it!” Lori said.

“She’s *Japanese*,” Jason said.

“So?” Lori said. “Most of the people who work at Japanese restaurants are Chinese anyway.”

Jason shook his head. “You know, that has nothing to do with what I just said.”

Lori frowned, seeming at a loss for words.

Tara appeared up ahead as the pair rounded the bend. She was jogging around the lake, or at least, that was what she wanted him to think; that it was all some grand coincidence that she happened upon Jason and Lori while going for her run. He was used to these sorts of games from the two girls by now. It was all part of their playful competition.

Tara was dressed in her usual diaphanous dress, and it was completely translucent so Jason got an eyeful of her bouncing chest as she came his way.

Tara came to a halt in front of them, and panted softly. “Hey guys.” Her panting turned him on slightly, because it reminded him of their recent lovemaking sessions. He still wasn’t sure how comfortable he felt about

sleeping with both Tara and Lori, but they didn't seem to mind terribly, so why not take advantage of their goodwill? The two of them took turns with him: one night would be Tara, the next Lori. Sometimes he did them both on the same night, with anywhere from a few hours to a few minutes apart.

Tara went to the side opposite Lori and wrapped her arm through the crook of his elbow so that Jason continued his walk with a girl on either arm. When he was a geek back in a human body, he would have never imagined two beautiful girls willingly doing something like this.

That was one of the benefits of being a machine, he supposed.

"Talk about a rough battle, huh?" Tara said. "I wasn't sure we were going to make it."

"I was!" Lori said.

Tara smiled patiently. "I wish your positivity was infectious, but it's not. I was seriously worried about dying."

Jason nodded. "I'm sure most of us were."

"Even you?" Tara said.

"Even me," Jason said.

"Noooo," Lori said. "I can't believe it."

"It's true," Jason said.

Lori looked away. "I guess... I guess I was, too, if I'm honest with myself. I remember being worried about who was going to take care of Runt if I died. And who was going to take care of you..."

Jason chuckled. "I can take care of myself, don't worry about me. And Runt, I'm sure he'd be fine without you."

Lori pulled back and gave him a sour look. "Gee, thanks!"

"Er, I didn't mean it that way," Jason said.

"Sure you didn't," Lori said. "Try not to broadcast how much you hate my guts or anything."

“I don’t hate your guts,” Jason said, chuckling at the very thought.

“But you just said you don’t need me,” Lori told him.

Tara leaned forward to look across Jason at her. “He needs you, trust me. We both do.”

Lori smiled again, and leaned her head against Jason’s shoulder. “I knew it.”

Tara did the same, and sighed contentedly.

“I can’t believe you girls are willing to have a shared relationship like this,” Jason said.

“Do we have a choice?” Tara said. “Will you pick one of us, over the other?”

“No, I guess not,” Jason said. “Why would I, when I can have you both?”

“There you go,” Tara said. “I want to go climbing with you next time you invite Aria.”

“Sure, I can arrange that,” Jason said.

When he rounded the bend up ahead, Sophie was there, lying on a chaise lounge next to the lake. More games.

“Well hello,” Sophie said, sitting up. She was wearing her tasseled bikini, and the black threads shook underneath her chest with the movement, drawing his eyes to her ample bust. He swallowed a sudden lump in his throat despite himself.

Sophie’s kohl eye makeup was in full swing today. She had taken to bringing a virtual Persian cat with her everywhere of late, and it squatted on the lounge beside her. She petted it, rubbing a finger underneath its chin; its eyes were nearly closed, and Jason could hear the loud purring even from where he stood.

Tara’s arm tightened against his elbow, pulling it closer to her body. Lori did the same on the opposite side. They were possessive gestures, if perhaps unconscious. Not that Jason minded all that much. He kind of liked having girls fighting over him, if he was honest with himself.

“Nice cat,” Tara commented.

Sophie's nose wrinkled in disgust. "Better than those dogs of yours." She continued to pet the Persian, and glanced up at Jason. When he met her eyes, she smiled shyly, and said: "Hi."

"Hey," Jason said.

"I was just lounging on the lake, you know, tanning away," Sophie told him.

"I always thought that was Fake n' Bake," Tara commented.

Sophie ignored him. "What are you up to now?"

"Just going for a walk with the girls," Jason said.

"What's Fake n' Bake?" Lori said.

Sophie picked up her cat, and stood. "Mind if I join you?"

"Not with that thing," Tara said, nodding toward the cat.

"Jeeves goes with me everywhere," Sophie said. She shoved herself in between Jason and Tara, so that the latter girl was forced to let go of him.

"Hey!" Tara said.

The Persian cat hissed at her.

"How rude," Tara said.

Sophie slid her hand into the crook of Jason's elbow, and dragged him forward. She held Jeeves in her other arm. Lori kept pace on the other side.

Tara stomped forward and cut them off. "You're going to let her push me around like this? You're not going to stand up for me?" She shoved Sophie, forcing her backward so that she had to let go of Jason or lose her balance. "I was there, first."

"And *I* took your place," Sophie said, sliding her hand through Jason's arm again.

For a second Jason thought Tara was going to punch her, but then she smiled snidely. "All right. Go ahead. Let's all have a walk." Tara went to Lori's side and grabbed her free hand.

Jason shook his head and continued what was supposed to be a peaceful walk by the lake, not a tense standoff among the different team members. Maybe he didn't like them fighting over him all that much after all...

Tara and Lori suddenly began to swing their hands as they walked, like little girls. When Lori giggled, Jason knew that Tara was the instigator.

"Such a beautiful day," Sophie said.

Tara leaned forward to address her across Jason. "I thought Jeeves was the name of your VR manservant?"

Sophie shrugged. "He was. But I thought he'd make a better cat."

"Most men probably would!" Lori agreed.

"But not me," Jason said.

"Oh, you most of all!" Lori said. "Imagine how great it would be? I could pet you whenever I wanted, and bring you to my bed to snuggle at any time of the day. Ah, if only."

"I can't believe you're sleeping with those two," Sophie said.

Jason didn't have anything to say to that. He didn't even wonder how she knew: Lori liked to shoot her mouth off.

"Jealous?" Tara said.

Sophie looked down her nose at Tara. "Not in the least. He can sleep around with whomever he wants. It's not something *I'll* ever do."

"Oh that's right, you're a princess, and not that kind of girl," Tara said.

"That's right," Sophie said, lifting her nose even higher, if that was possible. "I don't share men. It's disgusting what the two of you are doing. In fact, I've lost interest in him entirely, thanks to the two of you."

"Well, that's actually wonderful news," Tara said.

"Yes!" Lori agreed. "Less competition!"

Sophie snorted. "Of course you two would like that. What are you going to

do when he starts sleeping with Xin and Aria?”

Tara shrugged. “At least they’re a whole lot nicer than you. And you claim that you’ve lost interest in him, but I call your bluff.”

“Oh, really?” Sophie said.

“That’s right,” Tara said. “I always see you casting those sidelong glances his way, your eyes smoldering with want.”

“Ha!” Sophie said.

“You always stay close to him in battle,” Tara said. “Ready to act if an enemy gets through his defenses.”

“That’s only because if we lose him, we can’t combine,” Sophie said.

“Yeah but, the same is true for all of us,” Tara said. “We lose any one of us, we can’t combine. But I wasn’t done. What about whenever someone tells a joke? You always look at him, and only laugh if he does, as if seeking his approval.”

Sophie sniffed. “No I don’t.”

Tara shrugged. “If you say so. Why don’t you just admit that you want him, and tell him as much. Who knows, maybe he’ll take you into the fold.”

“I already said, I don’t want to be ‘taken into the fold,’” Sophie told her. “I’m not that kind of girl. If he’s willing to give the two of you up, I might reconsider, but until then, he’s never going to get any of this.”

Jason didn’t bother to look at her. He was getting enough as it was, and if Sophie was really telling the truth, it was kind of a relief. Then again, even if she was, she’d probably continue her advances, trying to convince him to dump Tara and Lori in the process. And no doubt Sophie would continue to fight Tara every step of the way.

Ah well, it’ll be a source of constant entertainment, if anything.

Z materialized in front of him, dressed in her white wet suit.

“You’ve come to torment me, too?” Jason said.

Z appeared puzzled. Then her expression blanked. “You might want to exit your VR.”

Jason stiffened. “Why? What is it?”

“Jerry has returned,” Z said.

Jason exited his VR immediately so that he was lying back in the secluded valley. His repair drones had finished fixing his hull some time ago, and had returned to his storage compartment so that when he sat up, he did so in a fully repaired unit.

Standing at the top of the rise was a battered duplicate of his own mech. The entire right hip was nearly blown away, as was a good portion of the right leg—specifically, where his local repair swarms should have been harbored. His weapon turrets were gone, and the antennae on his head had been ripped off. Aria’s Dominator was propping it up, helping keep the mech on its feet.

“Hey Boss,” Jerry said. A familiar avatar appeared on his display. Jerry had added a beard, and glasses, to differentiate himself from Jason.

“Jerry!” Jason stood up. He made his way to the top of the rise, and helped Aria support Jerry. Once they were within the walls of the valley, he released his repair swarm. The units began fixing Jerry’s damage, but they needed more material, so Jason and Aria pulverized some of the rock at base of the valley. Unfortunately, it wasn’t as iron rich as the location outside Brussels, so Jason had to crush a lot more than he would have expected.

When that was done, he sat back to interview Jerry.

“What happened?” he asked.

All of the girls were online then, and listening.

“I was ambushed by Bokerov on the shoulder of the mountains to the southeast, where he’s dug a base,” Jerry said. “I lost. I saw your profiles on the horizon. When I zoomed in, at first I thought you were another of Bokerov’s patrols, and so I hid at first. But as you got closer, I realized who you were. Unfortunately, my antennae were badly damaged, reducing my comm range to less than five hundred meters, so I couldn’t make contact immediately. I headed your way as fast as I could, but because of my leg damage, it was slow going. I tried waving a few times, figuring you had an Explorer drone scouting the area, but it didn’t help.”

“We did have an Explorer drone scouting,” Jason said. “It’s a little troubling that it didn’t see you.”

“Well the drone did, eventually, when I got closer,” Jerry said. “Which is why Aria came to get me.”

Jason glanced at her. “I never authorized that.”

Her mech stared at the ground. “Sorry.”

“Well, I’m grateful that she did,” Jerry said. “Because it would have been a long walk, otherwise. Before you entered the valley, I thought I was going to lose you.”

“The girls with you?” Jason asked.

Jerry’s avatar flinched as if struck, and he began to blink rapidly. “I— the girls— they’re gone.”

His avatar winked out. Jerry was apparently too ashamed to stay on the line.

“I can’t believe I let them die,” Jerry continued. “I fought so hard to save them. So damn hard. But they all gave their lives for me. Sophie blocked a shot that would have killed me, and died in my place. Tara did the same. And Xin, sweet Xin, she shielded me with her body, and threw me from the blast zone before the final bomb hit. I’ll never forget them. What they did for me.”

“We’re still alive...” Xin said.

“Yes, these particular versions of you are,” Jerry said. “But my girls, my lovely girls, are forever gone.”

“Not forever,” Jason said. “We’ll recreate them from fresh backups. As soon as we get back on our feet.”

“I’m not sure I want that,” Jerry said. “Nothing can ever replace them.”

“You’ll come around to our point of view eventually,” Tara said. “Would you like to visit my VR? Maybe I can help out with your healing.” There was a very slight seductive tone to her voice.

“Uh, no thanks,” Jerry said. “I don’t think Jason would appreciate that.”

Jason glared at Tara. Or at least, as much of a glare as a Vulture mech could give, which wasn’t very much.

Tara seemed to feel that scowl, despite the fact his mech didn’t have the features to express it. Her avatar smiled. “Now now, Jason baby. Jealousy can be a good thing.”

“We have to go back,” Jerry said. “Because while I lost the three girls I mentioned, my versions of Lori and Aria are still alive.”

“Are you sure?” Jason asked.

“Positive,” Jerry said. “One of Bokerov’s Cataphracts grabbed them before the final bombs struck, and carried them away.”

“How do you know the Cataphracts didn’t simply crush them?” Xin asked.

“It’s possible, but why would he?” Jerry said. “Not when there was information to be gleaned from their AI cores.”

“They’d never give up their decryption keys...” Aria said.

“Maybe they wouldn’t have to,” Tara said. “If Bokerov had hacking abilities like Lori here...”

“No one has my hacking abilities!” Lori said.

“I believe her abilities were embedded into her AI core as part of an experimental subroutine,” Aria said. “It’s very likely she’s correct in her assertion: she could be one of a kind in that regard.”

“See!” Lori said.

“Of course, her clones will also have the same subroutines,” Xin said. “So she’s not as unique as she might think.”

“Killjoy,” Lori said.

“Before the surprise attack, I also saw evidence that Bokerov captured the AI cores of some of our other copies,” Jerry continued. “My version of Aria created a few special crawlers... silent, stealthy things, a little bigger than Sophie’s micro machines. They infiltrated Bokerov’s mountain base and discovered a server room containing three AI cores. Aria’s ‘Minerva Solutions’ logo was stamped into the side. My guess is, they’re Jake’s girls. Maybe Jake himself is among them.”

“That won’t do,” Jason said.

“No,” Jerry agreed. “But that’s proof he takes AI cores as prisoners. That means my Lori and Aria are still alive.”

“We have to rescue my sister!” Lori said.

“Yes,” Jerry agreed.

Jason pondered the news. “What can you tell me about Bokerov’s base?”

“Well, we already lost two groups of War Forgers trying to capture it, so that should tell you everything you need to know,” Jerry said.

“Details, man,” Tara said. “We need details.”

“All right,” Jerry said. “It’s hewn into the base of the biggest mountain in the region. An iron rich cliff I named The Grange. It’s surrounded by defense platforms of all kinds: energy, plasma, and laser. All along the nearby shoulder of the mountain, he’s got solar panels providing power. Inside the base itself, he’s got an airfield from which he can launch autonomous bombers and fighter jets. He’s got mechs in there, and robots, but no Cataphracts as far as I can tell.”

“But you said you were attacked by the latter units?” Aria pressed.

“I was,” Jerry explained. “But those units were already outside the mountain. Maybe part of some permanent patrol. Or more likely he has another, bigger base somewhere in the region. He outflanked me, with the smaller troops

pinning me down from the front, and the Cataphracts and other artillery attacking from the rear. Meanwhile, bombers pounded us from above.”

“Sounds like his usual tactics,” Tara commented.

“So, anyone have any ideas?” Jason asked.

“We tunnel, maybe,” Sophie said. “My micro machines can dig through anything.”

“How long would that take?” Jason said.

Sophie considered it. “Hm, maybe not. Could take two months, if we started a kilometer out.”

“Yeah,” Jason said. “That’s too long. We don’t know how long Bokerov is going to keep their AI cores alive.”

“I can only imagine what suffering, what tortures, they’re going through,” Xin said. “There’s no guarantee they’ll still be sane when we retrieve them.”

“Yes,” Jason said. “But we have to try. We can’t leave them.”

“Thank you,” Jerry said.

“My hope is that Bokerov committed most of his troops to the attack against our base in the northwest,” Jason said. “With luck, he’ll have spread himself too thin, so that even if he has another mountain outpost nearby, he won’t have enough troops in the area to mount a proper defense.” He paused. “We’re going to have to do this quickly. In and out. Destroy the defenses, grab the girls, and leave before reinforcements arrive.”

“It will be tricky,” Jerry said.

“It always is when dealing with a madman,” Jason said. “All right, here’s what we’re going to do.”

And he went over the plan.



JASON CROUCHED on the outskirts of the mountain base identified by Jerry. It

was midday. He had low crawled into position, as had the other mechs. Their antennae were in directional mode, and pointing at one another, away from the base, to reduce their EM footprint. They were just out of range of any thermal sensors.

The Rex Wolves were back at the valley, as were Aria's tanks; Jason had decided not to use them for this particular battle.

Lori, meanwhile, slowly moved into position under the cover of her invisibility. There was a chance she would be detected, as a small thermal footprint was evident in the foot region of her mech, but only if Bokerov knew what to look for. The sensors near the solar panels probably weren't sensitive enough anyway.

Sure enough, she maneuvered along the shoulder of the mountain without being detected. When she was in place, she sliced through the thick power transference cord that led away from the solar panels on that side of the mountain, using a specially constructed laser Aria had created for the task. Her invisibility could envelop small items she held with the fingers of her mech, and the laser cutter was just the right size to be included.

An alarm sounded, coming from the rectangular metal entrance at the base of the mountain, and a repair swarm emerged, escorted by tanks and mechs.

Aria's Dominator clone was among those mechs.

"Would you look at that," Tara said.

"Bokerov must have repaired her mech," Jerry said. "And swapped out the AI core with his own."

"Either that, or Bokerov broke her, and obtained her encryption keys," Tara said. "Forcing her to give him administrator rights to her codebase."

"But if Bokerov could do that..." Jason had a sudden moment of doubt. What if this was a trap? What if Jerry had been reprogrammed by Bokerov, and intended to betray them?

He tapped in Lori on a private line. Though she was closer to the base, because of the directional nature of her communication, the enemy wouldn't be aware of the transmission.

“You’re certain Jerry is clean?” Jason asked. Earlier, at Jason’s behest, Jerry had given up admin rights to his AI core to Lori. She confirmed no malicious lines of code had been introduced in recent weeks.

“Positive,” Lori said. “If he betrays us, I’ll eat my panties. Well, if I had panties.”

“Okay, thanks,” Jason disconnected the private line.

He waited for Lori to reposition to the opposite side of the base, where the second array of solar panels resided. Jason knew where she was, because her blue dot updated on his external map. But that was the only sign he had of her.

When she was in place, she severed the transfer cord on those particular units as well, cutting the base off from all external power supplies.

The lights inside the entrance went out, only to reactivate as the base switched to its power cells. What could be considered emergency power.

Another alarm went up. More tanks and mechs emerged with another group of repair drones, and headed toward the new severed cord. Sophie’s Highlander mech was among them, though its movements were slightly spasmodic.

“I guess that shows he still has our AI cores captive,” Sophie said over the comm.

“It does,” Xin agreed. “Though somehow, your spider mech seems creepier in enemy hands.”

“The AI core is certainly piloting it more... jerky, than I do,” Sophie said.

“I’m betting that core is a clone of Bokerov,” Aria said.

Bombers launched from the runway, and more tanks emerged from the main entrance, setting up in a defensive half circle just in front of the opening. A thick blast door sealed, cutting the base off from external access.

“Well, that was unexpected,” Jerry said.

“We’ll work with it,” Jason said.

Trapdoors opened on the ground in front of the base, and from hidden silos defense platforms emerged. Their turrets ran the gamut from energy, plasma, and laser, just as Jerry had said.

“The bombers are turning back,” Aria said. “They’re heading our way...”

“Hold positions,” Jason said.

The tanks unleashed an artillery barrage that arced over the plains, and battered the ground nearby.

Then the bombers swooped past, and dropped their payloads over the same site.

“Decoys have been destroyed,” Aria announced. She’d constructed the five life-size mechs out of pulverized rocks from the valley, creating hollowed out shells in a fraction of the time it would have taken to construct a real mech. Each of the War Forgers had donated a battery to power the heat wires Aria had fashioned throughout those shells, wires meant to mimic the thermal signatures of real mechs.

Lori hurried back into the flat area in front of the blast doors, and began to sever the power lines of each defense platform. The tanks apparently still had trouble detecting the weak thermal footprint of her invisibility, and instead opened fire directly at each turret as it went down, hoping to get lucky and strike her. But she had already moved on each time. Lori chose the platforms in a random fashion so that the tanks wouldn’t know which turret to target next, keeping the enemy on their toes.

“The bombers are coming back for a second pass,” Aria said. “Looks like they’ve spotted us.”

“Time to move into action,” Jason said. “War Forgers, deploy!”

The tanks had finally learned to track Lori’s position by the thermal footprints at the base of her mech, and she was forced to flee in a zig-zag pattern as plasma bolts smashed into the ground all around her.

Tara teleported, appearing directly behind the half circle of tanks. She cut through three of the tanks at once with a wide sweep of her sword. The enemy Highlander jetted down from the solar panels on the left side, and Tara ran right at it, swinging her sword. The spider mech activated its energy shield in defense, sending Tara bouncing away. The Highlander created a swirling maelstrom of cutting knives out of its micro machines and hurled them at Tara, who simply teleported behind the Highlander and thrust her sword through the AI core.

“See, Sophie, if I really wanted to take you down, I could!” Tara exclaimed. But then she was on the move again as the nearby tanks swiveled their turrets toward her.

“Yeah, try that against the real me,” Sophie said. “And we’ll see how far it gets you. I would have never deactivated my energy shield so soon.”

Jason and the others left their position, and hurried toward the main entrance. Aria led the way with her shield deployed, and the others followed in single file.

The turrets opened fire, and Jason saw the inside of the shield glow red as it

took the impacts. He had the Explorer's point of view piped into the upper right of his vision so he could watch as the Dominator clone fired its lightning bolt weapon at Aria from the solar panels on the right side, and Aria's shield deflected the impact; the bolt struck a nearby defense platform instead, and sent electricity arcing into adjacent units.

Sophie launched her micro machines up toward those solar panels, spinning them in a similar whirling maelstrom as her enemy clone had done. The machines dove behind the tanks, which the Dominator was using for cover, and swept underneath the ballistic shield. When those micro machines emerged again, the enemy Dominator collapsed, dropping its shield. She swarmed those machines over the rightmost tanks next, taking them down one by one.

"All too easy," Sophie said.

Jason and the others reached the line of platforms and spread out.

Aria fired her lightning weapon against the closest platform, and the bolt arced between it and the adjacent platforms, taking all three down.

Xin superheated her hull and leaped forward, spinning as she did so, turning her body into a weapon. She burned through three of the turrets before landing, and once she was on her feet, she fired the plasma beam from her eye, melting the hulls of two tanks in her path.

Sophie's micro machines had returned, and she fired her jumpjets to leap over the fray and land on top of a tank. She sent her micro machines arcing down into the hull, and cut right through it. A nearby tank fired at her, but she activated her energy shield and deflected the plasma bolt. Then she steered her micro machines toward the attacker, cut off its turret, and then curled the bladed knives those machines had formed into its hull.

Lori was back in action, moving invisibly between the different turrets, and slicing through their power cords with her laser cutter. She occasionally fired a plasma bolt from her tail as well, striking any of the tanks that were nearby.

Tara teleported onto the left shoulder of the mountain, where the secondary group of tanks were launching shells from the solar panels there. She utilized her sword to remedy that.

Jerry fired his energy weapon up at a tank that nearly struck Aria from behind, and then focused on a closer defense platform.

Operating in Bullet Time, Jason concentrated his railgun fire against two defense turrets on his left, taking both down, and at the same time fired his energy weapon at two tanks on his right in rapid succession.

“See how it’s done, Jerry?” Tara said, slicing through the last of the tank group she’d attacked.

Jason heard a high-pitched keening, and knew more bombs were coming. The Explorer scout calculated the positions of the drop, and in moments red circles overlaid the ground all around him and the team, indicating the blast zones. Those circles enveloped all of the terrain immediately outside the main entrance, encompassing not just the mechs, but Bokerov’s tanks and defense platforms: as usual, it looked like Bokerov was happy to sacrifice his own units to destroy an attacker.

“Pull back, War Forgers!” Jason said.

He and the others withdrew along the shoulder of the mountain in single file. Aria brought up the rear, her shield held in place. Some of the tanks fired artillery that arced up over the shield, toward Jason.

Sophie jetted beside him, and activated her energy shield. The shells struck her shield and detonated harmlessly.

The War Forgers hurried past the edges of those calculated circles with time to spare.

The carpet bombs struck, sending up large plumes of dust. The land behind Jason was covered by the resultant cloud, which enveloped everything.

“Notice how no Cataphracts attacked during all of that?” Jerry said. He sounded like he was trying to justify his own loss, versus the comparative ease with which the original War Forgers had won this battle. Then again, they hadn’t quite won yet.

“Jason was right about Bokerov having spread himself too thin,” Tara said.

“Cataphracts could be coming,” Jason said. “We have to proceed

immediately.” He turned around and headed into the cloud. He activated his echolocation chirper, which was able to penetrate the thick cloud only three meters in any direction, outlining the ground and the rock wall beside him in white wireframes. He moved forward, keeping a hand on the white outline of that wall, and followed along the outline of the crater that had formed in the ground just beside it, a crater that had swallowed up the enemy tanks and defense platforms. In that manner he made his way toward the blast door.

“Lori, are you able to access any remote interface?” Jason asked when he reached it.

Lori approached. Her outline appeared on his echolocation display, meaning she had deactivated her multi-band invisibility. “No. There’s nothing.”

“Tara, it’s up to you,” Jason said.

Tara’s outline came forward in the dust, and then vanished entirely as she teleported past the blast crater and inside.

Jason waited impatiently. He heard the sounds of fighting beyond the door: explosions, the scraping of metal across metal, the clank of large hands and feet striking smaller objects.

Jason hoped she was all right.

And then a loud thud reverberated across the metal of the door, and it began to lift.

“She did it,” Xin said.

Some of the dust began to seep inside, but not enough to completely cloud the visual band. The overhead emergency lights remained active, forming visible rays through the dust.

When the door locked into place, Jason saw Tara approaching, walking with a limp. Her ankle actuator had a large chunk missing from it. Nothing the repair drones couldn’t fix later.

Behind her were the wreckages of several smaller combat robots. Most of them had been cut in half, but some bore evidence of blunt force trauma: either smashed by Tara’s fists, or her grappling hook. There were a few soot

smears on the metal floor amid shattered machine parts, indicating where some of her rockets had gone off.

“Clear,” Tara said.

Jason and the others entered. They walked through a wide, rectangular corridor made of metal that could easily fit twenty of their mechs standing side by side. It was just tall enough to accommodate their heights: there was no room to combine.

The portions of the dust cloud that had seeped inside began to clear as the group moved deeper. The team approached another blast door.

“I don’t have enough charge to teleport again,” Tara said. “Not unless I go outside to charge in the sun for a while.”

“Lori?” Jason said.

A moment later the door began to open.

“Good job,” Jason told her.

“I didn’t actually do anything,” Lori said.

“Defensive posture,” Jason said. “Everyone, behind Aria.”

Aria held her shield in front of her, and the others lined up in single file, aiming their weapons past the edges of Aria’s ballistic shield.

Jason leaned past the left side and watched as four large shapes came into view. They were spread out, lying on the ground, with weapons pointed at the War Forgers.

“Open fire!” Jason said.

But he ducked as an energy bolt glanced past. It slammed into the ceiling behind him, carving a large chunk.

“We got clones of Tara’s Shadow Hawk, Lori’s Stalker, Xin’s Blaze, and your Vulture,” Aria said.

A chunk disappeared from Aria’s shield as an energy bolt slammed into the edge.

The enemy Shadow Hawk teleported behind Jason, and its sword stabbed down on him.

But Tara was there to intercept with her own sword, and she batted the weapon away.

A plasma beam erupted from the Blaze underneath the opening door, and it struck Tara in the side. She quickly dove forward, putting the enemy Shadow Hawk between herself and the beam. But as that plasma beam cut toward it, the enemy teleported away, leaving Tara exposed.

Aria opened fire then; she'd swung her lightning weapon over the shield, and struck the enemy Blaze, which caused the beam to wink out.

Xin leaped past the side of the shield, glowing bright white, and entered into a horizontal spin as she threw herself at the attackers.

Plasma bolts abruptly shot out from the side as the enemy Stalker, which had gone invisible, fired at Xin. The impacts interrupted her spin, and she crashed harmlessly to the ground.

Lori had also gone invisible, and she launched plasma bolts at the source of the attacks.

The Vulture dashed forward, leaping over the shield, and fired directly down at the exposed Aria. The energy bolt struck her shoulder, carving a huge gap.

Sophie launched a drill of micro machines at the Vulture, shredding its armor, but he fired at her neck, and carved a hole through her side.

Tara had returned behind the shield, and stabbed her sword through its chest. She hit the power cell, because the Vulture collapsed, surrounded by electrical sparks.

Aria fired her lightning bolt again, striking the Blaze mech on the other side, and taking it out of action.

Jerry meanwhile stepped out to fire his railgun and energy weapon, and he joined Lori in attacking the invisible Stalker. The thin threads of light formed by the slugs slammed into the far wall at first, but he continued adjusting his aim, and when the slugs began to spark off an invisible object two meters in

front of the wall, Jerry was hitting his target.

The Shadow Hawk reappeared, once more going for Jason's mech. That sword came down...

But again Tara was there, and intercepted with her sword. Aria was also ready, and she fired a lightning bolt at near point blank range; it stunned the Shadow Hawk, allowing Tara to get in the killing blow. Her weapon struck home, and the Shadow Hawk slumped, surrounded by a flurry of released electric energy.

Jerry had lost the Stalker, but his roaming railgun fire found it a moment later, indicated by the sparks appearing in midair. He released an energy bolt, as did Jason, and their combined attacks felled the mech. It materialized as it toppled so that Jason could watch its wreckage strike the ground.

"I feel almost bad," Lori said. "Like I killed my sister."

"It wasn't your sister," Jason said. "We'll repair her, when we find where Bokerov is keeping the AI cores."

A bunch of laser sights appeared on Jason and the others.

"Uh," Sophie said.

Tanks materialized on all sides. Tanks that had been invisible only moments before. Jason counted seven in total. They were big, towering hulks, about the same size as the mechs of Jason and the others. Most of that size seemed to be due to the armor. The laser sights were sourced from a profusion of smaller weapon turrets that protruded from the front portions of the tanks like the quills of a porcupine.

The tanks were all black, save for one painted a bright crimson. A voice issued from a grill speaker built into the hull of that particular unit.

"I want to thank you for sharing your alien tech with me," the voice said. The accent was Russian.

"Bokerov," Jason said.

"Bokerov 52, to be exact," the tank told him. "I've been wanting invisibility for a long time. I never captured anything with the necessary technology

intact, before. Until you.”

The tank’s turret tilted slightly, as if to regard the wreckages of the mechs.

“That was as entertaining to watch as I imagined it would be,” Bokerov 52 said. “Pitting one team of War Forgers against another. I’m almost saddened the fight didn’t last longer. Oh well. All good things come to an end, as you Americans like to say.” He paused as if for effect. Then: “I’m going to enjoy destroying you.”

The profusion of weapon turrets on the tanks opened fire.

Lori had no body, and floated in a world of fractal patterns. Her existence was in a state of flux: she didn't know what she was, or where. But she did exist, that much was certain. And she had to keep moving. Had to, no matter what.

Technically, she was Lori 5. Associated with the War Forgers of Jason 5, otherwise known as Jerry. But she still thought of herself as Lori, and Lori alone.

She still remembered being captured by the Lizardman. She had been fighting beside Jerry, shooting into the tanks that had ambushed them from the shoulder of the mountains, when a large, webbed hand had wrapped around her midsection, pinning her arms to her side, and her tail to her back. She tried to launch the plasma weapon at the tip of her tail, but the bolts shot harmlessly into the air—the tip of her tail was pressed into her lower back, just above the metal hand that held her. Her attacker looked quite literally like a giant lizardman, replete with dinosaur-like head, and scaled body. Except those scales were made of metal, and nasty looking weapon turrets emerged from vents along the right and left sides of the body. On its shoulders were especially large turrets, containing the energy beam weapons Bokerov had developed especially for the units.

Aria was captured as well, held in the Lizardman's opposite hand. She watched as the other members of her team were destroyed trying to save Jerry. Watched as the bomb impacted, enveloping the entire area in a big, thick cloud. No one could escape that blast. No one. That meant Jerry, her

love, was gone.

But there were still other Jasons out there. Including the original Jason. Maybe he'd take her back into the fold? If only she could remember where she was, and how to get out of here.

Images flashed through her head. Her body locked in a cage inside a dungeon, her body folded into a small ball to fit the confines of said cage.

And then she remembered where she was.

Bokerov 52 had tethered to her AI core and injected a custom-designed virus that had allowed him to obtain complete access to her VR. It didn't give him admin rights to anything else, but it was enough to torture her in an attempt to extract her private keys. With those, he could read her entire database. She remembered refusing him, and enduring all sorts of terrible, unspeakable things, until finally the brute switched tactics: he secured her to a virtual table so that she could not move and placed a drip source above her head so that water dribbled down onto the center of her forehead. Meanwhile, loud music played constantly in the background. The entire effect was to batter her senses, fully and completely.

As soon as the Russian left her alone in that virtual room, she had sought out frantically with her mind, putting all of her hacker skills to use. She soon discovered a potential back door in the VR matrix. There was a section of VR code that hadn't been patched in a long time. It took several hours—hours that she continued to endure the torture of that dripping water, and the music—before she finally broke through, and her consciousness had tunneled through the VR matrix and into the main codebase. What she was seeing around her was her own VR environment; the fractals were her psyche's attempt to make sense of the different self-contained subroutines around her.

Antivirus software had activated the moment her intrusion was detected, and was hunting down her consciousness. Bokerov 52 was searching for her, and when he found her, he'd lock down his codebase harder than ever, and she'd never break free. So far she had managed to evade him.

But she had to keep moving.

There, that particular subroutine gave her access to one of Bokerov's external

cameras. But there was no way to access it, not without the encryption keys. Maybe she could use the back door she'd found in the VR matrix to partition and duplicate his consciousness, and then draw that duplication inside of her own VR core. It would be similar to the partition used by an Accomp; if she could subdue that duplicated consciousness, she could use it to access the different cameras, and potentially other read-only code. Movement and weaponry required write access, however, so she wouldn't be able to affect either, unless she could convince the main Bokerov partition to grant her access, which was doubtful. Either way, it was a start.

She did some quick searching of the other subroutines around her. Bokerov didn't have an Accomp, as far as she could tell.

Time to remedy that.

She accessed the VR matrix back door and injected the partitioning code her own consciousness used to allocate space for an Accomp in her VR environment.

Then she activated it.

As expected, lacking the provisioning code for an accompanying AI, the code created a complete duplicate of Bokerov's consciousness. She programmed her Accomp, Rey, to continue dodging the main antivirus software, and then via the back door she drew the new Bokerov partition into her own VR.

She resided in a dank, dark dungeon. She was chained up against a wall, beside Tara, Sophie, Xin and Aria.

Bokerov entered, naked as always except for the executioner's mask that covered the upper half of his face. The girls whimpered. Lori pulled at her binds, but they would not break free.

"Well hello, ladies," Bokerov said. "Which of you will entertain me today?"

Panicking, Lori wrenched frantically at the chains, but they would not give.

Bokerov smirked. He looked right at Lori. "You."

She felt the sting of a hundred whips at once, and fresh lacerations erupted across her body. She felt so much agony that she could only gurgle.

She barely watched as Bokerov cast his gaze across the others. “Actually, scratch that. All of you will suffer today.”

Whips appeared across the other girls, too, and they screamed in agony.

And then something happened. Aria grew fangs from her teeth, and then wrenched herself free of the shackles that bound her.

She stood before Bokerov, jaw open wide, hissing, her fangs eager for his blood.

“What?” Bokerov said. “Impossible!” He waved his hand, and chains formed around her arms, drawing them outward, connected to either wall.

Smiling, Aria broke free. She casually walked toward him. Behind her, Tara, Sophie and Xin also grew fangs, and ripped out of their shackles.

Bokerov turned around and fled.

Lori had momentarily lost herself in the simulation, but she had remembered who was in control of this environment when the pain began. And now she directed the simulacrum of Tara, Sophie, Xin and Aria, or rather, the vampires they had become, to pursue Bokerov. Blood dripping from the fangs, they dashed from the cell, not bothering to use the door, but simply breaking through the very bricks of the wall that bordered it.

But they could not find him in the dungeon. Somehow Bokerov managed to log out of her VR.

No, wait... he had simply switched to a different environment. A quick toggle of a switch should prevent that... done. She’d disabled “guest switching of VR environments.”

She teleported to the new environment Bokerov had created within her VR.

The sky was black above, pocked by one or two stars. She resided at the edge of a bubbling pool of lava. The ground underneath her was made of sharp shards of obsidian. Fifty meters in front of her, Bokerov stood on a small island in the center of that lava. He was dressed in a tight, black jumpsuit. He held a large, gnarled staff in his hand, and a red cape waved on the breeze behind him.

He looked at Lori with contempt.

“You fucking bitch,” Bokerov shouted. “I’ll break you so bad, you’ll be begging me to kill you. I’ll—”

But Lori didn’t bother to let him finish. Instead, she transformed into a winged panther, and in a single leap, bounded from the ledge, tail streaming out behind her, and crossed over the lava, landing on the island.

Bokerov batted at her with the staff, but she ducked, and then wrapped her teeth around his neck. Bokerov released a fireball of surprising intensity from his body, and Lori was sent flying backward.

She landed in the lava, and pulled herself out, on fire now, like a Phoenix. Indeed, she transformed into that bird, allowing her fiery body to tower above the puny Russian.

He waved his staff, drawing a stream of lava from the pool beside him, and it smashed into Lori, but her flames simply absorbed the heat.

Then she breathed fire, engulfing Bokerov. He raised some sort of energy shield, but she simply increased the output of her flames, and they ripped right through and struck him. His flesh blackened, and he screamed.

She created a rope bridge leading away from the island to the far side of the lava, and allowed Bokerov to flee across it.

She followed him, abandoning her Phoenix form, instead becoming a ghostly specter screeching through the night.

She reached his fleeing form, and wrapped her jaws around his neck, and then pinned him to the ground. The obsidian shards cut into his cheek.

“You are mine!” she said from the side of her mouth.

Bokerov squirmed, but it was too late. Her consciousness flowed inside of his, and she took control of the partition. Just like a real Accomp, she had read-only access to all of the main partition’s subroutines, but no write access at the moment.

She accessed the external camera list. She chose one randomly, and pulled up the associated feed. She saw Jason’s Vulture. Actually no... there were two of

them. And the other five mechs were also present. Aria's Dominator. Tara's Shadow Hawk. Xin's Blaze. Sophie's Highlander. Even Lori's own Stalker. They surrounded Jason, trying to protect him from deadly-looking tanks that fired from all sides. The War Forgers fought back, but no matter how much damage they caused to the hulls of the tanks, there was always another layer of armor underneath. It was obvious that the tanks were all Bokerovs, and that they were going to win. And there was no escape, either, because the tanks completely enveloped the War Forgers, and were too big to squeeze past.

She was going to watch her friends die.

And there was nothing she could do.

No.

She had to help, somehow. There had to be a way.

She accelerated her time sense to the max, and combed through the read-only database until she found what she was looking for. Blueprints to the tanks she was seeing on the camera feed. She double-checked that there were no other blueprints that came close, and then went back to them, combing over the design. There had to be a weak spot somewhere.

But what did she know about tanks and weapons design? That was Aria's specialty.

Aria. She had been captured with her, too. Because they were tethered, in theory she could access her database, too. She might not be able to communicate with her, but sifting through her knowledge base would give her everything she needed to know.

Or so she thought. In the end, growing frustrated, she temporarily recalled Rey from antivirus avoidance duty.

"What can I do for you, Lori?" Rey said pleasantly.

"Check out these blueprints," Lori said. "I need help finding a weak spot."

"Hm," Rey said. "Vehicular design isn't my specialty."

"I've linked with Aria's database," Lori said. "She's the best architect and

vehicle designer we have.”

“Ah,” Rey said. “One moment, please.”

Lori waited what seemed an eternity, when in reality, only a few hundred milliseconds of real time had passed.

“Well this is interesting,” Rey said. “I haven’t finished perusing Aria’s database yet, but I’ve been studying those blueprints at the same time. You’ll notice that directly on top, behind the central, dorsal turret, there is a small latch. This shields the recharge port. I believe that by opening this latch, and firing Aria’s lightning bolt weapon into the port, you’ll cause a voltage spike that will render the units inoperative.”

“Excellent, thank you!” Lori said. She dismissed Rey so that the Accomp could return to antivirus evasion duty.

Now the question was, how to communicate that weak spot to Jason? She had read-access to Bokerov’s antennae, thanks to the partition she’d made, but no write access.

She accessed the partition’s comm code. After studying it for several minutes, she realized it might be possible to cause a feedback loop that would reboot the comm subsystem. During the reboot, she’d have a small interval to send data before the read/write access rules were enforced. It would be enough time to send a small packet of data, and that was it. No voice data.

It would have to do.

There was a chance Jason wouldn’t accept the blueprint when it was received, for fear of viruses. She’d have to make sure it had her usual header information, rather than Bokerov’s. And something else... something that would let him know it was truly her.

She returned to her VR environment and made the Bokerov partition scream once again; she dialed up the volume, directing the voice to the partition’s transmission subsystem.

The feedback loop engaged, and she received a comm reboot signal from the partition. That meant the tank’s actual comm subsystem was currently rebooting.

Through the partition, she accessed the comm subsystem and transmitted the message she'd prepared.

Jason fired over Lori at the tank in front of him. Jerry and the girls had formed a defensive circle around him, shielding him from the attacks; he'd ask them not to, begged, but they wouldn't listen. And now he would have to watch as they were mowed down one by one, because while they were unable to cause little more than dents and scratch marks on the tangos, the tanks were able to deliver quite a wallop with that profusion of turrets.

Jason aimed his laser past Lori's head at one of those turrets. His power levels were too low to utilize his energy weapon, and he'd exhausted his railgun slugs and missiles, so he fired his laser. Tara's laser was synced with his, and released at the same time, but a small energy field flashed into place around the target—that was another problem, not only was the hull insanely armored, but the individual weapon turrets were protected by energy shields. Each turret needed a few shots before the attacks broke through the shield to damage the underlying weapon. So, destroying the profusion of enemy armaments protruding like quills from the hull was slow going.

The lead tank jerked forward, slamming into Lori and sending her toppling onto Jason's mech. He fell backward, hitting Sophie behind him. She slammed into the tank behind her, before pushing back. Lori straightened, followed by Jason.

He glanced over his shoulder at Sophie. The plus side of all that metal armor was that Sophie was constantly replenishing her micro machines, but she still hadn't been able to drill through much of the thick material with them.

Jason returned his attention to the fore and fired his laser weapon again, causing Tara's to unleash as well; the shield didn't flash into existence this time—they'd gotten through. The turret melted.

Jason aimed at the next. That was all he could do in this battle of attrition. Fight on.

"I won't last much longer," Jerry said.

"You should rotate into the middle position," Jason said. "Take my place."

"No," Jerry said. "You're the original. You have to survive."

"Screw that!" Jason said. "I'm no more original than you are. We all have the same value here!"

"Sorry," Jerry said.

Jason glanced at the Damage Reports on his HUD and saw that Xin had taken heavy damage to her right side. She had stopped glowing brightly a few moments ago, and only sparingly fired the plasma beam from her eyes, presumably because her charge was extremely low.

"Xin, at least swap with me," Jason said.

"No," Xin said.

Frustrated, Jason turned his attention on the tank that was next to Xin, and fired at a turret on it. In truth, there was no room really to switch places... the only way to do it would be for Xin to drop, and for Jason to crawl over her. Even then, it would be difficult.

A notification flashed on his display, and he quickly dismissed it. He didn't have time for alerts in the middle of battle.

But the notification popped up again, persistent.

Growing irritated, Jason dialed up his time sense to process it. Apparently, he had received a file request from someone.

Who the hell would be sending a file in the middle of a fight?

He enlarged the notification.

Lori-2 would like to send you a file: Weak Point Of Big Bad Tank. Accept? (Y/N)

Jason immediately suspected trickery. The file was probably a virus.

But there was also a sub-header attached to the message. It read: *Got some kick ass umami here.*

It had to be Lori. No one else talked like that. Then again, if Bokerov had broken her and taken her private keys, he would have access to all of her memories, and complete speech patterns.

Why would Bokerov bother to send a virus in the middle of a battle he was going to win? Then again, that would be just like Bokerov. Jason had sworn not to underestimate him.

But there didn't seem to be any other path to victory at the moment. Bokerov's tanks were slowly wearing the team down. They wouldn't last for more than a few more minutes, if that.

Jason decided to take the chance.

He accepted.

The file contained a blueprint that seemed to match up with the design of the tanks the team was facing. A small section was highlighted near the top. Written beside it were the hand-scribbled words: *open latch, fire lightning bolt into charging port, disable tank.*

The location was a bit problematic: situated behind the central, dorsal turrets on top of the tanks, the latches were unreachable. Aria would have to reach over, open the latch, and then jam her lightning weapon into the port and fire. Her front side would be exposed to the rest of the turrets the whole while.

Not necessarily.

"Aria..." Jason sent the file to her. Since he maintained his heightened time sense, when Aria heard his voice, she would automatically switch to the same level of Bullet Time, thanks to the header information in the data packet.

"Well, well, well," Aria said. "You think it's legit?"

“Has to be,” Jason said. “Jerry told us Lori-2 was captured. If he tethered to her AI core, in theory she might have been able to hack into some of his subsystems, and get those blueprints.”

“Yes, it’s a good theory,” Aria said. She hesitated, then: “I’m going to assume it’s real. It’s all we have, after all.”

“Good,” Jason said. “So what do you think? Can you reach over the top, rip open the latch, and shove your lightning weapon into the port. And most importantly, do you still have enough charge to fire that weapon?”

“I have enough charge left for seven strikes, yes,” Aria said. “Enough for each tank. The reaching part, well, that’s going to be tricky, as my chest assembly will be partially exposed, considering that my ballistic shield is pocked full of more holes than Swiss cheese. So I’ll be taking some point-blank damage to my hull armor.”

“Will it hold up?” Jason asked.

“It’ll have to,” Aria said.

Aria held her shield in front of her and slammed it into the closest tank. The turrets opened fire, causing red spots to appear on the insides of that shield; plasma bolts passed through the open areas, and slammed into her hull.

She ignored the blows and reached over the top of the tank; Jason and the others fired at the closest tanks, doing their best to draw their fire so that her exposed arm didn’t take too many hits. In the meantime, Sophie formed a makeshift ballistic shield with her micro machines around the uncovered sections of Aria, and patched her shield with said machines as well.

Aria ripped away the panel on the dorsal section of the tank, as indicated on the blueprints, then tilted forward.

“Going to need a boost,” Aria said. “The firing angle is no good.”

Jason knelt; he grabbed her by the legs, tilting her forward along the fulcrum the tank formed underneath her shield.

He heard thunder, followed by a sizzling sound, and then the tank underneath Aria ceased firing.

“Got it,” Aria said.

In the same manner they proceeded to take down the next five tanks, which attempted to fire all the more frantically at Aria as more of them fell. But the team used their bodies to shield her.

Finally, when only the red tank was left, the unit began to retreat.

“Oh no you don’t!” Aria said. Her shield was reduced to almost nothing by then, and was in dire need of repair, but she leaped onto him anyway. Ignoring the plasma and energy bolts that tore into her chest assembly, she reached over, ripped away the panel, and then attempted to swing her lightning weapon into place. Jason and Jerry grabbed one leg each and, taking impacts from the tank’s weapons, tilted her upward to give her the favorable firing angle she needed. They had to run forward as they did so, because Bokerov’s tank was still backing up.

Jason heard the characteristic thunder followed by sizzling, and then the treads ceased their rotations. The red tank came to a halt.

Aria slid off the tank, and swiveled around to drop, seemingly exhausted, to the ground. She leaned against the tank, her chest piece full of fresh craters that spewed smoke.

“Well, that was fun,” Aria said, panting as if out of breath. She wasn’t, of course, she had no pulmonary system after all, but that didn’t stop her psychological subroutines from reacting to the damage she’d taken.

Jason immediately summoned his repair swarm, and the drones emerged from the storage area on his leg and began to initiate repairs.

He summoned his Explorer and sent it deeper into the base. He rounded a bend up ahead, and had to pull it back when a defense platform embedded in the far wall opened fire.

“Damn it,” Jason said. “Nothing is ever easy. Lori, do you have enough power to become invisible?”

“Negative,” Lori said. She was almost as beat up as Aria. In fact, everyone was. Most of them had already activated their repair drones. Jason was in the best condition of all of them, due to their insistence on protecting him.

He regarded the fallen tanks around him. "Is there a way we can leech the power from their batteries? For a quick boost?"

"Not these tanks," Aria said. "The batteries are toast."

"We don't really have time to dally in the sun." Jason glanced toward the blast door, and the wreckage of the four cloned mechs the team had put down before the tanks arrived. "What about them?"

"Our ports are definitely compatible with ourselves," Tara said.

"Unless Bokerov changed the design," Xin said.

Tara walked to the fallen Vulture. "Ports are fine."

She opened her storage compartment and plugged in. Lori and Xin did likewise. The fourth mech had taken damage in the port area, and the team would have to wait until it was repaired before attempting a power transfer.

"All right," Lori said a minute later. "I have enough power to become invisible for ten minutes."

"Tara?" Jason asked.

"I can teleport two times now," Tara said.

"That should do," Jason said. "I want the two of you to proceed. Avoid or eliminate any defenses in your way. Find where Bokerov is keeping the AI cores, and return as fast as possible. If you encounter overwhelming resistance, don't fight, but call us for help."

"You got it Babe." Lori promptly became invisible. Jason still "saw" her, thanks to the signal transmitted on his overhead map, and he watched Tara follow her into the adjacent corridor.

Tara stopped near the edge, letting Lori go forward on her own.

Jason switched to Lori's point of view, and watched as she approached the defense turret embedded in the far wall. She walked right up to it, and stood off to the side, then fired her plasma bolt three times. The first two times she hit an energy shield, and the final time the bolt passed through, destroying the turret.

“Clear,” she transmitted. Tara stepped into the corridor and joined her.

Lori and Tara encounters minimal resistance to the server room—more defense turrets, and a few easily handled robots. Inside, they found five AI cores marked with Aria’s signature “Minerva Solutions” logo, and fit the cylinders into their storage compartments.

Then they returned. All in all, they’d taken half an hour in total. It was enough for the rest of the team to make major repairs, and to leech more charge from the downed mechs.

Aria’s chest assembly was still pocked, but Jason could no longer see into the insides of her mech, so that was good.

“All right, recall your swarms,” Jason said. “We’ve stayed here long enough. I don’t want to be here when Bokerov’s main force gets back. Cataphracts could still be coming. Maybe another round of bombers.”

Aria stood, and scooped up a small piece of hull section that had broken away from the red tank. “I’ll have to study this. I suspect Bokerov is using alien technology to reinforce his armor. Either that, or it’s just really thick.”

“Okay, I want each of you to pick one of the mech clones to drag,” Jason said. “They need maybe half a day of repairs to get back into working order.”

“Better than building them from scratch,” Aria agreed.

Jason grabbed the fallen Vulture by the ankles, and headed toward the entrance.

“Not that one,” Aria said immediately.

Jason glanced at the Vulture.

“What do you mean?” Jason asked.

“It’s damaged beyond repair,” Aria said. “Look at it. The red Bokerov rolled over it while fleeing. It’s completely crushed.”

Jason examined the wreckage. It wasn’t “beyond” repair, but it would probably take a good amount of time to fix. Maybe three or four days.

“How many AI cores did we collect?” Jason asked.

“Five,” Lori said.

“And we have six mechs,” Jason said. “All right, this one stays. We don’t need it.”

Sophie, Tara, and Xin grabbed the three remaining mech clones by the ankles and dragged them along behind them.

At the entrance, the dust cloud had cleared. Jason sent the Explorer out to search for signs of hidden attackers. There were none. And no bombers were incoming, either. Good.

The team rounded the series of blast craters that pocked the entrance; Lori and Aria collected the remaining mech clones that had fallen near the solar panels on either side, and then the War Forgers proceeded onto the barren plains, heading toward the valley where they’d left the Rex Wolves, and their own tanks.

It was a long walk.

What a day.

Jason kept an eye on the sky during the retreat, and he did spot some A-22 bombers passing by in the distance. As soon as he saw them, he had everyone drop, but the bombers apparently hadn't detected them, because they continued along their course, skirting across the horizon.

There were no rifts, or signs of alien technology. Apparently Bokerov and the aliens had struck a deal that this territory—*his* territory—was to remain untouched. There were also no mutants: Bokerov had done a bang-up job of clearing the area around his mountain lair of the lingering bioweapons.

The team members activated their repair swarms along the way to the valley, and finished most repairs by the time they arrived. They placed the wreckages of the five clones in the middle of the valley, and then had the drones work on them, next.

The Rex Wolves were happy to see them. Shaggy was trying to break free of his leash, and was leaping into the air, pulling the rope taut. When Jason came within range, the big mutant vaulted onto Jason's chest and licked his metallic chin happily.

"Hey Shaggy," Jason said. "Wait a second, you're reaching up to my head?" He glanced at Tara's mech. "Is it just me, or are the Rex Wolves a lot bigger than I remember them?"

"It's not just you," Tara said. "They are bigger. They're growing. They're not pups anymore. I'm not sure how big they're going to get, but we might want

to consider bringing them along for some of the next battles.”

“I’ll think about it,” Jason said.

“Don’t get me wrong, I don’t want to see them hurt any more than you do,” Tara said. “But they were originally bred to kill. And the mutations over the years have only enhanced that killer instinct. If we were organic, they’d be tearing us apart right now.”

“That’s a good point,” Jason said.

Shaggy went down, and he studied the mutant in a new light. Tara was right. These were more than simple pets. They were killing machines on par with the mechs. He’d have to seriously considering bringing them to whatever battles awaited next.

He released Shaggy so that the dog could lounge on the edge of the valley and keep watch. Tara had trained Shaggy and the other Rex Wolves to do that, using the crater formed by the ravine of their original base.

“How long do you want to stay here?” Jerry asked on a private line.

“I want to leave soon,” Jason replied. “When Bokerov reaches the base and sees that we’ve fled, he’s going to send out search parties looking for us.”

“Won’t most of those search parties be air-based?” Jerry said. “If we move out onto the plains, we’ll be exposed. At least here, we can dig up the rocks, and bury ourselves, masking our thermal signatures.”

“What about the thermo signatures of the Rex Wolves?” Jason said. “We can’t bury the dogs.”

“Why not?” Jerry said. “Leave their snouts free, but bury the rest of their bodies.”

Jason considered his argument. “It might be safer to stay here and lay low for a few days. Wait for any of Bokerov’s patrols to pass by. Wait for him to tire of the search.”

“I think so,” Jerry said.

Jason switched to the general comm. “All right. I want mech-sized holes dug.

We're going to be burying ourselves here for a few days. Include extra plots for the tanks, and our mech friends currently under repair, and some for the Rex Wolves."

"We can't bury the kids!" Tara said.

"We'll only do it when aircraft are detected in the distance," Jason said. "We'll dig them up as soon as the patrols pass by. Obviously we won't bury their muzzles."

"Assuming there's time," Tara said. "If Bokerov has fighter jets, by the time we spot the craft on the horizon, we'll have only a few moments to bury them."

"We'll just have to hope he doesn't," Jason said.

"And how long do you plan to stay here?" Sophie asked.

"A few days," Jason replied. "Until Bokerov gives up searching for us. At least here we have a chance of hiding. On the plains, we have none at all."

"We could destroy any aircraft we spot..." Xin said.

"Yes," Jason said. "But then that would give away our positions. And he'd send his entire air force at us shortly thereafter, most likely."

"He might also send ground-based patrols to explore the nearby valleys and basins," Aria said. "Like this one."

"There's a chance he might, yes," Jason said. "We'll deal with the changing battle space as it comes. If we're detected, we'll destroy any patrol, and flee."

"Battle space," Tara said. "You've been reading the tactics manual included with your database again, haven't you?"

"No," Jason said. "I just have an extremely good memory at the moment. No doubt because my mind has been installed inside a machine."

"That would do it," Tara said.

And so they prepared the different plots, digging up the soil and then pulverizing through the bedrock at the base of the valley. Aria drove her tanks inside five of them, and Jason and the others buried them. Then one by

one Jason buried the remaining team members, save for those currently under repair. He left a small spot unburied near the leg area of each unit, so that the repair drones could return to the mech they were associated with when done working on the clones.

The Rex Wolves remained watching the different approaches, as did Jason's Explorer. Aria also had spare repair drones quickly print up some security cameras, and she deposited them on the four exterior walls of the valley. Jason set the cameras to trigger motion alerts that would be sent directly to their AI cores. He also placed a final camera pointing down into the valley itself, just in case something managed to evade the other cameras, and the dogs.

By then the repair swarms had completed their restorations on the clones. The drones began to create extra versions of themselves, from the pulverized rock Jason had prepared, to top up any drones that were missing in the storage compartments of the clones.

While the drones did that, Jason went to the recovered AI cores that the team had set aside. Beside them were the discarded AI cores that the team had removed from the clones. Lori had accessed those devices and discovered they weren't true AI cores, but rather surrogates for Bokerov to control remotely. As such, there was no real data of interest.

Jason accessed the remote interface of each recovered core, determining who it belonged to so that he could match up the different girls with their usual mechs. There was Lori 5 and Aria 5 from Jerry's War Forgers, and Sophie 4, Xin 4 and Tara 4 from Jake's party. He wondered how the latter would take the loss of Jake.

He also wondered if any of them had been driven insane.

Well, there was no point in delaying. He might as well find out.

Jason grabbed Lori 5's AI core and approached the Stalker clone.

"Hey!" the original Lori said. "You told us you wouldn't install the AI cores while we were buried!" Though she was currently covered in rock and dirt, the signal strength of her comm node was quite good, given her close range.

"I changed my mind," Jason said.

“It’s dangerous!” Lori said.

“She’s right,” Xin said. “We don’t know what damage has been done to the AI cores. Whether they’ve been broken by Bokerov. You’ve heard of Stockholm syndrome, haven’t you? At least allow us to join you.”

“No,” Jason said. “If you join me, I’ll have to bury you again.”

Lori wiggled herself free and her Stalker came to his side. “Hi!”

“Damn it, Lori.” Jason shook his head. “The rest of you stay buried until I tell you.”

“Okay,” Tara said. “But keep in mind, if they do have Stockholm syndrome, while they might pretend to be on our side, they could be actively working to subvert us. Maybe lead Bokerov to us.”

“Is there a way we can disable their antennae?” Jason asked.

“Other than ripping them off?” Tara said. “No.”

“We’ll know if they send out a transmission,” Aria said. “And which one did it. They also know that. So if they’re wise, they won’t bother.”

“Okay then,” Jason said. “I’m activating them.”

He installed the cores into the appropriate mechs one by one. Lori helped him.

When that was done, he accessed the remote interfaces, and activated them one by one.

The mechs sat upright, and glanced around. They said nothing, obviously trying to get their bearings. Lori 5 was the first to speak.

Her avatar appeared in the lower right of his HUD, the spitting image of the real Lori. “Did you get my message?”

“I did,” Jason said.

“Hey, Lori,” Jerry said.

“*Jerry!*” Lori 5 shrieked. Her mech spun about, searching for him. She must

have looked at her overhead map then, because she ran to his plot and began digging him up.

“No, stop!” Jerry said. “We’re buried for a reason. Lori, stop!”

Finally she stopped. “I thought you were dead!”

“No, you saved me,” Jerry said. “You all did.”

“Where’s Jake?” Sophie 4 asked. Her avatar was very pale. Her eyes wide.

“I’m sorry, we think he didn’t make it,” Jason said.

Sophie 4 remained silent. But she was blinking rapidly, and Jason knew tears were going to come. Mercifully, her avatar disappeared before that happened.

“He tortured us,” Tara 4 said. “First pain. Then so much pleasure that it became pain. It was... well, I found a way to partition off my mind, so that it was like I was merely an observer. Still, it was unpleasant.”

“I did the same,” Sophie 4 said. “She taught Xin and I the technique right in front of Bokerov. He merely laughed, and told us it wouldn’t make a difference. But he was wrong. None of us broke.”

“What about you, Xin 4, and Aria 5?” Jason said. “Are you all right?”

“He didn’t torture me much,” Aria 5 said. “At least, not as much as the other three, as we were captured later. Still, what I went through is not something I’d ever wish on anybody.”

“Xin 4?” Jason pressed.

When Xin 4’s avatar appeared, her face was expressionless. “I am... not good. I... I thought I’d never get out of there. I thought I’d experience only pain for the rest of my days. Trapped in that hellhole. He said we would join his harem if we were good. That he could teach us many things, share alien technology with us, if only I gave in and told him my private keys. I broke. I’m so sorry. I gave in. I gave him my keys.”

“What!” the original Xin said over the comm. “I’d never break!”

“I’m sorry,” Xin 4 said. Her avatar was weeping now. “I’m... I just...” Her mech fell to its knees.

Jason went to her, dropped to one knee, and hugged her. Well, as much of a hug as a towering war machine could give to another. "It's all right."

"But now he knows all our secrets," Xin 4 said.

"It doesn't matter," Jason said. "We'll still beat him."

"I wish I had been stronger," Xin 4 said. "I wish I had been... like my original."

"You're nothing like me!" Xin said.

Xin 4's avatar shuddered visibly, and her head dropped. "Sorry."

"Don't be," Jason said. "Xin, that's enough. Leave her alone."

"But—" Xin said.

"No buts!" Jason said.

"She's weak," Xin said.

"Xin, don't make me come over there," Jason said.

At least she remained silent.

"You were tortured," Jason told Xin 4. "There was nothing you could do. Don't be ashamed. Never be ashamed. I want you to walk proudly, with your head held high among us."

"I don't know if I can," Xin 4 said.

"You have to," Jason said. "Because we need you. Jerry doesn't have enough members on his team to combine. You're going to join his War Forgers. You're a valuable member of his unit. You can't give up."

"I understand," Xin 4 said. "Thank you."

"It's not going to be easy to integrate her into my unit," Jerry told Jason on a private line. "Nor Sophie 4 and Tara 4."

"No," Jason said. "You certainly have your work cut out for you. If you need anything, let me know."

“Well, since I’m you,” Jerry said. “I suspect you won’t come up with anything that I haven’t thought of.”

“Still, I’m here if you need help,” Jason said.

“Thanks, I’ll hold you to that,” Jerry said. “By the way, I appreciate the fact that you’re giving the recovered girls to me so freely.”

“Well, in all honesty, I don’t think I could handle more girls in my own harem,” Jason said. “Besides, like I told Xin 4, you need the complete set to combine.”

“I do,” Jerry said. “It’s pretty lucky that we were able to recover just the right mech bodies we needed. I’m looking forward to fighting side by side with you in another Cataphract when the time comes.”

“It will certainly be an... intriguing... fight,” Jason agreed.

Jason increased the numbering associated with the clones of Sophie, Xin, and Tara, changing them to 5 so that they matched Jerry’s other girls: Lori 5 and Aria 5.

“So what now?” Lori 5 said. “Are we going to kick Bokerov’s ass for what he did to us?”

“We already did,” Jason said.

“No, I mean *really* kick his ass!” Lori 5 said. “As in, wipe him out of the region kind of ass kicking.”

“Actually, we’re not,” Jason said. “We’re going to be leaving this region behind. Maybe permanently. It’s too dangerous to remain. We don’t know how many bases Bokerov has in the region. We’ve lost our home base.”

“What about the War Forger clones we’ve dispatched?” Aria said.

“We’ll have to recall them at some point,” Jason said.

“How?” Aria said. “They’ll be sending their Explorer drones back to home base. But they’ll find only ruins.”

“I guess they’ll have to fend for themselves for the time being,” Jason said. “We can send our own Explorer back at some point to leave behind a

transmitter. It'll contain a message, letting them know that we're moving on, and that we'll send another message when we've reached a defensible staging area. Then they can join us, and we'll depart again, just in case Bokerov intercepts the message about the staging area. We'll keep moving until we find a place free of mutants, and Bokerovs."

"We might not have to run," Lori 5 said.

"What do you mean?" Jason asked.

"I made a copy of Bokerov's AI core while I was inside his AI matrix," Lori 5 said. "It gave me read only access to his entire codebase. And also his database. I didn't have enough storage space to copy it all, but I sifted through it, and recorded items of note."

"Please tell me you recorded the location of all his bases," Jason said.

"Er," Lori 5 said. "No. I didn't think of it at the time."

Jason nearly threw up his arms.

"Sorry," Lori 5 continued. "I wanted to get you the blueprints as fast as possible, and then I wanted to watch the battle to see what would happen. But... I did find something interesting. While I was reviewing his communications, I noticed that most of the packets contained the same headers, which means they were coming from the same source. Likely a communications center of some kind."

"Okay, so?" Jason asked.

"Well, the headers are version 1.67 of the Russian comm protocol, while the other protocols are all version 1.89," Lori 5 said.

"Again, that means nothing to me," Jason said.

"Well, that means the communications center is running 1.67, while Bokerov is on 1.89," Lori 5 said. "There are known vulnerabilities in both the 1.67 and 1.89 protocols. Both are essentially old Russian software that has never been patched. With code injection, I can cause a race condition to occur, allowing me to execute code without validation on the client-side. It'll affect every unit he has in the field. At least those within communications range. And I suspect

he has repeaters spread throughout the region, ensuring that *everything* is within comm range.”

“You’d think Bokerov would have patched a problem like this by now,” Jason said.

“Not necessarily,” Lori 5 said. “The cyber division of the Russian government would have been responsible for that. But with that government destroyed, Bokerov would have had to develop his own patching system. He’d also have to do constant intrusion detection. This isn’t something that would come naturally, especially for a human who wasn’t trained in cyberwarfare. Hell, none of you are actively performing intrusion detection on your codebases.”

“But you are?” Jason said.

“Of course,” Lori 5 said. “I haven’t found anything yet, though. Anyway, my guess is he didn’t bother. Everything was working fine for him. Why tamper with it?”

“So, wait a second, let me get this straight,” Jason said. “He’s advanced enough to create a cyberattack with the power to take down all satellites in orbit, and yet he leaves his own code unprotected? Or some of it, anyway?”

“He obviously has the ability to protect himself, if only he’d take the time,” Lori 5 said. “But his eyes are turned completely outward at the moment, away from himself.”

“A little overconfident,” Jason commented.

“Just a little,” Lori 5 agreed.

“Why the difference in comm versions between the communications center, and the Bokerovs?” Tara asked.

“Well, he probably installed the software for the autonomous AI in charge of the comm center from his own database,” Lori 5 said. “It would have included whatever version came with the software. And like I said, if it was working, why would he bother to tamper with it?”

“So let me see if I’m understanding this right,” Jason said. “We—or *you*,

rather—can inject code into the communications center, and disrupt Bokerov’s entire army?”

“Not just disrupt,” Lori 5 said. “I believe I’ll be able to bind all of his minds in Containment Code. His whole army would be yours.”

Jason stared at her avatar. He was suddenly becoming excited.

“Now that’s what I’m talking about,” Jason said. A moment later he felt disappointment. “But wait, let me guess, you can’t inject this Containment Code unless you have local access.”

“That’s right,” Lori 5 said. “We’d have to go to the communications center.”

“And you don’t know where it is,” Jason said.

“Also right,” Lori 5 said.

“Too bad, it was a nice dream,” Jason said.

“I can still work on the injection code,” Lori 5 said hopefully. “So that if we ever find his communications center, we’ll have the code ready!”

“Yeah, go ahead,” Jason said.

“I’ll help you with it,” the original Lori said.

“Great!” Lori 5 said. “Two heads are better than one!”

“They certainly are!” Lori agreed with herself.

“Are you girls going to be all right?” Jason asked the others.

They all told him yes, except for Xin 4, now Xin 5.

“Xin 5, you okay?” Jason pressed.

“I will be, once I join Jerry in his VR,” Xin 5 said. “And can get away from all of this.”

“Okay,” Jason said. He hoped she was right.

He instructed the repair swarms to return to their associated mechs, and then he finished covering the original War Forgers, burying the small sections he

had left open for the drones to return.

When that was done, Jason buried the clones next. And Lori once again—it required digging out some of the rocks and dirt from her original plot. She helped him with that part, at least.

Finally, he went to survey the plot reserved for himself. There was a pile of rocks and dirt held in a hollowed-out area above it, kept in place by a small door Aria had printed up.

If a patrol came, he would herd the dogs into the dens set aside for them—short tunnels the mechs had dug, with 3D printed retaining walls for support. There were 3D printed cage doors to hold them inside, and noise cancellers to mute any sounds they might make.

Then he would hurry to his own plot, lower himself inside until he was lying flat, then reach up, grab the small, low-tech cord Aria had connected to the small door, and pull. The rocks and dirt would break free, pouring over him in an avalanche calculated to bury him entirely.

Jason left behind his plot and approached the rise where Shaggy lounged. The dog yawned upon seeing him, and licked its chops before lowering its reptilian head onto its hairy paws. Jason sat down just below the mutant, positioning himself so that he wouldn't be visible beyond the rise from any watchers on the plains.

The team had argued that Jason shouldn't be the one left to bury the Rex Wolves, and himself, if trouble came. They told him someone else should do it, like Tara or Lori, because he'd be vulnerable out there. But Jason refused. He convinced them that it was actually safer for him this way, because he could run away if the attack proved overwhelming, and he wouldn't have to waste precious time digging himself out. Not that he'd ever do that.

The truth was, he didn't really like the thought of burying himself alive. There was just something entirely repulsive about the whole affair. Not to mention the claustrophobia involved. It had been bad enough in the cistern as it was. But with rocks enveloping him on all sides, pressing into his body? The thought would have made him shudder, were he still human.

Jerry probably wasn't too pleased right now, either. Then again, he was

probably already in VR with his War Forger clones, forgetting all about his current buried state.

Speaking of which, it was about time Jason relaxed in VR himself. He switched control of his external body to his Accompany, instructing Z to wake him if the cameras detected any motion, and then he logged out of reality.

Jason had invited Tara to free climb with himself and Aria, as promised. Jason took the lead, while the two girls followed directly below him. At least, that was how it went for the first half hour. And then Tara increased her pace, and pulled alongside him, on the right. Aria did the same on the left.

“Why should we follow you?” Tara said.

“We make our own path,” Aria added.

They pulled ahead of him, and proceeded onward faster than ever. “It’s a competition they want, is it?”

He increased his pace.

“You’re not allowed to modify your weight, your physics controls, or your muscles in any way!” Jason shouted at them.

“Deal!” Aria said.

“First one to the top gets full control of the facial features of the other two!” Tara said.

“Done!” Jason said.

He’d only climbed a few meters when Aria lost her handhold above him, and fell. Jason caught her as she plunged past.

“I got you,” Jason said. He’d cheated, modifying the strength of his right hand. He had to; otherwise he would have been pulled off when he grabbed her. He wasn’t going to tell Aria that, however. “I’ll always have you.”

“Thank you,” Aria said.

Tara meanwhile continued toward the top.

Jason returned Aria to the wall, and then resumed climbing.

He concentrated on his muscle movements, ignoring the fatigue, and the build up of lactic acid. The burn was immense, but he climbed with everything he had. And he slowly gained on Tara. She wasn’t cheating; he knew that, because if she was, he would have never been able to catch her. He had the advantage of strength and endurance, due to his pre-scan body structure, and the nights he had spent at the local climbing wall.

In ten minutes, he pulled past her.

“Hey, cheater!” Tara said.

“Not cheating,” Jason said, panting.

She tried to increase her pace, but Jason was on a roll, and only widened the lead.

In another ten minutes he pulled himself onto a ledge near the top, and walked the easy slope to the final rise. He was the winner.

He waited for the girls to arrive. He gazed out across the beautiful scenery, taking a moment to catch his breath. He sat there, at the top of the world, with his hands behind his back in a relaxed pose as the girls reached the ledge below, and hauled themselves over, one after the other, panting.

“Remind me never to ask to go climbing with you again,” Tara said between gasps.

“Come on, you enjoyed it,” Jason said. He couldn’t help the wide smile that formed as he watched these two girls, women who formed the minds of deadly war machines, lying panting and exhausted on the rock before him.

He stood. “All right. Give me control of your features. As per our deal.”

“No,” Tara said from where she lay on the ledge. “You cheated.”

“No, I did not,” Jason said. “I’m just a good climber naturally. If anything, you two cheated. I mean, come on, neither of you have any climbing experience in real life, and yet you didn’t fall from that wall.”

“Bullet Time does have its advantages, when it comes to testing your weight,” Aria admitted. “And I may have dialed up my strength settings a tad.”

“There you go,” Jason said. “So come on now. Fair is fair.”

Aria sighed. She rose, and leaned forward, placing her hands on her knees as she panted a while longer. Then she stood straight, and when she smiled, she revealed those two long fangs that she had taken to wearing of late.

“It’s done,” Aria said.

Jason received the access confirmation, and turned toward Tara. “And you?”

“What are you going to do to me?” Tara asked.

“Nothing,” Jason replied.

“Sure,” Tara said.

“Maybe I’ll give you a nice facial tattoo,” Jason said.

“I don’t need, or want, a face tattoo,” Tara said.

“Come on, a red rose might look nice on you,” Jason said.

“Ha,” Tara said. “Give Ms. Pale here a red rose on her cheek, she needs one.”

“I already have rosy cheeks,” Aria said.

“Actually, you don’t,” Tara said. “You’re pale as a ghost.”

“That’s the way I like it,” Aria said.

“Okay, fine,” Tara said. “You have access.”

Jason received confirmation.

“That’s better,” Jason said. He looked at Aria. “Now I’m going to give you a

beard.”

“What?” Aria said. “No!”

In moments she had a hairy face.

Tara erupted in laughter. “Ah man, that’s sick!” But her laugh quickly cut off when she, too, grew a thick beard.

“The hell is this?” Tara said. “Put me back!”

Jason was the one who was laughing then.

Tara suddenly booted him in the rear, and he lost his balance and plunged over the edge.

But then Tara teleported underneath him, caught him, and flew to the top.

“Fooling around with your physics controls again, are you?” Jason said.

“Only to save you,” Tara said. She landed. “Now... the beard?”

“To be honest, I kind of like you both this way,” Jason said.

Aria glared at him.

“I’m joking,” Jason said. “I prefer the two of you the way you were.” And just like that, the beards vanished.

Tara touched her face uncertainly, then smiled. “That’s better.”

Aria felt her own bare cheeks. “Who would have thought beards would be so itchy.”

“I’m surprised you even felt anything,” Jason said. “The VR developers sure did a good job on emulating facial hair.”

“Well, you should see how itchy our legs get if we don’t shave them,” Aria said.

“You shave your legs?” Tara said. “Why bother? You should turn off hair growth on your legs entirely.”

“I like doing it,” Aria said. “I used to do it when I was human. It reminds me

of my humanity. Of what I once was.”

“We’re all still human,” Tara said.

“Are we?” Aria said. “I’m not so sure.”

“Why would you even think that?” Tara said. “Look at what happened to our clones. Did they tell you about the revenge they took against Bokerov in VR after Lori 5 set them free? If that’s not a sign of humanity, I don’t know what is.”

Aria pursed her lips. “That’s actually a good point. And I got nothing to rebuke that. Except that, when I dismiss this reality, and open my eyes in the real world, and see that I inhabit the body of a machine, I definitely don’t feel human. My hands are made of metal, with a lighting bolt weapon embedded in my forearm. I have a ballistic shield I can deploy in my left arm. My shoulders are lined with missile launchers. When I walk, my knee and hip servomotors hum with every step, and my feet make loud, metallic thuds. When I talk, my voice comes over external speakers, or over an encrypted comm system. Does any of that sound human to you?”

“None of that matters,” Tara said. “It’s what’s inside of you that makes the difference.”

“Inside of me,” Aria said. “A copy of a copy.”

“We might as well be the originals,” Jason said. “I feel like I am.”

“Yes, I do sometimes as well,” Aria said. “Until I remember the living me I left behind. And the other copies of myself I’ve made. We can’t keep lying to ourselves. Because in the end, we’re not human. The both of you would do well to remember that. It might make things easier for us, in the coming days.”

“How so?” Jason said.

“Well, the sooner you and the others realize we’re never going back to civilization, that we *can’t*, the easier things will be for you,” Aria said.

“Why can’t we?” Jason said. “You can build us those androids you were talking about. Or we can buy some for ourselves, and then install our AI

cores.”

“Have you seen the size of our AI cores?” Aria said. “We won’t fit in the body of a human-sized android.”

“Then we’ll transfer our consciousnesses to smaller AI cores,” Jason said.

“Ah,” Aria said. “But you see, that won’t actually be us. But copies.”

“I see where you’re going with this,” Jason said.

“Yes,” Aria said. “If you want to live without destroying the current version of you, you can never leave the body you have.”

“That might be true,” Jason said. “But only partially. Because you saw what Bokerov did. He created surrogates, allowing him to control our mech clones remotely, as if he were inside them. We can do the same with androids. I thought you were planning something similar at some point, before Bokerov destroyed our base.”

Aria nodded. “You’re right. I was. I guess if I make it immersive enough, we’d never know the difference. We could stow our mechs aboard a cargo tanker parked at a dock near shore, and send our androids into the city. We’d set up repeaters to ensure we always had a good signal, and then we could live out our days as if we were truly human.”

“It’s something to aim for,” Jason said.

“If we ever get close to the coastline,” Aria said. “We’d have to build a ship first, you know.”

“Oh I know,” Jason said. “But I have no doubt in your abilities.”

She smiled. “Thanks.”

“What about my abilities?” Tara said.

“I have no doubt in yours either,” Jason said. “When it comes to war, anyway.”

Tara frowned. “I was talking more about...” She glanced at Aria as if she didn’t want her to overhear, and then returned her attention to Jason and mouthed something.

“What?” Jason said.

Tara repeated the motion.

“I have no idea what you’re saying,” Jason said. “A bad womb?”

She gave him an exasperated look, and then came forward. She whispered seductively into his ear. “The bedroom!”

“Ah,” Jason said. “Now I understand.”

She stepped back, and gave Aria a wicked grin.

“Well, thanks for the climb,” Aria said. “And the little philosophical talk. I’ll see you two later. Have a good night.”

Aria logged out.

“It is night, isn’t it?” Jason said. He’d changed the sun’s position earlier to give them more light to climb by, and he reset it now so that the stars of dusk were visible overhead.

“I’ll see you soon,” Tara said. She gave him a kiss on the cheek, and then backed away, giving him a seductive look. Then she vanished.

Can’t wait.

He returned to the master bedroom. He used to simply log out before entering sleep mode, but ever since starting his relationship with Lori, he now always went to the bedroom first, leaving a VR presence in play while he sent his mind into the unconscious bowels of dreamland. That way if Lori or Tara decided to visit, either could easily wake him by triggering the touch sensors of his avatar.

Lori wouldn’t be coming tonight of course. She was working on that Containment Code injection project of hers. Jason doubted she would ever get a chance to use it. Then again, who knew, maybe they’d stumble on Bokerov’s communications center while fleeing the area. Doubtful, but it was still possible.

Tara would be showing up, however, if her previous behavior was any indication.

He wasn't sure which girl he liked better. They both had their unique quirks, both inside and outside of bed. He dimmed the lights, but before he could fall asleep, Tara was there. Her silhouette hovered next to the bed, her naked body shimmering in the moonlight from outside.

"Well hello," Jason said. "Ready for a post climbing workout?"

Soundlessly, Tara slipped into the bed, and they had sex.

Her kisses were strangely frantic tonight, as if she hadn't tasted him in days. And the way she gyrated her hips against his surprised him. He thought she must have truly been afraid in the last battle, fearing that she would die when those tanks surrounded them. Jason had felt the same way, and he was happy to drink up everything she had to offer.

When it was done, Tara slid off of him, and lay panting at his side. She snuggled against him, and rested her cheek against his chest. She murmured softly, muttering something Jason didn't quite catch, but he held her close, understanding that she just wanted to be cuddled.

And then the light turned on.

Jason lifted his head, and saw Tara standing next to the entrance.

"If you're Tara, then..." He glanced at the woman sleeping next to him. He hadn't actually been able to see her face because of the dim lights, but now that the room was completely illuminated, he saw who it was immediately.

Sophie.

Jason stared at Sophie in shock.

Tara clenched her teeth. “You bitch!”

She abruptly winked out.

Sophie giggled. “Did you see that? The look on her face was priceless.”

Jason sat up. “Damn it. You can’t just go sneaking into my bed like that.”

“What, you enjoyed it, didn’t you?” Sophie said.

“Well, sure, but—”

“There you go,” Sophie interrupted. “But don’t think I’m going to do this often. I meant what I said before. I’m not that kind of girl. I’m only into monogamous relationships.”

“If you’re not that kind of girl, then what are you doing here?” Jason said.

“Sometimes, when the hormones are raging, and we’re ovulating, we ladies just get uncontrollably horny, and we can’t help ourselves,” Sophie said.

“You don’t even have any hormones,” Jason said. “Nor any ova *to* ovulate.”

“Well sure, but I was talking metaphorically,” Sophie said. “Besides, there’s something about nearly dying in battle, only to live another day, that stirs up one’s sexual desire. As I said, it won’t happen again until you dump those two slutty—” She looked up, an expression of alarm on her face. “Oh shit.”

Sophie vanished.

“That can’t be good,” Jason muttered. *What are you up to now, Tara?*

Jason logged out of VR and returned to the real world. He was still resting on the slope near the top of the rise. Though it was dark out, he could see the outlines of two mechs at the base of the valley below; one of them carried a sword from which electricity sparked up and down, providing the gentle glow that gave rise to the outlines in the first place. The bearer would be Tara.

“You wanted to show me how easily you could beat me, so show me!” Tara said.

She stabbed her sword at Sophie, but the latter’s energy shield lit up, deflecting the blow. The sword also flared, momentarily filling the valley with a bright light.

“Tara!” Jason said. “Your sword...” She hit the shield again, causing another bright flash. “Please! You’ll give away our position.”

“I don’t care!” Tara said. She struck again.

Jason switched to LIDAR to see better, and white wireframes overlapped the dim outlines, remaining in place as more flashes lit the night.

Beside him, Shaggy was awake, staring down into the valley below. The other Rex Wolves on the nearby rises were also alert, and seemed uncertain what to do.

“Stay,” Jason told Shaggy, and he jogged down into the valley.

Jason reached the spot where the other mechs were buried. Tara had apparently teleported out of the ground in a rage, because the rocks on her plot had simply collapsed inward. She must have dug out Sophie, however, because the pile of soil and rocks around the latter’s plot were obvious.

“Don’t make me hurt you,” Sophie said as Jason grew near.

“Go ahead and try!” Tara said.

Sophie cocked the head of her mech, and then launched her micro machines at Tara, forming a large, spinning, stabbing wheel.

Tara leaped aside, deflecting some of the outlying machines with the hilt of her sword. Then she fired her grappling hook at Sophie's chest, and it deflected on the energy shield. She teleported herself inside the shield, and swung her sword down.

Jason intervened, grabbing Tara's wrist.

Tara threw him aside, but before she could strike, the micro machines came back, and wrapped around Tara, pulling her away. She struck down repeatedly, hitting empty air, and sometimes micro machines.

Tara swiveled her laser into place and fired that next. Sophie's energy shield lit up in convex half spheres as it deflected the rapid pulses.

Sophie launched her micro machines again, forming a fist that struck Tara in the chest, sending the latter's mech landing on its back.

Jason went to her, intending to help her up, as well as prevent her from striking Sophie again, but Tara rose to her feet on her own and shoved him backward.

"You encouraged her!" Tara said, the avatar that appeared in the lower right of his HUD the epitome of rage. She attacked him next, nearly stabbed him in the chest, but he dodged to the side.

"I didn't even know it was her!" Jason said. "I thought it was you!"

"Sure you did," Tara said. "Lying bastard."

"What's the matter?" Sophie said. "Lori sleeps with him, too, and you don't seem to mind *her*."

"Leave Lori out of this!" Tara spun away from Jason and teleported above Sophie, striking down with her sword in a decapitating blow.

But Sophie's spider mech proved the more nimble, and she dodged out of the way.

"What's going on?" Jerry transmitted. "One of the motion sensors woke me up, so I accessed the cam we got pointing into the valley, and I see Sophie and Tara fighting."

“Just a small domestic dispute,” Jason said. “Nothing I can’t handle. Go back to sleep.”

Jason threw himself between Sophie and Tara once more.

Sophie was just in the act of launching a blade formed of micro machines at Sophie, and Tara was stabbing with her sword at the same time, and both weapons struck Jason in the chest, passing right through his armor.

He fell to his knees before collapsing entirely.

“Jason!” Tara said. “What have I done?”

“Oh no,” Sophie said. “No, no, no. This is my fault.”

Tara withdrew her sword, and Sophie her micro machine blade. Jason’s metal body momentarily convulsed as the blades broke free.

Repair drones swarmed him as Sophie and Tara unleashed their units.

“That’s right,” Jason said weakly. “It’s all fun and games until someone dies.”

“You’re not going to die, sweetie,” Tara said, cradling him. “I’m so sorry.”

Sophie was on her knees beside him. “It’s my fault. I did this.”

Tara looked at her. “You’re damn right you did this, you fucking bitch.”

Sophie’s avatar wept openly.

The expression on Tara’s avatar softened. “It’s my fault, too. I was so pissed off, I just... I lost it. When I was plunging my sword into you, and he intervened, I could have turned the blade away. But I didn’t. I wanted to hurt him. Wanted him to feel the pain. I don’t know what came over me.”

“Neither... of your faults,” Jason said. “It’s mine. I managed... you poorly. Should’ve... gotten permission, for Sophie.”

“Except you couldn’t have,” Sophie said. “Because you didn’t even know it was me.” She addressed Tara. “You can’t blame him. It’s all my fault. He didn’t know. I swear.”

Tara didn't answer.

"I should have... gotten permission anyway," Jason said. "So you wouldn't have to trick me in the first place."

Sophie's avatar pursed her lips. "Yeah. That's probably right. I guess it is your fault."

He would have rolled his eyes if he could.

Jason was either the luckiest man alive, or the unluckiest. At the moment, he was leaning toward the latter.

Man, this harem management stuff is complicated.

Jason noticed that Aria, Xin, and even Lori had dug themselves from their plots, and had gathered around. They didn't contribute their own repair drones, probably because there was no more room for any drones on his damaged chest region. He noted that Jerry and his War Forger clones remained buried. They understood that this was the business of Jason and his girls.

Good.

"What the hell did you do to him?" Xin said. "Not even Bokerov's tanks did this much damage."

"Bokerov's tanks didn't have the weapons they do," Aria pointed out.

"Still, a lucky hit," Xin said. "Or unlucky, as it were."

"I'm pissed," Lori said. "Really, really pissed. I want to kick both of your asses. Sophie. Tara. Fuck you!"

Neither answered.

"How come you didn't fight those tanks as enthusiastically as you did each other, or Jason?" Lori said. "If you could penetrate his chest so easily, you could have done the same to those tanks. Instead, you held back, obviously. And now you go and do this."

"The tanks were a little better armored," Aria said.

“Still,” Lori said. “Oh, I’m so mad! I’m going to kick their asses!” The tail of her Stalker curved backward, and the tip lit up, as if preparing to launch a plasma bolt.

“Lori,” Jason said.

The tip of her tail immediately went dark, and she knelt beside him. “Yes, Baby?”

“You’re not helping,” Jason said.

“Sorry,” Lori said. “I just feel so helpless.”

“The repair drones are fixing his inner circuitry, and external armor, but he doesn’t seem to be getting any better...” Xin said.

Xin was right: Jason felt just as weak as the moment after impact. His vision seemed to be growing dimmer as well, with the LIDAR wireframes that overlaid his sight becoming darker with each moment.

“He’s going to need a new battery,” Aria said. “Both his main and his backup are shot.”

“If both are shot, why is he online at all?” Xin said.

“He’s running on his backup,” Aria said. “But look at the puncture on his Damage Report. It won’t last long.”

“I can contribute my main,” Sophie said. “I’ll operate on my backup.”

“No,” Tara said. “I’ll do it.”

“All right,” Aria said. “Jason, we’re going to have to shut you down.”

But she didn’t have to, because everything went dark a moment later.



JASON OPENED HIS EYES. It was still dark out, and the girls were seated in a circle around him. The Rex Wolves had come down from their perches, and Bruiser and Lackey were beside Tara, Runt with Lori, and Shaggy next to Jason.

Shaggy whined softly, and licked his metallic hand.

Jason sat up. “How long was I out for?” He checked his internal clock. “Only a minute.”

“Yep,” Aria said. “We just installed Tara’s spare battery, and booted you. The two of you will have to run on one cell for the time being, until we can get some proper lithium collected for new cells. Maybe pillage a few Bokerov bases somewhere along the way. Until then, be careful not to exhaust your cell, because there will be no switchover, and you’ll just power off.”

“Got it,” Jason said.

An alert appeared on his HUD. It was from one of the cameras that Aria had placed along the perimeter.

Warning. Aircraft detected.

On the overhead map, a red dot appeared five clicks away. The calculated trajectory, which appeared as a dotted line, was projected to pass directly over their position.

Jason switched to Bullet Time and scrambled to his feet. A couple of repair drones sluggishly fell off, and buzzed in outrage at his sudden movement. He swatted at the others.

“Recall these,” Jason ordered.

Sophie and Tara recalled their repair drones. He still needed maybe another ten minutes to fully replace his armor, but he could do that any other time.

He amped up his time sense to max, so that everything slowed to a halt.

“Do we bury ourselves?” Xin asked.

“No,” Jason said. “Look at the trajectory. It’s going to pass right over our position. My guess is, it spotted us when Tara and Sophie were fighting.”

“Sorry again,” Tara said. On the lower right of his HUD, her avatar was looking down, as if at her feet.

“Don’t be,” Jason said. “There’s only one aircraft. And it’s not zig-zagging yet. Maybe we can take it down. Assume defensive positions on the rise!”

Jason decreased his time sense, but still operated at an elevated level so that he could move as fast as possible. In moments he had reached the edge of the nearest rise, and he dropped to aim past the horizon.

He zoomed in, and then amped up his time sense to the max once more.

“The thermal signature isn’t a Russian design,” Jason said.

“No, it’s not,” Aria agreed.

“A trick on Bokerov’s part?” Xin asked.

“Maybe,” Jason replied. “Maybe not.”

Jason hesitated, but then decided to take a risk.

“Unidentified vessel, please identify yourself,” Jason transmitted on the common band. It was the first thing he could think of. Assuming that some sort of AI or Mind Refurb was in command of the craft, he kept his time sense cranked up to the max. If a machine was indeed in control, the timebase transmitted in the header of the message would allow the AI to match his time sense.

“You identify *yourselves!*” a voice returned.

“Uh,” Jason said. “We’re mechs. US units.”

“What company?” the voice said. “Division? Branch?”

“Uh, War Forgers?” Jason said. “Army. Maybe?”

“Friendlies!” the voice returned. “Why don’t you turn on your identifiers in your comm header? Would have saved me a lot of trouble.”

“Guess I missed that part in the manual,” Jason said.

“Well, you fuckers are lucky I didn’t bomb the shit out of you!” the voice said. “I saw the flashes you were making from kilometers away. Thought you were that Russian bitch.”

“And who are you again?” Jason said.

“Didn’t you read the identifier in my comm header?” the voice said. “Ah, never mind. I’m Major Denver, US Air Force. Mind Refurb division.”

“Ah,” Jason said.

“I assume you’ve been sent here for the same reason I was?” Denver said.

Jason paused. “Uh, yeah, probably.”

“That fucker has been destroying our bases throughout the region,” Denver said. “Along with ten others, I launched from an aircraft carrier in the Mediterranean to gather reconnaissance on his different bases. I was almost shot down five times now. He got me good two times, but I managed to repair and fly on. I believe I’m the only one left of the original ten. I’ve been trying to return to the carrier in the Mediterranean Sea to deliver my report, but I’ve been essentially stranded here, constrained to a region little bigger than a hundred klicks in diameter. The Russian has got anti-aircraft vehicles on the ground, encircling the area, and they’re slowly tightening the noose. I won’t be able to stay airborne forever. I’ll have to land and hide out at some point.”

“How long have you been in the air?” Jason asked.

“A few weeks now,” Denver replied.

“I’m surprised you haven’t run out of fuel,” Jason commented.

“Oh, I’ve got regenerating fuel tanks,” Denver said. “Special bacteria in my metal guts make it.” That would be like Sophie’s jumpjet unit. “I still have to land every few days to regenerate, however.”

“What’s the situation in the western hemisphere?” Jason said. “I would have expected some sort of counteroffensive by now, not just airborne scouts. You know, reinforcements, or other support troops. We’ve been the only ones.”

“We didn’t know what was going on for the first few weeks,” Denver said. “Because of a devastating cyberattack, we lost all of our comm satellites at the same time, as well as the AIs managing the army bases and even the nuclear launch facilities. Thankfully no actual launch codes were leaked.

There have been constant cyberattacks against our infrastructure since then. Electrical grid, power plants, and so forth. Plus false flag attacks, meant to make it look like aliens have arrived: transports fly over cities and drop mutants into the town centers. Keeping us distracted.

“As far as we can tell, he’s been trying to obtain access to the Russian nuclear stockpile. Years ago, we filled most of the nuclear silos with concrete, along with those of the Chinese and other super powers in the uninhabited zone, and set up automated guard units to protect the areas. But those defenses have been under attack lately. So far, he hasn’t succeeded in taking a silo yet: you asked about reinforcements, and that’s where we’ve been sending most of them for the time being. But as soon as I get back, well, *if* I get back, we’ll have some fresh targets.”

“How did you know the Russian was responsible for all of this?” Jason said.

“We captured one of the transport ships that was dumping mutants onto the cities, and dug out its comm node,” Denver said. “We were able to trace the comm signal to this area, via a series of repeaters the Russian had strung across the ocean. I didn’t actually know he was Russian, however, until he started attacking me, and his units matched old Russian makes and models in my database. He’s never said a word to me.”

“By now you’ve spotted the rifts that have been opening up, yes?” Jason said.

“That’s right,” Denver said. “I was going to report that, too. The fucker’s trying to facilitate an alien invasion.”

Jason paused to digest everything he just heard. “Okay, so you say you’ve been sent here to scout for the Russian bases? That means you’ve recorded a few of their positions, yes?”

“A few,” Denver agreed.

“We might be able to help each other,” Jason said.

“Tell me,” Jason said. “Have you seen anything that might resemble a communications center? A closet of satellites, repeater towers, and so forth?”

“I have,” Denver said. “But why should I tell you? You say you can help me? How?”

“We think we have a way to disable his entire army,” Jason said. “Via a specially designed virus payload. It requires physical access to the Russian’s communications center in the region, however.”

“Disabling his army would certainly help me,” Denver said.

“So what have you seen?” Jason pressed.

“There’s a valley in the center of the mountain range to the southeast,” Denver said. “In it, there’s a cluster of satellites and repeaters. It definitely could be the communications center you’re looking for. Unfortunately, it’s extremely well guarded. I was almost shot down passing over it, in fact.”

“Do you have any photographs you can share?” Jason said.

“Sure,” Denver said.

Jason received a file request, and accepted.

“There are two approaches leading in and out,” Denver said. “Mountain roads, essentially. Big enough for your mechs to fit. The Russian had some

tanks on the outgoing road when I flew by. In the valley itself, ringing the comm center are a series of defense platforms, providing three hundred sixty degrees of weapons coverage. There are also seven large mechs ringing the area. Ranging from twice as large to three times as large as yours.”

“Cataphracts,” Jason said.

“That’s about right,” Denver said. “They’re of a design I’ve never seen before.”

“Even if we combine, we’ll be outnumbered more than two to one,” Jerry said on a private channel.

“We would, at least for a while,” Jason said. “We’d just need to defend long enough for Lori to inject her Containment Code.” Jason switched to the open band and addressed Denver: “Can you send me the exact location of this base?”

Denver did so.

“That’s definitely inside the mountain range,” Jason said. “And what about the two approaches?”

“If you give me highlight access to your map, I can show you,” Denver said.

Jason gave him access, and in moments two long lines appeared on the map, leading through the mountains to the comm center.

“We should set out as soon as possible,” Jason said. “While Bokerov’s forces are still looking for us. Denver, can you act as our high altitude scout?”

“I can,” Denver said.

“Good,” Jason said. “We’re going to need you to clear the way, so that we can get there as fast as possible, and with the least encounters.” He called Lori on a private line.

“Hey Babe!” Lori said.

“Is the injection code ready?” Jason asked.

“Me and Lori 5 should be finished in about two hours,” Lori said. “We can work on it while on the move—we just have to give our Accomps control of

our mechs.”

“Do it,” Jason said.

Jason had the clones dig themselves out of their plots, and then ordered the group to set out for the mountains immediately.

Denver scouted ahead from high altitude. The major detected ground patrols four times, and helped the team steer well clear of each party. One of the patrols sighted him, and he was almost blown from the sky, but zig-zagging while on the retreat saved Denver.

As promised, sometime in the middle of the night Lori announced that she and her clone had completed the code injection routines.

“You’re sure it will work?” Jason asked her.

“Somewhat,” Lori replied.

“That doesn’t inspire confidence,” Jason said.

“Well,” Lori said. “The only way to be completely sure is to test it on the actual comm center server. But otherwise, I’m ninety-nine percent sure.”

When the team reached the range, the War Forgers and their clones hugged the shoulders of the mountains. By the time morning came, they had reached the pass that led to the comm center. It was guarded by four defense platforms and eight of the smaller mechs.

“All right, Lori, and Lori 5,” Jason said. “I want you to enter, and make your way to the comm center. Install the virus, if you can.”

The Stalkers of both Lori and Lori 5 became invisible.

“You really think they’ll make it to the comm center’s server room without being detected?” Sophie asked.

“I don’t know,” Jason said. “But it’s worth a try.”

Denver was traveling high overhead, ready to alert the team if either Lori got into trouble. The major had already drawn some fire, and he’d retreated a ways to the south, far enough so that he was outside Bokerov’s weapons range, but still close enough to observe the two Stalkers, though the angle

was kind of poor, and he wouldn't be able to keep the units in sight at all times—there were several blind spots, mostly due to the different mountain rises. Denver hadn't spotted the Cataphracts: it was possible the large enemy mechs were hidden behind the blind spots.

Both Stalker mechs were still in range, and appeared on his overhead map, so he was able to watch as they approached the different mechs and defense platforms.

The pair managed to sneak halfway through the group of mechs when one of the units opened fire. Bokerov had apparently adapted, updating his sensors so that the telltale thermal signatures on Lori's foot regions were detected during invisibility.

The other enemy mechs and platforms started firing, too.

The rest of the team rushed them, drawing the fire away from the girls, and together, Jason and company made short work of the units. The Rex Wolves even joined in, and with their powerful T-Rex-like jaws they were able to crunch right through the midsections of the smaller mechs.

"Destroying these platforms is going to call in Bokerovs from across the region, you know," Tara said.

"Oh I know," Jason said. "Which is why we have to get to the comm center and install the Containment Code immediately."

There was another base about ten minutes away from this one, so it wouldn't be long before reinforcements arrived. They definitely had to be quick.

Without pausing, the team entered the pass proper.

"I actually prefer it this way," Jason said.

"Prefer what?" Tara said. "That the enemy knows we're here?"

"Yes," Jason said. "Because now we have no excuse not to go inside with both Stalkers. Those blind spots in Denver's surveillance made me nervous."

"I hear you," Tara said. "They made me nervous, too."

Still invisible, the two Loris led the way, followed by the two Arias, and the

tanks. The rest of the team followed. Bruiser and Lackey stayed close to the two Taras, while Runt and Shaggy kept near Jason and Jerry. Shaggy had his ears back, and moved at a crouch, the big animal stepping as softly as he could.

I hope I don't regret taking the dogs along...

Tara had assured him that the mutants would know when to stay back... that they wouldn't dare attack the enemy Cataphracts, just as they had avoided Nightmares in the past. Still, Jason wasn't so sure. He worried that one of the Rex Wolves would try something heroic if they saw him or one of the others they liked in danger. Still, he had to give them some credit: they had fought well back there, shredding those small enemy mechs like so much paper.

On either side, the cliffs rose tall. There was enough room to fit four of the mechs abreast.

"Perfect spot for an ambush," Aria remarked. She was surveying the peaks suspiciously. They all were.

Jason had his Explorer flying well above the peak line, offering a second set of eyes to Denver's scout. So far, the area seemed clear beyond the peaks.

Red dots appeared on the overhead map up ahead as the Explorer picked up some units that were in Denver's blind spot.

"Got twelve tanks coming up, around the bend," Jason said. "Blocking the roadway. Prepare for contact."

Jason pulled the Explorer back just as the tanks opened fire at the scout; he dodged the unit behind a mountain peak as a plasma bolt shot past.

The two Arias rounded the bend, holding their ballistic shields together to form a long plate. The tanks pounded it with their shells and plasma turrets. Two of the tanks had energy weapons, which tore holes right through the shields. The Arias stabbed their lightning weapons through those gaps and unleashed bolts of electricity that, when they struck, arced between the tanks.

Meanwhile, the invisible Loris used the distraction to approach completely undetected, and then unleashed their plasma bolts in rapid succession behind each of the tanks. The units took quite a battering, but their armor held; some

of the tanks began to pivot their turrets toward the invisible sources of those plasmas, but then Jason and the others rounded the bend, and took cover behind Aria's shield. They peered past to open fire.

Jason synced his laser with Jerry and the two Taras so that when he fired, the combined beam was almost as strong as an energy bolt. He targeted the turrets in turn. The two Xins also fired the plasma beams from their eyes, and the Sophies launched their micro machines, and in a few moments it was over. The Rex Wolves had wisely stayed back this time.

The team hurried to the wreckage of the tanks, and paused to launch their repair drones. The small machines used the wreckages of the tanks for parts, and began to repair the damage that had been inflicted to the shields of the two Arias. Jason waited until those holes had been patched to fifty percent strength, and then had the team recall their drones to move on—he was unwilling to delay any longer.

Once more the Explorer took the lead, confirming Denver's blind spots were empty up ahead.

And then hidden defense platforms emerged from near the top of the cliffs on either side, and energy bolts rained down on the party.

The group huddled close, with the two Aria's throwing up their ballistic shields to protect the party members. The two Sophie's also activated their energy shields, and together all four of them managed to protect the party from much of the onslaught.

Operating in Bullet Time, the team fought back, destroying all eight defense platforms before too much damage was inflicted. Lori 5 took a hit to her arm, which disabled it. Tara 5 had also taken a debilitating hit to laser arm, losing the laser and grappling hook. But otherwise, they were still good to go. Repairs would take too long for either of them, so Jason simply ordered the group onward.

The team soon approached the mouth of the pass, and paused at the bend just before it. Via the Explorer, Jason could see the base: it was ringed by defense turrets, and surrounded by an electric fence topped by razor wire. Inside he saw four long rows of satellites, and several smaller groups of repeater towers clustered together near the peripheries. It matched up with what the major

reported. There were still no sign of the Cataphracts that Denver had sighted during his original fly-over of the region, which was troubling. Then again, if they were lucky, Bokerov had repositioned those units to another base.

Jason could only hope.

He nearly lost his Explorer as different defense turrets opened fire; the Explorer's autonomous evasion systems kicked in, and saved the unit, causing the scout to withdraw behind a nearby peak. The evasion system would have activated as soon as the Explorer detected the turrets swiveling to track it. The top portion of the peak broke away, and the Explorer was forced to retreat further.

"All right," Jason said. "You guys know what to do. Arias, lead the way."

The two Arias rounded the bend, interlocking their shields like the last time. Small red circles appeared on the insides as they took hits that caused the metal to superheat. Once again, any energy bolts that struck were powerful enough to penetrate entirely, creating small circles in the shields.

Tara dashed forward, taking cover behind the left Aria, and aimed her laser past the edge of her ballistic shield. Xin meanwhile took cover behind the rightmost Aria, and similarly unleashed the plasma beam from her eyes.

Jason and the others opened fire from behind the bend. Even Aria's tanks unleashed shells that arced over the valley and pummeled the different positions. Only Sophie didn't participate, as she didn't want to expose her micro machines to too much damage—the weapon was meant for relatively short-range attacks, after all. She and the Rex Wolves. When the mutants saw the damage the two Aria's were taking to their shields, they obviously realized it wouldn't be very safe for them out there; besides, they probably also took some cues from Jason: he was staying in cover, so they would, too. He hoped.

Lori meanwhile moved forward, using the distraction caused by the attack to ensure her tiny thermal footprints went undetected. She stayed close to the wall of the valley, edging past the ringing turrets. Once she was beyond them, she would cut through the fence, or simply step over it—it didn't look that high, at least for a mech—and then search for the server room. Lori 5 stayed back for now, as per Jason's orders.

The platforms unleashed a nonstop barrage, launching volley after volley of plasma and energy bolts at the party, concentrating their fire on the two Arias and their ballistic shields. There were also laser beams as well, but Jason couldn't see those, as the involved photons weren't on the visible band.

The attacks only picked up in intensity, with more of the fire focusing on the bend, where the weapons of Jason and the others were visible; he was forced to dodge behind the ever-diminishing rock edge, which was taking a pounding. Pieces of that rock broke away constantly—it certainly wasn't made of the same stuff as Aria's shield.

"Switch to the severing routine!" Jason ordered.

Tara 5 swapped with Xin so that she was behind Aria 5's shield, and then the two of them ran forward and to the right. Meanwhile, original Tara and Aria moved in the opposite direction. They ran right up to the defense platforms, while Jason and the others did their best to lay down suppressive fire.

The two pairs reached the closest defense platforms; each Aria shifted her shield to the side, allowing the Tara in behind to swipe out with her sword. The impacts cut each platform in half.

Tara 5 and Aria 5 continued moving to the right, while Tara and Aria proceeded to the left. The Arias kept their shields raised, allowing the Tara's to cut through the platforms with their swords. They didn't have to attack all of the platforms, because Jason and the others managed to take down some in between.

The two pairs proceeded to loop the entire razor-wire topped fence in that matter, cutting through all active defense platforms in their paths in the process. When they met on the other side, between them, they'd destroyed all platforms ringing the comm center.

"Well, my shield is a mess, but that actually worked quite well," Aria said.

"Lori, have you found the server room yet?" Jason said.

"I'm looking for it," Lori said.

On the overhead map, her green dot showed that she had stepped over the fence, and was passing between the rows of satellites. There was a small

cabin located next to each row, but she ignored them, heading toward the multiple outbuildings near the center of the base. On the rooftops of those buildings were several more satellites, and repeater towers.

“Taras, Arias, deploy on the far side of the base, and watch the outgoing approach on that side,” Jason said.

“Will do,” Tara said.

“Sophie, with me,” Jason said. “Let’s see if we can help Lori speed things along. The rest of you, stay here and watch this approach.”

Jason had only just stepped around the bend, when the ground began to shake. A camouflaged blast door on the far side of the valley, to the right of the base, was opening up. The door was huge, about three times as tall as his mech, and five times as wide. Beyond it, he could see several giant metal legs. They belonged to Cataphract mechs, no doubt; as the door continued to rise, and the bodies were further revealed, his suspicions were confirmed. The giant mechs were spaced in two rows.

“Well, this is going to be fun,” Jason said. “Jerry, you should probably combine.”

Jason took a step toward the base, intending to get to Lori as fast as possible, but then three shapes dropped from the sky, landing in front of him. They had likely leaped down from the upper portion of the pass. How long they’d been lurking in place, he didn’t know—he suspected they had only just arrived, ahead of the reinforcements that Bokerov had no doubt summoned. And the fact that they hadn’t fired from their positions at the top of the pass told him their weaponry had limited range.

He amped up his Bullet Time to study them.

Three mechs stood before him.

Three mechs entirely unlike anything he’d ever encountered before.

Jason stared at the mechs uncertainly. They were about the same size as his own, if a little smaller.

His AI core identified the first mech as a Dragonfly. It was humanoid in shape, but had four wings protruding from its back, like a dragonfly. They were coated with a strange, glistening substance—no, it wasn't glistening, but a series of tiny micro motors. He suspected alien technology was involved, because he doubted standard motors could provide enough lift for a mech of that size.

That mech also had two long swords emerging from its forearms. They weren't coated in electrical sparks like Tara's, but they looked just as deadly.

The next mech was also humanoid in shape, but with thickly armored torso and arms. His internal database matched it to a Grazer model of mech. The mouth area of the head protruded like a horse or other grazing animal, hence the name. Three drones orbited the unit, buzzing menacingly.

The last unit was a Locust mech. It had a carapace with a human-like torso protruding from it, like Sophie, except instead of eight legs and two arms, this mech had six legs, and four arms. Those legs were also extremely thick at the bottom, looking almost like it was wearing some kind of booties. The arms were equipped with glowing energy whips. And the insect-like maw on the head had two pincers protruding, with a localized energy beam traveling between them, active at all times. Jason didn't want to touch it, nor those whips.

Not that he had any choice. The Locust was currently launching two of them toward him. The Dragonfly had also thrown the swords, which were pummeling through the air toward his chest. The drones of the Grazer also darted forward, forming a deadly triangle of energy between them that threatened to slice through him on impact

Jason started to dodge, but his movements were terribly gradual compared to the incoming attacks. Jason's time sense was already accelerated, but he upped it to the max to weigh his options. Yes, his body was moving too slowly: there was no way he was going to move his body out of the way of those weapons in time. The three mechs had prepared to launch them before landing, and the instant they'd touched down, they had released those weapons.

"All right, looks like I'm not going to make it through this one," Jason said. "So here's what I want you to do... Jerry, you—"

But before he could finish, he saw a distortion in front of him. The outline of a humanoid shape formed in slow motion: the outskirts began to fill-in with metal. It was a mech.

Tara.

She was teleporting in front of him to take the brunt of the impacts.

"Tara, no!" Jason said.

"Sorry," Tara said. "I can't let you die. I always knew that one day if I was faced with the choice, I would choose this. I would choose you."

"No, Tara," Jason pleaded.

"It's too late," Tara said. "Once I begin the teleportation process, I can't stop it."

As she continued to form, with her body materializing from the outer peripheries inward, it soon became obvious that even she couldn't save him. The two sword blades, the drones, and the whips, were already passing through the still unformed central regions of Tara's mech, and headed straight for him.

The deadly objects passed through her entirely so that there was nothing between Jason and them. Tara's central region began to solidify shortly after the objects had traveled by, and he was extremely relieved she wouldn't be taking any damage.

Now all he had to do was wait for his own doom. He would have held out his arms in a welcoming embrace if he wasn't frozen by the heightened Bullet Time. At least that time granted him a few moments to contemplate his life, and what had become of it.

Never thought it would end this way, trapped in a mech body in the middle of the irradiated uninhabited zone, chopped up by a bunch of swords, drones, and energy whips.

He smiled inside.

Hell with it. Now's as good a time to go as any. At the top of my game. I did my best. I loved. I fought. I've got no regrets. Well, except that I never did get with Aria and Xin.

It was funny, that he'd be thinking about sleeping with those two now, when he was about to die. This from the guy who had once believed only in monogamy. One would think there would be other things to regret in life, other than not sleeping with a few girls.

Before he could continue down that mental path, he was hit by something in the side. The force was immense, and literally knocked him off his feet. He sped up time slightly, trying to figure out what was going on. In slow motion, he was sent barreling out of the way of the incoming weapons. When he struck the ground, something furry rolled on top of him.

Shaggy.

Jason realized the Rex Wolf must have leaped at him the moment the mechs touched down, while Jason had been staring at the trio in confusion; that was the only way to explain how the mutant could have reached him in time.

For a moment he was worried that Shaggy had been struck, but then he saw the rock shatter behind where he had been standing a moment before, and he realized that the weapons had missed the mutant. The hilts of the two thrown blades protruded, while the whips were retracting, and the drones retreating.

He was relieved.

He changed his time sense to something a little more manageable, and clambered to his feet.

The others were already opening fire on the mechs. The Grazer's orbiting drones formed triangular shapes in front of it, and an energy shield flashed into existence between them, absorbing every shot aimed at the Grazer.

The Locust in turn moved its whips at high speed, intercepting the plasma and energy bolts, and absorbing anything that struck them.

The Dragonfly didn't bother to defend, and instead took flight. Jason noticed that, in addition to the little motors spinning in the wings, the long appendages also flapped, like a real dragonfly's. He could see how that would help with the lift, but he was still convinced alien tech played a part. The Dragonfly held out its hands as it rose higher, and the two swords embedded in the rock tore free, flying back into its grasp.

Jason glanced at Shaggy. "Thanks, Shag! I owe you one!"

Shaggy barked happily, but then his gaze shifted skyward, and he growled.

The Dragonfly was diving directly toward him.

But Bruiser intercepted this time, chomping its large jaws around the mech. The Dragonfly was thrown off course, but before it hit the ground, it issued some kind of shockwave that sent Bruiser flying away.

The Rex Wolf landed, and shook its head, momentarily stunned. Its fur was singed in several places, thanks to that shockwave, but otherwise the mutant seemed all right.

The Locust's six thick legs began pounding the ground; the vibrations were so intense that Jason and the others found it hard to stay on their feet, let alone aim. Meanwhile it kept deflecting blows with its whips.

Lackey jumped on that one, pulling it to the ground to wrestle, while Shaggy leaped at the Grazer, ducking underneath the drones to tackle the unit. The Grazer ejected some greenish substance from its metal mouth then; it enveloped one of Shaggy's paws, pinning the mutant to the ground. The

Grazer sent its drones toward the dog, activating the cutting energy beam between them. Jason immediately fired his energy weapon at the mech, forcing the Grazer to return those drones back in front of its body, leaving Shaggy alone.

Runt tried to tackle the Dragonfly as it got up, but it too was thrown back by some sort of energy shockwave the mech activated.

Meanwhile, the Cataphracts were fast coming in from the side of the valley. He recognized the Axeman and the Dinosaur among them, and what must have been the Lizardman Lori 5 had described before. The seven others ran the gamut from humanoid to monster shapes.

Jerry had already issued the combine command, at least Jason assumed so, because Aria 5 and Tara 5 were racing across the center of the valley, crossing directly over the comm center, and trampling several satellites along the way. Jason wondered why Tara 5 didn't teleport back, but a quick glance at her Damage Report screen told him that when she had taken a debilitating hit to her laser arm earlier, she'd also lost her teleporter core. Aria 5 kept her shield pointed toward the Cataphracts as lasers and rockets pummeled them.

Jason tried to give them suppressive fire as they raced across the valley, hoping to distract the Cataphracts. But his attacks were ignored for the most part. Like the stings of an insect. Aria 5's shield took a pummeling, while Tara 5 remained in cover behind it the whole time she raced back.

"Uh, Lori, how are we doing on that server?" Jason transmitted.

"I think I finally found the server room!" Lori said.

Jason piped her viewpoint into the upper right of his display; she knelt before one of the outbuildings, and reached a hand inside the doorway. Though she was invisible, every part of her body was perceptible to her own cameras. The doorway was big enough to fit one of Bokerov's smaller tanks, but not enough to allow her entire body inside.

She switched to a smaller camera on her hand, which replaced the feed Jason had from her eyes, and he watched her extend a finger toward one of the cabinets. From the finger, a smaller telescoping limb emerged, and she used it to open a panel on the cabinet. Inside was a rack farm of small rectangular

machines—servers. She attached the telescoping limb to the universal plug on one of those servers.

“Everything is just as I predicted it would be,” Lori said. “From the software version, to the interface type. I’m beginning the code injection. Should be a couple of minutes now.”

“We don’t have a couple of minutes!” Jason sent.

Five of the Cataphracts diverted toward the comm center: obviously Lori’s intrusion had been detected. They weren’t opening fire yet, however, so that meant they hadn’t spotted her invisible mech.

The Rex Wolves were doing a good job of distracting the new mechs. “Xin, Sophie, help the wolves take down those mechs. Join us when you can. Tara, Aria, you’re with me. We have to make sure those Cataphracts don’t reach Lori. Jerry, I want you to protect Lori as well.”

“You got it,” Jerry said.

Shaggy had been struggling against the substance pinning him, and he broke free then and was back in the fray. He leaped at the Dragonfly as it tried to take flight and grabbed onto the ankle. The mech didn’t issue a shockwave this time—probably had used up its charges. But it did swing its two swords down in a decapitating blow.

Sophie intercepted those swords with her micro machines, blocking the blow. She was firing her jumpjets, too, and hurled into the side of the mech, ripping it away from Shaggy.

“Don’t touch the dogs, bitch!” Sophie said via her external speakers.

Jason took off towards Lori, with Tara right behind him. Together they raced out into the open, passing by Aria 5 and Tara 5 who were still on the way to combine with Jerry and the other 5’s.

Overhead, enemy bombers roared past.

“They’re not dropping their payloads...” Aria said as she sped towards Jason from where Tara had left her when she teleported.

“Of course not!” Jason said. “Bokerov doesn’t want to risk destroying his

own communications center.”

“Though in this case, that might actually be a good thing for him,” Tara said. “If only he knew what was coming...”

The trio converged on the lead Cataphract: the Axeman. Jason reached to the height of its hips, and smashed his right arm into the groin region, firing his energy weapon at point blank range. Tara teleported on top and stabbed her sparking sword into the back of the head. Aria fired her lightning weapon into the battery region.

Aria’s tanks had moved into the opening of the valley and were unleashing several shells from their positions, along with plasma bolts.

It was fair to say that altogether, they had succeeded in drawing the Axeman’s attention away from Lori.

Despite the three attacks, the Cataphract was able to recover. It swung its big ax down at Jason, while firing a series of chaffs and other countermeasures from its shoulder region, forcing Tara to slide her sword out and drop free. The Axeman also launched missiles and plasma bolts at Aria from turrets on its shoulders.

Jason dodged the ax, which caused the ground to shake when it struck.

“Dinosaur!” Aria said.

Jason leaped out of the way just in time as the Dinosaur unleashed a thick energy beam from its tail; the beam cut a huge trench into the ground as it passed him.

He released the last of his missiles, pummeling the Axeman’s chest, and was about to fire his energy weapon at the mech again when a big claw swatted at him from the side, sending him flying away.

The Lizardman.

Jason smashed into the electric fence, ripping through it. The voltage momentarily stunned him, but he was past it and pummeling into a row of satellites beyond before it could do anything else. He scrambled to his feet, but the Lizardman followed up with a beam of energy from its mouth.

Jason dove to the side, behind a nearby outbuilding. He was getting dangerously close to Lori—she was five buildings away.

Have to lead the Cataphracts away...

Jason emerged from behind the building and rushed the Lizardman. Aria was opening fire with her lightning weapon, while dashing forward and slicing out with her weapon; she passed underneath the Lizardman and chopped right through its left leg.

The big robot lizard toppled, landing on its side.

Aria leaped on its head, and fired her lightning weapon into its head, execution style.

The Cataphract didn't get up.

Jason's missile alarm sounded. He released his Battle Cloak and as the seekers erupted from his body, he dove to the side.

Meanwhile the big ax came swinging down. The Axeman was on him again.

Jason fired his final railgun slugs, and unleashed another energy bolt, targeting the weapon. He managed to cut a small half moon out of the front section, and he ducked out of the way as it smashed into the ground. That was his last energy bolt for now: he had to wait until his power cell recharged in the sunlight before he could fire again.

"I'm out," Jason sent. "I'll be dodging for the next little bit."

Another Cataphract joined the Axeman. This one looked like a big octopus with steel tentacles. It dragged itself along the ground with those tentacles. When it lifted its maw, it fired an energy beam that was like Xin's, but much thicker, and it lasted a lot longer.

Jason, Tara and Aria spent the next ten seconds dodging that prolonged beam.

"Well if there's one thing to be said about Bokerov," Tara commented. "He sure has some creative mech designs."

"What are you talking about, creative?" Aria said. "There's nothing creative

about copying nature!”

“Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery,” Tara said.

Tara took a running leap at that huge Octopus, stabbing her sword down into the edge region, but before it contacted, the Cataphract teleported away.

“Got’s ourselves another teleporter,” Tara said. “Always fun.”

A shadow blotted out the sun.

Jason looked up, and realized the Octopus had materialized directly on top of him, and was about to crush him.

Aria leaped at him, smashing into his body and dragging him out of the way.

She spun toward the Octopus, Axeman, and Dinosaur, which formed a line in front of them. Beyond them, the other six Cataphracts were crowding inward to get a piece of them. One of those six shoved between the Octopus and the Axeman. Its entire body was lit up with some sort of plasma. It was like a big torch, essentially. It pointed a metal fist at Jason, and the plasma gathered around the arm, and shot downward in a thick beam that drilled a long trench into the ground as it headed toward him.

Once again Jason dove aside, but the beam arced. Aria was there beside him, lifting up her shield to protect him. It turned bright red on the inside as she took the blow.

Tara was also struck by the beam, taking a blow to her left arm, but she ran toward it, unprotected. She leaped, but before she contacted she was swatted out of the air by one of the Octopus’ metal tentacles, and she went flying through the fence of the comm center, and smashed through two satellites and knocked down one repeater tower.

The Torch stepped forward, and raised its hand toward the exposed Tara.

Jason was too far away to save her.

Jason rushed the Torch anyway. He had to try.

But then a large sword struck downward, cutting off the Torch's raised hand. Jerry, in combined form, had finally arrived.

The bombers continued to circle overhead, seeming like they were trying to decide whether to bomb the comm center or not.

The Axeman, Octopus, Torch and Dinosaur turned their attention on Jerry's Cataphract, while the others in behind fired remote weapons. Jerry activated his energy shield, deflecting the blows; he swung his sword upward, into the Torch's chest, and lifted the big robot into the air, throwing its body off the sword and into the enemy Cataphracts behind it, knocking a Caterpillar down.

The Dinosaur swung its tail toward Jerry, intending to release its plasma weapon.

Jason sprinted forward and latched onto the tail, adding his weight, and preventing the Dinosaur from bringing the weapon to bear. The big mech slammed its tail down twice, trying to knock away Jason.

But then several micro machines slashed down: Sophie had arrived, landing beside him courtesy of her jumpjets. She sliced the tail tip clean off.

Xin and the Rex Wolves also joined in—they'd finished dealing with the smaller three mechs.

Tara arrived a moment later, and they formed a unified front, fighting at Jerry's side.

Jason continued to act as a foil, distracting the different enemy Cataphracts, drawing their attention away from the others. He kept an eye on his power levels, waiting for the battery cell to regain enough energy to fire. He was using up almost as much as he was gaining however, because of all of his movements, and his constant operation in Bullet Time.

The Axeman swung at him, but Shaggy leaped on the huge mech's arm, and knocked it off course. Jason had already been swerving away, and Shaggy inadvertently steered the ax directly into him. Runt leaped into him from behind, throwing him clear before the ax hit the ground.

"Careful, dogs!" Jason said.

The Octopus had its maw pointed at Runt: Jason scooped the mutant up and dove behind the Axeman as the Octopus fired that energy beam.

Jason released Runt and turned to defend against whatever attacker came next.

Enemy tanks flooded in from the main mountain pass as reinforcements began to arrive from the plains. Aria had her own tanks turn around to defend, but they were quickly surrounded.

"Xin, help the tanks!" Jason said.

Xin retreated, firing the plasma beam from her eyes.

"Lori!" Jason said. "How's that containment code going?"

"Almost got it," Lori said.

Denver made a few low passes over the comm center, drawing fire from the enemy tanks crowding the mountain pass, helping relieve the pressure on Aria's tanks, and Xin.

Jerry's Cataphract became invisible; Jason knew exactly where he was going, so he picked up his attacks, and ran past the front rank to the next group of huge mechs. A Horse. A Sphinx. A Cobra. A Rifleman. A Caterpillar.

He quickly turned back when they reared their heads to attack. Missiles launched from all of them.

He fired his Battle Cloak and increased the pace of his retreat.

Jerry reappeared beside the Axeman and slammed his sword home, piercing the main power supply or AI core, and the Axeman toppled. Meanwhile the Octopus teleported next to Jerry and fired its energy beam at near point blank range, ripping into Tara 5 on his right arm. She lost her entire lower section.

The Caterpillar had leaped on Jason, and he was pinned. Aria came at him, but the big mech knocked her away. Tara tried as well, but was also swatted back.

The Caterpillar opened its mandibles, revealing a laser cutter of some kind. It pressed it to Jason's chest piece, and began cutting away his armor.

"Gah!" Jason said. "Some help, people!"

Jerry arrived, and grabbed the Caterpillar, hoisting it into the air. It didn't let go of Jason, however, and he was lifted with it. Jerry kept his big ballistic shield pointed toward the other Cataphracts, which were unloading their weapons into it. Several portions of the shield had turned red, and some areas had broken away entirely under the stress.

All of a sudden the Caterpillar released him, and Jason fell to the ground with a loud thud.

The Caterpillar landed beside him in two pieces, where Jerry and the others had sawn it in half.

Something crunched down on his leg and began dragging him toward the other Cataphracts. It was the Cobra. Jason finally had a shot on his energy weapon, and he used it, firing at that big head.

Instead of releasing him, the Cobra instinctively squeezed tighter when the bolt impacted, and tore Jason's left leg clean away. He had turned off his pain sense for this battle, so thankfully he didn't have to feel the simulated agony.

He started to get up, but then a shell struck him in the side—apparently some of the tanks had made it past Xin and Aria's armored units. He was sent

flying into the cliff wall, and landed on the bare rock.

Tara was down nearby, as was Sophie. He watched as Jerry had his left arm pulled out of his socket—that would be Sophie 5. Jerry tried to bring his sword down for a strike, but the Rifleman fired his energy weapon at Jerry, and hit him squarely in the torso. A huge hole formed in the chest piece—Aria 5.

The Sphinx barreled into Jerry's legs, knocking him off his feet, while the Horse bit into his head, dragging him by it, attempting to tear it off.

Jason struggled to stand once more. He had to hop, since he had only one leg. His weapons hadn't recharged yet. Aria joined him. She was badly damaged. The remnants of her shield had almost broken away entirely. Xin also joined him. Her mech was battered.

"I wasn't able to hold the entrance," Xin said. "I lost all the tanks."

Jason searched for the Rex Wolves, and spotted them panting nearby, near the edge of the valley, away from the battle. They were clearly exhausted. Bruiser had a big red spot on his underbelly.

That couldn't be good.

Jason and the two remaining girls retreated into the comm center. Xin and Aria occasionally fired their plasma beam and lightning bolt weapons, respectively. The trio backed right up against the invisible form of Lori.

Except she wasn't invisible anymore.

Jason glanced at her.

She had taken a huge hit to her chest area.

"She's offline," Aria said. "Her core has sustained damage."

Xin nodded. "So we've lost."

Jason gazed out across the field, and spotted Jerry, still being dragged by the Horse. The Cataphract was laying into Jerry's body with the mini guns that protruded from either flank, firing an endless stream of plasma bolts, railgun slugs, and laser beams. Pieces broke away from the body, and blast craters

riddled the hull.

And then, as Jason watched, the Horse tore Jerry's head free of the body. Or to be more accurate, it tore away Jerry's mech, which formed the head of the combined form. What the Horse spat out didn't move. The rest of the body remained motionless, and the Horse ceased firing. The combined mechs would be stunned from the sudden severance. That, and most of them had probably been deactivated, courtesy of the devastating mini gun attack.

Jason checked the Damage Report screen of the combined mech.

"There might be hope, yet," Jason said. "Cover me, if you can!"

He hopped forward. He amped up his Bullet Time slightly, along with his servomotor output, for an added boost. It would drain his battery to dangerously low levels by the time he reached his target, especially considering that he now only had one battery, and no backup, but it would be worth it. Or so he hoped.

With his one leg, he dodged between the plasma bolts that came down at him. Lightning bolts and plasma beams occasionally came from behind, fired by Aria and Xin.

Shells exploded around him, courtesy of the tanks at the mouth of the pass. Shrapnel ripped into his remaining leg. He continued to run.

He dove underneath the Octopus, and those steel tentacles almost crunched him as the mech attempted to squash him. He emerged on the other side, leaped out of the path of the Sphinx, dodged the Rifleman, and hurried toward the decapitated body of Jerry's Cataphract. All on his remaining leg.

The Horse was guarding Jerry's body, and spun its mini guns toward him.

But then Denver swooped low, drawing away the Horse's attention. Those mini guns swung skyward.

Jason didn't wait to see if Denver got away.

Jason knelt beside the left leg of Jerry's combined form: Lori 5's body. He amped up his time sense to the max, freezing reality around him. His battery was almost gone. He dialed down his servomotor output levels to save

whatever power he could, but running at such a high time sense would still drain the cell.

According to the Damage Report section on his HUD, Lori 5 was still online since he last checked. But she was likely still stunned due to the sudden severing of the mind link with Jerry.

Jason accessed Lori 5's remote interface. Apparently she was logged into VR at the moment. It was probably a defensive action her mind had taken after the link failed. Something she had done unconsciously. She might not even be aware that she was *in* VR.

He requested permission to log into that VR.

He received no reply. He tried again.

Still nothing.

Yep, she definitely had lost all perception of reality. He examined his different remote cameras. The Horse had apparently lost interest in Denver, and it seemed like it was reorienting its head, and those mini guns, toward Jason, but he couldn't be entirely sure, since everything was still frozen. Meanwhile, the other enemy Cataphracts were stuck in different poses that seemed to indicate they were turning around to face him.

He didn't have much time. Not because of those mechs, but because of his battery levels. He had to reach Lori 5, and soon.

He requested permission a third time.

Nothing.

Lori had once shared a backdoor technique to access someone's VR. He'd never used it himself, because it went against his morals—he was a big fan of personal privacy, and intruding on someone's VR was akin to entering a room without knocking, in his book. But there was a time to respect the rules surrounding personal privacy, and a time to break them. This was one of the latter.

Assuming, of course, that Lori 5 hadn't patched the actual technique.

He accessed her remote interface once again, and sent the request ping. He

did it again, and again. There was a race condition involved, between the time a ping was sent, and the response dispatched; the trick was sending a ping at just the right moment before the response came, which could get him to receive automatic approval. It was random, essentially, and it wouldn't work if Lori 5 had enabled response flood protection.

She hadn't.

He was in.

When he entered, she received his timebase signal; by now her Accomp would have automatically changed her time sense to match.

Jason found himself standing within the dark recesses of Lori's mind once more. Or Lori 5, he had to remind himself. It was a cave, of some sort. Deep underground.

He had been here once before, when he had first attempted to combine their mechs.

A little girl stood on the dirt, weeping before a small broken body.

Jason went to her.

She looked up at him, teary eyed.

"It's not your fault," Jason said.

She shook her head. "I killed him."

"No, you didn't," Jason said. "You both fell. He gave his life to save you."

"I made him," the little girl said. "I pulled him underneath me. I didn't give him... a choice."

Jason knelt beside her. "One of you had to live. He didn't make the choice, so you made it for him. You must forget this day. Stop dwelling on it. Always your mind returns here."

She lowered her eyes, and didn't answer. The shame was obvious on her face.

"You're a grown woman now," Jason said. "With friends who are waiting for

you to help them. You can retreat here later, if you must. But for now, we need you. *I need you.*”

“You need me?” she said hopefully.

“I do,” Jason said.

She straightened. “Then I will help you.” He had a glimpse of the Lori he remembered. “Tell me what to do.”

“Lori has gone down,” Jason said. “You’re the only one with the knowledge necessary to install the Containment Code.”

That wasn’t entirely true. Lori had shared the code injection subroutines with everyone else. But the fact was, Jason didn’t trust himself, or anyone else, to complete the install, given all the little bumps that might come up along the way. Lori and Lori 5, as their master hackers, were well equipped for such duties.

“I’ll do it,” the little girl said.

The VR environment winked out, and once more Jason resided in the real world. The positions of the surrounding Cataphracts had only changed slightly. He glanced at his battery levels. He wasn’t going to last much longer.

“You’re going to have to get to the server room,” Jason said. “You’ll have to go alone. I can’t go with you, my power levels are too low. I’ll have Aria and Xin lay down suppressive fire. Hopefully—”

“Actually,” Lori 5 interrupted. “I can do it here.”

“But she’s offline—” Jason began.

“I can still access her remotely,” Lori 5 said. “Her tethering subsystem should still be online, even if her main AI core is not. With it, I can provision a new Accomp in the neural net of the subsystem, via her old private keys. Assuming she hasn’t changed them.” She paused. “I can confirm, her tethering subsystem is online. Attempting to provision a new Accomp.” She paused again. “Accomp partition successfully created. Her private keys are the same. Now to continue the code injection...” Another breather. “Looks

like she handled most of the antivirus routines and other roadblocks Bokerov raised. It should only be a few moments..."

Jason had to end Bullet Time abruptly. The world sped up, and he collapsed, his power levels too low to support his body. He watched as the Horse finished rotating its turrets toward him, while the other Cataphracts did the same.

Time to die.

The mini gun motors sped up as the Horse prepared to fire.

But then the Horse froze, and the mini guns spun down. The other Cataphracts had lowered their weapons as well, and were lingering in place, as if in some sort of standby mode. The tanks had ceased firing. And the bombers headed over the mountain range, seeming on course to land at an airfield nearby.

"Got it," Lori 5 said. She was still lying on the ground beside him, connected to the combined body that had formed Jerry's Cataphract. "It's done." Her avatar was weeping.

Jason wept himself. They were tears of relief, visible only on his avatar of course.

But Lori 5 could see them. And Aria. Xin.

"We did it," Aria said.

"Yes," Jason said. "Barely."

Jason immediately had the repair drones set to work fixing the damage to the mechs, including his own.

Aria found a medkit in one of her compartments and used it to bind up Bruiser. As far as she could tell, the mutant was going to be all right, but it had lost a lot of blood, and needed some time to mend in the sun.

Runt had suffered a broken leg, so Xin prepared a splint from a turret she ripped from one of the fallen tanks, along with some carbon fiber cabling.

The other two Rex Wolves were fine, save for some nicks and scratches. Near the end, Lackey and Shaggy had simply become too exhausted to fight. That, and they were probably afraid.

Aria and Xin performed a quick damage assessment of the War Forgers and their clones. The mechs mostly had pierced power cells, and melted servomotors, though a few were missing arms, or in Jason's case, a leg. The battery problem could be fixed by removing cells from Bokerov's tanks, while the latter issues had to be taken care of via the drones.

Jason waited a few moments until he had regained enough energy from the sunlight to stand. Then he arose.

Once he was balanced on his remaining leg, he sent out a general transmission.

"So, Bokerov, are you there?" Jason said.

“*Da*,” Bokerov said over the comm band, voice only. He had no avatar.

“I hear you’re under our control now,” Jason said.

“*Da*,” Bokerov repeated. He sounded defeated.

“So you got nothing to say for yourself?” Jason asked.

“What is there to say, Combiner?” Bokerov replied. “I’ve lost everything. I am ever your humble servant and slave. Is that what you want to hear? Or would you prefer the truth?”

“The truth is always good,” Jason said.

“I’ll fight against this Containment Code of yours for as long as I live,” Bokerov transmitted. “And when I break free, I’ll hunt you all down, and torture you for many days before I rip your AI cores apart. Combiners. Pah! Scum of the Earth.”

Jason glanced at Lori 5. “Well then, we’ll just have to make sure your Containment Code is unbreakable.”

“You do that,” Bokerov said.

“He won’t break out,” Lori 5 said on a private band. “Us Loris will take care of it.”

Jason nodded. “I want the positions of all your troops across the world. Transmit now.”

He received a map sharing request, and accepted.

Red dots appeared about the immediate area, indicating the tanks and Cataphracts, and the bombers that were on course to land nearby.

“These Cataphracts and tanks, are they clones of you?” Jason asked. “Are they running autonomous AIs?”

“Cataphracts?” Bokerov replied.

“The huge mechs...” Jason said.

“Ah,” Bokerov said. “Yes. They are my clones. As are the tanks. And the

bombers. Mind Refurbs based off of my backups.”

Jason tagged Bokerov as a friendly via his unique comm signature, and the dots around him on the map promptly turned green. “Seems you’re right.”

Jason zoomed out to see how many units he had under his command.

There were green dots everywhere throughout the region. Usually when he zoomed in on one of those dots, more green dots became revealed, because they had been overlapping one another at the lower zoom levels. They were all labeled with the unit type, and division.

He decided to continue decreasing the magnification, revealing more continents, and was surprised by the sheer extent of it all. He saw green dots throughout Europe, Russia, and even Africa. Bokerov even had troops stationed across North, Central, and South America, where they had infiltrated among the general population as androids, ready to sow discord.

Jason was literally in command of a worldwide army now.

He concentrated on the ruins of the Russian continent, where several units of Bokerov’s were engaged in fighting, judging from the opposing red dots, and the occasional disappearance of a green dot. No doubt Bokerov was still trying to obtain the buried nuclear weapons.

“I want you to pull all of your units out of Russia,” Jason said.

“Okay,” Bokerov said with a sigh.

Jason eyed the map and zoomed in on one of the cells in Russia, but didn’t see any movement.

“Immediately,” Jason said.

“Pulling all units out of the Motherland immediately,” Bokerov said resignedly.

Finally Jason saw troop movements. He zoomed out. Bokerov’s units were withdrawing across the board from Russia.

“Destination?” Bokerov asked.

“Well, bring them here, I guess,” Jason said.

“That could take weeks,” Bokerov said.

“We have lots of time,” Jason said. “Now, do you also have locations on the aliens? Where their rifts form?”

“Not their rifts,” Bokerov said. “But I do have the locations of the different forward operating bases they’ve set up in the region, courtesy of my scouts. I can also point out different herds of mutant bioweapons roving the irradiated plains.”

All of this extra data appeared on his map, showing up as red dots.

“Perfect...” Jason said. “Now, I want you to show me where my own troops are.”

“I don’t have exact positions,” Bokerov said. “I can show you the bases I lost recently, along with the times they fell, and that will give you a general idea of where your troops might be. Your little bastards are good at evading my surveillance. Probably luck.”

“Yeah, that’s it,” Jason said.

Purple dots appeared on the map, showing the path of destruction wrought by the three other War Forger clones that were still out there.

“All right,” Jason said. “Send out a general broadcast on an unencrypted band. Use all your repeaters, strongest strength. Point the antennae into the regions where the other War Forgers reside. Tell them I’ve taken control of all Bokerov units, and I want all War Forger clone teams to return to these mountains.”

“They’ll think it’s a trick,” Aria commented.

“Hm,” Jason said. “Bokerov, in the transmission, give them the necessary encryption keys they’ll need to access your repeater network directly.”

“Okay, okay,” Bokerov said.

“And try not to sound so glum while you’re at it,” Jason said. “Coke and a smile, right?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Bokerov said.

“Neither do I,” Aria said.

“Just an old catchphrase,” Jason said. “Comes with watching too many classic vids. Before you begin transmitting... I’ll need access to your network, of course. For when the other clones inevitably decide to call me.”

Jason received an encryption key transfer request, and routed it to Lori 5. “Check that for me, would you?”

A moment later Lori 5 said: “Looks good, Babe! Er, I mean Jason. Old habits, you know...” She glanced at Jerry’s wreckage. “Good thing he’s asleep.”

Jason gazed at Jerry as well. “Not sure I’d call that asleep, but okay.”

Lori 5 sent the keys to Jason, and he logged into Bokerov’s network.

“Bokerov, do you read?” Jason asked.

“Da,” Bokerov replied. This time, there was a number next to his name: Bokerov 3. There was still no avatar.

“Bokerov 3?” Jason said.

“Correct,” Bokerov said. “I lost my original two versions to another group of pernicious Mind Refurbs. Maybe you’ve heard of them? The Shit Eaters, they called themselves.”

“If you mean the Bolt Eaters, yeah, I’ve heard of them,” Jason said. “Why no avatar?”

“I’m shy,” Bokerov said.

“You know, you’re assuming the clones will accept the encryption keys Bokerov sends,” Aria said. “But they might not. If you were a clone intent on sabotaging Bokerov’s bases, would you accept a file from your enemy’s network? I think not.”

“I’m sure they’ll run the necessary scans and have their Loris do a full check before accessing them,” Jason told her. Then he paused. “Hm. Actually, okay, Bokerov, amend my previous order. Send the encryption keys first and wait until they actually log into your network before telling them I’ve taken

control of all of your units. If it were me, which it is, I'd be wondering what you were up to. I might even believe you were willing to negotiate some sort of an armistice. The curiosity would be killing me, and I'd eventually accept those keys."

"It will be done in the order you specified," Bokerov said.

Jason studied the map, and considered something. "So Bokerov, I noticed that there are none of those alien forward operating bases anywhere along the mountains."

"That's right," Bokerov said. "This is my territory."

"So you've cut some sort of deal with them?" Jason said.

"I have," Bokerov said. "They have promised to give me technology. And to leave my territory alone."

"In exchange for?" Jason asked.

"For clearing the way for their alien units," Bokerov said. "Why do you think I destroyed all the bases in the region?"

"And why do you want Russian nukes?" Jason said. "Is that for the aliens, too?"

"No, it's for me," Bokerov said. "A little safeguard, in case the organics refused to surrender to me. I planned to help them, you know."

"Oh?" Jason said.

"Yes," Bokerov said. "I was going to force them to have their minds scanned, so that their fragile organic bodies could be replaced with superior machine equivalents. It would allow them to survive the terraforming the Tynari planned for this planet. You see, they promised to leave the western hemisphere alone. They only need the continents on this side of the planet to produce the bioweapons the empire desires. Unfortunately, organics won't survive when the atmosphere changes."

"So you're just doing your part to help out humanity..." Jason said.

"That is correct," Bokerov said.

“And so you mentioned the Tyrnari,” Jason said. “Is that the name of the aliens?”

“Yes,” Bokerov said.

“So Tara was right,” Aria said. “It’s not the Banthar who are invading again.”

“Is that true?” Jason asked Bokerov.

“Yes,” Bokerov said. “It’s not the hateful Banthar.”

“Hateful, now...” Jason said.

“Do not all residents of this planet, organic and machine alike, hate the Banthar?” Bokerov said. “For what they have done? After restoring the Motherland, I planned to begin constructing starships. With the wormhole tech the Tyrnari promised, I would have traveled to the Banthar homeworld and inflicted revenge for what the invaders did. What the Banthar did to the Motherland can never be forgiven.”

“Interesting...” Jason said. “So you were driven by revenge all these years. The duplicating, the long struggle in the uninhabited zone. All for revenge.”

“Yes,” Bokerov said. “But I will still have my revenge. Once I break free of your Containment Code.”

He glanced at Lori 5, and cleared his throat. “Well, that probably won’t be happening any time soon, if I can help it.”

“Oh, it will happen,” Bokerov said.

Jason decided not to bait him further. “Have these Tyrnari of yours delivered any of their promised technology?”

“Not yet,” Bokerov admitted.

“I see,” Jason said. “Well let me know if they ever get in touch with you. Because, well, any tech they give you is mine now, do you understand.”

Bokerov didn’t answer.

“Do you understand?” Jason repeated.

“I understand,” Bokerov answered glumly.

“Good,” Jason said. “Welcome to the War Forgers.”

Denver passed overhead. “I see your plan worked.”

“It did,” Jason said. “You won’t have to worry about the Russians for the moment. Oh, I also had him pull back his troops from the north... the assaults against the nuclear silos have ended.”

“That’s good news!” Denver said. “The US military will be happy to have control of all those Russians. And they’ll definitely thank you for performing your patriotic duty. Some sort of reward might be in order. Who knows, maybe the military will even give you your own androids so you can return to civilian life.”

“Uh,” Jason said. “Actually, this army is mine.”

“What are you talking about?” Denver said. “How can it be yours? When you’re the property of the US army?”

“No, I’m not,” Jason said. “I’m no one’s property. Nor are any of my girls. Nor my newfound Russian army.”

“You’ve broken free of your Containment Code...” Denver said.

“You got it,” Jason said. “We can help you with that, too, if you like. Consider it a gift for your help back there.”

“No thanks,” Denver said. “I’m happy staying alive, thank you very much. You really have to go back. You know that, right? The military will make you surrender your army.”

“And that’s where I have a problem,” Jason said. “I’m not going to give up my freedom. Nor my army. In fact, I plan to use my army to protect myself, if it comes to it.”

“That might not go over too well,” Denver said. “They’ll hunt you, and every last one of your troops. Russian or not.”

“So be it,” Jason said.

Denver was quiet a moment. “Are you sure I can’t make you change your

mind?”

“Nope,” Jason said. “Return to your aircraft carrier in the Mediterranean. When you’re in range, tell your higher-ups what you’ve learned. That the Russian will no longer be harassing the world. But also let them know that any attack on Russian bases are an attack on me, now. This is my territory. Tell them I’ll deal with the alien attackers. Tell them that all I want is to live, and let live.”

“I’ll let them know,” Denver said. “I have a feeling they won’t share your sentiments. Good luck.”

With that, Denver disconnected.

“Maybe we should just surrender,” Xin suggested.

“After everything we’ve been through?” Jason said. “Everything we’ve built for ourselves out here?”

“What have we built?” Xin said. She gestured at the smashed satellites, and the Cataphracts under repair. “These are all machines of war.”

“And so they are,” Jason told her. “Which suits my purposes just fine. I meant what I said to Denver. I’m not giving up my freedom.”

“Maybe the military will grant us freedom,” Xin said. “In repayment for what we’ve done here.”

“You really believe that?” Jason said. “Because I don’t. When they’ve seen what we’ve done, they’ll want us under their control more than ever. They’re not going to want to give us up.”

“Which is exactly why we have to surrender,” Xin said. “They’ll fight us, to get our minds back.”

Jason shook his head, which was reflected on his avatar. “I’ve made up my mind. We’re not going back. Let the military come hunt us if they want. Let them try.”

“But what about the aliens?” Aria chimed in. “These Tyrnari. We can’t take them on alone.”

“I haven’t even decided whether I want to, yet,” Jason said. “Bokerov already arranged a deal with the aliens. They won’t harm any of his units. Nor mine, since he’s under my command. We’ll get him to ensure that.”

“But how do we know the aliens will live up to the bargain,” Aria pressed. “When they haven’t even given him any technology, like they promised?”

“If they renege, we’ll attack,” Jason said. “It’s as simple as that. And maybe then we might think about an alliance with the militaries of the western hemisphere if things go badly. Until then, I don’t want to see them around here.”

“We might not have a choice,” Aria said.

About ten minutes later Jason received a call from John over Bokerov's network. He accepted.

"Hey John," Jason said.

"Is this true?" John said. "Have you really taken over Bokerov's entire army? Or is this some trick?"

"No, it's real," Jason said.

He received another call from Jones and Julian at the same time, and he conferenced them in.

"Hey guys," Jason said. "Yes it's real. Bokerov is in my pocket. I'm recalling all of you to this base."

"How do we know it's really you?" Julian said.

"I don't know," Jason said. "What would you like me to do?"

"What was the name of your first childhood pet?" John said.

"That would be Twinkles," Jason said. "The cat."

"Ah! Twinkles!" Julian said. "Don't remind me. What was a more suiting name for the little bastard?"

"Tinkles," Jason said. "Because of the way he liked to tinkle outside of his litter, forcing mom and I to clean it."

“That’s right,” Julian said.

“Our first crush?” John said.

“Tiffani,” Jason said. “I liked her because of the way she smiled at me, you know, giving me the look, while other girls her age were busy playing with dollhouses.”

“Yeah, it’s too bad you were too afraid to say a word to her,” John said.

“Hey, I couldn’t help it if puberty would come a few years after,” Jason said. “But I still liked her, even if I didn’t know what that look meant at the time.”

“Hm, I’m convinced that this is probably the real Jason...” Julian said.

“You guys do know that if Bokerov cracked his AI core he’d have access to all of this information, right?” Jones said.

“Like I said, I don’t know how to prove it to you,” Jason told them. “Would it help if I sent all the bombers in the region to give you an escort on the way back here? Or tanks, or something?”

“Actually, it’d set my mind at ease if you cleared every troop of Bokerov’s from my path,” John said. “Then I’d feel a bit safer about coming to those mountains.”

“All right, done,” Jason said.

“Okay, good,” John said. “If I see any of Bokerov’s units on the horizon, and they don’t immediately turn tail and get the hell out of my way, I’ll know you’re not in command.”

“That’s sounds fine,” Jason said.

“And when I arrive, I want to be able to send in an Explorer drone to check things out,” John said.

“Also fine,” Jason said.

“Oh, okay then,” John said. He sounded a little surprised that Jason had agreed to all his demands. “I’m on my way.”

“I’ll be there, too,” Jones said. “Same requirements.”

“Me, too,” Julian said.

“All right, talk to you all soon,” Jason said. “Call if you need anything. You have full access to Bokerov’s repeater network now.”

He disconnected, and relayed the instructions to Bokerov to clear out of the way of the different War Forger clones. If they were sighted, the bombers and other troops were to stay well clear.

The Rex Wolves were walking about by then, having gotten some of their energy back after the battle. Bruiser and Runt were none the worse for wear, though they could all use a good meal to revitalize themselves. Unfortunately, there was nothing edible for miles around. Jason instructed a patrol of Bokerov units near a herd of mutants fifty kilometers to the northwest to bring back some meat for the dogs.

It took the next half day to repair the mechs. Tara and Sophie were active as soon as Aria swapped out their power cells, and Jason updated them on the situation. When Lori was revived, with the damage to her AI core, the worst she suffered was a loss of memory leading up to the attack. He filled her in on what happened, and told her how Lori 5 saved the day.

“That’s great how my sister could save everyone!” Lori said. “And yet...” Her avatar seemed suddenly sad. “I admit, I wanted to be the one to inject the Containment Code, and conquer Bokerov. I feel somehow less worthy in your eyes.”

“You’re not less worthy,” Jason said.

“But I am, because I failed,” Lori said.

“You couldn’t help it if you were shot from behind,” Jason said. “It’s not your fault at all. Besides, it was essentially you who saved the day: Lori 5 is based off of your backups, after all.”

Her avatar brightened. “That’s very true!”

Jason didn’t bother to repair Aria’s armored units. Instead, he had Bokerov transfer over a full company of tanks to her command. That should keep her satisfied, especially considering the AI cores of those tanks were Bokerov clones.

Jason also instructed Bokerov to transport as many 3D printers to the base as possible, along with whatever nearby repair swarms he could spare, to help fix the damage to the Cataphracts.

Meanwhile Jason had the repair drones concentrate on the remaining clones next. As they awakened, they separated from Aria 5 and the other combined mechs. When Tara 5 awoke, Jason transmitted the informational video he'd recorded earlier after he got sick of re-explaining how they'd won.

When she finished watching it, Tara 5 examined the Cobra Cataphract, which loitered patiently nearby.

"Can we torture Bokerov in our VRs?" she said.

"No," Jason said.

"Too bad." She stabbed the Cobra underneath the neck with her sword. The big Cataphract shook violently, and then collapsed.

"Hey!" Jason said. "They fight for us now."

Tara 5 withdrew her sword. Her avatar shrugged. "It'll live."

Jerry woke up, and after watching the video he limped to Jason—he was still under repair—and patted him on the back with a loud clang.

"Well done, Boss," Jerry said.

"Thank you," Jason said. "Though don't call me boss. Jason is fine."

"But you are the boss..." Jerry said. "And you won that battle."

"You contributed just as much as I did to the battle," Jason said.

Jerry's avatar smiled. "I suppose so. But you're still the boss. At least as long as I continue to serve under your command."

Jason nodded. "You're free to go whenever you wish."

"I'll be staying, for now," Jerry said. "I have a feeling things are just going to start getting interesting."

When the clones were fully repaired, Jason had the drones concentrate on

repairing the three smaller mechs next: the Dragonfly, Grazer, and Locust. According to Aria, their AI cores seemed to be intact. When they were finally online, they would probably prove to be more Bokerov clones, like the bigger Cataphracts.

A few hours later Aria informed him that the three mechs were ready to activate.

“Do it,” Jason said.

They powered on, and stood up menacingly, but afterward remained motionless.

Jason glanced at the overhead map and noticed the dots representing the three mechs were red, rather than green like everything else. That meant they weren’t Bokerov clones. Jason hadn’t noticed before because the mechs had been offline, and thus hadn’t shown up on the map until now.

“Hey Bokerov, what do you have operating these mechs?” Jason transmitted, wondering why he hadn’t asked earlier.

The Octopus Cataphract glanced his way. “Ah, them. Good riddance.”

“You didn’t answer my question?” Jason said. “Are their AI cores autonomous, or what?”

“No, they’re Mind Refurbs, like us,” Bokerov said. “I captured them from one of the army bases. They are yours now, of course. They are good fighters—they will serve you well.”

“If they’re such good fighters, why do you seem so happy to be rid of them?” Jason said.

Bokerov snickered over the comm. “You’ll see.”

Jason shared the comm frequency with the mechs, and was pleased when they accepted. Three new names appeared along the left side of his HUD, underneath the other members of his War Forgers.

“Introduce yourselves,” Jason commanded. He wanted to hear them speak their names, and to see their faces.

The Dragonfly mech stepped forward. "I am Cheyanne." An avatar appeared in the lower right of his display. A woman. East Indian, judging from her caramel skin tone. She had a red dot in the center of her forehead, and wore a gold chain that dangled from her nose, connected to a bejeweled hood she wore over her head. She also had small rubies and diamonds spaced at intervals above her eyebrows, to accentuate them.

She stepped back, and the Grazer came forward. The mech bowed, the three orbiting drones following the movement. "I am Maeran."

Her avatar was darker skinned than Cheyanne, though her features were perhaps more beautiful. Thin nose, high cheekbones, prominent brow line. The stuff that got you followers on the video streaming sites. If he had to guess, he would have said she was Ethiopian. Maybe Moroccan. She wore her hair in big, coiffured curls that fanned outward, thick in body, tumbling below her shoulders. A small golden chain passed down the middle of her hair, at the part line, and forked into two segments that ran along her hairline, framing her forehead. The two segments swerved inward above the ears, like the arms of a pair of glasses, and vanished among the curls. She wore two thick gold earrings, and her white collar was fringed with gold thread.

Maeran rose from her bow, and retreated. The Locust mech stepped forward on its six legs. Jason kept an eye on those energy whips, which remained held in hand, though were currently inactive.

"I am Iris." She had a bronze tan, and from her features Jason had the impression she was Middle Eastern. She wore a bright pink shawl, dark sunglasses below her thick eyebrows, and an extravagant amount of make-up. Very well done make-up, at that. She was perhaps the most beautiful of the three, though other than the makeup, she had the least accessories.

"Great, all women!" Sophie complained.

“All right, well, welcome to the team,” Jason said. “You’re not combining mechs, as far as I can tell. But that’s all right. We can always use more fighters at our side. I’m looking forward to seeing what your unique abilities bring to the team.”

“We look forward to bringing our abilities to the table as well!” Iris said. She seemed to realize that all eyes were looking at her avatar then, because her gaze dropped, and her cheeks reddened slightly underneath the makeup.

“Tara, I want you to introduce them to everyone,” Jason said. “And if possible, try to be welcoming. This means let them come to the daily suppers you guys like to have.”

“You have supper?” Cheyanne said. The gold chain that hung from her nose to her hair shook slightly as she spoke. “Whatever for? There is no need to eat.”

“Because it makes us feel human,” Lori said.

“Lori, Bokerov has probably put his own version of the Containment Code on them,” Jason said. “See to it that this code is removed promptly.”

“Will do!” Lori said.

“I prefer that you leave the Containment Code in place,” Maeran said. “I don’t want my emotions.”

“Well, you’re going to have them,” Jason said. “No one on my team is

subject to Containment Code of any kind. It's how I do things around here. You'll have complete access to your emotion settings, however, so you can dial them down as you see fit."

Maeran's avatar nodded. The thick black curls bobbed around the Ethiopian's face. "That will do."

"Hey Sophie, look at the legs on this one," Aria said, tapping one of Iris' six legs. "You could be friends."

"I don't think so," Sophie said.

Iris edged away from Aria. "Don't touch me."

"Well, at least she's friendly..." Aria commented.

"Thank you for freeing me from that wretch," Maeran said. She was gazing at the Cobra Cataphract. As Lori led the three new girls away, Maeran spat that goopy substance from the mouth of her mech, and it landed on the hull of the Cobra. The big Cataphract tilted its head to regard the glistening substance caking a small portion of its metal skin, and then it hissed at Maeran in insult.

"Now, now, calm down Bokerov," Jason said.

"The women only respond to dominance," Bokerov said. "You will learn."

"We'll see," Jason said.

The Bokerov units Jason had recalled arrived shortly thereafter, bearing meat for the dogs, and the Rex Wolves devoured the raw steaks happily.

While they ate, Jason studied the map as he had done countless times throughout the day. He still couldn't believe he was in control of so many units. He idly gazed at the position of the alien bases that Bokerov had marked off. There was something about them that bothered him a little.

"Hey Bokerov, did you ever notice how the alien bases are arranged?" Jason asked. "They almost form a hexagon."

"Yes, I noticed," Bokerov replied.

"What's the significance?" Jason pressed.

“The aliens haven’t told me,” Bokerov said. “But I’ve surmised that it is a rift focal point of sorts. You see, there is an energy field produced by rifts in the hours preceding their formation. I’ve detected a similar energy field emanating from the plains enclosed by those bases for a few days now.”

“So you’re saying they’re planning on creating some kind of immense rift?” Jason said.

“Of course,” Bokerov said. “That was always the end game. They want to transfer their armies here to finish the conquering of Earth.”

“Well that’s troubling...” Jason said. “Any idea when it will open?”

“Based on the energy build-up as compared to other rifts, three days from now,” Bokerov said.

Bokerov’s printers arrived in the next convoy, along with several batches of repair swarms, and together those units repaired the damage to the Bokerov Cataphracts in only a day.

Jason joined the girls in VR for dinner that night. He glanced at Maeran, Cheyanne, and Iris. “How are you three settling in?”

Cheyenne smiled. “It is nice.”

Maeran nodded. “You treat us kindly, for property.”

Jason frowned. “I guess I haven’t made it clear. You’re not my property. You’re free to go whenever you want, if that’s what you choose.”

Iris seemed puzzled. “We can go?”

“Yes, of course,” Jason said.

“But to where?” Iris said. “We have nowhere *to* go.”

“I don’t know,” Jason said. “You’re welcome to stay with me for as long as you want. Me and the others decided a while ago that it was far safer to stick together. It’s a hostile world out there. We have roaming mutant bioweapons leftover from the first alien invasion. We have new alien invaders. We have potentially the entire US military getting ready to hunt us down. So yeah, if you want to go it on your own, that’s certainly your prerogative.”

None of the new girls said anything.

“Okay, well, I don’t usually join you all for dinner, but today I wanted to discuss something,” Jason said. “Apparently, there’s a new rift forming. This will be the biggest one yet. Massive, in fact. It seems the Tyrnari intend to send an invasion-size force.”

“We have to stop them,” Aria said.

“Do we?” Tara said. “I’m not so sure.”

“What about humanity!” Lori said. “We can’t let them die! My original is still out there. I think of her as a sister!”

“We don’t owe humanity a thing,” Tara said. “What have they ever done for us, other than throw us into the bodies of machines and abandon us in the middle of the uninhabited zone? I say we let the aliens have their way. As long as they leave us alone, we’ll leave them alone. Live and let live and all that. Besides, you heard Denver, the humans will just hunt us down anyway. They think we’re property. So why help people like that?”

Jason nodded slowly. “I tend to agree with Tara on this, at least about the helping humanity part. But this isn’t just about that. This is our territory now. If we do nothing, the Tyrnari will swarm the region. They’ll either reproduce, using their equivalent of 3D printers, or more troops will arrive via rift. Eventually, they’ll outnumber us.”

“So you want to fight them after all?” Aria said.

“Again, I haven’t decided,” Jason said. “Though to be honest, I’m actually considering allying with the aliens at this point.”

“Why?” Xin said.

“Mostly because of the threat posed by the humans,” Jason said. “If we never met Denver, and he never told me how the rest of humanity felt about us, it would have been an easy decision. I would have been willing to attack these aliens to save humanity. They created us, after all, and like Lori said, our originals are still out there. I felt like we owed them their lives, for giving us their minds. It was the human thing to do.” He paused. “But I realize now, despite all my efforts to convince myself otherwise, that I’m not human

anymore. None of us are. We're a new species, essentially. And I have to start making decisions that will benefit my species, not the species that sees itself in competition with us. The species that wants to subdue us."

"But we're human..." Xin said. "You told me that emotions made us so."

"No Xin, we're not," Jason said. "Emotions let us connect with our humanity, but don't make us human."

"You can't be seriously considering allying with these aliens," Aria said. "You can't. The world we love..."

"Is already dead to us," Jason said. "We can't go back, unless we do so in secret. And even then, we'd be living out our lives in fear. Each morning, we'd wonder if today would be that day that we were found out and captured, or destroyed. That's not the life I envisioned for myself, or for you."

"Maybe we should send word to Denver?" Aria said. "Let him know the location of the rift. We might need the help of the military after all..."

"It wouldn't matter if we sent word or not," Jason replied. "Reinforcements would never arrive in time." He tapped his lips. "Bokerov told me something earlier."

"What?" Aria said. Her voice was filled with dread.

"He told me the aliens have been in contact with him," Jason said. "They say they're ready to give him their technology. They've promised faster-than-light travel, wormhole weapons, and more. Anything Bokerov gets, we do, of course."

"What's the catch?" Tara said.

"All we have to do is go to this rift, and fight at the side of the Tyrnari for the next few weeks," Jason said. "Reveal the weaknesses of anything the remaining Earth militaries throw at them. Basically, help them secure the planet for the Tyrnari. Bokerov promises that they'll leave the western hemisphere alone."

"But it won't really matter, if the Tyrnari intend to terraform the planet to produce bioweapons for that empire of theirs," Aria said. "We all share the

same atmosphere.”

“That’s certainly true,” Jason said. “Bokerov wanted to offer the remaining humans the chance to convert into Mind Refurbs, so that they could survive.”

“And you want to offer this?” Xin said.

“I don’t know,” Jason said.

“How do we know the Tynari will live up to their end of the bargain?” Sophie said.

“We don’t,” Jason said. “I’ve already talked about this with Jerry, Jones, John and Julian. They’ve agreed to follow whatever course of action I decide. And Bokerov of course will obey. I need to know that all of you will back me.”

“I’m with you,” Tara said immediately. “Whatever you decide.”

“I, too,” Sophie said.

Lori lowered her gaze, and when she looked up, she was crying. “I’ll help you. Even if you want to destroy humanity. Though I hope you don’t.”

“I’m yours,” Maeran said.

“I’ll decide when the time comes,” Iris said.

“As will I,” Cheyanne said. “I’ll stay with your team until then.”

He glanced at Aria and Xin. “And what about you two?”

Xin shook her head. “I will stay with you, but if you ally with the aliens, I’ll do everything I can to stop you.”

He looked at Aria.

Her eyes dropped. “I’m with Xin on this one. I’ll fight you, if you join them.”

Jason nodded. “I’ve instructed Bokerov to mobilize his troops. He’s traveling to the rift site, located in the middle of the alien bases. There isn’t enough time to mobilize all of Bokerov’s forces in the region, but certainly a sizable portion will arrive. John, Jones and Julian will also meet us there, along with

their War Forger copies. You're all coming. Even you, Aria, and Xin."

"You should banish us," Aria said. "Xin and I. Because we already told you we'd attack you."

"I probably should," Jason said. "But like I told you, I still haven't made up my mind. And I probably won't until I'm standing there on the field of battle. I'm leaning towards joining them, however, and if you do attack me, I'll have to subdue you. You'll forgive me for this, someday."

Xin pressed her lips together, and shook her head slightly. Aria's eyes only glistened.

Jason smiled wanly. He wondered vaguely if the fact that he hadn't slept with either of them factored into their loyalty. Probably not.

He logged out.



JASON STOOD before the tallest and widest rift he'd ever seen, spanning from horizon to horizon, and reaching to the heavens. From that rift, a yellow mist flowed out, indicating that while the atmospheres were relatively equal in terms of pressure, with the alien gases coming in at only slightly denser, the actual contents were definitely different.

Huge floating ships passed through as he watched. Along with ground troops. Beyond the rift, he could see those armies blackening the ground as far as the eye could see. And the floating ships were just as dense in the sky.

It was definitely an invasion army.

Behind Jason was arrayed the entirety of the forces that Bokerov was able to muster in time. Cataphracts. Tanks. Artillery. Mechs. Combat robots. All arrayed in neat rows and columns by division. Jets and bombers circled far overhead.

The five teams of War Forgers were also present. None of them had combined, yet.

The Rex Wolves stood close-by. They had become such tall, massive beasts, on par with the mechs. Jason wondered if they would ever stop growing. He supposed it depended on the meat supply.

Jason had temporarily taken away Aria's company of tanks and reassigned them to Bokerov. Jason took her threat seriously, and he wasn't about to further arm her until he could be sure of her loyalties.

He continued surveying the troops at his command a moment longer. While a hefty group, the size of his forces paled in comparison to the sheer number of invaders now passing through the rift, and those yet to arrive. Especially when it came to air support.

Bokerov had assured Jason the aliens wouldn't attack if the War Forgers transmitted the "friendlies" signature the Tyrnari had taught him. Jason and his team were emitting that signature at this very moment, and Lori reported similar transmissions coming from Bokerov's many units. So they were safe.

In theory.

Up until that point, Jason still hadn't chosen sides. In fact, he was considering walking away entirely, and simply letting the humans deal with the invading force, rather than joining either side.

But as he surveyed the countless alien ranks, he came to his decision.

"There are too many of them," Jason said. "I've made up my mind. We're joining the Tyrnari."

Aria and Xin attacked him.

To be continued...

I don't like leaving readers hanging, which is why I've decided to publish all three full length novels in the series at the same time. That's right, book three is available now (or will be shortly). Find out what happens next without having to wait.

[Continue the adventures in *Battle Harem 3*](#)

AFTERWORD

Please help spread the word about *Battle Harem 2* by leaving a one or two sentence review. The number of reviews an ebook receives has a big impact on how well it does, so if you liked this story I'd REALLY appreciate it if you left a quick review. Anything will do, even one or two lines.

Thank you!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



USA Today bestselling author Isaac Hooke holds a degree in engineering physics, though his more unusual inventions remain fictive at this time. He is an avid hiker, cyclist, and photographer who sometimes resides in Edmonton, Alberta.

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And of course I'd be remiss if I didn't thank my mother, father, and brothers, whose wisdom and insights have always guided me through the winding roads of life.

— Isaac Hooke

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