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ALIEN WAR TRILOGY 3



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TITAN

ALIEN WAR TRILOGY
BOOK THREE

Isaac Hooke



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Rade stared at the bright veil of white in front of him. Walls of snow violently gusted inside the torn cabin, only to be swept right out again by the careening of the deck. An alarm sounded incessantly inside his jumpsuit.

The bulkhead had been ripped clean away by the ground-based attack, along with the entire starboard half of the drop ship and those members of the platoon who had been secured there. The remaining section containing Rade was spiraling out of control toward the surface. He could feel the horizontal and vertical G forces vying for domination over his body and threatening to knock him unconscious. It felt like someone had strapped him to the bottom of a spinning top.

He attempted to speak. The muscles of his face refused to respond, his lips locked in a rictus. The Gs were too powerful. He tried to turn his head to survey the remaining compartment, but couldn't. He saw only the blizzard raging outside and the gray-black deck just underneath him. There was supposed to be some blue in that deck, a part of his mind told him, but everything had gone black and white. Loss of color vision was a sure sign of imminent unconsciousness. The alarm in his helmet grew distant.

Unsurprisingly, he blacked out.

Or at least, he thought he did. Because when he opened his eyes a moment later, he was still strapped into the damaged drop ship. Gs continued to assail his body, but the forces seemed gentler, somehow. With effort, he could finally pivot his head, and he glanced at the mechs clamped into the alcoves on either side of him.

The alarm sounded persistently in his helmet. On the HUD, a flashing message accompanied it.

AI pilot disconnected. AI pilot disconnected.

That referred to the drop ship pilot, no doubt.

"Jerry, turn off that goddamn alarm," Rade said with difficulty, the muscles of his face struggling against the Gs.

The Titan's AI didn't respond.

"Jerrycan, I said turn off the alarm," he repeated.

"Affirmative, LPO."

The AI of his Titan had been named Jerrycan, no doubt by some wise-ass technician. Rade hadn't had time to change it. He doubted he was going to bother, especially since it responded to J or Jerry. Usually. Besides, the name was somewhat suiting.

He glanced at his overhead map, which showed the outline of what remained of the drop ship, along with the blue dots indicating those platoon members still clamped to it. Bender, Grappler, Manic, Lui, Tahoe, Fret, and Keelhaul were with him, in Titans.

The rest of the team—those members who had resided in the lost starboard portion of the craft—didn't show up on the map. Nor did any of the other drop craft.

"Chief, do you read?" He tried. "Facehopper?"

Nothing.

"J, I assume you've stabilized the drop ship?" Rade asked.

"As much as possible," Jerry returned.

"How much control do you have?"

"I have full control," the AI responded. "But unfortunately, the remaining main engine is not responding. Some of the dorsal, ventral, and port thrusters remain active, but I can't land with those. The craft will hit fairly hard, I'm afraid. There is an eighty percent chance the Titans will be lost with the drop craft upon impact. I recommend evac ASAP."

Sleet swept inside, riddling the hull of his Titan. The vibrations transmitted to his helmet sounded like hail.

"How much time do we have?"

"Uncertain," Jerry said. "Telemetry data unavailable."

Rade attempted to curl his biceps and the Titan mimicked his motion. However the clamps securing him to the alcove where he was stowed prevented him from lifting his forearms beyond a few millimeters. His legs were similarly locked down.

"Open up the clamps," Rade said.

"The clamps are not responding," Jerry replied.

"Can anyone else get free?" Rade said over the comm.

None of the platoon members answered him. He glanced at their status indicators, as arrayed on the lefthand side of his HUD. Their vitals were all green. Were the comms down?

He repeatedly flexed his arms and legs, trying to break through the

clamps. He boosted the strength on his exoskeleton to the max, hoping that the pressure against the cockpit inner actuators would be translated to the Titan's arms and legs.

A new warning appeared on his HUD, courtesy of his local jumpsuit.

Exoskeleton servomotors experiencing extreme stress.

That message only appeared when the jumpsuit servomotors were about to burn out.

He backed off immediately.

"Bender," he said over the comm. "My clamps aren't responding. Can you open them up?"

No response.

"Bender. Anyone?"

While their vitals might be green, he realized that no one else was actually conscious.

Didn't think the Gs were that bad.

"Why hasn't anyone else awakened?" Rade said. A blast of snow momentarily swept across the deck, and the craft rolled sideways before stabilizing.

"The G forces are causing repeated black outs," Jerry replied.

"I seem unaffected..."

"I injected a counteracting agent into your system."

"What about the other Titans?" Rade said. "Why haven't their AIs done the same?"

"You are LPO. It is my job to ensure you remain active at all times. Only you can authorize a similar injection for the others."

"Damn it," Rade said. "Who programmed you? New standing order, make the injection of counteracting agents automatic going forward."

"As you wish," Jerry responded.

A moment later Lui's voice came over the comm: "What the shit...?"

"We're going down," Rade said. "We have to get out of here. Is anyone able to open their clamps?"

Titans flexed their arms and legs against the restraining devices down the line. He saw the telltale glow of jumpjet activation as some of the mechs added thrust to the attempt. But for all that, no one was able to break free.

"Who's the genius who decided to build these clamps without a viable method of manually breaking them open?" Tahoe said.

“The Navy always builds in redundancies,” Bender said. “Unfortunately, those redundancies don’t seem to be working today.”

“That happens when your craft is torn in half,” Lui said.

“What is it with us and getting ripped in half?” Fret said. “Are we cursed or something? First the *Intrepid*, and now this.”

“The *Intrepid* was a starship,” Manic said. “Filled with evac stations. This is kind of worse, I think. It’s too bad none of us can lift our arms. We’d make short work of these clamps with our lasers.”

The drop ship rolled to starboard suddenly and Rade was jerked hard along with it. The craft didn’t re-stabilize.

“Craft propellant has been exhausted,” Jerry said. “I’ve done all I can. We’re on our own now.”

“Bender,” Rade said. “Are you sure you can’t override these clamps somehow?”

“If they’ve lost power,” Manic said. “They *can*’t be overridden.”

“The power to the clamps should have rerouted to the backup battery,” Tahoe said.

“Oh they rerouted to the backups all right,” Bender said. “But they still ain’t working. I’ll try to issue a manual reboot.”

“I’m surprised the AIs didn’t do that already,” Grappler said.

“I have in fact rebooted the system twice,” Jerry said locally.

“My AI says it tried to reboot twice already,” Rade repeated over the main comm.

“We’ll I’m going to try again,” Bender said.

The craft rolled once more, careening to port. Rade felt the Gs increase.

Abruptly his clamps opened up. He was still glued to the alcove however, due to the centrifugal force.

“Wooyah, I got the magic touch,” Bender said.

“Evac people,” Rade said. “We could impact any second.”

He activated his jumpjets and shoved off from the alcove. The drop ship slid away, and he canceled all thrust. The sensation of weightlessness took hold as he entered free fall. Surrounded by that blizzard, it felt like he floated in a formless, white void, his previous existence abandoned for some other dimension.

The only thing anchoring him to reality was the overhead map, which

showed the platoon members in relation to himself. That, and the occasional thrumming of snow pellets rippling into his hull.

He switched to the thermal and infrared bands. He still saw nothing.

“Jerry, ground location?” he asked the AI. For a moment he worried he might be falling into a gas giant, or something similar.

Without warning the surface appeared through the whiteout of the storm.

Before Rade could give the order, Jerry engaged the air brakes and fired the aerospike thrusters in the feet.

He still hit hard. His legs caved so that his knees rammed into his chest area, and he felt his lower back tweak. The snow directly underneath cratered, producing a half sphere three meters in diameter around him; a similar dome formed in the blowing snow above because of the shockwave produced by his impact, but it was quickly swallowed by the blizzard.

He stood up. His lower back throbbed for a few moments, but the pain quickly subsided. According to his vitals, he hadn’t suffered any lasting harm. He checked the Titan’s diagnostics. The mech seemed undamaged as well.

Rade took a few tentative steps beyond the white crater formed by his impact, and the deep snow swallowed his mech to the knees, leaving footprints as deep as a man was tall behind him.

He glanced at his map. The seven others had landed nearby within a radius of one kilometer. The signals from some of the more distant Titans winked in and out. Interference from the blizzard? Or something else?

“Muster with me, people,” Rade sent.

“Say again?” Bender replied. He was one of the more distant.

“I said, *muster with me.*”

As the mechs grew near, he watched them slowly appear around him on the thermal band. The blowing snow was so thick that even visibility on that spectrum was reduced to about fifty meters. It was better than nothing at all, he supposed, as was the case with the visual band. The local-beam LIDAR was useless under those conditions as well.

“I thought this snow was supposed to be methane?” Grappler said. “According to the preliminary planetary scans.”

“It is methane,” Lui responded.

“Then why is it white?”

“Dunno,” Lui said. “Could have something to do with the way the radiation clouds scatter the light. Or the nature of the system’s sun. Or the molecules bound with the Methane to form the snow.”

“The question really is, how much of this is snow, and how much of it is fallout?” Tahoe said.

“Speaking of fallout, how are we doing on the radiation levels, Jerry?” Rade asked his AI.

“I’m detecting external readings of 0.5 mSv per minute,” Jerry returned.

For comparison, on a typical starship shielded from the gamma rays of deep space, the exposure levels were 0.5 mSv per week.

“How’s the rad shielding holding up?”

“Well,” Jerry said. “Only 0.05 mSv per minute are penetrating. Well within the tolerance levels of the subdermal anti-rads you all harbor.”

“Any sign of the HS3s that were supposed to deploy with our platoon?” Rade said.

“Negative,” the AI replied. “The HS3s were stored in the aft compartment of the drop ship. As you know, that section was ripped away when we lost the starboard side.”

“Too bad,” Rade said. “Scouts would’ve been nice right about now.” Though admittedly even HS3s would have been relatively useless under the current conditions.

A platoon of Centurions had also been pegged to accompany them, but the combat robots had come down in a troop carrier. If the Centurions survived, they would be waiting at the staging area of the original drop point.

“Fret,” Rade sent over the main comm. “Are you able to reach any of the ships in orbit? Or anyone else nearby?”

“That’s a Negative with a capital N,” Fret said. “I don’t know if it’s this blizzard, or some form of jamming, but I’m not getting squat on the comm node.”

“Gotta be some other interference,” Tahoe said. “Remember, this enemy has intimate knowledge of our technology. If anyone could set up a planet-wide jamming system, it’s them. The radiation levels aren’t helping either.”

“I’m inclined to agree with you,” Rade said. “The air support squads that dropped with us had several repeater drones with them, not to mention

comm nodes. They have to be up there somewhere, even though we can't see them."

"Uh," Lui said. "Unless they were shot down, like us."

"How the hell did the enemy see well enough to shoot us down in this shitstorm anyway?" Fret said. "When we can barely discern a thing on the thermal band?"

"Maybe it was a lucky shot," Grappler said.

"A drop ship has a slightly bigger profile than a mech, bro," Lui said. "And there are other means of targeting than infrared, you know. Just because our mechs don't use gamma rays to acquire targets doesn't mean our enemy does not."

"There's a reason we don't use gamma rays..." Bender said. "Because they pass right through the goddamn targets!"

"Not all of them," Lui said.

"You'd need a damn sensitive instrument to track the reflections," Bender said.

"No you wouldn't," Lui said.

"Maybe they use gravity waves," Manic chimed in.

"Then you'd need an even more sensitive instrument," Bender said.

"Hey, these are *aliens*, remember," Lui said.

"Aliens with a predilection for using human tech," Manic reminded him.

"I'd guess they have other tech in reserve, my friend," Lui said. "Just because we haven't seen it, doesn't mean it doesn't exist."

A sobering thought.

He hoped Lui was wrong. Because if the enemy *could* track them in white-out conditions like this, they were all very likely doomed.

Trudging through the deep snow, the nearer Titans began to arrive at Rade's position. Because these mechs had been retrofitted with the thermal smearing feature of the Zeus models, they looked like big blobs on the infrared band, only slightly warmer than the surroundings. All weaponry and other identifying markers were completely masked. As for the visual band, even without the current white-out conditions, Rade doubted he would have spotted them. The camouflage capability of the hull skins would have activated upon touch down: all-white mechs were insanely difficult to spot after a fresh snowfall.

Of course, even though he couldn't see them, he knew precisely what the Titans looked like, and the armaments they possessed. And this wasn't just a passing familiarity gleaned from a glance-over in the hangar bay. No, he was well-acquainted with the Titan IV-B class of mech, mostly thanks to the long hours spent in the simulator during the journey to the planet. Not a day went by where he and the others hadn't piloted the mechs in their war games for at least an hour. They would split into competing teams of Titans and vie against one another.

At first they had set the simulator to select random environments for their war scenarios, but after entering the alien home system, and obtaining actual telemetry on the planet, they had switched exclusively to an environment matching the surface of the alien homeworld. The simulator had even accounted for the extra bulk required in the torso region for the radiation armor—he had had the involved technicians tweak the thickness and center of gravity of the virtual mechs until every platoon member piloted an exact replica of his particular Titan—so that by the time each of them had stepped into their real-life war machines, they already had the necessary muscle memory. The only difference between the simulator and reality was the methane snow, which had been colored yellow in the simulations, not white.

As for the armaments on the Titan class, they proved a hybrid between the Zeus and Hoplite. Swivel mounts available on each arm allowed the pilot to cycle between two kinds of weapons, unique to each arm. The right hand could switch between a “zodiac” lightning thrower and a grenade

launcher, while the left had the choice of a “cobra” laser or an incendiary thrower. The latter had its own fuel supply so that it didn’t draw from the jumpjet supply; it also utilized an oxidant to ensure the weapon could fire even in void conditions, however the oxygen content of the alien atmosphere was sufficient for any produced flames to continue burning, though probably not for very long in the current weather.

Each swivel mount also had the prerequisite empty position to allow the pilots to manipulate objects with the fingers of their mechs when the weapons weren’t needed. This enforced some limitations. It meant a Titan couldn’t climb while armed, for example: the weapons would have to be swiveled away to allow the fingers to attain handholds. Not a big deal, perhaps, but the extra time needed to arm a weapon could mean the difference between life and death during a battle. In the simulator Rade had “died” a few times in the climbing scenarios, simply because he couldn’t arm himself fast enough when an attack came.

Like the Zeus, a missile launcher was mounted on each shoulder, though these could each hold eight of the Hellfire H-7B minis, rather than five, giving every Titan a total complement of sixteen rockets. Those Hellfires also exposed a potential vulnerability: because the rockets were more powerful than the H-7 versions, if detonated prematurely, they also more easily damaged the mechs that wielded them. During the war games, it had become a favorite tactic of his to target the missile launchers of the opposing team, because striking just one H-7B in the tip with a laser would usually cause a cascade explosion involving the whole cluster. The resulting detonation was almost one hundred percent guaranteed to disable the involved mech, sometimes killing the simulated operator in the process.

As for the defensive capabilities, both arms had retractable ballistic / anti-laser shields available; each shield only covered roughly seventy five percent of the mech when deployed, but they could be stacked one atop the other if necessary to achieve full coverage. The familiar Trench Coat anti-missile countermeasure system was also available, and each mech carried enough charges packed into the launch cones rimming the torso for eight usages.

A new defensive countermeasure had been retrofitted into these particular models to offset the horde attacks witnessed in previous engagements. Called the Lighter, when activated any creatures or robots

touching the hull would be jolted with upwards of one million volts, depending on the number of enemies and whether other objects grounded the hull. Lying down would cause less voltage to be discharged versus standing up, for example, and ten enemies would receive less volts between them than three. The recharge interval was one minute, and the Lighter couldn't be activated during the interim period.

Because of the extra weight required by the armor and all those armaments, the jumpjet fuel burn rate was significantly higher than a Zeus or Hoplite. Also, the maximum running speed was roughly three-fourths that of a Zeus, at forty-five kilometers an hour, or roughly as fast as a pedal-bike traveling down a moderate hill. The shoulder missile mounts could be jettisoned to improve both statistics, as could the incendiary thrower and its fuel supply, however the other weapons were bolted into place and could only be swapped out in dry dock or the equivalent, though in a crunch they could probably be forcibly ripped away.

Lui was the first to reach Rade, followed by Fret.

"Not much of an extermination force, are we?" Lui said.

"We're the exterminators who were exterminated," Fret said.

"We haven't been exterminated." Bender arrived. "What the frick you talking about, bitch?"

"You're a bitch," Fret said.

"Bender is right," Rade said. "Our mission is still a go as far as I'm concerned."

"How can it be a go?" That was Manic. He was still a hundred meters out. "We've been shot down. We're cut off from communications with the fleet and the landing party. We have no way to signal the bombers if we come upon any substantial enemy force."

Rade sighed. "Well, for the time being, we're going to proceed to the original drop point. That much of the mission is still a go. The chief will expect us to meet him there."

"If he and the others survived," Manic said.

"They survived," Rade said.

"Whatever you say, boss," Manic replied.

"Uh, how exactly do you plan to navigate to the drop point in the first place?" Fret said. "We've got no positional satellites in orbit. Nor any drones or other air support overhead. At least none that can punch through the

interference down here. Our overhead map contains only the topography we ourselves have generated from our own cameras, limited as they are in this piss-storm.”

“Go ahead and explain it to him, Jerry,” Rade said.

Jerry spoke over the main comm: “I have calculated the position of the target site based on the acceleration vector employed by the drop ship before it lost all positional data feeds due to ballistic impact; as part of my computations, I have factored in acceleration due to gravity, the additional drag and air friction imparted by the damaged structure of the craft, and the effects of the wind based on the pitch, yaw and roll recorded by my internal gyroscope during the flight, using data from when the positional feed was still operational as a basis, and my internal accelerometer data thereafter. This data has allowed me to calculate the deviation of the drop craft from its original course after we were blown apart, all the way to when we ejected and landed. I have come up with our most probable landing site, and plotted a course to the original target.”

“Well ain’t you the smart one,” Bender said.

Rade put the calculated drop site up on his map and transmitted it to his platoon mates.

“Whoa,” Manic said. “That’s far.”

That was an understatement. The calculated site was roughly one hundred and sixty kilometers away to the northwest. The main nuclear impact zone was forty kilometers due north of the site, where one of the alien dome cities had purportedly been located. The nuke bombardment formed a wide trench about eighty kilometers long and four kilometers wide to the next city—the two cities were supposedly connected by underground tunnels, and the Brass, in their infinite wisdom, decided to detonate digger nukes all along the length of said tunnel. He doubted the senior command really knew whether the tunnel even existed at all, but if it did, there were likely many other tunnels branching away from the main that remained untouched. The long trench was visible on the map as a large black valley—the data had been uploaded to their mechs before the drop.

“No way that drop site is accurate,” Tahoe said. “There are too many factors involved.”

“It *is* accurate,” Rade said. “It will have to be. Because it’s all we have.”

“What’s the margin for error?” Lui asked.

“Go ahead, Jerry,” Rade said.

“Plus or minus ten kilometers.”

“Seems a little low, considering,” Lui said.

“Low?” Fret said. “That means the actual drop site is basically within a twenty kilometer diameter, or an area of over three hundred kilometers. Pi squared, people.”

“We’re going to have to split up and traverse the area in a search grid, obviously,” Lui said. “It won’t take that long to find signs of the staging area. Especially if we use kilometer-wide separations. We’ll probably spot air support forty klicks out anyway.”

“Assuming anyone else made it down alive,” Fret said. “And that visibility gets back to normal at some point.”

“All right, that’s enough negativity for the moment,” Rade said. “The other members of Alpha Platoon *are* going to meet us at the drop site. They have survived. I don’t want to hear anything more on the subject. And visibility will improve. Eventually.”

When everyone had closed to within thirty meters, Rade had them trudge northwest. To start with, Tahoe was on point, Grappler on drag, and Rade in the middle as dictated by the safety protocols that went with being LPO.

He used an ordinary single-file marching formation, since the overwatch variations weren’t of much use in those conditions. He did maintain a separation of ten meters between mechs, enough for him to see all the Titans ahead and behind on the thermal band. They marched in a straight line so that the following mechs could trudge more easily in the man-sized footprints created by the lead Titan. They took turns at the grueling point position.

They couldn’t hit the top speed of forty-five kilometers per hour in those conditions. No, they averaged ten klicks per hour at best. Anything over that and the point man was liable to trip—it was difficult to clear the top layers of the heavy snow, which would catch at the ankles at the faster speeds. That ruled out any sprinting. At ten kilometers per hour, the estimated time to the drop site was sixteen hours.

They were protected from the cold, of course—the inner environment of their jumpsuits maintained a comfortable temperature, abetted by the

cockpit heaters and the body heat produced by their own movements.

As Rade advanced through the white monotony, that formless limbo stretching from horizon to horizon, faces sometimes seemed to coalesce momentarily within the swirling snow. They weren't of anyone he knew, nor even human really, but ghostly approximates. Without fail their expressions seemed malevolent and accusing, as if blaming Rade for the crash of the drop ship.

Maybe it was my fault, somehow.

He sighed. Of course it wasn't. But as the commander, the man solely responsible for the well-being of his men, it was only natural to assume that somehow he had committed some grave error.

Don't worry, you haven't made a mistake yet.

You have the entire mission for that.

And he knew quite well that trusting the calculations of his AI could be the first.

Over time the snow grew deeper, so that it swallowed the Titans to the thighs instead of the knees, reducing their speed to eight kilometers an hour. An hour later, the storm began to abate very slightly, enough that Rade and his men could actually see twenty meters ahead or behind on the visual band.

“You know, I’ve been thinking...” Manic said at one point.

“Bad idea,” Bender said. “You and thinking don’t mix.”

“Funny. But listen. We were supposed to nuke the major population centers, and all the defenses that come with those centers, right? But we’ve seen how well that worked out. As in, it didn’t.”

“Anti-aircraft batteries are definitely a bitch when they don’t go down,” Lui agreed.

“Anyway,” Manic said. “I think Rage was right.”

“About what?” Rade said.

“During our mission briefing,” Manic replied. “He expressed some concern regarding the reliability of the information obtained from the interrogation of enemy captives, and the partially-converted ‘Half Hosts’ used to corroborate said information. You were right, boss. What we extracted from the enemy wasn’t worth a damn.”

“Either that,” Lui said. “Or the enemy had warning of our intentions, and moved their bases before we arrived.”

“That’s certainly a viable possibility,” Manic agreed. “Because think about it for a second. Those Half Hosts were supposed to be able to tap in to the communications between full hosts, right? But maybe it worked both ways, and the full hosts could read them right back. In fact, they almost certainly could, but the Half Hosts just didn’t know it. Makes perfect sense. I’ll bet our nukes missed the population centers entirely.”

“What none of you have considered yet,” Tahoe said. “Is that the enemy might have evacuated the planet entirely, leaving behind only a token defense force. If you had advance warning of an extinction-level attack, wouldn’t you?”

“You’re assuming they had enough ships to evacuate,” Lui said.

“You saw all those dodecahedrons in orbit,” Tahoe said. “I’d guess

each one could hold up to three or four thousand evacuees.”

“Fine,” Lui said. “But you’re also assuming that the population estimates gleaned by the so-called Half Hosts were even remotely correct.”

“Wait a second,” Keelhaul said. “Back up for a minute. The fleet launched telemetry drones shortly after we secured the Slipstream. And we scanned the planet from orbit again immediately before the nuclear attack. We confirmed where their bases were before a single nuke was launched.”

“Did we?” Manic said. “That’s what we all want to believe. But what if the scan results proved inconclusive, and the senior command thought, ‘hell with it, we’re launching the attack anyway.’ You know how warlike some of the generals and admirals can be. This far away from UC space, cut off from contact with the commander-in-chief until the return Gate can be built, it would have been an easy decision for them.

“And here’s something else for you to chew on. You know that telemetry information can be faked remotely, right? All it requires is the careful placement of thermal energy sources and LIDAR reflectors. Remember, these beings have captured and converted human beings. Hundreds of them: likely almost all one thousand of the civilians who were left stranded at Radiance, and at least several dozen Marines. Not to mention one of our own chief scientists. They know everything we know. And they know how to trick our sensors and telemetry drones. Of course they were prepared for our attack. It’s naive to think otherwise.”

“If what you’re saying is true,” Grappler said. “Then that means we could be stranded on a fully populated, fully defended alien homeworld, without backup or support of any kind.”

“Kind of brings new meaning to the phrase, ‘behind enemy lines,’ don’t it?” Bender said.

“Yeah, sure,” Grappler said. “What do you do when the *whole friggin planet* is your enemy?”

“All right,” Rade said, not wanting the morale to drop off a precipice. “That’s enough speculation for the time being. Because the truth is, we don’t know exactly how strong the enemy is. And we don’t need to know. All we need to focus on right now is getting to the drop point.”

“You still think our mission is a go, boss?” Bender said.

“I’ll decide when we get to the drop point,” Rade said. “Now quiet on the comms. Please.”

They continued the tedious march for the next thirty minutes. The blizzard subsided further, and visibility actually improved to about a kilometer. Not that they could see anything but plain white out there. If there were any hollows or protrusions in the landscape, the snow veiled it well.

Unfortunately, in another thirty minutes the wind picked up even more violently than before, with the blowing snow becoming so thick that even the thermals were obfuscated down to the level of twenty meters. Rade ordered the separation between mechs reduced to five meters. They walked against the gusting wind, the average speed of the bulky mechs reduced to five kilometers an hour.

“If the snow keeps up at this rate,” Grappler said. “We’ll be buried up to our torsos.”

“Actually, I think the snow stopped,” Fret said.

“What are you talking about?” Grappler said. “I can’t see a thing in this whiteout.”

“No, I’m serious,” Fret said. “As far as I can determine it, the wind is just blowing the top layers back into our faces.”

“Well that’s... just... wonderful.”

Fret seemed right, in that the blizzard was apparently formed of blowing snow, because the depth never changed. It continued to swallow them to the thighs and no higher. Well, that wasn’t entirely true: they did come upon deeper drifts piled in hollows and against outcrops that slowed them down considerably. They sometimes were forced to utilize their zodiacs to clear a path, expediting their advance through such terrain. The cobra lasers shot too narrow a beam to be of much use.

Some of the platoon mates tried incendiaries in such areas—you’d think with all that methane and oxygen floating about, it would be disastrous conditions for a fire. Not the case... whatever molecules were bound to the methane produced a tight bond, and because of the cold, very few of them were actually liberated. It was like trying to spray water-based snow with a flamethrower—sure the snow melted, and sure the jellied gasoline continued to burn in place for a few minutes, but the fires didn’t spread. In the end, it proved a waste of incendiary fuel, so the platoon members resorted to zodiacs instead.

Speaking of the zodiacs, the plasma channels formed by the electrolasers were diminished: instead of producing large, arcing lightning

bolts with multiple tines, the zodiacs discharged thin, sickly single-pronged bolts. Rade blamed it on the atmospheric content, and the temperature.

The mechs themselves held up well in the frigid weather. Which was expected: Titans were rated for the cold of deep space operation, after all. Sometimes a servomotor would seize, and a platoon member would have to heat it with a burst from his incendiary. Once, Grappler had to dismount, braving the blizzard in his jumpsuit to tighten a loose bolt in the armor jury-rigged to his torso. He was only exposed for about a minute, but the magnetic fields of his jumpsuit protected him from receiving too much radiation. Other than that, the platoon members suffered no lasting mechanical failures.

The gusting wind ebbed and flowed over the next few hours on the march. At first Rade had been afraid of alerting the enemy to their presence, so he had instructed Fret not to send out automated pings over the enhanced comm node the communicator carried in his mech. But as the hours dragged on, and it became obvious that nothing was out there, Rade had Fret set the comm node to dispatch pings at one minute intervals. It was a potential risk, but worth it if they could contact another drop party.

At the six hour mark, the winds became particularly bad, reducing the speed of the party to a little over three kilometers an hour in the deep snow. Visibility was nil on the visual band, and ranged between ten and fifteen meters on the thermal band. Rade had dialed down his external microphone volume to zero long before then: there was nothing to hear out there but the incessant roar of the gale-force wind.

“Can’t believe this,” Fret said. “These big, bad mechs, brought to their knees by a little snow and wind!”

“Believe it,” Tahoe said. “If there’s one thing these mech aren’t, it’s aerodynamic. We’d need a rocket engine constantly firing behind us if we wanted to make any good headway in this.”

“But when you drive a wheeled vehicle up a hill against the wind, you hardly notice, except that maybe you’re pressing a little harder on the gas pedal,” Grappler argued.

“Take that wheeled vehicle and turn it into a four-tonne truck, and add some snow and ice to that hill, and let me know how well it does,” Tahoe said.

“Put chains on the wheels,” Grappler said.

“Still going to slow it down,” Tahoe said.

“Personally, I think we’re doing just fine,” Manic said. “Three kilometers an hour is great headway.”

“Like hell it is,” Bender said. “I can walk faster than that. Shit, I can do seven or eight kilometers an hour on the treadmill, at incline.”

“I doubt it,” Manic said. “After half an hour walking that fast, you’re going to have sore calves for the rest of the day. Not to mention blisters.”

“Speak for yourself, bitch,” Bender said. “Some of us are more physically fit than you. And they’re called running shoes, bro. You might want to try them. They work wonders against blisters.”

“Don’t discount the effects of height,” Grappler said. “You put me on a treadmill, anything over five kilometers an hour is a struggle for my short legs.”

“That’s why you love your strength-enhanced jumpsuit so much,” Keelhaul said. “The great equalizer.”

“Love my mech more,” Grappler said.

“Bender, you say you can walk faster than three kilometers an hour on a treadmill?” Tahoe said. “In case you haven’t noticed, there’s no treadmill out here. I invite you to step out of your mech and show us what you can do. I’d like to see how far you make it in your jumpsuit out there. I really would.”

“Ha, no thanks,” Bender said. “If I had some hovershoes, or even old school snowshoes, I might take you up on your offer. Otherwise, trying to trudge through drifts higher than I am tall isn’t my thing.”

“You’d probably only sink up to your waist,” Lui said. “Then again, the jumpsuits do add a fair bit of weight.”

“No thanks,” Bender insisted.

“Then like Manic said, we’re making good progress,” Tahoe told him.

“Is anyone else getting tired?” Fret said.

“Put your mech on autopilot, fool,” Bender said.

Rade had done so a while ago, because when piloting it himself, the inner actuators of the cockpit mimicked the external drag of the snow on the mech, translating it to his body so that it felt like he was wading through the drifts directly.

“It is on autopilot,” Fret said. “It’s just the monotony of everything. The endless white. The constant vigilance. It’s draining.”

“I’m authorizing you all to take a half hour nap,” Rade said. “While

your mechs continue on autopilot. I'll take the watch."

Technically, it wasn't necessary to have someone remain on watch, since the AIs of each mech would be fully alert. But it was protocol for one human pilot to stay awake in such a scenario.

"You're our LPO, you need the rest," Tahoe said. "Go ahead and rack out. I'll take the watch."

"Fine," Rade said.

He set a timer and then closed his eyes. He was out promptly.

Rade awoke to the strident tone of an alarm. Blinking rapidly, for a moment he didn't know where he was. He was expecting to be greeted by the dark gray bulkheads and steel decks of a shipboard berthing area, not the harsh reds and blacks of thermal vision.

Then he remembered he was aboard a mech, stranded on a partially-nuked alien homeworld. Heart pounding loudly in his ears, he switched to the visual band. The bright white of the snowy plains filled his vision.

"Sit-rep," Rade said urgently over the comm.

"Nothing to report," Tahoe said. He sounded bored. "Other than the wind has died down."

Rade realized the alarm he had heard was the timer reaching zero. He had slept for the designated half hour. With a sigh he took several deep breaths, allowing his heart rate to calm.

He glanced at the overhead map overlaid upon the formless terrain. The eight mechs were still marching in single file. The vitals of the occupants were all green.

"Everyone awake?" Rade said.

A chorus of ayes and yeahs reached his ears as the platoon members reported in. The only one who didn't answer was Fret.

"Fret?"

"Yeah." He sounded groggy. "I'm here."

Like Tahoe had said, the wind had abated greatly in the intervening half hour, so that visibility had improved to five hundred meters. The mechs had been able to resume their ten kilometer per hour pace. Still plodding, perhaps, but it was better than three kph.

"Fret, anything on the comms yet?" Rade said.

"Nada."

"All right, well, go ahead and have your half-hour nap, Tahoe," Rade said.

Roughly an hour later, Manic broke the silence.

"Gotta love nuclear winter," Manic said. "We really wrecked this planet. Not that there was much to wreck in the first place, I suppose."

“You got that right,” Tahoe said. “The planet was already cold to start with.”

“Sure,” Manic said. “But now it’s colder. Like I said, the wonders of nukes.”

“I hear the Sino-Koreans are working on something that will eliminate nukes forever,” Keelhaul said.

“What are you talking about?” Lui said. “Nothing will eliminate nukes from the fleet’s arsenal.”

“Oh yeah?” Keelhaul said. “Well the SKs got something better than nukes up their sleeve. Get this: a geronium bomb.”

“A geronium bomb...” Lui said dubiously.

“Yup. Read about it on Smiki’s Leaks.”

“That site is bullshit,” Bender said.

“Not all of it,” Keelhaul said. “They exposed the Venusgate scandal, remember.”

“I can only imagine the yield you’d get from a geronium explosion,” Tahoe said. “Makes me shudder.”

“Oh I know,” Keelhaul said. “But get this, according to the blueprints leaked to the site, the SKs aren’t planning just any old geronium bomb here. It’s a multi-warhead, multi-phase weapon designed to rip the crust right off a planet.”

“Rip off the crust?” Grappler said. “I doubt it.”

“No, it’s very possible. See, the Delivery Vehicles separate in high orbit, and spread out above the surface so that their impacts are equidistant. They vary the number of DVs based on the planet size. Anyway, once a given DV is in position, it doesn’t wait for the others, it begins its journey to the surface right away—less chance of getting shot down by planetary defenses. Upon impact, a drill unit containing the main warhead is deployed, sort of like a digger nuke. It burrows deep into the crust, and once the calculated depth is attained, it halts, waiting for the other units.

“When all the devices are in place, a code is transmitted from warhead to warhead, planet-wide. A five second countdown begins, adjusted of course to account for the separation between the warheads and the time it took for the code to arrive. When the timer reaches zero, the embedded bombs all activate at the same time. The result is a massive cascading explosion that tears the crust right off the surface. Planet killers. Can you

imagine? If the UC had something like that, we wouldn't even be here. Hell, ground-based combat troops might not even exist at all."

"I can see a flaw in that design already," Tahoe said. "If you can take down even one delivery vehicle, I bet the cascade explosion would be ruined. You'll get some fairly bad earthquakes, but not much else."

"No, you're wrong," Keelhaul said. "You haven't seen the schematics of these things. The warheads that make it through to the detonation phase will still interact enough to partially tear away the crust. And that right there will kill a planet. The disruptions to the magnetosphere, atmosphere, oceans, the endless earthquakes... you've ruined that world, I guarantee you."

"Well then shoot down the main deployment device before it separates," Tahoe said.

"Maybe. Assuming you can bypass the stealth and obfuscation measures. Like a typical ICBM, there are multiple decoys deployed with every device. And the delivery vehicles themselves have their own layers of decoys and subterfuges. I think you know how hard it is to shoot down an evasively moving target at those speeds; good luck hitting the right one with all those decoys."

"Well, if those blueprints are true," Tahoe said. "I'm sure the UC is working on a defensive grid of some kind to protect against such an attack. Probably expensive as hell, so they'll only use it for Earth."

"Sure, but as I said, a weapon like that mostly eliminates the need for ground troops."

"You'll always need combat troops," Bender said. "No one would ever use a weapon like that. The only reason for it to exist is as a deterrent."

"Not so sure about that," Fret said. "If we had a weapon like that, you can bet your sister's pussy we would have used it here. At least I hope we would have."

"What?" Bender said. "Don't be bringing my sister's pussy into the conversation."

"Maybe your sister wants me to bring her pussy into the conversation."

Rade cancelled his autopilot. He might need to intervene, soon.

"If you don't shut it," Bender said. "I'm going to eject from my mech and you can tell me to my face how much my sister wants her pussy in the conversation. And it's not going to end well for you."

“Better stay in your mech if you do that,” Fret said. “Because I’m not leaving mine.” He was quiet a moment. “I licked your sister’s pussy.”

Bender spun his mech and leaped toward Fret.

Rade was ready. He intercepted and deployed his shield, using it to shove Bender backward. “That’s enough you two. Back in line, Bender. Fret, quit provoking him.”

“Sorry boss,” Fret said. “Sorry Bender. I was being an idiot.”

Bender growled over the comm, but returned to his position in line. The march resumed.

“I’d hope we wouldn’t ever find ourselves in a political environment that would even consider the use of such a thing as a planet killer,” Lui mused. “Not that what we’ve done here is any better, but at least we’ve left the planet relatively intact.”

“Look around,” Grappler said. “Does this look intact to you? It’ll be hundred, maybe thousands of years before the planet recovers. Did you know that in addition to the radiation, we ripped a hole as big as a continent in their ozone layer equivalent?”

“Terraforming can help,” Tahoe said.

“But that’s my point,” Lui said. “At least the planet *will* recover. You rip the crust off a planet, it will never recover. The planet is killed, as you say.”

“Well, never fear,” Keelhaul said. “These planet-killers are decades away. We’ll probably never see them during our tenure on the Teams. Well, excluding the lifers among you—if you survive that long, that is.”

“Then why bring them up?” Fret said.

“I don’t know,” Keelhaul said. “Better than talking about Bender’s sister and her pussy all day, isn’t it?”

“Hey!” Bender said.

Shortly thereafter the party came upon a series of circular, snow-covered humps protruding from the drifts.

Manic, currently on point, diverted to explore one of them.

“Careful...” Rade said.

Manic swiveled the electrolaser into his right hand and the cobra his left. When he neared the hump, he wiped the snow from the top with the stock of his cobra. He continued digging away in that manner, and shortly folded the weapons away to use his hands.

“What do you have, Manic?” Rade said. He switched to Manic’s point of view and watched as he uncovered a large brown object.

“I think it’s a bioengineered creature,” Manic said. “I got a fur-covered flank so far.”

He slowly dug up the collapsed, frozen mass. Rade recognized four thick limbs protruding from an elephantine torso, as well as a large head. It looked, for all intents and purposes, like a Woolly Mammoth. He pulled up the encyclopedia entry for the extinct mammal on his Implant. This creature had the same sloping back, small ears, and shaggy coat of the extinct beast, though in place of the trunk were two reddish tentacles. It had no tusks, either, but a maw with two large, downward curving canines. Meaning they were carnivores, rather than herbivores like the extinct animals.

“Fret, Grappler, uncover those two,” Rade pointed out two more humps near them.

In moments Fret and Grappler had unveiled two more creatures of the same species.

Fret scanned one of them. “Far as I can tell, their blood is basically antifreeze.”

“But at some point didn’t someone theorize that these bioengineered creatures were cold-blooded?” Grappler said.

“Apparently these ones aren’t,” Fret said.

“So why did they die?” Rade asked.

“Well, they were obviously engineered for a cold environment,” Fret said. “But I’m guessing, not this extreme. The temperature has dropped on average by ten degrees planet-wide since we unleashed the nukes. In some places, like where we are, the drop is closer to forty degrees. They couldn’t adapt. I’m sure the radiation didn’t help matters, either. See this one? Its coat has fallen out in clumps. And look at these marks on the bare skin. Radiation burns.”

“Wouldn’t they have to be directly exposed to the nuclear detonation to get burned like that?” Grappler said.

“They’d be incinerated if that happened,” Manic said.

“No, I mean at a distance, obviously.”

“Maybe they were, but then ran away and ended up here,” Keelhaul said.

“Localized beta burns, people,” Lui said. “It happens when fallout

lands on you.”

Rade nodded slowly.

“I’m starting to wonder if maybe all life on the planet has been exterminated after all,” Tahoe said.

“If that’s true, then there’s absolutely no point for us to be here, none at all,” Bender said. “We were sent to kill the survivors. Can’t do that if there’s nothing to kill.”

“Then who shot us down?” Fret said.

“Has to be an automated defense system of some kind,” Tahoe said. “Think about it. If everyone on Earth was wiped out tomorrow, our defenses and their AIs would still be operational. They would live on.”

“That’s exactly what I’m afraid of,” Rade said.

“You’re thinking of all those robots the enemy liked to tote about with them?” Bender said.

“That’s exactly what I’m thinking.”

“Guess we still have some exterminating to do after all,” Bender said. “Killing of robos is still killing.”

“It certainly is,” Rade said. “Though it’s not going to be easy, considering that those robos will be shooting back. I’d almost prefer the bioengineered swarms.”

The march continued uneventfully for the next several hours. They survived on the meal replacements in their jumpsuits and the recycled water.

It took twelve long hours in total to reach the calculated drop point. He authorized two separate half-hour naps during the march. When they finally arrived at the target site, there was nothing there but endless white drifts.

The snowstorm had completely subsided at that point, though the sky was still overcast of course. Visibility had increased to a crisp four kilometers. On his camera, Rade zoomed in and out, searching his surroundings.

There were no depressions or protrusions in the snow; no bombers jetting past overhead; no signs of any sort of staging area

“All right,” Rade said. “We got a twenty kilometer square area to explore. We’re going to split into groups of two and begin a grid search.” He created four two-person teams and then assigned the routes. “Make liberal use of your zoom lenses while you’re out there, people.”

They spent the next six hours combing the site, to no avail.

When they mustered at the center of the grid after the sixth hour, Fret said: “Maybe no one else survived the drop.” He sounded weary, unsurprisingly. They were all exhausted.

“The more palatable answer,” Bender said. “Is that the boss’ AI is full of shit.”

“What do you have to say for yourself, Jerry?” Rade said. “Because I refuse to believe we’re the only survivors of the invasion.”

“My apologies,” the AI replied over the main comm for the benefit of everybody. “The margin of error in my calculations may been slightly greater than I believed.”

“Slightly greater, my ass,” Bender said. “More like a *lot* greater.”

“So what now, boss?” Grappler asked Rade.

We have to find a landmark of some kind to reorient ourselves,” Rade said. “According to the map, there should be a north-south trending mountain range somewhere to the west. If we can hit that, all we have to do is follow it to the north. When we reach the last mountain, the drop site should be roughly forty kilometers to the east.”

“You’re assuming that we hit the correct mountain range when we go west,” Fret said. “We could be hopelessly off course. On the wrong hemisphere, even. There might be mountains. There might not.”

“Well if there *are* mountains,” Tahoe said. “Now that the weather has cleared up some, we can use our local-beam LIDAR to map out the shoulder of the ridge as we advance. All we have to do is line it up with the topographical data on our maps, and voilà, we’ll know where we are.”

“Sure, if the current conditions hold, then we can,” Fret agreed. “But if the snowstorm returns...”

“Positivity, Fret,” Rade said. “I’d like to see some from you, for once.”

“We all know that positivity is—”

“Yes yes,” Rade interrupted. “The bane of all warriors. Negativity keeps us alert and all that. Well just this once, let’s forgo that. Let’s be positive.”

“All right boss,” Fret said. “All right.”

And so the party headed west.

The landscape proved little different as they headed on the new bearing. In fact, the only way Rade could tell that they were trudging in the proper direction was because of the positional updates displayed on his HUD, courtesy of the built-in accelerometers and gyroscopes of the mechs. Their orientation could have been all wrong of course, but the AI assured him, after extensive analysis of the rays of sun that penetrated the cloud cover, that they were in fact marching in the proper direction.

Rade was trudging ten meters behind Manic’s Titan near the center of the single-file formation, when the incident occurred.

He was tracking the plains from left to right, scanning for enemies as

he often did while plowing through those drifts of everlasting white. Since the winds had died down, he had dialed up his external microphone, and that allowed him to hear the sharp crack that suddenly erupted from ahead.

“What—” He brought his gaze forward.

Manic had frozen. Ten meters in front of him, where Lui had been, remained only the snowdrift. Another ten meters beyond him, Tahoe, on point, had stopped and turned around.

“Lui?” Rade said.

“He just vanished!” Manic rushed forward.

“Manic, wait!” Rade said.

Manic halted.

“Don’t move,” Rade said. “Cyclone, you too.”

“I don’t plan to,” Tahoe said. He had swiveled both weapons into the hands of his Titan, and he was scanning the drift immediately surrounding him, searching for whatever it was that had hauled Lui underneath.

Rade glanced at his overhead map. According to the data on the HUD, Lui was still there, and his ping times were updating.

“Lui, do you read?” Rade said. “Lui?”

“I—” came Lui’s frantic response. “I can’t get a grip.”

“Manic,” Rade said. “Zoom in on his previous position.”

Rade switched his viewpoint to Manic’s camera feed. There was a mech-sized depression in the drift where Lui had vanished, but from the current angle, he couldn’t see the bottom of it.

“Edge forward,” Rade instructed Manic. “Very slowly.”

The snow immediately surrounding the depression began to fall inward, as if plunging into a buried crevice.

Then he realized what was happening.

“Jerry, open up!” Rade said. The cockpit fell open and Rade jetted outside.

“Rage!” Manic said.

Rade landed in the deep snow beside the depression, and sunk to his shoulders. The snow was loose, since he was near the edge of the depression, and he plowed his body through it with relative ease. Below him was Lui in his jumpsuit, hanging onto the edge of the depression. The soldier was submersed in yellow-white liquid.

Rade offered him a hand and pulled him from the liquid. Lui

collapsed on the intact drift beside it, his body sinking deep into the snow.

“We’re on some kind of lake, people,” Rade said.

“It’s a liquid methane composite.” Lui shook his head behind his faceplate. “I can’t believe I lost Arachnid.” That was the callsign of his mech. “It just sunk. That composite has no buoyancy properties whatsoever. I couldn’t fire my jumpjets. They were clogged with the stuff. I ejected, and my jumpsuit’s jetpack wouldn’t work either. Luckily I emerged near the edge of the broken ice, but I had trouble finding purchase. Thanks for grabbing me, boss.”

“Anytime,” Rade told him.

“I think I know what happened,” Tahoe said.

“We *all* know,” Bender said. “We’re walking on thin ice. And we’re too damn heavy.”

“That’s only part of the story,” Tahoe said. “Use the sensors padding the feet of your Titan. See that liquid methane underneath, between the metal and the ice? I think the ice would have held under ordinary conditions. But the massive pressure induced by the feet of our Titans, the focal point of our entire weight, caused the surface layer to melt underneath. The cumulative melting effect of several passing mechs weakened the surface. We probably shouldn’t be walking in single file over this lake, nor in each other’s footsteps...”

Lui abruptly leaped up, evidently startled.

“What is it?” Rade said, standing as well.

“The opening.”

Rade glanced at the liquid. A white, glistening human hand was reaching up.

Rade wrapped his arms around Lui and jetted into the air.

The hand continued to reach higher below him.

“Start retreating, people,” Rade said. “Tahoe, give that hole a wide berth. We don’t need you plunging through the ice, too. Everyone, keep your fingers on your jumpjet triggers. And avoid stepping in the footprints we created on the way here.”

Rade landed on his Titan, secured Lui to the passenger seat, then loaded into the cockpit.

“What about that hand?” Manic said.

When the external camera feed kicked in, Rade glanced at the hole in

the ice.

The hand definitely wasn't human. The arm it was connected to was far too long—the thin, glistening white appendage now reached two meters above the surface.

“Forget the hand, we retreat,” Rade said.

The drifts closest to the hole began to vanish in an outward pattern as more of the ice collapsed.

“Faster, people,” Rade said. “Jump jump jump!” He activated his jumpjets and landed thirty meters farther from the hole. He confirmed that Tahoe was behind him and then advanced as fast as he was able; like everyone else, he avoided the earlier footprints and trekked over fresh snow, which made it difficult to travel with any speed.

Up ahead Grappler tripped and fell, and for a moment Rade worried the ice—or the creature—had taken him, but then his mech emerged from the drift and was quickly on the move again.

He heard several loud cracks. Looking back, Rade saw that three pairs of those long appendages had emerged; the drifts around them had fallen away, revealing more of the methane lake. A large, amorphous mass momentarily surfaced: the source of the appendages. A wide, insectile maw opened at the base, just above the liquid.

“Cyclone, let's tell this thing that we're not interested in being friends,” Rade said.

Rade and Tahoe let off a few Hellfires.

The detonations tore off several limbs and ripped away part of the maw. The beast squealed loudly.

“Fuck you too,” Tahoe told it.

The creature vanished under the ice.

“Shouldn't the explosions have ignited the methane?” Manic said.

“We've seen similar reactivity before,” Tahoe said. “Or rather, the lack thereof. When we unleashed our incendiaries at the snow for example. For whatever reason, the chemical combustion point is different.”

“It's not pure liquid methane,” Lui said from the passenger seat. “There are other chemical bonds involved. I told you it's a *composite*.”

“That's right,” Tahoe said. “There you go.”

The Titans continued their hurried retreat. Rade scanned the snowy surface around him, watching for signs of the creature. He kept one finger on

the jumpjet trigger, another on the cobra.

“Think it’s gone for good?” Manic said.

Just as he said those words, up ahead the ice literally erupted from the lake. A massive body thrust skyward like a sperm whale surfacing. Rade got a better picture of the thing: the best description was a mixture of a whale and a caterpillar. The long white limbs ran down the glistening black skin on the lower flanks; at the head region, two mandibles crunched at the air underneath large, twin insectile eyes. Liquid methane squirted from a blowhole on the dorsal surface. There seemed to be gills, too, judging from the fleshy plates located on either side of the head.

The giant creature reached the apex of its upward thrust, hovered there like an office tower for a few moments while its momentum reversed, and then began its descent. That massive form loomed directly above the party, its angle of descent aligned with the positions of their mechs on the ice so that if they remained in place they would be crushed into the lake.

“Jumpjets,” Rade said calmly. “Go around it to the left. And let it feel our sting.”

Rade and the others jetted around the plunging form. They unleashed their cobras and zodiacs, and the creature squirmed underneath them, roaring.

The thing slammed into the ice, breaking away more of the lake’s surface. It vanished underneath the liquid methane and did not return.

Rade and the others landed.

Grappler continued on point, and the rest followed, slightly offset to the left and right so that no one stepped in the footprints of anyone else.

“I think we’re off the lake,” Grappler announced a few moments later.

“How do you know?” Fret said.

“Check your foot sensors,” Grappler replied. “There’s tundra under this snow.”

Rade confirmed it, and then cross-checked his location on the map.

“Jerry, can you update our position on the map, so that it corresponds to a lake east of the mountain range?”

“I can,” the AI replied. “But which lake would you like me to use?”

Rade glanced at his overhead map. Unfortunately, there were at least a hundred lakes of similar size east of the mountain range.

“Ah, never mind,” Rade said. “Grappler, let me know the moment you detect more ice. We’ll see if we can’t correlate our position. Now, the

question remains, what are we going to do about Lui? Though the radiation isn't too bad out here, closer to the drop site, and the city, it gets fairly intense. We're—"

Abruptly a Titan burst from the liquid methane hole carved by the massive creature. Lui's mech, Arachnid. It jetted skyward like a geyser, as if it had been spat out by something, and arced over the frozen lake. As it came down, it fired its air brakes and aerospike thrusters and landed in a cloud of snow.

"Apparently I didn't agree with its palate," Arachnid said.

"Hell ya!" Lui jetted forward and loaded back into his Titan.

Rade glanced at Tahoe. His Titan shrugged.

"Providence," Tahoe said.

They switched to a single file march once more and resumed their previous pace.

Half an hour later Grappler announced that he had found more ice.

"Jerry, compute the distance between our current location, and the lake we left behind, and see if you can line it up with lakes separated by a similar distance on the map."

"No correlations found," Jerry said a moment later.

"It must be a tiny body of water," Rade said. "Or part of the same lake. Grappler, find the edges. Lead us around."

Grappler turned inward after only a few meters. It was definitely tiny. Far too small for the resolution of the orbital scans that had constructed their maps.

In two hours they found another frozen lake. The AI was finally able to calculate their positions based on the two bodies of water and the planetary topography data.

"Are there any other lakes separated by a similar distance?" Rade asked the AI.

"No," Jerry replied. "I believe our coordinates are accurate."

"My AI says our coordinates are accurate," Rade announced.

"We'll see," Bender replied. "Once we actually reach the mountain range."

The party diverted around the latest lake. The edges detected by the point man corresponded with the boundaries of the lake as depicted by the overhead map.

A good sign.

Four hours later, when the mountains appeared, the location of the range matched up precisely with the map. Rade had the squad run a few local-beam LIDAR scans, and they shortly confirmed that the topography was a match.

“All right, people,” Rade said. “There we go. We finally have our bearings again.”

They proceeded north toward the drop site on autopilot. The party rationed their meal replacements and water; the former would run out in three days, the latter six—roughly the same time as their oxygen supply. Rade authorized a much-needed four hour sleep during the advance, with two watches. Fret took the first watch, Manic the second.

Six hours later—roughly two hours from the site—a fresh snowfall began once more, and the winds picked up. In the span of minutes, the calm and visibility were replaced by fierce gusts and near white-out conditions.

“Weather turns fast on this planet,” Lui commented.

Rade dialed down his external microphone and settled in for a long, tedious march.

Bender, currently on point, abruptly paused.

“What is it, Bender?” Rade sent.

“Thought I saw something.”

Rade switched to Bender’s viewpoint. Visibility was down to thirty meters by then. He stared at the snow in the distance but discerned nothing. He piped in Bender’s thermal camera feed instead. Still nothing.

The legs of Rade’s Titan transmitted a slight vibration to his ankles.

“Detecting slight seismic activity,” Tahoe said.

“Seismic?” Rade asked.

“Yes. Something is approaching.”

“Has to be pretty big, to shake the ground from that far way,” Rade said.

And then he spotted an object in the distance. It wasn’t big, not yet. It winked in and out of view with the ebb and flow of the blizzard.

Wait... there was not just one object out there. But two.

Now three.

Several.

Their shapes were indistinct on the thermal band.

But one thing was certain:
They were getting closer. Fast.

Are we receiving a signal from them, Fret?” Rade said.

“No,” the communicator replied.

“Should I open fire?” Bender said.

“Not yet,” Rade told him. “I want visual confirmation that these aren’t UC.”

“If they *were* UC, we would have a signal by now.”

“Would we?” Rade said. “I’m not so sure about that.”

He switched back to the visual spectrum of Bender’s feed and waited. The snow swirled, blocking any view of the incoming objects. A gust momentarily lifted the white veil and Rade saw them.

His immediate impression was that of a group of Yeti—large creatures covered in white fur, resembling a cross between humans and bears.

The snow descended a moment later and they were gone.

“Form a battle line, people,” Rade said. “Three meter separations. And open fire.”

He switched to his local viewpoint, took a place near the center of the line, and activated the targeting scope on his laser. He tagged an incoming tango on the thermal band and unleashed the cobra. The target went down. He launched his electrolaser next. The electrical bolt boomed forth and felled another creature.

As the beasts got closer, with those at the forefront emerging from the blizzard, Rade switched to the visual band for a better look. He realized they were similar to wildebeests or antelopes more than anything else. Very shaggy wildebeests. Almost like mountain goats with all that white fur. Very big ones, at that, roughly the same height as the Titans, their massive legs readily wading through the deep drifts as they half ran, half hopped. The ground shook violently with their approach.

The platoon members continued to fire as the beasts came in. Keelhaul’s Titan was knocked over by one of them; it continued right on past him. Others purposely avoided the mechs, and hurried in-between the Titan ranks.

“I don’t think they’re actually aggressive,” Lui said.

“Lui’s right,” Tahoe said. “They don’t seem to care about us at all. If they hit us, it’s an accident.”

Rade stopped firing and watched as the herd tore past on all sides. The individual animals diverged to pass him on either side, like water from a fast-running stream separating around a rock.

“They’re running,” Fret said.

“From what?” Rade asked.

The tail end of the herd appeared, and in moments the remaining beasts had dashed past. A short interval of quietude followed.

Rade had the answer to his question when different creatures emerged from the blizzard.

Twice as tall as the Titans, they appeared to be very big, and very furry... things. They stood on two muscular feet that easily plowed through the snow. Their upper bodies were hunched forward, and from the upper chests jutted two smaller, human-sized grasping arms. Thin, pentagonal plates formed a long line down their backs from head to tail. A bony frill protruded above the necks. The massive heads were each the size of a human body, and from them two large tusks arced upward. Smaller horns grew from the beaked snouts. Several of those snouts were smeared black, the hair about them matted: perhaps the blood of recently downed prey.

“Hornheads,” Manic christened them.

The leading beasts roared when they saw the platoon members, and they homed in on various Titans in the line.

“Fire at will,” Rade said.

He launched two Hellfires and sent body parts geysering into the air. He switched to the grenade launcher in his left hand, the electrolaser his right, and managed to take down two of the creatures before the front ranks met the line. A hornhead plowed straight into his mech, swinging its neck at the same time.

Rade was sent hurtling away and he landed on his back in a snowdrift.

The hornhead leaped down upon him and pinned him with those heavy legs. From its snout emerged a green, starfish-like... proboscis, for lack of a better word. It lashed out, striking his Titan in the torso. The creature emitted a high-pitched squeal and gushed some sort of acid from the proboscis, which began to burn through the mech’s chest area.

“Watch their proboscises,” Tahoe said over the comm.

“Now you tell me.” Rade wrapped both hands around the tissue connecting the proboscis to the snout and twisted, ripping it away.

The creature howled wildly, then jabbed its large head down upon Rade, opening a wide, toothy mouth.

Rade stabbed his grenade launcher inside and released a small bomb.

The massive head exploded.

Rade sloughed off the dead body and clambered to his feet. The other Titans were finishing up the surviving hornheads in the snow. The beasts went down as he watched. He realized the pursuers hadn’t been all that numerous. Rade counted about twenty corpses in total.

He approached Tahoe, who stood beside the last terminated creature.

“Well, at least we know how the aliens feed their bioengineered creations,” Lui said.

“Fret, shut down your automated ping transmission, would you?” Rade said.

“Done,” Fret replied.

“Worried that the nano-machines in their brains will transmit our location?” Tahoe said.

“Somewhat,” Rade replied. “The lieutenant commander told us the machines depend on their organic components: when the body dies, the machines deactivate shortly thereafter. But the LC never said how long it would take before that deactivation occurred.”

“Isn’t it too late to hide our positions?” Manic said. “If these bioweapons have nano-machines in their brains, they’ve probably already notified nearby enemies.”

“Very true,” Rade said. “But why make it even easier to find us? Everyone all right, by the way?”

He glanced at the vitals as everyone reported in. Grappler had wrecked the servomotor in his right elbow, but other than that no one had suffered any lasting damage.

“I like the star,” Bender told Rade.

Rade glanced down and saw the pattern etched into his chest from the acid of the proboscis.

“You’re a superstar, boss,” Fret said.

“Jerry, tell me this acid isn’t going to eat all the way through to my

cockpit?” Rade said.

“It won’t,” the AI replied. “The acid has already ceased its corrosive action.”

“All right then people, let’s proceed.”

“Wait,” Manic said. “There’s one thing I don’t get. If it’s true that the nano-machines exist in the brains of all these bioengineered creatures, then why didn’t the fleeing herd attack us?”

“Fear of the hornheads probably overrode any existing termination objectives,” Lui said. “Either that, or maybe it’s not true that the nano-machines infect every one of their bioengineered creations, especially when those creations are reserved for the food supply.”

The next hour toward the drop site passed uneventfully. The snow and wind abated somewhat, allowing the party visibility of seventy-five meters.

About fifteen minutes from the drop site, Fret spoke up.

“I’m detecting a weak ping,” Fret said.

“I thought I told you to shut off your automated ping?” Rade said.

“I did,” Fret said. “It’s not a reply to any signal of mine. It’s an incoming ping from someone else.”

Rade searched the terrain and sky on all EM bands, but saw nothing out there.

“Where is it coming from?” Rade said.

“Twenty kilometers to the northwest,” Fret said. “Or about five kilometers away from the original drop site. It’s UC.”

“Are you certain it’s genuine?” Rade said. “And not an alien trap?”

“I can’t be certain of anything at this point,” Fret replied. “Do you want me to respond to the ping?”

“Negative,” Rade said. “Everyone, keep your handshake protocols disabled for the time being until we’re sure what this is.”

Rade had them adjust course to proceed toward the signal, rather than the drop point proper.

A moment later Fret said: “Reading more pings.”

As they grew near, those signals kept multiplying until there were hundreds of them by the time they reached the transmission point.

“Is this the spot?” Rade surveyed the white plains before him. There was nothing out there.

“Yes.”

“Then where the hell is everyone?” He activated his local-beam LIDAR and proceeded to scan the area. The LIDAR picked out several small humps in the snow that he hadn’t noticed against the white.

“Keelhaul, see that protrusion in the snow beside you?” Rade said. “On the LIDAR?”

“I see it.” Keelhaul approached and dug out something underneath.

Rade switched to Keelhaul’s viewpoint. It was a robot. The wreckage of a Centurion.

Rade had the party split up, and with the LIDAR and signal sources uncovered more troops: Centurions by the truckload. HS3s. Fallen mechs. Dead men. Marines lay outside the cockpits of some of the mechs, jumpsuits chewed open, half eaten entrails frozen in the snow. The pings the party received were from the PASS devices on the utility belts worn by the dead—the Personal Alert Safety Systems used to help locate fallen soldiers.

“Any sign of the remaining members of Alpha Platoon?” Rade said.

“Nope,” Bender replied. “These are all Marines. Different companies from 3rd Battalion 27th Marines and 1st Battalion 31st, judging from the profile tags.”

“Guess it’s probably a good thing we didn’t make the drop point after all,” Fret said. “Don’t think I’d want to meet whatever did this.”

“Found something,” Tahoe announced. He had uncovered a PASS device strapped to a severed Centurion leg that had been impaled into the tundra.

Rade approached. “What is it?”

“There’s a storage device here,” Tahoe said. “Wirelessly accessible. I think it’s a message from the chief.”

“When was it recorded?”

“On the twenty-fifth,” Tahoe replied. “At oh seven hundred standard time.” Almost twenty-four hours ago.

“Let’s hear it,” Rade said. “Broadcast it platoon-wide.”

“Wait,” Tahoe said. “It’s encrypted. I’ll try the private key from my embedded ID.”

If it truly was from the chief, in theory Facehopper would have granted decryption rights to all of their private keys, so that any of the platoon survivors could have played the message.

“That did it,” Tahoe said. “Broadcasting.”

Facehopper's voice came over comm. "This is Chief Facehopper, Alpha Platoon, MOTH Team Seven. If you're listening to this message, you're either a stranded Marine who somehow cracked my decryption codes, or you're one of my very own MOTHs. I'm going to assume the latter." The voice was strained, as if Facehopper had recorded the message during combat. "I have Harlequin, Trace, Mauler, TJ, Bomb, Skullcracker, and Snakeoil with me. We're under attack. Overwhelming forces. Comms are down. No air support. We're falling back to the closest alien city. We detected a UC distress signal coming from the nuked city a few hours ago. It's either an alien trick, or survivors from another drop group. We'll learn soon enough. I'm attaching the location of the distress signal to the end of this message. Make your way to us as soon as you can. We'll be waiting for you, my brothers. Chief out."

The message ended. A location transfer request appeared on Rade's HUD.

"Let me accept it," Fret said. "I'll scan it for viruses."

"Go ahead," Rade told him, though it seemed an unnecessary precaution.

"Seems safe," Fret replied a moment later.

The request appeared again and Rade accepted. A flashing icon appeared on his map. Located forty-five kilometers to the north, it was located almost precisely in the middle of the nearer alien city, or what was left of it anyway.

"Are we picking up any further UC signals out there?" Rade said.

"No," Fret replied. "If there was a signal, it's not transmitting anymore."

"If Facehopper is at the site," Grappler said. "Wouldn't we be able to communicate with him at this very moment? It only makes sense... after all, he was able to receive the distress signal from there, all the way here."

"There may have been working repeater drones operating between here and the city at that point," Tahoe said. "Those repeaters have obviously gone offline since then. Which would explain why we aren't receiving any further distress signals."

"Maybe the repeaters are actually still out there," Keelhaul said. "But there's no one left to send anything."

"No, we'd get a ping from the repeaters if they were operational," Fret

said. “It’s actually too bad, because without them we have no way of knowing whether the chief or anyone else actually made it to the site.”

“They made it,” Rade said. “Salvage what supplies you can from the wreckages, people. We have a nuked alien city to visit.”

Because the blizzard had abated entirely, Rade and his men made good time across the snowy plains. Visibility was once more four kilometers in every direction underneath the dreary, overcast sky.

“You know, out of all the missions I’ve been on,” Fret said. “I have to say this is the most downcast. It’s the lack of sunlight, I think.”

“We’ve been on worse,” Bender said. “You forget the stealth mission we had aboard the *Róng Fù*. Trapped inside the cargo hold bulk carrier for all those weeks while we sneaked across SK lines. No gym. No natural light. Man, talk about cooped up. Even the virtual reality sucked. They had no selection aboard.”

The *Róng Fù* was a captured SK privateer also known as the *Royal Fortune*. Unlike everyone else apparently, Rade had only fond memories of it. Because that was the ship where he had met Shaw again after bootcamp, at a time when he thought he would never see her again. Shaw.

He hoped his ex-girlfriend was doing well on her side of the galaxy. Better than him, anyway. He wondered what he would write to her if he ever got out of this alive.

Probably not a thing. They were through.

Though if he was truthful to himself, deep down he knew he still had feelings for her.

Why would I be thinking about her at a time like this, otherwise?

Bender still talked in the background. “And what about the numerous moons we’ve hunted privateers on?” he was saying. “Moons without atmospheres. Now those were dreary-ass missions. Not that I’m complaining. I’m all about the missions, dreary or not. It’s what I do. Bring them on, I say. I’d rather be on some shithole like this than sitting around bored back on Earth, or aboard some tin can of a ship like the rest of the navy.”

“I wonder how this planet looked before we nuked the place?” Lui said. “From the surface, I mean.”

“We’ll never know, probably,” Keelhaul said.

“Sure we’ll know,” Bender said. “Take a look at the preliminary planetary scans when you get back.”

“Assuming the Brass declassify them,” Lui said.

“What was this place called again?” Manic said. “XYZ-789 or some crap like that?”

“Xerces-98 II, I believe,” Tahoe said. “After the system, Xerces-98.”

“Yeah, about that,” Manic said. “Who’s the moron who comes up with these names? Why couldn’t we have called it Alien Homeworld or something simple like that?”

“As if Alien Homeworld is a better name,” Fret said.

“All right, fine, but why the Xerces-98 II crap?”

“Well II stands for the second planet in the system, of course,” Lui said. “And Xerces-98 is the star.”

“Yeah I know, thanks, Genius,” Manic said. “But it’s so typical. I can just imagine the naming committee that comes up with these things. ‘Man, we’re so lazy, we can’t be bothered to think of a real name, so we’re just going to count the number of orbital positions the planet is from the star, append the resulting number to the star name, and voilà we got ourselves the planet name!’ Though I guess at least it’s better than the dudes who throw together a couple of random characters and numbers and call it a planet. ‘Welcome to ABGH-12, citizens!’ Of course, then you have the names stolen from ancient mythology or history. ‘Oh fiddlesticks, we can’t think of anything on our own, so we’re going to pilfer from the ancients and it’ll sound cool! Look, it’s Planet Nebuchadnezzar and its Moon, Sphinx!’ Then you have the terribly unoriginal names where they just throw the word new in front, and all of a sudden you have a whole new planet. ‘Oh look, it’s New Earth and New Mars! And is that New New York on New Earth?’ The same applies to starship names, and cities. New Coronado, anyone? I tell you, sometimes I feel like I’m living in a universe where originality and creativity is a thought crime or something.”

“Manic, shut up,” Bender said.

“But I’m—”

“Shh!” Bender said from his position on point. “I’ve had enough of your raspy voice.”

Rade wanted silence, too, but he didn’t have the heart to order it at the moment. Morale was low enough as it was. So while he was somewhat glad that Bender had quietened Manic, he wasn’t certain whether that had been the best idea. He resolved to let his men talk now, while they still could. He

knew that there would be little talking in the hours and days to come, as the food ran out and the enemies closed in.

They trudged on in silence for several minutes, the only sound the whir of servomotors and electromechanics, and the crunch of snow underneath metallic feet pressing down with the weight of several tonnes.

“You know, I always thought I would’ve quit the navy by now,” Grappler said, in a rare moment of candor for the man.

“How do you mean?” Fret asked.

“I’m thirty-eight,” Grappler said. “I’ve long since completed my required twelve years. I’m a full citizen.”

“No kidding?” Fret said. “Thirty-eight? You don’t look that old.”

“Tango Mike,” Grappler said. Thanks Much. “I actually transferred to the Teams from the regular navy at thirty-five.”

“*What?*” Manic said. “I thought the age limit was thirty?”

“I got a waiver.”

“How the hell did your thirty-five-year-old ass survive Trial Week in training?” Bender said.

“Hey, what can I say, I’m one tough sunnavabitch,” Grappler replied.

“Probably cheated,” Bender said.

“Not at all,” Grappler said. “All right, truthfully, I got some rejuvenation work done. Week before MOTH training, I spent half my savings and visited the best Rejuven doctor in town. He put my body back to the way it was when I was eighteen.”

“Told you he cheated,” Bender said.

“Getting rejuvenation done is hardly cheating,” Grappler said. “In fact, it was one of the conditions for my waiver.”

“So you got your body back to the way it was at eighteen,” Manic said. “But what about your libido?”

“That was rejuvenated, too,” Grappler said.

“Guess you put that to good use,” Manic said. “Given all the MOTH Hogs who hang out at the bars near the base.”

“Ha. I only wish I had time for those groupies. Wait, did we take different MOTH training or something? Because in the first phase of my BSD/M classes, I wasn’t allowed to leave the base, nor have any external contact, for the whole eight weeks.”

“No, we had the same restrictions,” Manic said. “I was talking about

in the week before class-up.”

“Nah,” Grappler said. “Didn’t have time then, either.”

“Must have had some good twister sessions with your hand then,” Fret said.

“Again, did we take different training or something?” Grappler said. “I had no time for self-gratification. Every day was pure exhaustion. I was just beat. Weary to the bone.”

“What’s that?” Fret said. “Weary of rubbing your bone?”

“We took the same training, Grappler,” Bender said. “But it was a *breeze* for the rest of us. That’s what you get for bringing your old ass to the grinder. I had enough energy each night to make ten mile runs around the base before racking out. And don’t even get me started on self-gratification, as you call it. I rubbed one out daily. Multiple times a day, in fact. I masturbated so often my hand got sore. Hell, I even found a way to jack during beach pushups: it involved the strategic placement of a happy sock dug just so into the wet sand. I guess my libido is simply that strong. And I didn’t need no rejuvenation treatments to get it that way.”

“Sounds like you had an easy class to me,” Grappler said.

“Hell no!” Bender replied. “My class was so hard, you could hear the gavel tapping the flint stone twenty-four-seven. Recruits quit by the hour. Their helmets formed a long white line beside the grinder. People threw up blood and shit sweat. Class 1088, baby. Toughest around. What about you, what easy-ass class did you graduate from?”

“I’m a proud graduate of Class 1107,” Grappler said.

“You were in Class 1107?” Rade said before Bender could get in a word. “You were the class before Cyclone and I.”

“No kidding?” Grappler said. “That’s funny. I have no recollection of hazing either of you.”

“I don’t remember seeing your ugly face on the base, either,” Rade said. “Did you train on East Coast, or West?”

“East.”

“Ah,” Rade said. “The real MOTHs train on the West. 1107 you say? I thought East Coasters used completely different class numbers.”

“That’s what I thought, too,” Grappler said. “Guess we’re more alike than we care to admit. And the real MOTHs I know all trained on the East. Present company excluded, of course.”

“We don’t need your vote of confidence,” Bender said. “More like, you need ours. And right about now I’m giving you a thumbs way down. ‘Real MOTHs train on the East.’ Bah.”

“You never told us how you got your callsign, Grappler,” Lui said.

“Ooo, do tell,” Bender said. “Can’t wait to hear this. He probably got it while wrestling his man love in the showers.”

“No, I guess I haven’t told any of you, have I?” Grappler paused. “All this talk about training... so many memories. I still have nightmares about it. You’d think my bad dreams would be from the battles I’ve fought. Instead, I wake up covered in sweat, terrified that I’ve slept through a qualification or forgotten to go to an exam, half-expecting an instructor to order me into the water for a bone-chilling sea immersion evolution. Anyway, there was a woman in my class. One of the first, back when the East Coast experimented with allowing female applicants.”

“Told you the East Teams were for women,” Bender interjected.

“Yeah,” Grappler said, unfazed. “Caylee Rail was her name. Extremely cute, even with her shaved head, but acted very butch. Thin as a stick, she was the weakest in the class. Barely made the physical entry qualifications. The other trainees pegged her as the first to fail. But she had heart. She stuck through all the hardships, pushing on through as others around her quit.

“I remember she could only do a maximum of fifty push-ups at any given time, even with her light weight. When she or the rest of the class was punished with a hundred or more push-ups, she would keep pumping them out, pausing when she lost the strength to do any more, but still holding the plank position, and after a moment she’d lower herself and do a slow-as-hell push-up, then hold it again at the top. She’d pump out those two hundred push-ups if it took her the rest of the day. She never gave up. The thought never even occurred to her.

“The instructors berated her for doing her push-ups so slowly, and sometimes told her to do another two hundred. And she would still be out there on the black asphalt of the grinder late into the night, long after the rest of us had gone to bed, finishing up her push-ups. She was an example for us all.”

“Sounds almost like you were in *looove* with this bitch,” Bender said.

“I most certainly was,” Grappler said. “As a sister. Just as you are my

brothers. She helped get me through training. See, one day I'd decided I'd had enough. In my exhausted state of mind, I decided I wasn't cut out for the Teams. I was going to return to the regular navy, to my job as an astrogator. My decision came when I'd experienced a triple blow. I'd made a pact with my roommate, you see. We promised to see each other through to the end. Well that morning my roommate tapped out after a grueling four-hour run inflicted by the instructors. Later that day my portage team came in last, and we were given extra sea immersion as punishment. Finally, the last straw that evening came when an instructor singled me out for no reason during another intense session of PT, telling me I was far too old for the Teams. He told me Caylee was kicking my ass. A woman. They liked to use her against us by that point, you see. He told me someone like me would only hold everyone back. That I'd be a liability, rather than an asset, to a MOTH Team. And because of my slowness, he was inflicting another two hundred push-ups on the group.

"In my fragile state of mind, doing push-ups there on the grinder while the instructors sprayed us down with high pressure water hoses, with men vomiting and soiling themselves all around me as the second hour of PT came up, his words snapped me. I took it personally. I believed him. I got up, mumbled some apology, and stumbled to the flint stone. I grabbed the gavel to tap it three times and officially quit.

"But I was distracted by a sudden assault of invective hurled by the instructors. They weren't talking to me, I quickly realized: Caylee had gotten up. Ignoring the threats of extra PT thrown at her by the instructors, she approached and grabbed my hand. Before that moment, I had never really talked to her, but there she was, trying to save me from quitting. 'Don't do it,' was all she said. And that was all she needed to say. I looked her in the eyes, saw the respect there she had for me, and knew she considered me an asset, not a liability. And I remembered what the shrinks had told us before the training began. About the relentless psychological warfare that would take place. This was all just another test for the instructors to see if they could break me.

"I let the gavel drop from my hand. Caylee and I returned to the asphalt and continued our PT. We were given extra punishment for what we had done. I purposely slowed down, matching her pace, so that when she got the inevitable extra reps for her plodding speed, I got them, too. They kept

punishing us all through that night, calling us lovers and other names I can't mention.

"I've never done so many pushups in my life. But I didn't quit, and neither did she. I saw her occasionally in the days following, on the other side of the grinder, or the beach, while enduring the different evolutions. But she vanished during Trial Week. I thought she had quit in the end, and I just hadn't noticed: you all know what Trial Week is like. I found out a few weeks later that she had actually died during Trial Week. It was a random accident. Her exhausted team was porting an ATLAS 2 mech, and they lost their footing on the wet pier. They all fell, but unfortunately for her, the heavy mech landed with most of its weight on her. Crushed the life out of her before the Weavers could get the thing off to even begin treatment." He was silent for a moment. "She was the best of Class 1107."

After a few moments, Lui said: "Sad story, bro. We all have them. But I actually asked you about your callsign."

"I suppose you did," Grappler said. "That'll have to wait another day, I think. But I'll leave you with this. It has something to do with mixed martial arts, and a certain post-graduation elective."

The platoon marched on, heading north. No one felt like talking much, not after a story like that.

Rade thought of his own training, and the people who had quit, or died. It was certainly a traumatizing experience, and like Grappler he still had nightmares about it. But the intense evolutions did what they were meant to do: weed out the mentally weak and incompetent. Because of that training, he knew he could rely on these men beside him to come through for him no matter what happened. It was that training that had made them all brothers.

"I see something!" Bender said from his position on point. "And it ain't good."

Rade realized a red dot had appeared on the map at the very edge of visual range, courtesy of Bender's Implant. Red didn't automatically signify an enemy object, but rather, 'unidentified.'

Rade immediately switched to Bender's point of view. Bender had zoomed in on a black, airborne object that was approaching from the northern horizon, from the direction of the nuked alien city.

"Is that one of ours?" Tahoe said.

"Don't think so," Bender replied. As Rade watched, Bender zoomed in further. A small, dodecahedral craft approached.

"Definitely not one of ours," Rade said. "Everyone, drop where you are! Bury yourselves in the snow and switch to stealth mode!"

"You got it, boss," Fret said. "But uh, isn't it kind of obvious where we are? We have a trail that leads to our position, and then abruptly stops."

"Would you rather stay out in the open and welcome the craft with open arms?" Rade said.

"Good point."

"Take cover, and wait for my command to fire." Rade watched as the mechs dove into the snow in turn. Each of them had initiated stealth mode—a low-power stand-by state that deactivated all nonessential systems but kept the weapons charged and fed energy to the hull skin, ensuring the camouflage and thermal smearing capabilities remained active.

Rade scanned the snow on the infrared band before he went under, wanting to gauge how effective that thermal obfuscation was. His companions were buried deep enough under the drifts that the smearing blended them in entirely.

Satisfied, Rade activated his own stealth mode and dove into the snow so that his mech sank to the bottom; momentum carried him a short ways across the tundra underneath. Lying on his back, he spreadeagled his Titan. The hull sensors told him he was buried well.

There were other more penetrative measures that could be used other than visual and thermal bands, of course, but the hull skin was designed to mimic the signature of natural granite to most EM scans. The only problem

was, the definition of natural varied from planet to planet: granite might be found in abundance as part of the tundra on one world or area, and have no presence at all in another.

Though he couldn't see the small dodecahedron through the thick veil of snow, his external microphones transmitted the muted roar of the engines to his helmet speakers as the craft passed overhead. The noise halted there above him, neither growing in volume nor receding, the engines firing continuously to maintain its present position. He guessed the craft was hovering around thirty to fifty meters above him. Had the enemy seen through their ruse already, or was the vessel merely curious about the large footprints and why they ended so abruptly?

Rade was about to order his men to burst from cover to stage the attack when the engines changed in pitch, and the volume receded.

Rade knew he could yet give the order to strike at any time, yet he held back. He decided it was safer to remain in hiding for the moment, especially considering that he didn't know the capabilities of the craft, nor whether he and the others had been detected.

"Boss, do we attack?" Bender said.

"No," Rade said.

Fret spoke next. "What if it's merely putting some distance between us and itself so that it can send a couple dozen missiles our way?"

"Quiet on the comms," Rade said.

The engine sound continued to fade; when it vanished entirely, Rade waited another several minutes, then burst from the snow. There was no sign of the craft on the far horizon.

Rade ordered the other mechs to similarly emerge from cover.

"What do you think?" Rade said.

"They know we're here," Tahoe said. "The only reason they didn't attack was because they didn't have the armaments. Could be a scout ship of some kind. It's one of the smallest enemy craft I've seen..."

"What if they want to capture us?" Fret said.

"So why didn't they?" Bender asked.

"Maybe that particular ship isn't equipped for capture," Fret said. "Having the necessary armaments to kill are one thing. But capture tools are a completely different game. So it's gone back to fetch some."

"Or it could be that they really didn't detect us," Manic said.

“Then why did it turn around and fly back the way it came?” Fret asked.

“I have to agree that they’re coming back,” Tahoe said. “With more troops.” On a private line to Rade he sent: “Probably shouldn’t have let them go.”

“Maybe,” Rade replied to his friend. “Then again, you’re assuming our lasers would have been able to bring them down, even at close range. If we had attacked, this snowdrift could have become our tomb. You saw what happened to those Marine companies back there...”

Rade surveyed the landscape on the local-beam LIDAR band. He spotted what looked like a snow-covered outcropping to the east: a remnant of the mountain range they had left behind.

“We’ll camp there for a little while.” He highlighted the outcropping on the overhead map. “If we’re lucky, the enemy won’t send any search parties, but if they do, at least we’ll have a relatively advantageous overwatch. If it comes to it...” He swiveled the grenade launcher into one hand and the incendiary thrower the other. “Then we fight.”

“Wouldn’t it be safer to retrace our steps and head to the mountains?” Fret said.

“Eventually we’ll have to face them,” Rade said. “If we want to rendezvous with the chief. Besides, if they have air dominance, which seems to be the case, they’ll easily outrun us on this terrain.”

“Where’s a blizzard when you need one?” Manic muttered.

Rade turned toward the rock formation. “Jumpjets, people. Leave no trace of your flight to that outcropping. When you touch down, bury yourself in the snow where you land, in these positions.” He laid out a cigar shape for the platoon members to assume.

“My jumpjet fuel is getting kind of low,” Keelhaul said.

“It’s low across the board,” Rade agreed. “We’ll make it. Let’s go.”

Rade jetted across the plains and landed near the top of the wide, snowy outcrop, and buried himself using the surrounding drifts. He left one camera slightly uncovered on the top of his Titan so that he had a perpetual view of the land to the north. The thermal leakage from it would be minimal, especially in stealth mode. His brothers assumed their designated positions, and similarly buried themselves in the snow atop the outcropping. Tahoe, Grappler and Bender also left their cameras unobscured so that they could act

as lookouts to the south, east and west. The rest buried themselves completely.

The platoon members waited. There was absolute silence on the comms. No external sounds came to the microphones embedded in his hull.

In stealth mode, no background connections were maintained between the different comm nodes or Implants—there was no video or realtime location sharing. If someone spoke, a low-power signal would transmit, then cut out the instant the involved soldier finished.

He zoomed in and unlinked the camera from his head movements so that he could rotate the view from the left to right, allowing him to scan the horizon.

Twenty long minutes passed.

He was just starting to think that no one was coming.

And then a lone enemy arrived.

Rade heard and felt it long before he saw it. Subtle vibrations passed through the rock and into his mech underneath him. A very soft thud echoed from his speakers. He increased the volume, unsure he had actually heard anything but random background signal noise; the thud recurred. There was definitely something out there.

He zoomed in and out, moved the camera left and right, but saw nothing. He cycled between the video feeds of Tahoe, Grappler and Bender, momentarily increasing the signal bandwidth shared between them. Still nothing. He quickly disconnected, returning to stealth mode.

The heavy thudding and its accompanying vibrations continued in the background, slowly growing in intensity. It seemed like the ponderous footfalls of some giant. He increased the magnification and continued his left-right-left sweep of the horizon. He passed a hitherto unseen black object and hastily re-centered the view upon it. A black shape stained the horizon.

It was unlike anything Rade had ever seen before. The size estimates put the thing on the level of a small apartment building. A huge robotic body stood upon four powerful metal legs. A long, elephant-like trunk—or neck—extended from the body several lengths in front, capped by what looked like an electrolaser of some kind, judging from the mirrors and the funnel shape around the turret. The robot had a long, massive tail to counterbalance the weight, and at its tip was what appeared to be a swivel-mounted laser turret. Additional missile batteries and pulse cannons of some kind were attached to

either side of the main body, so that it looked a little like a fully-armed gunship when viewed from the front.

It moved at a lumbering pace. Only one foot ever left the ground at a time. It was how he imagined a dinosaur must have walked. He began to think that the mechs he and his men piloted were misnamed. The real Titan was that robot.

As it closed, those footfalls grew in volume until each step literally sounded like thunder and the ground shook as if in an earthquake. Loose snow trickled down from the ledges of the outcropping, and for a while Rade feared that the white covering would slough from the outcropping entirely and reveal their positions.

The robot was so near by that point, Rade could hear the whir of the servomotors in those massive legs, driving the up and down motion of each foot. So far it ignored the outcropping, moving instead toward the disturbed snow the mechs had left in their wake on the plains. Rade swiveled his external camera, following the advance.

When the giant reached the edge of those footprints, which seemed so tiny in comparison to the robot, it paused. Its long trunk, or its neck—Rade wasn't sure just what that was—extended over the area, the electrolaser tip almost seeming to sniff the snow.

He watched with his heart in his throat. The robot was only fifty meters away, and that close its large size was all too apparent. Though his adrenals pumped him full of epinephrine, he wasn't certain it would be enough. They hadn't been able to salvage much food and water from the drop site, and the strict rationing had reduced his mind and body to a weakened state. He needed to be at his strongest. His most alert. He instructed his jumpsuit to inject a stimulant and in moments the sound of his heart grew louder in his ears, faster.

I'm ready, he mentally told that robot. *Come on, bitch. Come on.*

With the stimulant pulsing through his veins, enhancing his senses, he found it hard to restrain his warrior instincts. He wanted to give the order to attack. Their mission was, after all, to exterminate creatures and robots like these. Still, those wicked armaments protruding from its flanks gave him pause. He decided for the sake of his men that this was an encounter best avoided. A job for bombers, not mechs. But if it came to it, they would fight.

All of a sudden the robot's head turned toward the rock outcropping,

as if it had heard a sound or something else to pique its interest.

Rade hadn't heard a thing, of course. He found himself holding his breath, and he wondered what could have attracted its attention.

That trunk, or whatever it was, slowly moved in the direction of the outcropping, while the body remained stationary.

And then it twisted slightly, as if cocking its head.

The robot reared up on its hind legs, swiveling its whole body toward the outcropping. When its forelimbs slammed into the snow, the clamor was a veritable thunderclap, and the rocks shook worse than ever.

Several missiles burst from those launchers on its flanks.

Warnings flashed all over Rade's HUD...

The AI launched the Trench Coat countermeasures before Rade could react. Other Titan AIs did the same. That action saved their lives, because the missiles detonated only a few meters in front of the outcrop.

The explosion hurled Rade backward and he landed in the center of the rock formation near a couple of other stunned Titans. He clambered to his feet. The snow in front of him, where he had been hiding, was completely melted away.

“Attack!” Rade barely got the word out when the enemy electrolaser fired next.

The lightning bolt tore through the air, striking Tahoe’s Titan and sending it hurtling backward. The electrical energy was definitely much more powerful than the meager, stunted bolts the mechs could launch.

Tahoe landed, but quickly clambered to his feet. His shield had saved him: it was burned half away.

Rade prudently activated his own shield, choosing the one on the left arm.

As the Titans returned fire with lasers, electrolasers, grenades, and missiles, the robot charged.

Rade jetted upward and fired the cobra in his right hand. He aimed at the base of the pulse cannon batteries on the rightmost flanks.

The robot smashed into the rock outcropping and halted, nearly tripping.

Rade landed on the thing’s back and begin hammering the base of its long neck with missiles. As the head turned toward him, he launched a missile at the site of the electrolaser, but the neck swayed, dodging it.

From the corner of his eye Rade noticed the tail hovering above him, and he dove out of the way just as it unleashed a laser. The beam burned a thick hole into the already damaged base of the neck.

“Nice one, boss!” Bender said.

Completely accidental.

Meanwhile the other mechs jetted around the torso like hornets, employing their stingers: lasers, eletrolasers, missiles, and grenades. In

moments the weapon batteries on both flanks were smashed and disabled.

“Concentrate fire on the base of the neck,” Rade said. “Let’s cut off it’s head!”

The robot launched a spray of flame from an alternate nozzle near the tip of its tail, coating Rade and other nearby Titans in jellied gasoline. It stuck to their mechs, burning while they fought. The slight rise in temperature Rade felt inside the cockpit didn’t affect his combat efficiency in the least.

The tail tip abruptly disintegrated as someone’s Hellfire impacted it dead-on. His team moved in to help him ‘cut off the head.’

A lightning bolt fired again from the electrolaser at the tip of that neck.

It struck the shoulder launcher of a Titan perched on the robot’s back near Rade. It was Grappler. Unfortunately, like most of the mechs, Grappler hadn’t launched all of his rockets yet, so the cascade effect of the one explosion caused all the rockets to explode. Grappler’s Titan was sent flying off. It was the very same technique Rade had employed to great success during the simulations.

Rade glanced at Grappler’s vitals. They were orange: he was severely injured. Rade wanted to go to him, but he couldn’t help him yet, not while the rest of his men needed him.

Rade angrily launched another missile at the electrolaser site, but the neck dodged out of the way once more.

“Damn it.”

From the corner of his eyes, he noticed hatches folding open on the robot’s left and right flanks.

Hundred of smaller spider drones crawled out. They were about the size of a human head.

In moments they had completely covered Rade and those others who hadn’t jetted away from the robot. The spiders didn’t care about the fire coating their mechs, and started to drill through the hulls.

Rade folded away his weapon and tried to pull one of them off him but it held on fast. That electrolaser on the neck came around again, and Rade leaped off the robot as it unleashed another blow. The lightning caught the tip of his shield, burning it off.

Rade landed in the snow and immediately activated the Lighter, electrifying the hull with a hundred million volts. Instantly the robots

clinging to him fell away. Unfortunately, the recharge interval was one minute, and more spiders were already attaching to him.

The giant had come about, and the underside of one of its massive feet was bearing down on him.

Rade scrambled upright from the drift and activated his jumpjets. Only one of the jets activated, probably because a spider had climbed up the other nozzle and plugged the feed, and he went careening sideways. But at least he was out of the way of that massive foot.

He landed on the outcropping, and fired his laser and electrolaser in turn at the spiders, at close range, slowing picking them off. When a minute had passed, he activated his Lighter again, and the rest sloughed off.

He jetted toward the giant, which the other Titans had kept occupied, and landed on the torso near the neck. There were only a few spiders left. Bender's mech clung to the farther side of the neck, near the electrolaser, which he was pounding repeatedly with a steel fist. It looked about ready to break off. The others meanwhile were concentrating their fire on the base of the neck, which was hanging to the torso by a thread of metal.

Rade landed and fired his electrolaser at that thread, severing the neck. It fell away, bringing Bender with it.

"Hey dipshits I'm still hanging on!" Bender said as his mech crashed into the snow.

The main body continued to move about, weaponless save for the small spiders. Rade crushed the two spiders that tried to attach to him, and then dove inside the open hatches in the flanks with the other Titans. The mechs landed within nondescript storage bays, and proceeded to shoot out the internals. In moments the platoon members were jetting away as the large metallic body foundered to the snow.

The jellied gasoline coating his mech and the others had burned itself out by then, so that when they landed their mechs once more assumed the color of snow. Mostly—there were black splotches in places where the fires had damaged the camouflage skin.

Rade glanced at his overhead map and hurried to the site where Grappler went down. His Titan was a crumpled mess.

"Grappler, how you doing?" Rade sent. "Grappler. Talk to me."

Nothing.

Rade sent its AI the override order for the cockpit hatch, but it didn't

respond.

“Grappler, can you open your hatch?”

Still nothing. Around Rade and Grappler, the other Titans gathered in a half-circle. He knew that behind those expressionless steel faces, the human operators were watching with worried eyes.

Rade put one metal foot on the twisted torso and grabbed at the hatch with his other hand; with some effort he managed to pull the cockpit door free.

Not caring about radiation exposure in that moment, Rade knelt his mech and dismounted. He hurried to the open cockpit that contained Grappler’s motionless jumpsuit. Because of the damage, Grappler was all folded up inside, almost in the fetal position.

Rade was reluctant to move him, but according to the stats returned by his suit, no bones were broken in his neck or back. Other bones were splintered, but not those. So it should be safe.

Grappler was lodged fairly tight in there, but Rade managed to free him from the cockpit with the help of his strength-enhancing jumpsuit. The broken bones in Grappler’s arms and legs helped. Rade leaped off the mech and set him down in the snow.

A large piece of metal protruded from the center of the soldier’s chest. It had pierced his suit, but the internal pressure formed a seal, saving his life. But not for long: according to his vitals, the internal injuries were severe. The shrapnel had plunged deep into his chest cavity.

Rade retrieved the medkit from the storage compartment of his own Titan and initiated a flow of analgesic into Grappler’s body using the plug-in slots above the glove area of the jumpsuit. He considered having the suit inject another dosage of its built-in stimulant, but that would likely only prolong the suffering. Rade wanted to ease Grappler’s passage to the other side, in whatever way he could.

“Aren’t you going to help him, boss?” Bender said.

Rade shook his head. “There’s nothing I can do. Check his vitals.”

“But you have to try,” Bender said.

Rade pressed his lips together. Bender was right. Rade had to try.

The first thing, then, was removing that fragment.

Rade grabbed several SealWraps from the medkit, which he could use to create a self-sealing funnel around the entry wound, and set to work.

“Caylee,” Grappler said suddenly, opening his eyes behind his faceplate. They were wide, and stared off into space.

“Grappler, it’s me,” Rade said. “Rage.”

“I can’t do it anymore, Caylee,” Grappler said.

Rade smiled sadly. “You can, Grappler. Don’t you quit on us.” He worked faster.

“I... I’m not strong enough for the Teams. I thought I was. But I’m not. I’m going back to the regular Navy. I’m a liability here, like the instructor says. I’m going to tap out.”

“No,” Rade said. “Don’t you dare. You’re an asset. The greatest asset we have. We need you.”

Grappler shook his head behind his faceplate. “I can’t do it. I’m sorry, Caylee.” He struggled to lift his right hand for several moments, but then his arm dropped.

Grappler looked at his hand uncertainly. “The gavel, it feels so heavy. I think I might need the Weavers. Can you help me lift it?”

Rade momentarily paused in what he was doing and grabbed him by the shoulders. “I told you already, you’re not going to quit.”

Grappler stared right through him. The injured soldier finally raised his glove after what seemed extreme effort—with the broken bones, the suit had to be doing most of the work. He flicked his arm thrice, gently touching Rade’s helmet each time. Tapping out.

Grappler’s hand dropped forcefully. His eyes remained opened behind his faceplate, but his vitals flatlined.

Rade mechanically disconnected the IV tubing and SealWraps, coiled them up, placed them in the medkit, and returned the whole thing to the storage closet of his mech.

When he returned, Lui, having ejected from his mech, was openly weeping above Grappler’s body. “He never told us how he got his callsign.”

“We can’t leave his body here on this alien world,” Manic said. “It isn’t right.”

“No, it’s not,” Rade said. “I’ll carry him.”

With Lui’s help, Rade hauled the body into the passenger seat of his mech and secured it. He didn’t want to dwell upon the gravity of what had happened. Grappler was the first man to die while under his command. Rade needed to stay focused on getting the rest of his team out of this alive.

Mindful of the ever-present radiation, he returned to his shielded cockpit; the hatch sealed behind him and the inner actuators pressed into his body. He paused for a few moments, kneeling there, staring at the broken mech that had held Grappler.

I can't lead them. I'm not cut out for this.

He stood to his full height. The act seemed to snap him out of his self-doubt and grief.

"Let's find Facehopper," Rade said. "We'll head due west, and come at the nuked city from a different vector. More from the southwest, than southeast."

He relayed his planned course to the others.

"That'll add two hours," Tahoe said.

"I know," Rade said. "But with luck we'll avoid any other patrols they send this way. Let's move. Bender, you're on point. Tahoe, drag."

The party started on its way, heading due west through the snow in single file. Rade took his place in the middle of the formation.

"Boss," Tahoe said a few moments later. There was a strange urgency to his tone. "Keelhaul."

Rade glanced at the overhead map. Keelhaul's dot was far behind the others; he hadn't joined the formation. Tahoe was waiting for him.

Rade turned around. He realized Keelhaul was still standing in front of the ruin of Grappler's mech.

"Keelhaul," Rade said. "We don't have time to grieve. If we stay here, he died for nothing. We have to push on. Let's go."

"It was my fault," Keelhaul said quietly over the comm.

"What are you talking about?"

"It was talking to me," Keelhaul said.

"What? Who?"

"The robot," Keelhaul said.

Rade spoke uncertainly. "How could it be talking to you?"

"I don't know," Keelhaul said. "But then again, I guess I do."

"No," Rade said. "You were cleared for duty months ago. And again last week, like the rest of us. Clean bill of health. The nano-machines were completely removed from your head when the Implant was excised."

"That's what I thought, too," Keelhaul said. "Apparently the scientists were wrong."

Rade hesitated. "Are you sure it was the robot that spoke to you? Not some glitch that caused phantom sounds from your local AI? Or a stress hallucination induced by a combination of the battle and strict food rationing?"

"Positive," Keelhaul said. "This was no local AI, or hallucination. I saw the same colors in my head, and heard the same tones that I did while aboard the alien ship. That same pulsating, machine-like data. They've got me, boss. Definitely got me. Grappler was wrong. He said he was the liability. But I'm the liability. I can't go with you anymore."

"You're not a liability," Rade said. "We're certainly not leaving you here."

"But how can you trust me? Who knows how much of my brain has been converted by now?"

Rade glanced at the Titans closest to him. "How the hell is this even possible? He was *cleared*."

"He must have had only one or two nano-machines left in his head," Lui said. "I can see the scientists overlooking them. It would be like trying to find a particle of sand in the middle of the brain. They were obviously latent all this time. Something must have activated them."

"Considering that we've landed on their homeworld," Manic said. "I'm not surprised they'd reactivate. The kiddies have come home."

"Keelhaul's right," Bender said. "We can't take him with us. Not if his presence gives us away."

"But you don't know if it was Keelhaul who gave us away back there," Rade said.

"Why don't you ask him when those colors appeared in his head?" Bender said. "Before or after the attack."

"Keelhaul?"

"After," Keelhaul said. "I think it was trying to convince me to help it."

"There you go," Rade said.

"But who's to say the robot hadn't detected its little friends beforehand?" Bender argued. "And only decided to communicate when we unleashed hell on its ass?"

"We've never had our positions compromised in the past from having Keelhaul with us..." Rade said.

“But as Lui said, they were latent all this time,” Bender countered. “If they’ve activated now, and begun taking over his brain, he is definitely a liability.”

Rade sighed. He knew Bender was right.

Crisis after crisis.

“I’m going to have to ask you to give up control of your mech, Keelhaul,” Rade said. “I’m programming the AI of your jumpsuit to keep you sedated.” He dismounted his mech, opened the storage compartment, and retrieved the medkit. “I’ll have it periodically inject something to reduce your heart rate and core body temperature. Hopefully that will slow down the infection. Meanwhile, the AI of your Titan will man the mech for the duration of the mission. When we get home, I’ll hand you over to the scientists. Let’s hope they’ve figured out a way to reverse the process by then.”

“I understand,” Keelhaul replied. He sounded forlorn. Like Rade, he knew quite well what his chances were. There was little hope: so far the scientists had made no headway in reversing the spread of the nano-machines in an infected brain.

“How do we know sedating him is enough?” Bender said. “Maybe the nano-machines can still communicate regardless of whether the host is awake or not.”

“I can’t leave him,” Rade said.

Bender turned his Titan away. Rade thought he grumbled something over the line, but he didn’t catch the words.

Rade went to Keelhaul, who had already transferred control of the mech over to the AI, and was waiting in the open cockpit. Using the contents of the medkit, Rade swapped out the stimulant vials in Keelhaul’s jumpsuit with the necessary sedating agents.

“I’m sorry, Keelhaul,” Rade said as he secured the chemicals inside Keelhaul’s glove panel.

“No,” Keelhaul replied. “I’m the one who’s sorry. After all the risks you and the others took to rescue me from that alien ship, turns out it was all for nothing. I’m infected.” He spat the word.

“We’ll find a way to save you yet,” Rade said.

“Don’t bother.” Keelhaul shook his head behind the faceplate. “Grappler was my brother.”

“He was a brother to us all,” Rade said. “Just as you are our brother. Don’t be so hard on yourself. It wasn’t your fault. If you really are infected, then there was nothing you could have done.” He finished programming the AI. “Are you ready?”

“No,” Keelhaul said. “And I never will be. But go ahead.”

Rade smiled sadly, then activated the first injection.

Behind the faceplate, Keelhaul’s eyes widened. “Gah, is it supposed to hurt so much?”

Rade frowned. “It’s not supposed to hurt at all.”

“Then why...” Keelhaul’s head slid forward inside the helmet and he closed his eyes.

Rade checked his HUD. The soldier’s vitals remained stable, though his heart rate had slowed precipitously. But that was as planned.

“Sleep well, brother,” Rade said quietly. He loaded Keelhaul back into the mech—for the radiation shielding—and the cockpit sealed shut behind him.

The party marched west across the snow-covered plains, as Rade ordered.

“How are you holding up?” Tahoe transmitted to him over a private line at one point.

“I’m holding,” Rade replied.

“You know,” Tahoe said. “The place I rent near the base has a crazy big yard. A lot of green grass, and these pine trees like you wouldn’t believe, their branches just spreading across the property. Anyway, quite a few robins nest nearby. I usually don’t see them very much, except during a storm. That’s right, in the pouring rain, without fail the robins are out there in full force braving the downpour, hunting for worms driven up by the excess groundwater.

“My point is, you have to be willing to get wet if you want to eat. We all knew what we were in for when we signed up for this. We all knew that we or any of our brothers could die at any time. It comes with the job. We’ve come to terms with it. We expect it, even, though we like to tell ourselves we’re elite because of our training, as if that makes us invulnerable. As if it will somehow bar the cold fingers of death from ever reaching us. No amount of intense training can stave off bad luck, pure and simple. None of us blame you for what happened to Grappler. So don’t blame yourself.”

Rade chuckled. “If only it were so easy. A few words can’t magically turn a wrong into a right. Grappler was my responsibility. I feel I failed him somehow.”

“We all failed him,” Tahoe said quietly.

And then Rade suddenly remembered what it was like before he had become LPO. He remembered feeling responsible for the death of any of his brothers. Everyone felt that way. It was wrong of him to assume he was alone in his guilt, that his blame was somehow magnified merely because he was LPO.

Tahoe’s right. I can’t blame myself for bad luck. Nothing we can do but soldier on through it.



WHEN RADE JUDGED that the party had traveled far enough to the west, he turned his Titans north. Finally, after four hours, they neared the perimeter of the nuked alien city.

Though there was currently no snowstorm and thus visibility was high, Rade hadn't seen the city yet. However he knew it lay just ahead, because according to the overhead map the outskirts awaited in the valley beyond the next rise. But Rade still had his doubts about the accuracy of that map—or rather, his position as portrayed on it—despite the many correlating topography scans they'd performed while passing the mountain range to the south.

He was following Manic and Lui up the rise. The pair reached the top in turn and simply stood there, motionless in their mechs, gazing down at whatever sight awaited before them.

When Rade reached the summit, he knew immediately that the map coordinates were correct: below the land fell away and in the expansive valley before him slumbered the remains of the city.

He swept his gaze across the snow-covered remains, his eyes drawn to the tall crystalline structures that protruded from the drifts and formed a vague donut shape around the blast crater at the center. Though badly damaged, enough of those structures were intact to hint at the wondrous city that once was. The architecture seemed unlike anything he had ever seen. Snow-capped dodecahedrons, of multiple crystalline hues and sizes, dominated the skyline, but other large geometrical shapes were present as well: cones, rectangles, spheres, cubes. It was the kind of city a deranged mathematician might design, or maybe someone new to 3D printing.

None of those geometric buildings were perfect—chunks were missing on all of them, and the dodecahedral blocks that seemed to compose them jutted up from the surrounding drifts like chunks of meat floating in a white stew. Cones ended in abrupt fingers. Rectangles had become irregular pyramids. Large, snow-covered rubble mounds replaced entire city blocks.

Through it all there were few jagged edges—most of the structures looked like they had partially melted, with large globules of crystal frozen along the sides like solidified wax. The wind had blown the snowdrifts away from the bases of some buildings, revealing thick accumulations of those globules shining like glass.

Rade's gaze reached the center of the city, that donut hole where the devastation proved complete. Nothing remained standing—there weren't even any signs that buildings had even existed in those areas. Instead, multiple craters, broad and deep, marred the tundra. The bottoms were sheathed in snow, and the side walls were slanted cliffs of black glass.

Those craters had swallowed roughly seventy percent of the city. Near the northern horizon, Rade could see the valley carved by the digger nukes that had been dropped by the UC in an attempt to eliminate the underground tunnel that connected this city to the next one farther north.

The broken remnants of a geodesic dome that had apparently once enclosed the city curtained the outskirts in places. The glass panels of the intact sections were pentagonal, reminding him of the similarly-shaped tiles that coated the enemy ships. All of those panels showed signs of heat damage, with melted, solidified smears dripping down onto the lower sections.

Rade saw no signs of life anywhere, on any of the EM bands. That wasn't entirely unexpected: any living thing in the city during the attack would have been incinerated when the nukes dropped. He was expecting to spot at least a few UC troops, however. Perhaps even a forward operating base. Or maybe a couple of enemy units that had returned to the city in the aftermath. But there was absolutely nothing down there.

He zoomed in on the location where he was supposed to rendezvous with the chief, but the spot was obscured by some of the broken structures.

"Any sign of the distress signal that was supposed to be coming from the place?" Rade said.

"Nope," Fret replied.

"I'm going to try a general broadcast," Rade said. "Full signal. Assume a defensive formation."

Rade and the others spread out along the rise and buried themselves in the snow.

"Facehopper, do you read?" Rade attempted.

Nothing.

"To any members of the UC drop teams," Rade tried again. "This is LPO Rage of Alpha Platoon, MOTH Team Seven. We are here to render assistance."

Still no answer. He half expected an attack to come, maybe in the

form of a missile, but the city remained dead quiet below, as did the plains behind them.

Rade split the squad into two fire teams and initiated bounding overwatch. The first Titan fire team burrowed into the snow while the second deployed ballistic shields and advanced, wading through the drifts in a zigzag pattern. When the second fire team reached one hundred meters out, they dove into the snow, replaced shields with weapons, and allowed the first fire team to leapfrog them.

In that manner they made their way down the rise and into the valley. It wasn't as efficient as the single-file formation through the snow, but it was safer. The mechs were running in silent mode, but even so the crunch of each footfall in the drifts seemed loud to Rade's ears. When they reached the city, the structures would further muffle the sounds, and obfuscate the direction to any listeners.

Halfway down the valley, night came to the planet. It made no difference on the thermal spectrum, but visible light was reduced to about fifteen percent of previous levels. It probably should have been closer to zero with that overcast sky, but a subtle glow emanated from the crystalline buildings ahead, and the dim illumination reflected from the snow. The different colors invoked a kind of amusement park atmosphere, and Rade had to remind himself that they were stepping into a war zone, not a funhouse. He didn't allow any of his men to activate the headlamps of their Titans.

"Jerry, how are we doing on radiation levels?" Rade asked the AI of his Titan.

"I'm detecting external readings of 2.0 mSv per minute," Jerry returned. "Or four times the previous levels. Though that is still within acceptable parameters of the armor."

"Let me know if that changes."

Eventually the two fire teams passed through the remains of the enclosing geodesic dome and entered the ruined city proper. Up close, those intact, glowing structures literally towered above them, reaching into the sky. Even in his Titan Rade felt small. Once again he felt that the mech had been misnamed.

We're not Titans. We're ants.

He thought of the creature from the methane lake and the giant robot from the plains, and the memories only reinforced the feeling.

As he advanced, he realized the sides of the structures that faced the blast crater did not glow, and were invariably colored black. The sight helped ground him, and reminded him, along with the broken dodecahedral blocks, that the enemy was not invincible.

Rade continued to employ bounding overwatch in the murk, and the two fire teams crossed the untouched snow, alternately taking cover in whatever was available to them: the alleyway formed by two structures, or behind a collapsed wall, or inside the snowdrifts themselves.

They came upon the wreckage of a small dodecahedral craft at one point, smoldering beside one of the structures it had evidently crashed into.

“I wonder if that’s the same craft we saw out on the plains?” Manic said.

“It very well could be,” Rade replied.

They continued onward.

Tahoe was in charge of the lead fire team. A few streets past the crashed ship, Tahoe abruptly stopped his team twenty meters after leaving cover.

“What is it?” Rade sent.

“There’s a path here between the buildings,” Tahoe said. “And not just any path. The snowdrifts have been pressed right down, as if an army came this way.”

Tahoe and his team sheltered beside the path, allowing Rade and the second fire team to approach. It was true. A veritable road had been pressed into the drifts. The center was compressed into snowpack four meters wide, while at the edges individual footprints could be seen: some could have belonged to Centurions, others mechs and larger entities, but Rade couldn’t say for certain whether it was members of the UC who had created the trail, or the enemy, or a mix of the two. Definitely a whole lot of troops had passed that way, if not an army like Tahoe had said.

The path wound between the structures to the north, vanishing around a curve. To the south, the trail led to the outskirts of the city, where it climbed the rim of the valley before also vanishing from view.

Rade was reluctant to take the snowpack route; one of the core tenets drilled into him from his training was stealth. So instead he ordered his men to turn onto a side street between the structures, where the snow drifts were still unblemished, and continued toward the target coordinates.

It turned out that the snowpack trail mirrored their route, and the two fire teams had to occasionally alter their course to avoid coming too close to it. Soon avoiding it became difficult: the trail had expanded, with the snowpack extending into the streets beyond. The expansions weren't as densely packed or as thick as the main route, and many discernible footsteps lined the edges.

The road less traveled.

The only way to truly avoid the expanding path was to retreat the way they had come, loop back, and approach from the side. Something that Rade was unwilling to do, considering that they were so close to the rendezvous point. So he continued.

And then the squad arrived at the dead bodies.

Rade realized something was wrong when Bender, the point man in his fire team, abruptly halted. Bender's Titan stood beside a large lump that protruded from the snowpack in the dim light.

"What now?" Rade said.

"Boss, better look at this," Bender replied.

Fearing the worst, Rade switched to Bender's viewpoint. He was relieved when that lump proved to be not a Titan from Alpha Platoon, but one of the "hornheads," readily identifiable by the three horns protruding from its face and the bony frill behind its neck.

Bender rotated his head so that Rade was looking forward: he saw more of the furry bodies scattering the route all along the snowpack. None of the corpses were buried in snow, Rade noted. Which meant they had died after the last blizzard. All of them showed signs of physical trauma—some lay in pools of blood, others were maimed, others had their heads twisted at obscene angles.

"Looks like Alpha passed this way," Bender said grimly.

Rade switched back to his own point of view and glanced at his HUD.

"According to the map, the rendezvous point is just ahead, past the screen of buildings," Rade said. "Lead the way."

As the fire teams proceeded, the dead bodies became denser, filling the streets. Damaged humanoid robots, of a new type Rade had never seen before, joined the corpses. The golden-hued metal bodies vaguely reminded him of Centurions with those cylindrical limbs and round joints, but the faces... the faces were what got him. They were meticulously crafted to mimic a human being's, down to the skin color. Seeing those incongruous faces tacked onto the robotic heads caused a chill to shoot down Rade's spine. It was downright creepy, if not macabre. And while each one of the visages had different features, the Sino-Korean traits they shared were unmistakable. With a shudder, Rade wondered if he was looking at the alien endgame—the final result after the nano-machines completely converted a human being.

When the fire teams emerged from the screen of buildings it was to

discover bodies piled up everywhere. Facehopper had evidently made some sort of stand there, with his back to one of the broad craters the nukes had vaporized into the tundra at the city center.

“Radiation levels have increased fourfold to 8.0 mSv per minute,” Jerry intoned. “The armor is no longer effective. The drip-feeds from your anti-rad subdermals are protecting your bodies, for now.”

“Bender, check it,” Rade said.

Bender waded and shoved his way forward through the piles of alien dead. Most of the corpses reached up to his chest area, though some were stacked to twice the height of his Titan.

Finally he reached the edge of the crater. According to the map, Bender had aligned his Titan with the rendezvous point.

“Nothing here.”

“What about in the crater?” Rade asked.

Bender peered over the edge.

Rade switched to his viewpoint but saw only more bioengineered bodies down there, half-buried in the snow.

Bender turned away. “Nope. You know my ass is getting fried by radiation out here, right?”

“Get back.”

“Don’t know why the chief would pick such an irradiated spot to meet,” Fret said.

“My guess is,” Rade said. “He didn’t know. One thing fleet neglected to do was give us a radiation map of the area.”

“Probably because they knew we wouldn’t go on the mission if we knew how bad it really was down here.”

“Oh we knew it was bad,” Bender said, returning to the screen of buildings. “We dropped forty nukes on the place. How could we *not* know?”

“Not looking forward to the bone marrow and microvilli transplants,” Tahoe said.

“The radiation isn’t that bad,” Rade said.

“No,” Tahoe agreed. “Though if we stay here too long, it will be.”

“I thought I just detected a ping,” Fret said. “It was very weak.”

“Can you pinpoint it?” Rade said.

Fret didn’t reply.

“Fret?”

“I’m waiting for the damn thing to repeat,” Fret said. “They must have set the interval really high.”

Fret waded out into the bodies. He had one hand extended in front of him, and he swept it to and fro as he advanced.

“See, Bender?” Manic taunted. “Fret isn’t afraid of the radiation.”

“Yeah,” Bender replied. “He never was too bright.”

Fret closed with the edge of the crater and proceeded alongside it.

“The interference from the radiation isn’t helping,” Fret said.

“Maybe don’t walk so close to the edge, bro,” Bender said.

“Probably a good idea.” Fret moved away from the crater, back into the heaped bodies.

He paused, then fished through the nearest pile, bringing out one of the dead so that it lay on top. He fired his cobra into the hornhead, slicing open its innards.

“Didn’t know you were hungry,” Bender commented.

“Don’t think we could digest that even if we wanted to,” Lui said.

“Not like you, huh Lui?” Manic said. “We all know your foodie stomach is a machine.”

“You know what the definition of a foodie is, right?” Lui said. “I’d never eat that shit.”

Fret plunged his hand into the incision and produced a small cylindrical transmitter. “Good hiding place.”

“Is there a message or not?” Rade asked.

“There is,” Fret replied. “Polyphasic encryption again. I think my private key will work. One second.”

A moment later Facehopper’s voice came over the comm. “As you might have guessed, we had a bit of trouble here. Least of all from the radiation. We had to move. Meet us here, instead.”

A location transfer request appeared on Rade’s HUD.

“I’ve already scanned it for viruses,” Fret said.

“Kind of you,” Rade said. *Though entirely unnecessary.* Sometimes he wondered if he’d ever get used to the overprotection and pampering that came with being an LPO.

Rade accepted the request and a new flashing beacon appeared on the map, about five kilometers to the west, though still within the city limits according to the map.

Rade dispatched the waypoint to their Implants.

“Are we sure that message was authentic?” Manic asked.

“The keys matched up,” Fret said. “Has to be authentic.”

“It could have been recorded under duress,” Manic said. “For all we know, the chief is now an alien host.”

“Obviously we’re going to have to take every precaution as we continue,” Rade said. “Be vigilant now more than ever, people. We are on an alien homeworld, after all. In the heart of one of their cities. Sure, we nuked it, but apparently that’s only pissed them off more than anything else.” He surveyed his Titans. His brave, loyal brothers. Then he nodded to himself. “Move out. Bounding overwatch. Same fire team designations. Bender, lead the way.”

As they advanced, leapfrogging each other across the snowpack streets, the bodies began to thin out once more.

The second fire team was making its way forward when Rade, hidden behind a pile of rubble with the first team on overwatch, spotted movement in a side street between some of the nearby structures.

“Fire team two take cover,” Rade said. “I’ve got movement.”

Rade glanced at the overhead map to confirm that the second fire team had indeed halted and taken shelter, then he zoomed in on the side street where he had spotted the motion. There: more of those humanoid robots with the Sino-Korean faces jogged past in rigid formations. Carrying wicked looking rifles, they were headed in the direction of the crater. He glanced that way and his gaze drifted toward the top of the valley. He could see more motion in the hills there as companies of enemy units fanned out, bioengineered creatures and robots alike.

Perhaps it had been a bad idea to make that general broadcast up there.

Good thing we came to the city from an unexpected direction.

When the nearby robots had jogged past, Rade asked Jerry: “Is it safe to communicate between Titans? Or will we give ourselves away?”

“Local communications over the adhoc network formed between Implants should be fine,” Jerry said. “Due to the limited range. But I recommend against using the more powerful comm nodes in the Titans. With all of these structures in the way, the enemy will have difficulty pinpointing your location even with triangulation sensors, but why risk it?”

“This is a test message,” Rade sent to his brothers via Implant. “Do not reply.” He kept an eye on the retreating patrol through the buildings, but none of the robots faltered or otherwise gave any indication that they had heard the transmission.

Rade glanced at his overhead map. The icons that represented his men returned low ping times, which meant the Implants had been exchanging positional information all that time anyway: if the enemy could listen in to the local band, those robots would have detected them already.

“Looks like we can communicate safely with our Implants,” Rade said. “But avoid the use of comm nodes. Unless you want to bring those patrols down on us.”

“We *are* here to exterminate them,” Bender said. “In case you forgot.”

“We are,” Rade agreed. “But given the numbers of enemy units I’m seeing up there, it looks like they’re the ones more likely to be doing the exterminating, than us.”

“I don’t know about that,” Bender said. “It looks like the chief handed them their asses on a silver platter back there...”

“Maybe,” Rade said. “But there’s a reason why we haven’t found any other landing parties out here, and that reason is most likely the overwhelming enemy numbers. My priority at the moment is to find the chief.”

“On the plus side, I guess sedating Keelhaul actually worked,” Manic said. “Those nano-machines in his head kept quiet about our positions.”

“I’m starting to think more and more that he only experienced a stress hallucination back there,” Tahoe said. “Triggered by the intensity of that fight.”

“I have to keep him sedated,” Rade said. “You know that, Cyclone. To be on the safe side. Besides, we were in plenty of stressful situations in our last deployment, if you recall, and he never had an hallucination then.”

“I know.”

“It might not have actually been Keelhaul’s fault that the robot attacked us on the plains,” Lui said. “After all, here we have actual structures to hide behind. On those plains we were basically lying out in the open on that outcropping, covered only in snow. I don’t need to tell you how many ways you can detect something hiding under a snowdrift. We’ve talked about

this before...”

“Okay that’s enough for the moment,” Rade said. “Let’s have some quiet on the comms, please.”

Rade waited until he was sure the enemy patrol was out of earshot—he added on an extra two minutes to account for the sensitivity of robotic hearing, factoring in that the crunch of the Titan footfalls weren’t all that soft on the snowpack in the first place—and then he and the others advanced, continuing their bounding overwatch formation. Over time, the dead bodies dwindled completely so that soon the streets were empty save for the compressed snow.

In a few blocks, the crystalline structures gave way to squat, closely packed stucco buildings that he hadn’t seen from the vantage point at the valley top. Those buildings had rectangular doors, arched windows, and “mansard” roofs with the four sloping sides preferred by the Sino-Koreans. All of them were damaged in some way, of course; most of the windows were broken, and there were no curtains. Many of the homes were burnt out husks. Bare asphalt painted with dividing lines occasionally peeked out from the windblown drifts next to the snowpack, as did the wreckages of a few rotor crafts. It reminded Rade of a wintry Chinatown neighborhood on Earth. After a bombing.

Perhaps the aliens had designed the place to comfort the newly converted human hosts they had brought to the homeworld. The “human quarter.” Rade wondered how many such neighborhoods had existed in the city before the nukes arrived.

A little oasis of humanity in an alien city.

The buildings didn’t glow like the crystalline structures, so the area was cloaked in shadow. Rade preferred that. He switched to the thermal band as Bender led the way.

Rade’s fire team was on overwatch when Tahoe’s neared the new coordinates. Fret, the point man of Tahoe’s team, halted at the precise spot marked on the map. Fret crouched, scanning the street and the surrounding buildings with his cobra in one hand, and his shield the other, while the remaining Titans of his fire team assumed support positions.

“Nothing here, boss,” Fret said.

Something leaped down in front of Fret, landing with a loud crunch on the snowpack only five meters from his Titan. On the thermal band, it

looked like a big, red smear.

Rade glanced at his overhead map. The newcomer was represented by a red dot. Not the friendly blue...

The tango straightened up, standing to its full height; its smudge resolved enough for Rade to catch a glimpse of weapon turrets locked into place upon large robotic hands.

Rade aimed the targeting reticle of his cobra over the smear's center of mass. He knew that those providing overwatch with him were doing the same. He kept the video feed from his main camera piped into his other eye to maintain battlefield awareness—he saw Fret bring his shield to bear and crouch behind it. The others in Tahoe's fire team out there similarly swiveled their bodies toward the tango and shielded themselves.

Rade knew he should have unleashed the cobra already if he wanted to bring down the newcomer, but something didn't add up.

"Hold your fire!" Rade said. "It would have shot you down already if it meant to attack."

"I thought it was you." A barely audible voice floated to Rade from outside. He jacked up his external volume.

"Trace?" Fret said over the comm.

"The one and only," came the muffled voice.

Rade switched to Fret's point of view to get a better look at the heat smear.

"Fret, can you get closer?" Rade said.

Fret stood up and cautiously approached. The soldier switched to the visual band; when he was two meters away the exposure compensation converted the dim outline into a recognizable figure in the dim light.

It was another Titan mech.

"Fret, pipe me in to your external speakers," Rade sent.

"Done," Fret replied.

"What the hell are you doing, Trace?" Rade said. "We nearly shot you down."

"I was calling to you," Trace answered. "Why didn't you answer me?"

"Fret, did you hear him?" Rade asked.

"No," Fret said.

"You might have tried the communication band," Tahoe said. "You have your external speakers set to such a low volume, our footfalls were probably louder. You're not showing up as a friendly on the overhead map

either by the way...”

“Chief’s orders,” Trace said. “No Implants, or comm nodes. You’re going to have to shut down both before I can take you to him. The external networking portions, anyway.”

“Facehopper isn’t here?” Rade said.

“He’s here, but not at this precise spot,” Trace said. “I’m on lookout.”

“How did you know it was us?” Fret asked.

“I recognized the Alpha Platoon insignias scratched into your chest plates,” Trace said.

“Oh.”

There were no such insignias of course.

“Obviously it was you,” Trace said. “Since no other Titan models were part of the drop team.”

“But how could you see us in this dim light?” Fret said. “When we couldn’t recognize you worth a damn, even after you leaped down?”

“I’ve been overwatching your approach from this rooftop for a long time,” Trace said. “I saw your mechs pass in and out of the shadows from several streets away.”

“Doesn’t bode well for any enemy snipers watching us out here,” Lui said.

“Come on,” Trace said. “I’ll take you to Facehopper. But please, shut off the adhoc networking portions of your Implants. It’s far too easy for the enemy to track us otherwise. All they have to do is close to within fifty meters and then their own Implants handshake with ours and we appear as friendlies on their overhead maps. We tried Snakeoil’s Node-jammer, but all it did was further alert them to our presence. So shut off the Implants in your heads, and disable the comm nodes in your Titans. Please.”

“Do as he says,” Rade sent. “Going forward, we communicate via external speakers only. Low volume. Boost the sensitivity of your external microphones.”

Rade watched as he lost connection to every member of the squad in turn, and when he was the only one left, he too disabled the adhoc networking portion of his Implant, maintaining local connections only so that he could preserve his link to the Titan. Additionally, he disabled the mech’s comm node.

Trace led them along that street, keeping close to the building walls,

until he arrived at a larger building in the human quarter. A warehouse of sorts.

Rade scanned the nearby rooftops and spotted what appeared to be the outlines of laser pulse platforms. He wondered what range trigger the automated weapons had been set to. Not too close, or a nearby enemy patrol would be alerted to their presence when the platforms opened fire. And not too far, or an incoming attacker would more readily breach the perimeter. It was a delicate balance; he suspected hidden sentries resided on the rooftops with their hands on the overrides, ready to make a judgement call if an enemy patrol came by.

Inside the warehouse, Rade and his men discovered the remainder of Alpha Platoon, along with several Marine infantry units wielding laser rifles and clad in bulky, radiation armored jumpsuits. The members of Alpha resided on the left side of the warehouse, while the Marines sat in clusters on the right, seated around strange, glowing crystals with pentagonal facets jutting forth from dodecahedral bases; those crystals were the secondary source of illumination in the warehouse, after the headlamps. Marine combat robots stood guard near the walls, carrying heavy assault weapons slung over their shoulders.

The Alpha Platoon members remained inside their mechs, most likely because their jumpsuits didn't have the same radiation protection as those of the Marines, and they relied upon the Titan armor to protect them.

More laser pulse platforms had been raised along the inner perimeter of the warehouse, in between the combat robots, and the turrets tracked each Titan as it entered. Obviously the platforms had been programmed for visual recognition, because without active Implants or comm nodes the new Titans wouldn't have otherwise been recognizable as UC.

"Facehopper?" Rade said. Without the adhoc network of his Implant, he couldn't tell which of the Titans contained the chief.

"I'm here." A mech lounging in the middle of Alpha raised a hand. "The rest of us are here, too. Mauler, TJ, Bomb, Skullcracker, Snakeoil, and Harlequin. And you already met Trace."

"Glad to see you all made it," Rade said.

"Not sure made it is the right word," Bomb said. "Surviving, seems more suiting."

"I can't tell you how much I've missed your pretty faces," Bender

said.

“Too bad you can’t see our faces at the moment,” Snakeoil said.

“Probably a good thing,” Bender said, the irony continuing to ooze from his words. “I wouldn’t want to tarnish the memory.”

“We’ve missed your sexy face, too,” TJ said.

“Yeah, Bender is pretty hot,” Manic said. “He’d be popular in prison.”

“Not as popular as your ass,” Bender said. “Literally. By the way, who are the chicks?”

Rade glanced at the Marines. He zoomed in on the helmets and moved his gaze from face to face. He thought at first that Bender was only being sarcastic, but the Marines really were all women.

“You’re looking at a couple of rifle platoons from B Company, 1st Battalion 37th Marines,” TJ said. “The all-women battalion otherwise known as *The Storming Amazons*. And don’t ever let them hear you call them chicks. Or bitches.”

“Too late, Dirt Astronaut,” one of the women said. “We already heard.”

“That’s Tamara Luxe, by the way,” Mauler said. “Their sergeant.”

“No major with them?” Rade asked.

Luxe shook her head behind her faceplate. “We lost our major at the drop site.”

“What about the Centurions?” Rade said, indicating the combat robots that sat behind the infantry.

“A weapons platoon from the same company,” TJ said.

“No HQ and Service company members?” Rade asked.

Facehopper was the one who answered. “The HQS company was downed at the drop site, too. The enemy captured the comm node.”

Rade studied the Marines for several moments: “How do we know they aren’t infiltration units, like the Marines who turned on us at Radiance?”

“How do we know *you* aren’t?” Luxe retorted.

“Her Amazons fought beside us at the drop site,” Facehopper said. “If they are infiltration units, they would have had to kill their own kind to gain our trust.” Facehopper paused. “You’re missing a Titan.”

“Grappler didn’t make it.” Rade tilted slightly so that the dead body of his passenger could be seen.

Facehopper remained motionless for several moments, the gaze of his mech fixed on that passenger seat.

“Did we lose anyone else?” the chief finally asked.

“I have Keelhaul sedated,” Rade said. “He was showing signs of alien infection.”

“You have one of *them* with you?” Luxe said, standing. Other Marines stood up, too. They slid down the laser rifles from their shoulders but kept them pointed at the floor. For the moment.

Facehopper extended a big metal palm toward them. “Relax for a second, Sergeant.” He turned toward Rade. “I thought Keelhaul was cleared for duty?”

“We all thought that.” Rade eyed the Marines uncertainly. “But apparently not. He claims the aliens were trying to communicate with him.”

“We’ve seen evidence they can communicate even when unconscious,” Luxe said.

“Maybe they can, for full hosts,” Rade said. “But he isn’t even a half host. As far as we know.”

“As far as you know...”

“We’ve encountered patrols,” Rade said. “We hid. Our positions weren’t discovered.”

She turned toward Facehopper. “I say we get rid of him.”

“No can do,” Facehopper replied. “Keelhaul stays with us. For as long as he doesn’t put the rest of us in danger, anyway.”

Luxe hesitated. For a moment Rade thought she was going to pull out her platoons and abandon them.

But then she sat back down. The Marines followed her example.

“If they find us,” she said. “I’m holding you and your men personally responsible.”

“I wouldn’t have it any other way,” the chief said.

Tahoe’s Titan stepped forward. “I have a question: what the hell are those?” The gaze of his mech was directed toward the multifaceted crystals the Marines sat about.

Rade was glad his friend was changing the topic of conversation, as the tension between the two units had been growing palpable.

“We don’t really know,” Facehopper admitted. “TJ thinks they’re data storage devices of some kind. They’re made of the same substance as the

crystalline buildings out there.”

“Data storage?” Tahoe said. “As in, alien archives?”

“Something like that,” TJ replied. “I’ve seen patterns in the crystal that remind me of the holographic imprinting techniques used in human storage tech.”

“But never mind that for now,” Facehopper said. “Rage. You said you passed enemy patrols on the way here?”

“We passed one, yes, but they didn’t notice us,” Rade said. “A bunch of them were swarming the top of the valley though, where I made my initial broadcast.”

“You’re talking to the south?”

“I made my broadcast at the overlook to the south, yes,” Rade replied.

“All of your Implants and comm nodes are turned off at the moment, right?” the chief asked.

“That’s correct.”

“But your Implants were still active when you hid from that one patrol?”

“Also correct.”

“How close did they pass?”

“No more than a hundred meters,” Rade told him.

Facehopper swiveled his Titan to regard the other members of Alpha. “Beyond the handshake range.”

“We should be safe,” TJ said.

“All right, mates,” Facehopper said. “It’s high time we left behind this irradiated, alien-infested dump for good. We’ll use the distraction Rage and his men provided to the south to our advantage.”

“I’ll obey, of course, but why not stay?” Fret said. “What’s the difference between hiding here and hiding on the plains?”

“We’ll be surrounded by fewer enemies, for one,” Facehopper said. “Every day more of the alien survivors return to this city. They’re regrouping. We disembarked from our starships far too soon. We should have waited a few days and pummeled them with a few more nukes, first.”

“But we’ll starve to death just the same out on the plains,” Fret said. “We have what, a day of food left? And I bet your Marines have even less.”

“We have two days of food,” Luxe replied. “And our oxygen runs out at the same time.”

“There you go,” Fret said.

“But what Luxe isn’t telling you,” Facehopper said. “Is that she knows where booster rockets fell.”

Rade perked up. “Booster rockets?”

“Yes,” Luxe said. “For our lost mech platoon.”

“Wish they would have dropped boosters for our own platoon,” Manic muttered.

“They probably did,” Harlequin said. “The senior command simply neglected to tell us where before we lost contact.”

“How can we be sure these Marine booster rockets will work with our Titans?” Rade said.

“The boosters utilize the standard ATLAS interface,” Luxe answered.

Rade felt somewhat sheepish. As LPO, he should have known that.

“Yeah, I’m not convinced that taking booster rockets up into orbit is a good idea,” Fret said. “You saw how easily we were shot down on the way here.”

“That’s what evasive maneuvers are for,” Facehopper said. “We launched from a hot LZ before outside Radiance, in case you forgot.”

Rade remembered that Radiance launch only dimly, because of the injury he had taken at the time. He did recall the evasive zigzagging performed by each Titan as they flew upwards into the sky. The G forces had been... unpleasant.

“I suspect the ground-to-air fire will be a little worse this time,” Fret said.

“The other option is to stay here and die,” Facehopper said.

Fret chuckled softly. “Stay here and die. Or launch and die. Well, I guess at least in the latter, we have a fighting chance.”

“Yes,” Facehopper said. “And you know that if there’s a fighting chance, we have to take it.”

“What I’m wondering,” Lui said. “Is why y’all didn’t go directly to the booster rockets the moment you found out about them.”

“What are you trying to say?” Trace said. “That we’re cowards? That we would abandon half our platoon without even giving them a chance to rendezvous with us?”

“No it’s a valid question,” the chief said. “Lui, we elected to come to this city first to see if there was any hope of completing the mission. And to

see if we could find you. But when we got here, and found ourselves faced with countless enemies, we quickly decided there was no way in hell we were completing the mission. The best choice seemed to be to return to orbit, and try to reconnect with the fleet. We decided we would wait one full day for you here, and if you didn't arrive by then we would head for the booster site, leave the planet, and return later to search for you."

"How much time until that full day expired?" Bender asked.

"You still had another forty-five minutes to go."

"We cut it kind of close, didn't we?" Manic said.

"You did." Facehopper stood up. "All right mates, let's help the Marines pack up these pulse platforms. I want to move in fifteen. Luxe, get your platoon ready."

TJ abruptly raised a halting hand. "Do you hear that?"

Rade listened. He heard a soft hum coming from outside. He recognized the noise immediately:

It was the sound made by a firing laser pulse platform as its turret revolved.

The Marines leaped to their feet. The combat robots swung their heavy weapons toward the entrance. Rade and the other Titans followed their lead.

The hums increased in volume as more of the rooftop platforms opened fire.

"Told you to get rid of your infected man," Luxe said.

Rade kept his cobra pointed at the twin doors of the entrance.

"Luxe, where are your scouts?" Facehopper asked.

"Should have already reported in."

That hum grew to a steady, low-pitched buzz, reminding Rade of a hornet's nest. He could hear shouts outside. And crunching in the snowpack.

A Marine sentry abruptly burst inside. Rade almost shot her.

"They're here," the Marine said.

As Rade watched, the warehouse door exploded inward. The Marine sentry who had just entered vanished in a pink mist. Rade was hurtled backward by the shockwave and smashed into another Titan, bringing them both to the floor.

The pulse platforms surrounding the inside of the warehouse began firing as hornheads rushed inside. The fur upon their reptilian bodies was jet black, like the night. There were too many for the platforms to take down, and some pushed through over the bodies of their comrades.

A Marine dashed forward, yelling something on her speakers as she unleashed her heavy laser gun. She felled two hornheads. A third broke past and impaled her on its horns.

Rade had clambered to his feet by then, as had Skullcracker—the pilot of the Titan Rade had collided with.

“Skullcracker, with me,” Rade said. The two of them positioned themselves between the attackers and the remaining Marines on the right side of the warehouse. The other Titans were assailing the incoming enemy with zodiacs and cobras from their positions on the left.

“Getting kinetic in here!” Mauler said over the din.

“The way I like it,” Bomb said.

“Didn’t someone have a theory that these things never attack at night?” Mauler asked, his voice straining as he fought.

“We’re not on Radiance anymore, bro,” Lui said. “They’re not cold-blooded.”

“You think?” Tahoe injected sarcastically.

“They always attack in waves,” Facehopper said. “They send the beasts in first to soften us up, and then the robots come after with their lasers. We’re going to have to retrograde.”

“Request permission to activate Implants and comms!” Rade fired his electrolaser into a hornhead at point blank range, and then shouted over the resulting thunder: “They know where we are already anyway!”

“Permission granted,” the chief replied. “Do it, mates!”

Rade activated his Implant with the mental command. The blue dots

of Rade's companions began to repopulate the overhead map as Marines and MOTHs alike reactivated their own embedded devices.

He bashed aside another hornhead and fired his cobra into the maw of the next.

"Storming Amazons, I want as many of you to load up into our passenger seats as you can," Facehopper said. "Two to a mech at least."

The hull sensors alerted Rade when two Marines jetted onto his rear seat.

"There's someone here already," a woman transmitted. The Implant identified her as Luxe herself.

"He's dead," Rade said.

"Fantastic," Luxe said. "Mind if we roll him off to make room for the living?"

"He stays," Rade said. "You'll just have to make do."

"This way!" Facehopper said. A waypoint appeared on the overhead map representing the inside of the warehouse. "Damn, but it's bloody good to have my Implant again."

Rade and Skullcracker covered the retreat of the Titans as the others made their way toward the far side of the warehouse, where the waypoint was located. They also covered the Centurions and those Marines who hadn't boarded any mechs.

He stepped backward slowly as he fought, occasionally glancing at the floor behind him via his rear camera—one of his nightmares was crushing some hapless Marine he didn't see. Sensors were supposed to warn him before such an occurrence happened, but he preferred not to rely on them overmuch.

He heard an explosion; it came from the far side of the warehouse behind him.

He launched a grenade into the latest knot of hornheads that had shoved past the pulse platforms, and then activated his aft camera to see what had happened.

The rear exit of the warehouse had blown inward and more hornheads were racing inside from that vector.

He returned his attention to the front.

A long, green, starfish-like organ abruptly wrapped around his right forearm, redirecting the aim of his electrolaser. He tracked the proboscis to

the snout of a hornhead two meters to his right.

Rade fired the cobra of his free hand into the organ, severing it before it could emit acid. He followed up by taking two steps forward and bashing his fist into the hornhead while unleashing the fully charged zodiac.

The already wounded creature was torn in half down the middle.

Two hornheads jumped on him, attempting to pull him down.

Tahoe and Skullcracker wrenched the beasts off of him, threw them to the ground, and slowly crushed their heads beneath their feet as they beat off more of the incoming beasts. Those bodies squirmed wildly underneath them, and the spiked tail of one of them tripped Rade.

“Damn it.” He got up, grabbed that tail halfway between the tip and the base, and swung it like a whip at the next two hornheads that presented themselves.

The pulse platforms began to fail as the hornheads overwhelmed the positions.

“Retreat!” Facehopper called over the comm.

Rade took that as his cue to hurry. He launched two more grenades, and as the body parts of the incoming creatures rained down satisfactorily, he turned around and sprinted. Tahoe and Skullcracker joined him.

He glanced at his overhead map. The remaining members of the platoon were clustered near the rear entrance, where they were smashing their way outside through a large swarm of red dots. Another group of red dots lurked beyond them, in the street outside—on the rooftops apparently. It could only be the second wave Facehopper had alluded to.

When Rade reached the others, he fought back to back with them: the Titans formed the outer layer of a nested defensive circle, the Centurions the middle layer, and The Storming Amazons who were still on foot, the center.

After a few moments the group had forced its way outside. The snowpack teemed with dead hornheads; more continually rushed in to replace the fallen.

“Shields in hand!” Facehopper said.

Rade activated his leftmost shield to protect the body of his Titan from any lasers and other ballistics, at the cost of not being able to use the cobra of that arm.

“Why aren’t the robot tangos taking part?” Lui said.

“Maybe they don’t want to harm their brethren?” TJ said. “We’ve

seen similar behavior before.”

As he fought, Rade glanced at one of the rooftops, and in the dim light saw that enemy robots were indeed perched there. And like Lui said, they weren’t firing.

“Chief, suggest we jet onto a nearby roof,” Rade said over a private line.

“Not yet,” Facehopper replied. “We’ll be in full view of those robots if we do.”

“But we have our shields...” Rade bashed aside a hornhead, broke off a long proboscis that had wrapped around his neck, and fired his electrolaser.

“We do,” Facehopper agreed. “But what’s to stop them from concentrating their fire on one of us? At this range, combined lasers will easily pass through a shield and into a cockpit. If the robot tangos won’t fire because of the bioengineered hordes surrounding us, then we use *them* as our shields!”

Apparently some of the Marines and Centurions in the center of the defensive formation had begun firing at the robots on the rooftops, because those red dots were beginning to wink out. Above the din, he heard the distant explosion of a grenade behind him, and two more of those rooftop dots winked out. But there were still a lot of them. At least thirty.

If they really wanted to kill us, Rade thought. They’d shoot right through their kin, combining their shots like Facehopper said.

But then again, if there was anything resembling a brotherhood among the aliens, they wouldn’t dare do such a thing. A MOTH would never sacrifice another MOTH simply to kill an enemy. Unless it meant saving the lives of other brothers. Which was why the alien behavior was so puzzling. Robots and hornheads were dying; it made some sense to sacrifice a few hornheads to spare the rest.

Unless the enemy had specific orders to capture the humans.

A Marine was dragged from Skullcracker’s passenger seat when one of the hornhead’s impaled her, and before Skullcracker could shoot it down, the hornhead severed her body into two halves.

So much for the capture theory. Though perhaps the enemy tangos had instructions more akin to: “capture as many of the humans as possible, and kill a few for sport along the way.”

Rade felt something latch onto his right forearm once again. As that

arm was drawn away by the external force of whatever had grabbed him, he rammed the upper edge of his shield into the neck of his current foe, half severing it.

He glanced at his arm. He had assumed another starfish-like proboscis had wrapped around him. Except that was no proboscis, but a black chain. It was secured to his arm by thick pincers.

He slammed the bottom edge of his shield down on it, attempting to sever the cord. His shield struck the snowpack, driving the chain into the slushy surface; the force of the blow resounded up into his arm. But a moment later he was dragged forward. The chain remained intact.

He followed its source to a nearby rooftop, where several humanoid robots crouched—the ones with the Sino-Korean faces. They held strange, harpoon-like weapons. Another robot launched one as he watched: a chain erupted toward Rade, tipped by pincers.

Rade shot up his shield in time, deflecting the blow.

A blur of motion crossed his vision. A second chain had fired from an adjacent rooftop, and its pincers had wrapped squarely around the forearm of his shield arm. Now both chains were pulling him away from the defensive circle.

“Guys...” Rade sent.

He wrenched at those chains, trying to arrest his motion, but his feet slowly slid along the snowpack. He saw that the robots had attached the harpoons to winch-like mechanisms, which were reeling him in. Those devices were too heavy for him to move, apparently, at least by pulling on the chains.

He retracted his shield and tried to point his weapons up at the things, but the clamps that secured the chains limited the range of motion of his mounts, and though he fired repeatedly, his aim was off just enough to miss the winches every time.

The hornheads used his incapacitation to redouble their attack. Rade kicked at them with his feet, putting his mixed martial arts training to use. Roundhouse kick. Front sweep kick. The Titan didn’t have the full range of motion as his actual human legs of course, but it was enough.

Then one of the hornheads plowed into him, tripping him so that the chains dragged him sideways across the snowpack. He tried to stand, but the hornheads pinned him.

“Luxe, a little help here...” Rade said.

Laser fire from behind took down the hornheads.

Luxe leaped onto the shoulder of his mech and ran down the arm. She aimed a blaster at the chain.

Before she could fire, another blur shot forward; pincers wrapped around her waist. She screamed, squirming as a chain reeled her onto a nearby rooftop. The other Marine with Rade tried to jet back in the direction of the defensive circle, but she too was similarly snagged.

Rade started to clamber to his feet, intending to kick away the next round of hornheads, but he tripped as the chains pulled him forward especially hard.

“Chief, in some trouble here,” he transmitted.

“We all are!” Facehopper replied.

Rade realized that chains were slashing through the air all around him as robots from the surrounding rooftops continually fired them.

He activated his jumpjets and whipped upward in an arc.

Humanoid robots leaped out of the way as he slammed into the roof panels. More chains came in, these ones clamping around his legs. One of those pincers struck him in the side, and the robot that shot it dove in, circling his body once. Rade tried to kick the robot, but his legs were being pulled taut. He heard metallic thuds coming from the cockpit region of the hull, and realized the robot was wrapping a chain around his midsection.

“Jerry, open up the cockpit,” Rade said urgently.

“The hatch is not responding,” the AI replied. “It appears to be blocked.”

Well, probably not a good idea to go out there anyway, given the rad levels.

Rade struggled further, but was soon held prostrate and spread-eagled one meter above the surface of the roof. He fired his jumpjets again, but he merely bobbed up and down like a fly caught in a spider’s web.

He tried activating the Lighter, but electrifying the hull had no effect on the chains, nor the robotic winches that held them—the flexible links were apparently non-conductive. He was out of shoulder-mounted missiles, and he couldn’t bring his grenade launcher or other weapons to bear. He fired a few times and downed one off-guard robot, but as mentioned, because of the way his mounts were restrained, he couldn’t bring the targeting reticles over the

winches that held him.

Three hornheads came forward. Positioning themselves outside of his line of fire, they attempted to physically remove the weapon mounts attached to his arms and shoulders. Though his Hellfire launchers were empty, one of the hornheads twisted the associated shoulder mounting precariously to the side. Rade activated his Lighter, and electrified that creature and the other two touching his mech. The hornheads fell away.

He heard an explosion from a nearby rooftop, followed by an unearthly squealing, and knew his brothers were still fighting out there even if they were restrained like him.

Three more hornheads approached him and struggled once more with his mounts. One of them incautiously stepped in front of his electrolaser, and Rade obliged the creature by unleashing a lightning bolt squarely into its midsection. The thing fell away, smoking. The others gave up a moment later.

“Not so easy to rip away the weapons of a Titan, is it bitches?” Bender transmitted.

More such comments came over the comm, telling Rade that most, if not all, of the platoon had been captured. He glanced at his overhead map—true enough, the blue dots of the Titans had relocated to the rooftops. They were stationary like his own, and surrounded by several red dots each.

Nearby hornheads stepped aside, making way for smaller box-shaped robots that carried blowtorches and laser saws.

The robots applied their cutting instruments to his mount points. Rade activated his Lighter, but it had no effect on the robots as they weren’t actually touching him. He struggled frantically, watching in horror as his weapons were systematically severed.

When it was done, the robots moved away, leaving him almost completely and utterly disarmed. He never felt so impotent, so helplessly under the power of someone else. He still had his blaster, attached to the utility belt of his jumpsuit, and a small laser rifle in the storage compartment of his mech, also meant for jumpsuit use, but those were pointless if he couldn’t leave his cockpit. He still had his Lighter, too, and retractable shields. Also useless.

Mercifully they had left his external camera intact, so when the cutting robots departed, he directed his lenses toward the platoon members on

the adjacent rooftops; he saw that the other Titans were similarly bound, and had also been stripped of their weapons. The Marines, restrained by single chains to their associated winches, had had their armaments confiscated, too.

The hornheads loaded the large winches onto four-legged pack animal robots that waited on the snowpack below; the mechs were dragged down with them, courtesy of the chains.

About the size of each Titan, those large pack robots reminded Rade of the elephantine ARAT I rescue units employed by the UC. Four pack robots were needed to transport every mech, one for each chain binding their limbs.

When every Titan and Marine was in place, the pack robots advanced toward some unknown destination. The robots coordinated their advance so that they moved in unison: those that held Rade kept to the four corners of his mech, ensuring that he remained prostrate and spread-eagled one meter from the ground.

On his overhead map he saw that the other mechs were arrayed in a single-file line ahead of him, with each Titan similarly surrounded by red dots at its four corners. More red dots followed the advance from the vantage of the adjacent rooftops, while the dots representing the remaining enemy tangos dispersed. Those latter took the confiscated weaponry with them.

Rade saw that only one pack robot was utilized for each Marine, who were ported at the head of the party. As for the Centurions, the UC combat robots had disappeared from the map entirely—either destroyed by the hornheads or gunned down by the second wave, no doubt.

“Um,” Bomb said.

“Yeah,” Bender said. “We’re in trouble.”

Rade stared forlornly at the overcast clouds above him as the pack robots ported him across the human-style neighborhood. The escorting robots leaped between the buildings, staying to the roofs; their numbers had diminished to only a few on either side. No hornheads were among them: the bioengineered creatures had moved on, although their howls could be heard occasionally in the night.

“If anyone has any ideas,” Facehopper transmitted over a platoon-wide private channel. “Speak up.”

“These robots are based on human tech, right?” Trace said.

“Mostly,” TJ said. “A mixture of UC and Sino-Korean variants, with some alien designs thrown into the mix.”

“Okay well, take these pack robots,” Trace said. “They look like glorified ARATs to me. Classic UC tech. You and Bender are our best hackers, TJ. If anyone can find a way to override these things, it’s you guys. Or maybe you can hack into the robots providing overwatch on the rooftops.”

“Trust me, I’ve been trying,” TJ said. “All of my remote connection attempts have been refused. I’ve tried a few buffer overflows and other zero days to force the connection, no good. *Niente*. If I can’t connect, I can’t even begin a privilege escalation attack.”

“Bender?” Trace said.

“No luck here,” Bender replied.

“Any other ideas?” Facehopper said.

Several moments of silence followed.

“We have no useable weapons,” Fret said. “We can’t eject from our cockpits. Our mechs are bound in chains. Just face it, we’re doomed.”

“I refuse to believe that,” Rade said. “At some point they’ll have to open up our cockpits if they want to get access to our bodies. And that’s when we’ll attack. Each of us carries a blaster strapped to our utility belts. We have laser rifles in our storage compartments that we can give to the Marines as well.”

“They use special Weaver-type robots equipped with long needles to inject their nano-machines, right?” Fret asked.

“That’s correct,” Rade responded.

“Well then,” Fret continued. “How do you know those needles of theirs can’t pass through our cockpits and into our helmets *while* we’re still in the mechs?”

“We’ve never seen it before,” Rade said. “And those would have to be some strong needles. They’ve always had to remove us from our jumpsuits and shave our heads before they could apply them in the past.”

“Sure,” Fret said. “But just because we haven’t seen it, doesn’t mean it doesn’t exist, as Lui likes to say. These aliens innovate just as fast as we do. Hell, they’d have to, given the number of us they’ve assimilated. You know what I would do if I were them? I’d switch out our O2 tanks. They know that when we’re in the cockpits, the external tanks on our mechs automatically take over from the jumpsuit supply. So switch out our O2 with something tainted. Throw in some kind of nerve agent. And after we’re all unconscious, *then* remove us from the mechs to introduce us to their nano-machine friends.”

“You know, you should probably be careful what you say over the comms,” Manic said. “There’s a good chance they’re listening in. Try not to give them any ideas or anything.”

“Afraid that can’t be helped at the moment,” Facehopper said. “It’s a risk we’re just going to have to take.”

“I doubt they’re listening,” TJ said. “Remember, we’re using a private channel with different encryption keys.”

“There you go,” Facehopper said. “So, any ideas other than waiting until they bring us to their den?”

“Speaking of their den,” Mauler said. “It’s probably going to have a life support environment. Something with an airlock. A radiation-shielded building. Or underground bunker of some kind.”

“I don’t know what you’re getting at,” Bomb said.

“I actually don’t either,” Mauler admitted.

“I know what you’re trying to say,” Skullcracker said. “Eventually, we’ll reach a choke point. Be it an airlock, or a tunnel. And they’ll have to load our mechs inside one by one. These pack robots won’t fit. That’s when we strike.”

“I agree it’s certainly something to watch for,” Facehopper said. “But I want a solution for an escape *now*. This den of theirs is going to be heavily

fortified. Probably surrounded by pulse platforms designed to shoot down any escapees. We'll have the best chances if we can break free before then. Especially with the small number of escorts they've assigned. So give me some options, mates."

The conversation ebbed and flowed in the coming minutes, with various untenable ideas bandied about between the MOTHs and Marines.

"What about we just keep struggling, and hope one of them slips and falls?" Manic said.

Rade pulled on his arm bindings, testing the validity of that idea. He noticed that the pack robots tilted toward him slightly when he did so. They moved inward a few steps before the servomotors in their long legs kicked in, whirring louder as the robots expended more energy to keep themselves in place. Rade noticed that when he ceased his resistance on one side, those robots would overcompensate afterward, altering the overall course a small amount. He realized he could steer them in that manner, at least a short distance. Not enough to make much difference on the wide thoroughfare however.

"Don't think they're going to slip and fall," Lui said. "And even if they do, it's not going to help us all that much. You forget there are robots on overwatch, waiting to fire their lasers at anyone who decides to misbehave. What we really need to do is find a way to rip away these chains trapping us in the cockpits. At least then we have a chance of fighting back with some real weapons."

Rade thought about those chains. He activated his external hull display, which showed an outline of his Titan from the front view. The restraints were indicated as dark bands across the arms and legs, and around the torso region, as determined by the hull sensors.

He realized that the chain wrapped around his chest was located near the lower portion of the cockpit hatch. Because of its relatively short length, it only looped once around his body, so in theory if he could apply enough pressure he might be able to slide the chain out of the way.

"Jerry, try again to open the hatch," Rade told his AI.

He heard a clicking sound but the hatch didn't move.

"Retract the cocoon," Rade said. "And engage emergency internal lighting. I'm going to give you a hand."

The inner actuators retracted and Rade dropped to the bottom of the

cockpit. Blue HLEDs provided a gentle background glow. He considered activating his headlamp but if succeeded in opening the hatch, the light would only draw the enemy to him.

“Open it again on my mark. Mark.” He threw himself at the inside of the hatch as it clicked. The door didn’t budge. “Again. Again.”

He repeatedly hurled his shoulder into the hatch but it was no use.

He accessed the profile view of the Titan once more and determined that the chain had indeed remained stationary.

On the display, he rotated the mech around to the back side. He saw the chain was positioned neatly between a pair of dorsal jumpjet nozzles and Trench Coat outlets. If he could shift that chain slightly, moving it up or down over either of them...

“Jerry, one more time, open the hatch on my mark. Mark.” He rammed himself at the hatch. Again. He kept his eye on the display, but the chain never shifted.

Finally, after five attempts, he stopped. Breathing hard, he surveyed the display once more.

“What am I missing...” Then he realized something. “Jerry, highlight the location of the air brakes for me, would you?”

The rear view outline updated with the requested information.

The air brake panels overlapped the chains, with the majority of the retracted wings located just above it.

Promising...

“Deploy aft air brakes,” Rade ordered.

“Deploying aft air brakes,” Jerry replied.

He heard the sound of the brakes activating, but according to the display they didn’t open entirely, and had jammed up against the chain.

“Retract, and deploy again,” Rade instructed.

The brakes closed and opened. Still the chain prevented the full deployment. Its links had actually slid down slightly on the back, according to the display, but had become snagged upon the upper portion of the jetpack nozzle.

“Again. Again.”

He repeatedly had the AI redeploy those brakes, and after three tries the wings finally snapped out; the chain slid down so that a few of its links were located directly over two of the jumpjet nozzles.

Rade asked the AI: "Can you perform a materials analysis on the foreign chain segments located below nozzles 1B and 2B?"

"I can..." Jerry replied.

"Give me the melting point, if possible," Rade said.

"Estimated melting point: one thousand five hundred Kelvin."

"If we fire jumpjet 2B on slow burn, fuel conservation mode, how high can we heat the chain links crossing it?" Rade asked.

"One thousand, eight hundred Kelvin."

Perfect.

"But we will expend approximately eighty percent of remaining fuel," the AI added.

"Even with the one nozzle?" Rade said.

"Even with the one," Jerry replied.

"How long until we melt through?" Rade said.

"Given the current materials analysis, approximately one minute, twenty three seconds," the AI replied.

"Okay," Rade said. "Finally, what are the radiation levels like out there? How long can I survive in my jumpsuit?"

"It isn't a question of how long you can survive," the AI replied. "But how long before you receive a fatal dose."

"Fine, how long before I receive a fatal dose?"

"At the current levels, you have forty-five seconds," Jerry said. "The anti-rads embedded in your skin will protect you until then. But anything beyond that and the subdermals will oversaturate, causing you to die within the next few hours."

"Forty-five seconds," Rade said. "Got it. Begin slow burn, fuel conservation mode. Nozzle 2B."

"Beginning slow burn," the AI replied.

On the mech diagram overlaying his vision, Nozzle 2B glowed red.

"I agree with you, Chief, it was a mistake for the aliens to thin out the ranks of their escorts," Rade said over the comm. "But they made another, even worse mistake."

"And what's that?" Facehopper asked.

"They left our jumpjets completely intact." He instructed the platoon members to repeatedly deploy their air brakes until the rear chain segments slid over the jumpjet nozzles. Most of them couldn't do it—the chains had

been wrapped slightly differently around the torsos of each Titan—but Bender, Manic and TJ succeeded, and similarly engaged their jumpjets on slow burn.

As he waited for the chain to melt, he thought about the robots that followed them on overwatch from the rooftops. While it was indeed a mistake for the enemy to thin out their ranks, there were still enough of those robots to easily mow down Rade and the others once the MOTHs emerged. Unless he could find a way to distract them...

“If I melt the top layer of snowpack with my other dorsal nozzles,” Rade told the AI. “How long will it take for the snow to refreeze into ice?”

“A two hundred microsecond burst applied at full power will cause the top layer to refreeze in three seconds,” Jerry replied.

“More than enough time.”

As the chain neared melting temperature, Rade quickly relayed his plan to Alpha and the Storming Amazons.

“It’s not going to work,” Luxe said when Rade was done. “Too many moving parts.”

“It *will* work,” Rade told her. “And there aren’t too many parts. Not at all. It’s a simple plan.”

“If you’re not back inside your mechs in forty-five seconds,” Luxe said. “The four of you are giving yourselves death sentences.”

“We’ll make it.”

In that moment his display flashed.

“The slow burn emission from Nozzle 2B has melted through the chain,” Jerry announced.

“Cease slow burn,” Rade said. Over the comm: “Charlie is cut.”

He waited tensely. He was worried one of the pack robots, or the tangos escorting from the rooftops, would notice. The ends of the severed chain were likely dragging along the snowpack at that very moment. The sound would be soft, but still audible—whether or not the robots would hear it above the crunch of the many metallic feet was another question. But if they did, he would just have to set the plan in motion early, and wait for Bender, TJ and Manic to join him later.

But as the apprehensive seconds passed, and none of the robots gave any indication they had perceived the break in the chain, he began to relax slightly. The red dots remained in their respective positions around the

mechs, slowly advancing.

“Charlie is cut,” Bender announced.

“Mine too,” TJ said.

“And mine,” Manic added a moment later.

Rade glanced at the overhead map. The convoy was passing through an area where the human-style houses had collapsed into rubble on either side, and the escorting robots had to pick their way across the debris while the pack robots faced little resistance in the street below. He and the others would be too exposed if they vacated at the moment. He needed intact human-style buildings. And not the crystalline, geometrical structures that were quickly coming up after the current neighborhood.

“Hold,” Rade sent.

He waited several anxious seconds until the rubble was replaced with relatively stable housing once more. The escort robots promptly returned to the rooftops.

“Now, Cyclone,” Rade sent.

“Initiating burst,” Tahoe said.

On his overhead map a green section appeared, indicating where Tahoe had fired his jumpjets to temporarily melt the top layer of the snowpack, turning it to black ice for the following mech, containing Skullcracker.

Skullcracker’s dot, and the red dots of the pack robots that carried his Titan, swerved sideways as he obviously pulled on the chains binding him. He steered them so that one of the pack robots was headed directly toward the black ice.

“Jerry, prepare to proceed with the plan,” Rade said.

“Ready,” the AI replied.

The pack robot passed over the icy section. Skullcracker must have pulled again, because Rade heard a thud.

“Robot down,” Skullcracker transmitted.

Metallic clanks drifted through the air to Rade. Skullcracker had pulled the helpless pack robot to him along the ice, and was pounding it.

Distraction in play.

Rade set a timer on his HUD to forty-five seconds. “Proceed, Jerry.”

He heard a soft click as the hatch opened a crack in front of him.

Rade drew the blaster from his utility belt and initiated the HUD countdown. He kicked the hatch open completely against the unresisting chain, leaped out, and jetted toward the closest house, aiming for a window.

He spun around in mid-flight, and with targeting help from his local AI, took out the two robots in his immediate line of fire on the opposite rooftop.

He caught a glimpse of Manic, TJ, and Bender also jetting through the air, aiming for different houses beside him.

Then he collided with the building; the glass was actually intact, surprisingly, but he smashed right through it and landed on the floor inside.

The roof fell in as a robot plunged through to take him.

Rade got lucky—the robot was already in his line of fire. From where he lay on the floor, he had merely to rotate his wrist a few centimeters to the right and squeeze the trigger; the robot fell with a large hole burned into its torso.

Rade glanced at his timer.

Thirty-eight seconds remained until the lethal radiation dose.

Remaining where he was, he surveyed the hole in the rooftop, looking for any further enemies up there; the area seemed clear, at least from his current angle.

He low-crawled to the window, then peered over the rim with his blaster. He scanned the rooftops across from him and spotted another robot. He fired. The tango toppled.

He returned his attention to his Titan outside, which was still held spreadeagled by the pack robots in front of the building. With the help of the jumpsuit AI, he targeted the remaining chains in turn, firing the blaster and waiting the prerequisite recharge period each time, which was short given the relatively lower power output of the weapon. After eight quick shots, two per chain link, his mech was free.

Jerry deployed its shields in both arms as enemy laser fire came in upon the Titan from above. The mech leaped to the adjacent rooftops and began pummeling smaller robots. The mechs of Bender, TJ and Manic joined

in shortly as the respective platoon members freed their own Titans.

Twenty-three seconds remained on the timer.

Rade was beginning to feel nauseous.

While the AI-manned Titans provided a distraction on the rooftops, Rade focused on the torsos of the remaining mechs. He shot out the chains that bound the hatches and freed more of his brothers.

The newly released captives emerged in their jumpsuits and joined the fray, taking cover and adding their firepower to the mix, so that soon the whole platoon was free.

As the others worked on freeing their mechs from the cover of nearby buildings, Rade concentrated on Luxe next, who was bound with the Marines near the front of the line.

Fighting the nausea, he fired two more shots on high zoom, breaking through her chain links.

Luxe rolled free of the pack robot that carried her and vanished into the shadows.

Three seconds remained.

“Jerry!” Rade said, jetting from the window. “I need to load up *now!*”

The Titan leaped down from the rooftop. Rade caught a glimpse of its anti-laser shields: they were riddled with bore holes.

The mech scooped up Rade in its large metal hands and shoved him into the open cockpit. The hatch sealed behind him and the inner actuators pressed into his jumpsuit.

He glanced at the countdown and watched the timer decrease from one second to zero.

Barely.

He vomited inside his helmet.

As his mech continued on autopilot, Rade wrapped his lips around the life straw protruding from the inside of his helmet rim and struggled to drink. Unfortunately, the tip of the straw was coated with vomit, and the taste nearly made him throw up again.

After a few sips of water, Rade said with a gasp: “Jerry, give Luxe the laser rifle from storage. Then continue doing what you’re doing.”

“Affirmative,” Jerry said. “Are you all right?”

“Never better.”

Rade took several more sips of water. He checked the radiation

saturation levels of his subdermals: ninety-nine percent.

A red cunt hair away from a fatal dosage.

He glanced at the positions of Bender, TJ, and Manic. His companions had loaded into their own individual mechs, and their vitals remained green. He checked their subdermal saturation levels, which varied from ninety-five to ninety-eight percent.

Close one, my brothers.

Jerry reached the alleyway where Luxe had taken cover. The mech positioned its body between her and the street, and then the storage compartment opened up.

“Grab the rifle!” Rade sent her.

She fetched the rifle from Rade’s compartment and then returned to cover.

Jerry leaped onto an adjacent rooftop and beheaded a robot with a plunge of the massive shield.

On the street below, as their own timers approached zero, other platoon members quickly returned to their newly released Titans. Afterward, shields riddled with laser bores, they steered their mechs to the freed Storming Amazons and gave them rifles from their storage compartments, just as Rade had done. Not all the Marines received weapons, of course, but it was enough.

In under forty-five seconds the rest of the Marines were freed, and the remaining robots destroyed.

Rade glanced to the south. Hornheads were swarming back toward the neighborhood, with robot reinforcements in their midst. “We’ve got incoming to the south.” He was really starting to miss his weapon mounts by that point.

“I see them,” Facehopper said. “Sergeant, can your armor withstand the radiation levels inside the crater?”

“Barely,” Luxe replied. “Why?”

“I think you know why,” the chief responded. “Mates, we’re heading for the crater at the center of town.”

“Wait, what exactly are we going to do there?” Manic asked. “We’ll be even more exposed to their fire if we jump down there.”

“No we won’t,” Facehopper said. “We performed a local-beam LIDAR scan earlier and picked up several tunnels wide enough for mechs down there.”

“And let me guess,” Fret said. “You want to dive into one of these radiation-dense tunnels.”

“That’s exactly what I want to do. The hornheads won’t pursue us there. The radiation is too high.”

“What about the robots?”

“We’ll worry about them then,” Facehopper replied. “Storming Amazons, load up into the passenger seats! As usual, I want to see at least two per mech!”

Once again Luxe took her customary place in Rade’s passenger seat, along with another Marine, joining Grappler’s dead body secured there.

“Now move out, blokes!” the chief said.

“Traveling overwatch?” Rade asked.

“No time! Fire at will, Amazons!”

The mechs—and those Marines yet on foot—hurried between the buildings, jetting over debris, making their way toward the crater in a jagged line. Laser fire occasionally erupted from behind them. A foot soldier fell. Another Marine scooped her up and continued onward. Those Marines perched in the passenger seats continually fired back at the enemy.

“Do you want us to turn off our Implants?” Manic asked.

“What’s the point?” the chief replied. “They know where we are.”

“What about the nano-machine host you’re carrying?” Luxe said. “He’s a liability. We have to get rid of him!”

“My point still stands,” Facehopper answered. “The enemy already knows where we are. And I’m not convinced it was Keelhaul’s fault they found us.”

“Well I am,” Luxe said.

“I’m in charge,” the chief replied.

“Like hell you are,” she said.

“We talked about this already,” Facehopper said. “Compare the size of your battle suit to my mech. And think very hard about whether you really want to defy my authority.”

She didn’t answer; she remained perched in Rade’s passenger seat, presumably continuing to fire upon the enemy.

“You know, she might have a point,” Trace said. “If we send away Keelhaul and his mech in another direction, some of the enemy are bound to break off. Whether it will make a difference in the long haul is another story,

of course.”

While it might be a good idea, Rade didn’t want to sacrifice a man simply to separate a few pursuers from the main horde.

Neither did Facehopper, apparently, because he said: “Keelhaul stays with us.”

“What about an empty mech?” Mauler said. “Dispatched as a diversion.”

“Still a waste,” Facehopper said. “Have a good look at the numbers behind us. Even if we split them in half, it won’t make much of a difference.”

They reached the crater and promptly dove over the edge. Another Marine on foot was shot just as she leaped, and her body bounced lifelessly from the rock face as she plunged. One of the Marines left her spot in Trace’s passenger seat to retrieve the body, and then jetted back to secure her to the seat; Trace and the other Titans continued moving the whole time.

As Manic had said, there was no immediate cover at the bottom of the crater. At least on the streets above they had the buildings and other structures. Down there, they had nothing but the glassy, blast-damaged tundra.

“This way!” the chief said.

A green rectangle appeared on the terrain ahead, highlighting the location of one of the LIDAR-scanned tunnels Facehopper had mentioned.

Rade was feeling well enough by then to take control of the Titan back from Jerry. He did so, and had only just turned toward the green rectangle when a missile warning appeared on his HUD, sourced from the lip of the crater above.

He fired his Trench Coat, as did other Titans across the platoon.

The resulting explosions sent Rade hurtling across the bottom of the crater. The Titan’s torso scraped the blast-damaged surface, denting the chest area. He was well aware that he was damaging the precious radiation armor at a time when he needed its protection most.

Hornheads were landing all around them, along with the occasional human-faced robot.

“I thought you said they wouldn’t follow us down here!” Manic said.

“Guess they don’t care about their well-being,” Facehopper replied. “They’ll all be dead within the hour.”

“And what are we supposed to do until then?” Fret said.

“To the tunnel!” the chief said. “Storm, Amazons! Storm!”

Those Marines who were still on foot—and armed—covered the retreat. The Storming Amazons secured to the passenger seats likewise fired.

Rade dove into the indicated tunnel after Bender. He found himself inside a moderately tight, circular cave, with a diameter of about five meters. The only illumination came from the headlamps of the Titans and Marines.

He plowed onward, and soon everyone was inside the tunnel, at least according to the updates on the overhead map. They hurried onward in single file through the gloom.

“Wait wait wait,” Fret said as they rounded a downward sloping bend. “There are so many reasons why this is the worst idea of the century. Especially considering that the enemy robots and hornheads might not even follow us down.”

“Oh they’ll follow us,” Luxe said.

Rade glanced at the camera feed that served as his rear view mirror, and beyond the mechs he spotted the trailing members of the rifle platoons as they hurried around the bend. The Marines paused to peer past the edge and fire their rifles—the horde members were undoubtedly pursuing.

Rade’s eyes drifted to the close ceiling as he ran.

“I wonder if we can collapse this ceiling,” Rade said.

Snakeoil spoke up. “Scans indicate several microfractures near the central portion of the ceiling. The pounding from the nukes almost collapsed it. A couple more well-placed blows in the weaker areas will certainly cause a cave-in. The only worry is a potential cascade effect: the ceiling might cave in for meters all around it.”

“If we don’t cave the ceiling, we’re going to have to fight them,” Rade said. “Sure, we’d probably be able to hold off them for quite some time, given the choke-point nature of the cave. But these tunnels are theirs, I would guess. They know where this one leads, and they know what other caves they can potentially take to cut us off. So the question boils down to, how long would it take them to circle around and come at us from behind, while we’re occupied with holding off the attackers from the other end? I don’t think we have a choice.”

“But you don’t know that,” Fret said. “What if this tunnel doesn’t lead anywhere? Man, what a shitty time to be stranded without HS3 scouts. We could be sealing ourselves into our own tomb.”

“Then we’ll dig ourselves out.” Facehopper’s mech glanced at the Marines who were still firing past the bend and holding the rear. “Luxe, can your Amazons stand these rad levels or not?”

“Barely,” Luxe answered. “We’re close to a fatal dose. If it gets any worse...”

“It should only get better here on out,” the chief said. “As we move away from the blast radius.” He paused. Then: “All right. Bender? Stay here and collapse the cave. The rest of you, proceed! That includes you, Storming Amazons!”

Rade and the others hurriedly traversed the tunnel, moving away from the bend.

“You’ll have to move quickly when the cascade reaction begins,” Snakeoil instructed Bender. “You’ll only have maybe a second before the falling rocks swallow you. I’d suggest programming your AI with instructions to fire the jumpjets automatically when the debris flow reaches critical levels.”

“I know what I’m doing,” Bender said. Behind them, he began pounding his large metal fists into the ceiling.

Rade heard the thuds from thirty meters away. He hoped Facehopper hadn’t ordered him to his death.

Good luck, brother.

Those thuds were soon replaced by an all-consuming rumble, and in moments dust completely obscured the view.

Rade was forced to switch to the thermal band.

The floor curved upward unexpectedly, and Rade tripped.

“Watch the ascent,” Trace sent too late.

“Bender, did you make it?” Facehopper asked.

Rade scrambled to his feet and glanced at the overhead map. Bender’s dot had moved inward since the collapse, however currently it remained motionless. His vitals were still green, however.

“Bender?” the chief tried again.

No answer.

“Shit. TJ, you’re going to have to go back and look for him.”

“I’m all right,” Bender said. “Had some rocks pinning my leg, but I’m free now and right behind you.”

His dot was moving again.

“How’s the collapse?” Facehopper asked.

“Complete,” Bender replied. “They’ll be digging for a while if they want to get to us from the other side.”

“I’m sure they won’t bother,” Facehopper said. “They’ll try to head us off at one of the exits. Move, people. Best speed.”

The platoon continued the advance. After trending upward for a few minutes, the tunnel sloped downward once again. Rade kept the thermal feed active as the headlamps couldn’t yet penetrate the thick dust.

“You’re assuming that this tunnel actually has an exit,” Fret said. “But what if it doesn’t? What if it opens up into some underground alien base? And you thought we were screwed before...”

“It’ll lead to the surface,” Rade said.

“Also better hope it doesn’t become so narrow we have to exit our mechs,” Fret said. “Because we all know what a death sentence that will be.”

“Negativity, bro...” Rade said.

“Is he always like this?” Luxe asked.

“Unfortunately.”

“I don’t allow morale leeching of any kind in my platoons,” Luxe said.

“We have different management styles, obviously,” the chief said.

The combined mech/rifle platoons soon moved beyond the range of the dust and Rade was able to switch to the visual spectrum once again.

The group continued onward. At any branches, Facehopper always chose the direction that would lead them farther from the city and closer to the booster rocket locations that Sergeant Luxe had shared with them. According to the map, those boosters were located roughly three kilometers to the east of the drop site.

The tunnel curved downward for two hours and then sloped up once again.

After another hour, they finally surfaced.

The chief sent three mechs through the opening first to form a defensive perimeter, but there were no enemies waiting for them on the snow-covered plains beyond.

The others cautiously emerged and took up similar defensive positions in the snow, forming a nested cigar shape. It was still night. The city was ten kilometers behind them according to the map. After a quick

search to confirm that nothing was hiding in the nearby drifts, the group proceeded toward the booster rocket site.

“So we pulled through unscathed after all,” Manic said. “You were all worried for nothing, Fret.”

“Not for nothing,” Fret said. “We got lucky. The cave could have easily become too narrow for us to proceed, or it could have ended in an impassible section. Like Snakeoil said, that ceiling was on the verge of collapse in several places, no thanks to the UC’s nukes.”

“You’re right, of course,” Facehopper said. “But we can’t dwell on the past, nor our luck. We survived, and that’s all that matters for the present moment. We have to keep looking forward. And continue doing so until we’ve left this frozen hell far behind.”

The combined platoons continued advancing across the plains under the alien night. For stealth reasons they had deactivated their helmet lamps, and relied solely on thermal vision.

The snowdrifts proved too deep for the Marines who remained on foot, and they had to crawl up onto the heads and shoulders of the mechs, or crowd into the passenger seats. Some even hung onto the rungs that climbed the legs and cockpit areas.

Rade himself was carrying four Marines at the moment, and despite the extra weight he noticed no difference whatsoever in the performance of his Titan. The wonders of electromechanics.

The mechs moved in a single-file line across the deep drifts. Facehopper had split the Titans into two squads, traveling overwatch formation, with the second squad lagging fifty meters behind the first, well within thermal range in those clear weather conditions. Though of course, because of the single file line they employed to save electromechanical energy, only the point man in the second squad could actually overwatch the first squad; the others saw only the thermal outline of the Titan directly in front of them.

“I want to swing past the drop site,” Facehopper said after some time. “Before heading toward the booster rockets.”

“Why?” Luxe said. “That’ll add another fifteen minutes to our journey.”

“You forget,” Facehopper told her. “While some of your Marines might be armed, none of our mechs are. We’re going to make us a quick armament run.”

“Is that really necessary, especially considering we’ll be leaving the planet shortly?” she asked.

“You assume those boosters won’t be guarded,” Facehopper said. “Also, even if there is no resistance, you don’t know what we’ll encounter in orbit. There might not be any UC vessels left. We could have to board an enemy ship. I’d rather not do that unarmed.”

“Who’s the negative one now?” Fret said.

“I’m not being negative,” Facehopper said. “Just practical. All I’m saying is, don’t expect our escape to be easy.”

“Should we be keeping our Implants active?” Manic asked.

“No point in shutting them down now,” Facehopper said. “Not at this distance from the enemy.”

“What about the nano-machine host you’re carrying?” Luxe said.

“Damn it,” Facehopper said. “You keep bringing him up. We’ve already been through this. For the last time, I’m not giving up any of my men.”

About fifteen minutes later, Luxe sent Rade a message directly.

“By the way, LPO, thanks for what you did back there,” she told him.

“What, the rescue?”

“Yes,” she said. “You only had forty-five seconds to set us free. And you did it, at great risk to yourself.”

“I wasn’t the only one,” Rade said. “TJ, Bender, and Manic helped. As did everyone else we let out.”

“But you’re the one who came up with the idea.”

“All in the line of duty, Sergeant.” Rade paused. “You know, I’ve never actually heard of the Storming Amazons before.”

“That’s nice.” She sounded peeved.

“I was simply curious,” he said.

“Then check your Implant,” she replied. “You can read all about us in the offline data.”

“I figured I would ask you, since you’re hitching a ride on my mech. Least you could do, after all.”

“Look, I already thanked you,” she said. “That’s about as far as I want to take this relationship. You think we’re friends all of a sudden. That we’re going to have some male-female bonding going on?”

“It’ll certainly help when we have to fight side by side,” Rade said. “And any relationship we develop is only going to be of the working kind.”

“Oh I know that,” Luxe said. “But look, once we reach that booster rocket site, and fly back to our respective ships, we’ll never see each other again. Why expend unnecessary energy on needless conversation?”

“All right,” Rade said.

He marched on in silence.

“The Storming Amazons were created forty years ago,” Luxe said out

of nowhere. “It started as an experiment by a Lieutenant Colonel named Lucy Brownstone. She took the six best female Marines from her brigade and put them into an elite all-female unit. Basically a direct action implementation team, filled with combat soldiers who could go into those places that men couldn’t. Every year, she drafted six more females onto that team, until eventually she had enough to form a company, and then a battalion. We still have a small group within the battalion focused on direct action missions, mostly involving the infiltration of Sino-Korean targets, but as the battalion grew, we morphed into an infantry unit. One of the best. Every female Marine aspires to join the Storming Amazons during training. But not just anybody is allowed in. Only the best of the best become Storming Amazons.”

“We’re in good company then,” Rade said. “Because only the best of the best become MOTHS.”

“Every elite unit always thinks they’re the hottest,” Luxe said.

“You’ve only figured that out now?” Rade said.

“Hardly,” she replied. “I’ve worked with my fair share of elite units.”

“Well so have I,” Rade said. “And I’ve come to accept the fact that there are other elite teams out there just as good as our own. It doesn’t affect the pride and sense of brotherhood I feel about my own team, not at all. That said, it remains to be seen whether or not your rifle platoons can be considered worthy of the title ‘elite.’”

“Ha,” she said. “I was thinking the same thing about you and your platoon.”

Rade waded on in silence through the deep snow. He switched to autopilot a few minutes later.

The party made good time since there were no blizzards. Of course, the con to that was they were more readily visible. Rade often scanned the horizon for three hundred and sixty degrees around him, but he never spotted anything of note in the distance. He knew his brothers were doing the same.

“It’s times like this where I envy the human ability to immerse itself in oblivion,” Harlequin said at one point.

“Oblivion?” Fret said. “What’s the Artificial talking about? Death?”

“He means sleep,” Bomb clarified wearily.

“Bomb,” Manic said sarcastically. “What’s going on? This is the first time I’ve ever heard you refer to Harlequin as ‘he,’ rather than ‘bitch.’ And usually you interrupt the Artificial in mid-sentence.”

“I know,” Bomb said. “I’m mellowing out toward the thing I guess. You didn’t see him fight at the drop site with us. I foolishly ejected at one point, trying to save a fallen Marine while my mech was supposed to guard my back. Didn’t work out the way I thought. I was separated from my Titan. Surrounded by hornheads. But Harlequin pulled a *deus ex machina* and saved my ass. But that doesn’t mean he isn’t still a bitch, of course.”

“Thank you, Bomb,” Harlequin said. “For a moment there, I was worried you might have actually begun to call me something other than bitch.”

“You’re very welcome, bitch,” Bomb said. There wasn’t any malice in his tone whatsoever. In fact, Rade thought he sensed amusement.

“But actually,” Harlequin continued. “My aid could hardly be classified *deus ex machina* if you go by the strict definition of the word. A *deus ex machina* is when a completely unexpected rescue occurs. The term is in reference to the Greek tragedies, where the gods descend from the heavens at the end of the play and neatly wrap things up. Their appearance comes as a complete surprise to the audience: throughout the entire play, not a wink was heard from said gods, who then suddenly show up to save the day at the end. My rescue, while perhaps a surprise to you, was not *completely* unexpected as it was known to you that I fought nearby. In fact, you were probably hoping for it.”

“I *was* completely taken by surprise actually,” Bomb said. “Nearly pissed my pants when your mech started cutting through them like some butcher excited by the new meat machine he just bought. But you saved me and I won’t forget it.”

“You’re welcome, of course,” Harlequin said. “Though I would be remiss if I didn’t mention that I was merely performing my duty.”

“You’ll have to tell me what MOTH training was like for you sometime, Harlequin,” Lui said. “Was it really the breeze all of us make it out to be?”

“The training was one of the easiest things in the world,” Harlequin said. “Physically. But the mental tests, on the other hand, were not so easy.”

“What mental tests?” Bender said. “If the training was physically easy for you, I don’t see how your mind could have been tested whatsoever.”

“The mental aspect came not from the physicality of the training,” Harlequin said. “The lieutenant commander never told you, but four other

Artificials were in the class with me. They all dropped out.”

“What?” Bender said. “No way. The lame-ass robots quit? Impossible.”

“They quit,” Harlequin said. “Not because the physical part of the training was unendurable. But because of the way the other recruits treated them. Remember the hazing you did to me when I first joined your platoon? Now magnify that by ten times, and you’ll understand what BSD/M was like. Whenever an instructor looked away, there was always a recruit with a shiv ready to stab into one of my servomotors. You thought *you* were resistant to having me in your ranks? You should have seen them. We had to be constantly on the lookout, ready to defend ourselves, because any damage we obtained wouldn’t be repaired until the end of each phase. We had to remain attentive at all hours, including throughout the night. Sometimes they ganged up on us, and we couldn’t escape the damage. It was like being in a prison. One of the Artificials became so damaged he had no choice but to quit. And I’m talking mentally, not physically. He had to get a complete personality wipe.”

“If only wipes of human beings were possible,” Manic said. “I know a few people I could suggest for the procedure.”

“I’d suggest *you*,” Bender retorted.

“Thanks, Bender,” Manic said.

“Very welcome,” Bender replied.

“I’ve heard about certain rehabilitation sentences that allow inmates to reduce their prison terms,” Tahoe said. “Involving experimental personality wipes.”

“I’ve heard about that, too,” Lui said. “The SKs have been experimenting with the tech for years. The new personality never sticks. The UC hasn’t been able to take it much further.”

“Well anyway,” Bender said. “Getting back to Harlequin. *Boohoo*, robot. I’m glad you got at least some taste of what MOTH training is supposed to be like.”

“I wasn’t whining,” Harlequin said. “Or trying to elicit pity. I was merely answering the original question posed to me by Lui regarding my training.”

“So wait,” Mauler said. “About your earlier comment regarding the human ability to sleep. Can’t you shut yourself off? With a timer set to

awaken you from hibernation after a given amount of time?”

“Yes,” Harlequin said. “But hibernation mode is not a true power down. My AI core remains active. The only way to truly ‘sleep’ is by performing a hard shutdown. That is not something I can revive myself from on my own, unfortunately, so it doesn’t count as sleep.”

“Sure that counts,” Bender argued.

“If sleep was bashing one’s head into a brick wall to achieve coma, then perhaps,” Harlequin replied.

“Do you have anything to add to that, Jerry?” Rade asked his AI.

“No,” Jerry said. “Only that, I’m happy I do not sleep. I don’t envy the human ability at all. Oblivion of any kind is my greatest fear.”

“Speaking of sleep and oblivion,” Facehopper said. “I’m authorizing a half hour nap. I’ll take the watch, along with Harlequin and Luxe. Rack out, mates. You too, Amazons.”

“Wouldn’t it make sense to have more of my rifle platoons on the watch?” Luxe said. “Since you already admitted that you’re not armed.”

“It would not,” Facehopper said. “Now instruct your platoons to rack out.”

“As you wish,” Luxe replied.

Rade set a timer via his local AI and then closed his eyes. He was out almost instantly.



A FEW HOURS later the platoon members reached the drop site. After spending a few moments securing the area, those who were unarmed focused on retrieving what armaments they could. It was difficult to find anything under the thermal band, since all of the equipment was the same temperature as the surroundings, so they switched to the visual spectrum and set their headlamps on low.

Rade swept the snow away from a few lumps protruding from nearby drifts and found the wreckage of a Hoplite. He tore away the cobra mount. The rear attachment functioned as a workable grip for his left hand, and the forward trigger stock fit his right hand. It felt a bit odd having his trigger arm held so far forward like that, but he knew it was better to have the trigger in the hand he was used to firing with. Muscle memory took a long time to

change, after all, and it wouldn't do to have his trigger finger repeatedly squeezing a bare grip during a time of crisis.

The rest of Alpha similarly ripped weapon mounts away from other fallen mechs, which included the ATLAS, Hoplite and Cougar classes. Meanwhile, unarmed Marines secured rifles from fallen Centurions.

TJ and Bender momentarily dismounted their units to apply elevation privilege hacks to everyone's weaponry, allowing the triggers to work with their Titans. The end result was that all of Alpha Platoon carried mech-grade weapons: either a cobra, a Gatling, or a grenade launcher. Manic found himself a laser pulse platform, but unfortunately because of the weight it severely threw off his center of gravity; plus the vibrations from the large weapon destabilized his cockpit actuators. In the end he had to abandon it for a cobra instead.

After arming themselves, they salvaged what little supplies remained from their earlier looting of the drop site: they recovered only a few tanks of jumpjet fuel and oxygen. They also found a previously hidden cache of food and water in one of the snow-buried carriers, and distributed the rations equally amongst themselves.

Thus fully armed and adequately supplied, the group proceeded once more out onto the plains, heading toward the site of Luxe's booster rockets.

The men and women remained quiet over the comms. Rade doubted any of them actually believed they were going home. Not yet. Like Facehopper had said, it was very doubtful their escape was going to be easy.

Something's going to happen at those boosters. Either the rockets won't be there, they won't work, or we'll be ambushed. One of those three.

Rade took a deep breath.

Stop it. You're thinking like Fret.

But though he tried, Rade couldn't shake the feeling of doom.

The first of the booster rocket beacons appeared on Rade's overhead map when the party was five kilometers out from the designated site.

"I'm detecting a booster rocket," Snakeoil said.

"I see it," Facehopper said.

As they proceeded eastward, more of the rockets filled the map, for a total of six. Rade continued to scan those nighttime plains for any abnormal thermal signatures, but there were none. If enemies were present, they had hidden themselves well.

When the party was about a kilometer away from the nearest beacon, and no further boosters had appeared on the map, it became apparent that there were no more out there.

"Only six of them," TJ said. "That presents a small problem."

"Only six of us are going home," Facehopper said. "Plus one passenger each."

"We can probably carry two passengers per seat," Lui said. "The fuel requirements won't be too much more, especially considering the weight we've lost with our weapons mounts. I'll run the calculations." A moment later: "Yep. We're good with two. But three would be pushing it, especially considering the planned evasive maneuvers we'll have to make during lift-off."

"All right, two per seat," the chief said. "For a total of eighteen. That means twelve of us are going to have to stay behind."

"Ten of those twelve should be MOTHs," Luxe said.

"And why is that?" Bender asked. "Why should the Marines get preferential treatment?"

"Do you want to give up your Titans to us?" Luxe asked.

"If it means leaving this ice ball behind, hell ya!" Bender said.

"And what about your exposure to the planet's radiation?" Luxe said.

"This far from the city," Tahoe said. "It'll be at least fifteen minutes, if not longer, before we receive a fatal dosage, thanks to our subdermals. We'll be fine wearing jumpsuits in the passenger seats during take off."

"All right, whatever," Luxe said. "We'll all draw straws then to see

who goes and who stays.”

“Seems the fairest method,” Facehopper agreed. “Might as well do it now. Let’s not keep our platoons in suspense. I’m running the randomize app now. Transmitting the results.”

The app worked by picking a decimal number between zero and one for every member of the group. Those twelve whose numbers came in the closest to zero were the losers.

Rade’s result came in.

Loss.

He smiled wanly. So he wasn’t going home after all. He supposed he had been right to feel doomed.

He reminded himself that just because eighteen of them were launching into orbit, didn’t necessarily mean they were going “home.” There might be nothing left of the fleet up there. His brothers might be flying straight into enemy hands.

Facehopper lost the drawing as well. Rade thought the chief must have rigged it to ensure he remained behind. Rade would have done the same: it wasn’t right for a commander to abandon his troops.

“So, eight lucky MOTHs and ten Marines were chosen to launch into orbit,” Facehopper said. “I’m running the app again to decide who has to give up their mechs and ride shotgun when the time comes. The losers are: Mauler, and TJ.”

“Figures,” Mauler said.

The group continued toward the rocket site. That is, until Facehopper’s mech abruptly halted.

“Chief, what’s wrong?” Rade sent.

“Chief Facehopper is no longer conscious,” his AI returned. The Implant indicated its callsign as Moccasin.

“Why, what happened?” Rade glanced at the chief’s vitals. They had changed to orange.

“Unfortunately, during the escape from the city, Chief Facehopper exceeded the forty-five second exposure limit,” the AI responded.

“By how long?” Rade said.

“He operated outside his Titan for an extra thirty seconds longer than he should have,” Moccasin said. “He was exposed for a total of one minute, fifteen seconds, exceeding the saturation limits of his subdermals. He has

received a fatal dose of radiation, and requires immediate advanced medical care.”

“Why didn’t you tell any of us this before!” Rade said.

“I was ordered to silence.”

“Jerry,” Rade said. “Let me out! And open up the storage compartment!”

The cockpit hatch fell open and, via the climbing rungs, Rade lowered himself to the compartment in the leg. He reached for the medkit.

“Nothing in the medkit will help him,” Moccasin said. “He will be dead in five minutes.”

“How long until we reach the first booster?” Rade asked no one in particular. “Best speed?”

“Best speed?” Snakeoil responded. “If we use our jumpjets liberally, and sprint as fast as we can, we should get there in ten minutes. Discounting any trips and falls in the snow along the way. But it’ll take at least another hour before we dock with a ship in orbit.”

“There must be something we can do,” Rade said.

“As I said, nothing in the medkit will help him,” Moccasin replied.

Rade hesitated. He knew radiation poisoning was fatal without complete bone marrow and microvilli transplants. Even then, the victims didn’t always pull through. Facehopper was as good as dead.

Unless...

“You’re wrong,” Rade said. “There *is* something that will help.”

He snatched the medkit and jetted to Facehopper’s cockpit. He held onto the climbing rungs beside the hatch.

“Open up.” Facehopper’s AI didn’t respond. “I’m in command now. You’re under my authority. Open up.”

Finally Moccasin’s cockpit hatch fell open. Without the inner cocoon supporting him, Facehopper collapsed, lying half inside the cockpit and half on the bottom of the open hatch.

Rade set the medkit down on the hatch. From it he removed a small pair of forceps, two retractors, a sonic injector containing a coagulant, a skin patch, and a SealWrap. He double-checked that he had everything he needed—forgetting something in the middle of what he planned would be very bad. A vascular occluder would have been nice to stop any bleeding, but unfortunately the kit didn’t contain one.

When he was satisfied, he placed the smaller end of the funnel-shaped, translucent SealWrap around his wrist, grabbed the forceps, retractors, injector, and skin patch in the same gloved hand, and affixed the wider portion to the inside of his opposite forearm assembly, joining his two arms. Rade waited a few seconds for the atmosphere to evacuate and the seal to form: the translucent material deflated, trapping the medical equipment inside with his glove.

“Boss, what are you doing?” Tahoe said, the concern evident in his voice.

“Operating on myself.” Rade pulled at his wrist to ensure the seal had taken. Then he flipped open the cap on his index finger with the thumb of his glove and used the surgical laser to open an incision in his forearm assembly. The SealWrap puffed out as the inner atmosphere filled it.

An alert sounded on his HUD.

Warning, suit penetrated. Warning.

“Rade?” Tahoe said more urgently.

“I know what I’m doing, *Cyclone*.” Rade emphasized the callsign to show Tahoe he was functioning in the capacity of LPO at the moment, not the friend. It was Rade’s duty to save the chief, no matter the cost.

Rade dismissed the puncture warning. He applied the bigger retractor to hold the suit puncture open, adjusted the depth of the laser, took a deep breath, and then shoved his finger inside the gap and fired again, cutting into his own flesh. He flinched at the pain, but he knew it was nothing compared to what was coming.

When he had judged the incision long enough, he removed his finger. Blood smeared the tip.

He gritted his teeth as he clamped the smaller retractor in situ. The enlarged wound sent throbs of pain up his arm. He scooped up the forceps and slid them between the suit puncture. He hesitated above the wound.

Not going to enjoy this.

He couldn’t apply a sedative. He needed to remain focused for what was coming. Besides, if he numbed the area, he might have difficulty finding what he needed, as everything would be done by touch: the forceps didn’t have any of the high-tech features of the operating room.

No microcameras or surgical nano drones here.

He took several deeps inhales, then dug the forceps inside the wound.

The pain was nearly unbearable. He bit down so hard that the agony in his arm was almost equaled by the throbbing of his jaw. It was a good thing his dentistry was up to date, because any rotten teeth would have fractured under that pressure, tearing into his cheeks from the inside.

He missed the embedded object at first, and only realized after several seconds that he was trying to remove a piece of his own muscle tissue. Phosphenes filled his vision, and for a moment he thought he was going to pass out. He paused, breathing hard, letting go of the forceps but leaving them embedded in his wound. The stars slowly cleared from his eyesight.

“Boss, you going to be all right?” Mauler asked.

“Good,” Rade panted. Not the most grammatically correct response, but he didn’t exactly care at the moment.

Rade carefully inserted his fingers into the handles of the forceps, ignored the pain as he straightened the instrument, and took several deep breaths. Then he dug around again. Stars spattered his vision anew as the agony came.

“Man, glad I’m not a corpsman,” Bomb said. “I feel the pain just looking at him work.”

“Quiet!” Tahoe said. “Don’t distract him!”

Rade kept trying until he hit something solid. That had to be it.

He positioned the tips of the forceps around the object and then pulled. It gave easily, unlike the aforementioned muscle tissue he had grasped, and in moments he had the thin, blood-covered thing removed.

He exhaled, taking a moment to catch his breath. Then he set down the forceps and the precious object they held, injected the coagulant, removed the retractor, and applied the skin patch. By then his fingers were dipped to the knuckles in his own blood.

“I think I’m going to sick up,” Fret said.

“Quiet...” Tahoe said with a growl.

Rade scooped up the bloody object, and the medical instruments, and formed a fist around them. Then he slid his gloved hand from the SealWrap. It tightened as the glove emerged, sealing the suit puncture he left behind. He was left with a dull, throbbing pain in his forearm.

He grabbed a water bottle from the medkit and dialed its temperature up. He squeezed the resultant hot water onto the object and washed away the partially frozen blood. He retrieved another skin patch, replaced the sonic

injector, then applied another SealWrap around his wrist. He grabbed the instruments and attached the SealWrap to the chief's forearm, choosing a position slightly higher up than where he had placed it on his own arm.

When the seal was complete, he punctured the suit with his surgical laser, then applied the larger retractor to hold the tear open. He made an incision in the skin of the chief's forearm underneath, and as he clamped the smaller retractor in place, he was just glad it wasn't his flesh anymore. The chief remained unconscious and mercifully oblivious to it all.

With the forceps, Rade gripped the anti-rad subdermal he had surgically removed from his own forearm; he slid the medical instrument into the suit opening.

After two failed attempts, Rade took a moment to steady himself.

You can do this.

Cognizant of the fact the chief was slowly bleeding away, he tried again. Finally he slid the object underneath the skin.

He injected the coagulant, removed the skin retractor, applied the skin patch, and then removed the final retractor from the suit. Grabbing the medical instruments, he slid his glove from the SealWrap entirely and it closed the suit puncture.

"He's stabilizing," Moccasin said. "Well done, LPO, you've brought him back from the edge."

Rade slumped. “How much time does he have?”

“Current estimates give him another twenty-four hours,” Moccasin said. “If he has not returned to a ship with proper medical facilities by then, he will die.”

“What if another one of us gives him a subdermal?” Trace asked.

“It won’t matter,” Moccasin said. “The existing subdermal is only half saturated. Additional anti-rads won’t make a difference. He needs tissue transplants.”

“Why did you have to do this to yourself?” Rade asked the unconscious Facehopper.

“He cannot answer...” Moccasin said.

“Thanks. I couldn’t figure that out on my own.” Rade collected his gear and gently shoved the chief back inside the cockpit. As the hatch sealed, Rade said: “We’re going to get you home, chief.”

“Warning,” the local AI of his jumpsuit said. “Radiation saturation levels becoming critical...”

Rade jetted back to his mech. Now that he had one less subdermal, even the lesser radiation out there would be dangerous to him. It wouldn’t do for him to succumb to the same fate as the chief.

He shoved the medkit into the storage compartment and quickly clambered into the cockpit. When the hatch sealed behind him and the inner actuators took hold of him, the warning indicators vanished.

He sighed in relief.

“Well done, boss,” TJ said.

“Thank you,” Rade said.

“Looks like you’re leading us, now,” Manic said.

“Looks that way,” Rade said. “We continue toward the boosters. And I’ll need a volunteer to give up their passenger seat when we launch. I want the chief headed back into orbit ASAP.”

“I’ll give up my seat,” Luxe said quietly.

“Thank you,” Rade told her.

“Naw,” she said on a private line. “I wasn’t planning on going back

anyway. Your chief rigged the draw back there, hoping to get rid of me. Just as he ensured that both you and he remained behind. I decided to play along with his game, for a little while in any case. Just as I will play along with your game, while you pretend to be our commander.”

“I *am* your commander,” Rade said.

“We’ll see.”

Moccasin assumed control of the mech and carried Facehopper during the march, just as Keelhaul’s Titan did for him. Rade had an image in his mind of two babes gestating in the womb.

That’s what they are, essentially, at this point. Completely vulnerable and at the mercy of their Titans.

Rade’s forearm continued to throb; it would probably hurt for the rest of the day, if not the week. He considered injecting an analgesic but thought better of it: he didn’t want to do anything to influence his clearheadedness, not when he was in direct command of the platoon. When he saw the six booster rockets safely launched, he might consider it.

Ah, pain. An old friend. Rade had trained himself to ignore it. He knew it for the mind illusion it was: if he could focus his attention elsewhere, say on the same region of the opposite arm, the pain would diminish slightly. And if he didn’t move the affected area at all, the throbbing might vanish from conscious notice entirely. From time to time.

He glanced at the mechs who marched in single file in front of him, and the Marine stowaways strapped to their passenger seats or clinging to their shoulders. He had spent so much time alone with half of Alpha Platoon, leading them across that frigid alien homeworld, stranded and cut off from friendly support troops. He had only just returned to Facehopper, only just finished passing the burden of command back to the chief, when he was thrust back into a full leadership role once more.

At least with Facehopper around he could relax into his old role a bit, knowing that the major life and death decisions were no longer his. But his personal identity had once more receded into the background. Rade was, for all intents and purposes, chief in everything but name.

He felt strangely powerful. These men piloting the Titans before him were ready to obey him, like living and breathing pieces on a chess board. Yet they were so much more than that. In his mind, he and his men formed a living entity; he was the brain, and they were the body. Every single one of

them was an essential part of himself, and to lose any one of them would literally be like cutting off a limb. It would hurt just as bad. More.

He thought of Luxe sitting in the passenger seat behind him. Luxe and her Storming Amazons. They were the wild-cards. She had already questioned his authority as commander, though on a private line at least. It was too bad she was staying behind. He understood completely why Facehopper wanted to get rid of her. After the others departed, if she didn't fall into line when the time came, the remaining Storming Amazons and the MOTHs would have to part ways. Rade hoped it didn't come to that.

The group finally reached the first booster rocket, at least according to the map.

"Do you see anything?" Rade asked the point man of squad one, Bomb.

"Nope."

Rade switched to Bomb's point of view. There was nothing visible but the empty snowdrifts on the thermal band. He cut back to his own viewpoint.

"Defensive formation Cigar, Squad One," Rade said. "Centered on the waypoint. Clearance fifteen meters. Squad two, Half Curve overwatch."

The first squad formed a cigar shape around the flashing beacon indicated on the map, leaving a clearance of fifteen meters at the closest point. The second squad, containing Rade, spread out into a half curve and crouched in the snow to overwatch the first from their farther position away. Two of the Titans in squad two guarded the rear.

"Snakeoil?" Rade said. "Care to do a quick search?"

"Got it," Snakeoil replied.

Rade zoomed in and watched Snakeoil's Titan leave its place in the cigar formation. Snakeoil marched to the spot indicated on the map and began shuffling and stamping his large metallic feet through the snow.

After a few moments Snakeoil said: "Strange..."

"What is it?" Rade said.

"There doesn't seem—"

A soft clang drifted through the air.

"Here we go." Snakeoil momentarily set aside his cobra weapon and knelt; with his Titan's large hands he readily uncovered an object—it proved to be the booster. "Let me run a quick diagnostics check... seems to be in

working order. Who's riding up first?"

Another squad one mech abruptly left formation. Rade's Implant identified it as Tarantula, the Titan that carried the sedated Keelhaul.

"Tarantula, what are you doing?" Rade sent. "Keelhaul wasn't chosen to return. The two of you are staying here with me."

The AI didn't answer, instead taking another step toward the booster.

"Jerry," Rade said. "Transmit my command codes to Tarantula. Give control of the mech to me."

After a moment Jerry said: "Unable to comply... I appear to be locked out."

The mech advanced another pace. It started lifting the cobra it had taken from the drop site.

"It's raising its weapon..." Snakeoil said.

"Get back!" Rade said.

The members of squad two swiveled about in unison, inverting the cigar from a defensive formation to an offensive one, with all weapons brought to bear on Tarantula.

Snakeoil retrieved his cobra and cleared well away, joining the cigar. The Marines hitching a ride on Tarantula similarly vacated, jetting instead to other mechs nearby.

Ignoring the dull throbbing in his arm, Rade aimed the targeting reticle of his cobra at Tarantula: the mech was in full view. "Squad two, target the legs. Squad one, target the weapon. Fire."

In moments the Titan was disarmed and immobile. Rade had struck a servomotor in the left knee. Someone else had shot out the right knee.

Keelhaul's voice abruptly came over the line. "It's booby-trapped!"

"He's awake!" Manic said.

"Keelhaul?" Rade transmitted in disbelief.

Tarantula's cockpit hatch fell open, and a smaller thermal signature emerged.

Keelhaul.

He jetted toward the booster rocket. "They're rigged I'm telling you!"

"They're not rigged!" Rade said. "Those nano-machines in your head are making you hallucinate. Get back inside your mech, now!"

Keelhaul landed on the booster rocket. Rade saw a thermal flash from the soldier's glove area, and realized Keelhaul had fired his blaster into the

device.

“Snakeoil, grab him,” Rade said.

Snakeoil ran forward and attempted to grab him with his Titan, but Keelhaul jetted away. Keelhaul continued firing, judging from the thermal flashes. Rade couldn’t tell if the target was Snakeoil, the booster rocket, or something else.

“Keelhaul, stand down,” Rade said. He tracked the man with the targeting reticle of his cobra. “I repeat, stand down!”

“The nano-machines have taken over his brain,” Manic said. “It’s not him anymore. We have to stop him.”

“Damn it!” Luxe said. “Paxon, Gibbs, grab that idiot!”

The two designated Marines jetted forward from their passenger seat perches.

Keelhaul landed again on the booster rocket.

“He’s firing at us!” Paxon said. “I’m hit!”

Rade still had Keelhaul’s center of mass in his targeting reticle.

Hearing those words decided it for him. No one else could do what needed to be done. It had to be him.

Rade squeezed the trigger.

Keelhaul dropped from the rocket, vanishing in the snow beside it. On the HUD, his vitals turned black.

“Keelhaul’s down!” Mauler said from squad one. He ejected from his Titan and jetted toward where Keelhaul had fallen.

“Gibbs, how’s Paxon?” Luxe said.

“She’ll live,” Gibbs said. “Hit in the right calf. Her skin ballooned to seal the entry and exit wounds of the suit. I applied seals to the laser punctures, and to be on the safe side, had her recycle her atmosphere. She’ll have a bit of a limp for the rest of the trip, but otherwise she’s fine.”

Hearing those words, Rade wondered if he had killed Keelhaul for nothing.

“He’s gone,” Mauler said. “Who shot him?”

“I did,” Rade said.

Silence.

Then Tahoe said: “You did the right thing. It wasn’t Keelhaul, not anymore.”

“It’s true,” Skullcracker said. “For me, Keelhaul died the moment we

sedated him. I made my farewells to him then.”

“I think we all did,” Snakeoil said.

“Well I didn’t,” Mauler said.

The platoon members remained very quiet. Then:

“The question is, why the hell did he wake up?” Fret said.

“Probably because the nano-machines had taken over enough of his brain to cancel out the effects of the sedative,” Lui said. “Perhaps even creating a custom machine organ to secrete a counteracting agent.”

“But why did his Titan allow him to gain control?” Manic said.

“If the nano-machines took over his brain,” TJ said. “Then he would have the hacking knowledge of their entire species in his head. You remember what the lieutenant commander said about how they communicate with each other? Those tiny evaporating wormholes and all...”

“I’m not sure I buy the whole wormhole thing,” Tahoe said. “But I do buy that they can communicate in ways we can’t.”

“Communicate,” Lui said. “If that’s true, and Keelhaul has been communicating with them since he woke up, we should definitely pick up the pace. Because those aliens know precisely where we are.”

“Assuming they even care anymore,” Trace said. “Oh sure, they might make a few attempts to shoot us down when the anti-aircraft defenses at the city detect our launches. But otherwise, why bother? We’re not a threat, not out here.”

Rade hardly heard any of it.

I killed him.

“Well, we can’t use this rocket,” Snakeoil said. He was standing beside the booster. “Keelhaul poked holes in the fuel tanks. We’re lucky it didn’t explode. The fuel has been evaporating away all this time: there isn’t enough to achieve escape velocity. What do you want to do, boss?”

Rade didn’t answer.

“Boss?”

“He’s obviously no longer fit for command,” Luxe said. “I’ll—”

Hearing her voice finally snapped Rade out of it.

“We move to the next rocket,” he said.

“Do we carry Keelhaul’s body?” Lui said.

“It’s not him anymore,” Tahoe said. “Remember that. The nano-machines are supposed to die when the body dies, but we don’t know how

long that takes. Do we really want to risk that those machines might remain in contact with the enemy until then?"

"He comes with us," Rade said. "Mauler, port Keelhaul's body."

No one contested him.

The two Marines in Mauler's passenger seat made room for the body.

When Mauler had secured the corpse, Rade said: "Move out, people. Same formation. Lead the way to the next rocket, squad one."

And so the beaten-down group began the weary march to the next closest rocket. Rade scanned the horizon numbly, looking for signs of any incoming tangos. His mind kept drifting back to what he had done. The throbbing in his arm where he had cut out the subdermal occasionally flared up, but he welcomed it.

I deserve pain.

“You going to be okay?” Tahoe asked at one point over a private line.

“Yeah,” Rade replied. “But please don’t give me another pep talk. I don’t think I can take it this time.”

“But a pep talk is exactly what you need,” Tahoe said. “You did what you had to do back there. It wasn’t Keelhaul anymore.”

“I know,” Rade said. “But that doesn’t make it any easier.”

“No.” Tahoe paused. “You could have ordered us to shoot him instead.”

“I couldn’t do that to you,” Rade said. “I had to be the one. The burden was mine to bear.”

“Thank you, for that,” Tahoe said. “It’s a moment every leader fears, I think. When you’re faced with the terrible choice of sacrificing one of your own men, so that the others might live.”

“But that’s just the thing,” Rade said. “He wasn’t even shooting to kill. I shot him down for nothing.”

“You don’t know that his next shot wouldn’t have killed that Marine,” Tahoe said.

“No,” Rade said. “And the not knowing is what’s eating me.”

“Even if he thought he was helping us,” Tahoe said. “We would have had to kill him, or at the very least abandon him, at some point.”

“I would have rather abandoned him, than killed him,” Rade said.

“Even so, it was fairly obvious the machines controlled most of his mind. He woke up, after all. Despite the sedation.”

“But that’s another unknown,” Rade said. “Maybe his Titan had used up all its sedative supplies. Did anyone bother to check?”

They had left the immobile Titan behind with the first rocket. He

doubted anyone had investigated the supply levels.

"I'm sure the AI would have made an announcement if the supplies were low," Tahoe said.

"Then why didn't it announce when he woke up?" Rade said.

"That's a good point. I'm starting to wonder if some of those nano-machines spread to the AI core."

"How?" Rade said. "They would have had to penetrate the jumpsuit first."

"That's easy, just use the excretory system built into the jumpsuit," Tahoe said. "It would only take a few nano-machines hitching a ride in the piss."

Rade suddenly laughed. "Sorry. I don't know why but that image, and your word choices, well, it just made me laugh. But it is a scary thought. It almost makes me want to turn around and blow that Titan to smithereens."

"Maybe we should," Tahoe said. "It's still in range behind us."

Rade paused, then he gave the order for the platoon to concentrate fire on the abandoned Titan. Lasers and electrolasers penetrated the torso, obliterating the AI core.

Then the march resumed. Tahoe tapped in on a private line soon thereafter.

"Don't kill yourself over his death, Rade," Tahoe said. "That's all I can say. If you're going to lead us, you have to file away what happened. Shove it deep into the farthest recesses of your mind, and don't let it resurface, maybe not ever again."

"I'm working on it," Rade said.

When the party reached the waypoint, Rade had the two squads once more assume defensive formations while Snakeoil exhumed the booster. "She's good to go. Who's first?"

"The chief, of course," Skullcracker said.

Rade was reluctant to send up Facehopper first, especially in his incapacitated state. "No. He's second. If anything goes wrong up there, I want someone fully conscious in the pilot's seat."

"Well then make him a passenger," Manic said.

"Not for the first run," Rade said. "Once I see someone successfully achieve orbit, then I'll send the chief."

"But the first run might be the smoothest," TJ said. "Before the aliens

have a chance to train their anti-aircraft guns on us.”

“I’ve made up my mind,” Rade said.

“All right,” TJ said. “It doesn’t matter. You’re the boss. So who’s first then?”

“We’ll draw straws,” Rade said.

He selected the names of the mechs who had won the initial lottery and then executed the randomize app.

“Fret, you’re up,” Rade announced. He zoomed in on the first squad from his overwatch position.

“Well well well.” Fret stepped toward the booster. “I’m the first one off this shitcicle. Can’t say I’ll miss it. Good luck y’all. Don’t get all misty eyed at my departure.”

“If we’re misty eyed,” Bender said. “It’s only because we’re stuck on this world while your ass gets to fly away.”

“That’s as close to a declaration of love as you’ll get from him,” TJ said.

Fret was securing his Titan to the booster. “Oh, Bender. I’m touched. I love you, too.”

“Shut the hell up,” Bender said.

The two Marines on Fret’s shoulders leaped down, as they weren’t part of the chosen group, leaving the other members of the Storming Amazons strapped into the passenger seat.

“Harlequin,” Rade said. “See if you can find room for those two.”

“I’ll see what I can do,” Harlequin replied. “If nothing else, they can hang onto the rungs of the leg and torso regions of my Titan. Not the most comfortable traveling positions, but—”

“Thank you, Harlequin,” Rade interrupted the Artificial. “Remember, Fret, fire evasive thrust all the way up. We have to assume that any intact ground-to-air defenses near the city will try to shoot you down. “

“Oh I’ll fire them, don’t you worry,” Fret said. He sounded nervous.

Rade didn’t blame him.

“Are you ready to launch?” Rade asked.

“My Titan was ready a while ago,” Fret said. “But I’ve been psyching myself up.”

“Are your passengers secured?”

“They are.”

“Give him clearance, squad two,” Rade said.

The members of squad two retreated, joining squad one.

“Launch when ready,” Rade ordered.

The booster nozzles ignited in pre-burn. Rade switched to the visual band and watched as the pre-burn became full burn and the Titan arose into the night.

It had climbed maybe two hundred meters when the explosion came. There was no warning whatsoever. One moment the Titan and its attached booster were jetting ever higher, and the next a fireball consumed them both.

Rade stared in shock as the fiery wreckage descended. He thought he spotted something jettisoning from it.

He switched to the thermal band.

Yes, a thermal signature jetted toward the party. The implant identified it as Fret, clad in his jumpsuit.

“Well that didn’t quite go as planned.” Fret landed on Mauler’s mech and latched onto the rungs beside the cockpit.

The wreckage slammed into the snow a hundred meters from them, producing another fireball.

“Your passengers?” Luxe said urgently.

“They’re not here?” Fret said.

The blue dots of the passengers had vanished from the display with the initial explosion.

“Paxon, Teeson, with me!” Luxe said.

The three Marines jetted forward.

“Split up,” Rade said. “We have to find them. Search pattern Omega.”

“I found Gibbs,” a Marine transmitted a moment later. “What’s left of her didn’t live very long.”

The badly burned body of the other Marine was recovered shortly thereafter. Fret’s Titan had protected him from the majority of the blast. The Marines, because of their positions in the passenger area, weren’t so lucky.

“Did anyone detect any weapons fire?” Rade said when the bodies were found.

“No,” Snakeoil said. “If the enemy fired a laser, the pulse rate was far too high to detect.”

“Maybe they didn’t fire a thing,” Mauler said. “Maybe Keelhaul wasn’t lying, and the rockets are all booby-trapped.”

“We don’t know that for sure,” Tahoe said.

“We’ll know soon enough,” Rade said. “When we reach the next rocket, I want a thorough search performed. Something I should have ordered done in the first place.”

“You couldn’t have known the booster was booby-trapped,” Tahoe said privately.

“But I *should* have. And that’s the whole point.”

Keep making mistakes.

Rade turned toward the Marines. “Storming Amazons, load your dead.”

Marines yielded their spots in the Titan passenger seats so that the dead could be ported, and the displaced riders found other places to latch onto the mechs, namely the rungs near the cockpit hatches.

“What are we going to do about Fret?” TJ asked.

Rade glanced at the soldier, who was clinging onto TJ’s mech, clad only in his jumpsuit.

“Obviously he can’t stay outside like that for too long,” Rade said. “Not in this radiation.”

“Too bad we shot up Keelhaul’s mech,” Mauler said.

“There was a good chance it was compromised,” Tahoe countered.

“One of you is going to have to deactivate your inner cocoon,” Rade said. “And let Fret shelter in the cockpit with you.” That meant giving up control of the Titan to the AI. “Any volunteers?”

“I’ll do it,” Trace said.

The hatch of his Titan fell open.

Fret jetted across and clambered inside. “Thanks, bro.”

When the cockpit sealed shut behind them, Bender said: “I always suspected those two were man loves.”

“Notice how quiet they are in there?” Manic said. “Makes you wonder what they’re doing right now, in that warm, dark chamber.”

“I don’t want to know,” TJ said.

“They don’t call it a *cock-pit* for nothing,” Bender said.

“Ooo Trace baby,” Fret said. “I didn’t know you were so *big*.”

“All right, quit fooling around,” Rade said. “Have some respect for those we just lost.”

“Sorry, boss,” Fret said.

“Have you transferred control of your mech to the AI, Trace?” Rade asked.

“I have,” Trace responded.

“Good. Let’s proceed.”

At the next booster, Snakeoil performed a thorough search.

“It’s booby-trapped all right,” Snakeoil said.

“You’re sure?” Rade asked.

“Positive. Have a look.”

Rade switched to his viewpoint. Snakeoil’s Titan was lying in the snow, shining his headlamp up into one of the nozzles. Several small blocks had been attached to the inner surface. Snakeoil highlighted them in green with his Implant.

“See the explosives?” Snakeoil asked.

“I see them,” Rade replied.

“Somehow a part of Keelhaul got through to us,” Mauler said. “Despite the nano-machines controlling his mind.”

Hearing that made Rade feel even worse.

Killed my own brother. Who was only trying to help us.

He suppressed the thought.

Shove it deep into the farthest recesses of your mind.

“Can we remove those charges?” Rade asked.

“Don’t think so,” Snakeoil said. “Not without detonating them.”

“We have to try,” Trace said.

“We can evacuate one of our Titans,” TJ said. “Use it as a bomb disposal unit.”

“Yeah right,” Bomb said. “Who among us is going to willingly sacrifice their Titan like that?”

Rade used the randomize application once again. Bomb lost.

The Marines Bomb was carrying were distributed among the remaining Titans. Bomb himself took shelter in Mauler’s cockpit.

TJ took remote control of Bomb’s evacuated mech and began the delicate process of disarming one of the charges.

About fifteen minutes into the job, TJ said: “I can’t disarm them.”

“Are you sure?” Rade said.

“I tried all my escalation hacks first,” TJ said. “Then I drilled a hole inside and removed the case. The design is familiar enough for me to

recognize that if I tamper with it further, it will detonate. Also, there's a mercury vial attached to the trigger. A motion sensor. If I try to remove the charge, it will blow up. We'll lose the booster, and the mech."

Rade exhaled. "It looks like none of us are getting off this planet after all. Bomb, get back in your mech."

"I bet one of my Amazons can disarm it," Luxe said.

"If TJ says he can't disarm it, no one can," Rade said. "I'm assuming you want your Amazon to get up close and personal with the charge?"

"That would be a good assumption," she replied.

"I can't allow them to take the risk."

"Even if they're willing?" Luxe pressed.

"We've lost enough lives for today wouldn't you agree?"

"You'd rather remain stranded here, than even try?" she said.

"I already told you," Rade said. "If TJ says it can't be disarmed, then it can't. Besides, if the UC has failed in orbit then it won't matter if we launch a few of us into space anyway. On the other hand, if the UC has prevailed, or is close to doing so, then a rescue party will be coming any time now. Bomb: your mech."

"What about the other boosters?" Luxe asked.

"We'll check them," Rade said.

After Bomb returned to his Titan, Rade ordered the party to the next three booster rockets in turn. Each of them contained hidden charges. Like the first, TJ couldn't disarm any of them.

"So what now?" Manic said.

"There's not much more we can do," Rade said. "We move far away from here, and hope the UC finds a way to contact us soon."

"What's that?" TJ said.

Rade looked to the north. He saw a fireball streaking through the sky.

"I think it's one of our shuttles," Snakeoil said.

Rade watched the streak of light tear across the sky. “What makes you so sure it’s one of ours?”

“I’m reading a very faint distress signal from the comm node,” Snakeoil said. “It’s barely piercing the interference. There’s not enough bandwidth to attempt a return message, I’m afraid.”

“Can you be certain the distress call isn’t some enemy spoofing attempt?” Rade said.

“No,” Snakeoil admitted.

A moment later the fireball vanished over the horizon. A brighter glow momentarily lit the sky there, then it faded.

“There goes our rescue party,” Fret said.

“Snakeoil,” Rade said. “Calculate the impact site.”

“Got it.”

The site appeared on the overhead map.

“It’s fifty kilometers to the northeast,” Snakeoil said.

“Worth investigating?” TJ said.

“If we can salvage the comm node,” Rade said. “We might be able to communicate with the fleet.”

“Didn’t Snakeoil say the distress barely pierced the interference?” Manic asked. “And that there wasn’t enough bandwidth to send a return message? That means even if the comm node is intact, I’m guessing it’ll be useless to us.”

Rade smiled sadly, though no one saw because of the layers of metal enclosing the cockpit. “I did say *might*. Who knows, maybe we’ll be able to contact other nearby ground troops if the comm node proves undamaged. Either way, it’s our duty to search for survivors. Let’s march, people. We make for the impact site. Traveling overwatch, single file.”

He expected Luxe to contest him but she remained silent. Without a troop carrier, the Titans provided the only effective means of transport across the deep snow available for her team, after all. And he supposed she considered the chance of a comm node better than the alternative of sacrificing one or more of her Marines to failed booster disarm attempts.

When they were five kilometers away, the weak thermal glow of the crash site appeared on the distant horizon.

“Is the wreckage still smoldering?” Rade asked. *Like the wound in my arm.*

“Impossible,” TJ said. “Not at this temperature. What we’re seeing has to be a power source of some kind.”

“That’s a good sign, right?” Fret said.

“Maybe,” TJ replied.

Two kilometers out, Snakeoil said: “I’m picking up the distress signal again. It’s far weaker than before... I don’t think it’s coming from the comm node. And that power source seems far too small to belong to the shuttle. Looks like something else survived the crash.”

A hundred meters out from the wreckage, Rade had squad one proceed forward while he remained behind with squad two in overwatch. The first squad proceeded to secure the crash site.

“We’ve found a Centurion here, boss,” Bender said. “What’s left of it, anyway. The AI is still active. The robot managed to salvage a few batteries from the shuttle to boost its distress signal.”

“That would also explain its thermal profile,” Tahoe interjected. “Relatively bright, for a robot of the class.”

“Anyway,” Bender continued. “It’s asking to speak to our commanding officer.”

“Pipe it through,” Rade said. “And put it on an open channel. No secrets, here.”

“Are you the CO?” a mellifluous female voice said.

Rade frowned. That was a strange choice for the voice of a combat robot: it could sing you a lullaby while shooting you to death. “I am. You’re speaking to LPO Rage, commanding officer of Alpha Platoon, MOTH Team Seven.”

“And Sergeant Luxe, B Company, 1st Battalion 37th,” Luxe said.

“Excellent,” the Centurion replied. “You can deliver my message. First of all, how much do you know of the battle space to the north?”

“Not a whole lot,” Rade said. “Most of us didn’t make the southern drop site, and those that did were nearly obliterated to the last man and woman. Any updates on the battle space are greatly appreciated.”

“You were involved in the first wave sent to ABS?” That was the

code for the southernmost city. It stood for Alien Base: South.

“Yes,” Rade said.

“Ah. A second wave was dispatched shortly thereafter, when the debris of your drop crafts was detected. Several decoys were employed, allowing the second wave to enter the atmosphere on the opposite side of the planet, which proved lightly defended. The troop shuttles skimmed the surface, hugging the ground as they proceeded westward for several hundred kilometers, finally landing safely twenty kilometers to the target. The troops traveled the rest of the way overland via armored carriers to ABN”—Alien Base: North—“where they deployed around various tunnels detected from orbit. Each of the battalions was assigned a different tunnel, with orders to explore the depths and terminate any enemies holed up inside—we believe the aliens escaped the nuclear blasts by hiding deep underground.”

“Why didn’t your craft take the same overland route?” Rade asked. “Why try to land here when the enemy anti-air defense systems are still active in the area?”

“We intended to,” the robot replied. “We even had decoys. But unfortunately, while the shuttle was proceeding to the far side of the planet, it was hit by a lucky ground-to-space attack. I say lucky, because the heavy cloud coverage prevented the AI from responding in time. We were forced to crash land here.”

“What’s the status of the fleet?” Rade asked.

“The fleet has been forced to retreat to a higher orbit, due to the continuous ground-to-space attacks.”

“And because of that higher orbit, you can’t punch through the interference down here, am I correct?” Rade said.

“You are correct.”

“So the UC sent you down, resorting to the old-fashioned courier system to get its message through,” Rade said. “And you want us to be your replacement.”

“Also correct.”

“So what’s the message, and to whom do we deliver it?”

“The 2nd Battalion 29th has been besieging a tunnel in the southeastern quadrant of the ABN area,” the Centurion transmitted. “About fifteen clicks from the outskirts of said city. The fleet has recently detected abnormally high thermal readings coming from the tunnel. That, among other

reasons, has caused the senior command to believe the alien command and control center resides within. I'm transmitting the location."

Bender vetted the incoming location data for any viruses, and then transmitted it on to Rade.

Rade accepted and the coordinates appeared on his HUD. The location was about a hundred kilometers north of his current position, and like the robot had said, fifteen kilometers to the southeast of the northernmost alien city, ABN.

"That's ten hours away," Rade said.

"Yes," the Centurion said.

"What's the message you want me to deliver to the 2nd Battalion 29th?" Rade asked.

"Tell them to use whatever means necessary to take that command and control offline."

"We can certainly do that," Rade said. "But I presume you have the necessary command authorization codes to prove these orders are real?"

"I do. Transmitting now."

Once more Bender intercepted the request first, then sent it on to Rade.

A moment later a message flashed on his HUD:

Command authorization valid.

Rade nodded. "Your codes are good. But tell me, what happens if the battalion succeeds in destroying the command and control?"

"The fleet scientists believe the interference will cease," the robot replied. "And we will therefore be able to better coordinate with our boots on the ground to target the remaining defenses."

"Seems a bit of a leap of faith to me," Rade said. "What makes the scientists so confident the interference will end with the destruction of that particular command and control?"

"The interference is strongest in the area immediately surrounding that tunnel."

"Ah." Rade considered what the robot was saying for a moment. "Tell me why the fleet can't target the air-to-space defenses right now? From orbit? Why the reliance on the boots?"

"The tunnel system extends far beyond ABN," the Centurion replied. "With openings scattered throughout this entire side of the planet. The air-to-

space defenses of the enemy are mobile: a turret battery will emerge from an opening and fire for several moments, and then vanish, only to appear again from a different opening a few minutes later. There are at least a hundred mobile turrets roving back and forth like that. Probably more.”

“So eventually we’ll have to sweep the tunnels,” Rade said.

“Some other Marine battalions are working on that,” the Centurion replied. “But again, coordinating with the fleet would help matters. Who knows? Perhaps shutting down the command and control will deactivate those subsidiary defenses as well.”

“If only we can be so lucky,” Manic said.

“Luck.” Rade nearly spat the word. “It hasn’t been on our side lately. Tell me something, Courier: why hasn’t the fleet simply nuked the command and control?”

“Besides the fact that a Marine battalion is now in the way?” the robot asked. “Because of the thermal distribution pattern of the surrounding openings, and the radiation dispersal of the interference, the scientists believe the command and control is embedded deep underground. A nuke won’t reach it.”

“Use a digger nuke,” Manic said.

“Apparently all of those variants were expended in the first strike,” the Centurion said.

“Too bad,” Manic said. “This war could have been ended by now, otherwise. Some of these fleet higher ups aren’t too smart, are they? ‘Restraint’ isn’t a part of their vocabularies. Once they start dropping nukes, they get excited and can’t help themselves, unleashing everything they have until even the reserves are gone.”

“This is a classic example of why AIs should be running the UC,” Harlequin said. “An AI would have kept digger nukes in reserve.”

“Well it’s done now isn’t it?” Rade said. “And we have to deal with it. Courier, is there anything else you’d like us to relay to the battalion?”

“Only that, it’s possible the Sentience that leads the aliens will be present in that tunnel,” the Centurion said. “It is of the highest priority that the Marines capture or kill that Sentience. Otherwise, a new command and control will eventually crop up.”

“Do we know what this Sentience looks like?” Rade asked.

“Unfortunately, no.”

“So wait,” Lui said. “The scientists are moving from the Hive Mind theory to the Central Mind variant?”

“I don’t think the scientists ever told us exactly what their theories were,” Tahoe said. “They’ve kept us guessing all along.”

“Doesn’t matter,” Rade said. “We’ll just tell the Marines that if they see a big, bad alien resembling a brain, they should take it out.” Rade regarded the Titans of squad two who had remained on overwatch with him. “Looks like we have another mission.”

“We just escaped one of their dens,” Fret said. “And now you want to go right back to another one?”

“Wooyah,” Skullcracker said.

“We’re simply delivering a message,” Rade reminded them.

“But the lieutenant colonel or whoever is in charge will want our help, no doubt,” Trace said. “Especially if we offer it.”

“And we *will* offer it,” Tahoe said. “We’ve been on the run, on the defensive, for too long. It’s time to take the fight to the enemy. It’s time to move to the *offensive* for once.”

“Agree completely,” Bender said. “Let’s kick their collective asses. It’s payback time. For Grappler, Keelhaul, and Facehopper.”

“Facehopper isn’t dead yet,” Lui reminded him.

“No,” Bender said. “But I still want payback. It’s their fault he received that radiation dose.”

“Let’s move out,” Rade said. “Before company arrives. We can’t be the only ones who saw that shuttle crash. Can the robot come with us?”

“Don’t think so,” Bender said. “It’s midsection is fused to the wreckage. If we try to pull the robot away, I believe its body will fall apart.”

“Leave me,” the Centurion said. “I plan to activate my self-destruct mechanism when enemy units arrive, and terminate as many of them as I can.”

“You’re a heroic one, aren’t you?” Rade said.

“It’s simply my programming, LPO,” the combat robot replied.

Rade recalled squad one, then dispatched the Titans north toward the new waypoint. He kept the squad separations, and the single-file traveling overwatch formation through the deep snow.

“How do we know for sure that this isn’t some grand deception staged by the aliens?” Manic said shortly after beginning the march. “They could

have programmed that Centurion to say those things, and then shot down their own shuttle. They could be playing us for all we're worth."

"Why bother to go through all that trouble?" Rade said.

"Maybe they want to capture us really bad," Manic said.

"Or maybe the fleet really did detect the source of the interference," Tahoe said. "And the command and control center along with it."

"That's another option," Manic agreed. "But it's also possible the aliens simply decided to tell us where to find their command and control."

"What?" Bender said. "That's got to be the most ridiculous thing you've ever said, bitch."

"Bender's right," Lui said. "Why would they tell us where to find their command center?"

"Makes it all the easier to capture us," Manic said. "Or who knows, maybe there's actually a human forward operating base hidden deep underground or something, and the aliens want to trick us into destroying it."

"You're ever the conspiracy theorist, aren't you?" Rade said. "But I'm not convinced."

"We'll know for sure when we arrive," Manic said. "If there's no 2nd Battalion 29th waiting for us, I'd say it's a probably a good idea for us to turn around and hightail it out of there."

"Moccasin, update me on the chief's status," Rade said.

"Chief Facehopper is still stable," Moccasin replied.

"Can he survive the ten hour march?"

"Yes," Moccasin said. "My earlier estimate of twenty-four hours still stands. Though only twenty-two hours remain, now. He will need to return to a properly equipped starship before then if he is to survive."

"Maybe the battalion's medical unit can do something to prolong that time," Rade said.

"Maybe," Moccasin agreed.

After five hours of traveling due north through the snow, Rade directed the group to the northwest, and eventually they came alongside the trench the UC digger nukes had carved into the ground between the two cities. Morning had come to the alien world by then, the sun shining weakly in the overcast sky, so that Rade was able to switch back to the visual band for a detailed view of the devastation the nukes had wrought. It had appeared as a small gash on the overhead map, but up close that "trench" was a vast

valley, four kilometers in width. Snow covered the bottom, but the ragged sides were partially visible where it was too steep for any drifts to cling. Those bare cliff faces glistened in the muted sunlight, their edges turned to black glass by the terrible power of the nuclear yields. The rad levels were extremely high.

“The wonders of digger nukes,” Fret said.

Bender picked out a tunnel opening at the bottom of the valley. That, along with the high radiation levels, made Rade decide it was best to give the place a wide berth. He ordered the two squads to move away until the valley was a dark line in the distance.

After the tenth hour on the march through that white wasteland, they closed with the waypoint. The pain in his arm had begun to abate by that point, but it still flared occasionally, depending on how he moved his fist or squeezed his fingers.

Three kilometers away, Mauler, who was on point in squad one, said: “I see something.”

Rade switched to Mauler's point of view and zoomed in. He discerned several armored carriers arranged in a broad circle: a combat outpost of some kind. Mauler ran his gaze across the snowpack beside those carriers. The bodies of hornheads and other bioengineered creatures began to litter the ground, becoming thicker as Mauler continued, until the corpses became so dense that they formed neat, ever higher stacks. He spotted some robot body parts in the mix, but he couldn't make out the class. Definitely wasn't UC, though.

Those stacks abruptly dropped away, descending into an ominous black tunnel. ATLAS mechs stood guard next to the opening, the dead forming ramparts around them.

"Snakeoil," Rade said. "Announce us as soon as you get a signal."

"Will do," Snakeoil answered.

"Now do you believe it's not a trap, Manic?" Rade said.

"Maybe," Manic replied. "But they could all be infiltration units for all we know."

As the lead squad grew closer, Snakeoil said: "The lieutenant colonel sends his greetings. He wants to see you and Sergeant Luxe in the command tent as soon as you arrive."

Marines in jumpsuits patrolled the outer perimeter of the outpost; a few nodded as the lead squad passed, but most regarded the Titans suspiciously from behind their faceplates.

"Disgusting things," Bender said at one point. "Look like giant centipedes, but with alligator heads. Gatorpedes."

Rade switched to Bender's viewpoint in squad one and saw that he had zoomed in on a pile of dead. The corpses looked precisely as Bender had described them, complete with hundreds of tiny legs and sharp rows of teeth. Their bodies were curled up and crimped around one another in death. The snowpack was black around the bodies, probably indicating where alien blood had spilled.

Squad one approached the ring of armored carriers that enclosed the combat outpost. Pulse platforms had been raised on the flat tops of some of

the carriers, adding additional defensive weaponry to those the vehicles already possessed. A gap had been left in that mobile fence, forming an entrance, and the lead squad made for it. Squad two, containing Rade, hung back in the rear.

The ATLAS mechs standing guard at the entrance to the outpost remained motionless as the Titans of the lead squad passed. The Marine units showed up as blue dots on the overhead map.

Rade switched back to his own external cameras. Because of the height of his mech, he was able to peer easily over the ring of carriers and into the outpost. The command “tent” near the center was an opaque geodesic dome surrounded by pulse platforms. Smaller domes had been raised near it.

Squad one reached the main geodesic dome, which was guarded by more ATLAS mechs. Two Titans separated and made their way around the back side.

“Looks clear,” Mauler said.

Rade noticed the hundreds of laser holes marring the outer fabric of the dome. He wondered why the lieutenant colonel hadn’t repaired them.

“Bomb, see if they’ll let you have a look inside,” Rade said.

Bomb dismounted his mech and entered the dome. He returned a moment later, leaped onto his cockpit hatch, and gave Rade a thumbs up. “Definitely a lieutenant colonel waiting for you in there. Seems a bit grumpy today.” The hatch sealed behind Bomb as he disappeared in his mech.

“What lieutenant colonel isn’t grumpy?” Tahoe said.

“All right,” Rade said. “Squad two, advance.”

Squad two passed into the outpost and joined the waiting squad one in front of the geodesic dome.

Rade stared at the wide open airlock, which wouldn’t fit his mech. With the dome riddled with laser holes like that, it didn’t make much sense to pressurize the dome at the moment. Still, he found himself slightly distrustful.

“The lieutenant colonel says, ‘come right in,’” Snakeoil announced.

Rade sighed. “How are the rad levels, Jerry?” he asked his AI. Just because TJ could go outside, didn’t mean Rade could. Rade was missing a subdermal, after all.

“Magnetic field emissions from the carriers and geodesic domes are countering much of the radiation,” the AI returned. “If you plan to dismount,

you should be safe out there in your jumpsuit for an hour at least.”

“All right,” Rade said. “Luxe and I are going in. Hold the fort, TJ.”

Rade dismounted his Titan and entered the dome with Luxe. The first thing he noticed inside were the repair drones busy plugging the holes. The attack had been recent, then.

The lieutenant colonel sat at the head of a conference table, but he stood up to greet them. Behind the faceplate, his skin seemed wrinkled and his jaw angular, but it was hard to see much more of his features beyond the clouded glass. Rade did see the eyes quite clearly, however: hard, brown, glinting orbs.

Rade introduced himself and Luxe.

“Lieutenant Colonel Harlan at your service.” The LC extended a gloved hand and Rade shook it, as did Luxe. “You’ll have to excuse the poor condition of my office. We only just finished repelling the latest attack. I tell you, we can’t take much more of this. We’re going to have to fall back to the muster point. Probably won’t be the only ones. I bet you half the battalions from wave two are already there.” He sat down behind the long conference table, a spartan polycarbonate affair whose sole purpose was apparently to provide a place for the lieutenant colonel to rest his boots.

“You’ll have to excuse my caution,” Rade said. “You never know who you can trust these days.”

“I would have sent my men in first, too,” the lieutenant colonel said. “So. Your communicator tells me you have a message for me. I hope it’s good news. Reinforcements? Or withdrawal orders perhaps. Both are more than welcome.”

Rade exchanged a look with Luxe. “Neither,” he said. He shared the message.

The lieutenant colonel listened with an ever darkening face. Finally, when Rade finished, the man shook his head behind his faceplate and stood. He paced back and forth at the end of the conference table, at least as much as the cramped inside of the geodesic dome allowed.

Finally, he stopped, then leaned across the table and planted his gloves down on the empty counter. “Can’t do it. Those goddamn bastards all comfy in their ships up there have no idea what it’s like down here. None at all. I can’t send any more men inside. I just can’t. Every platoon I’ve sent down there has never returned.”

“Have you tried HS3s—” Luxe began.

Harlan slammed the table with one of his gloves. “Of course I’ve tried HS3s goddammit! Between the incoming enemy waves I’ve sent loads of HS3s and Centurions into that hell pit. Why do you think we have no Centurions left? I’ve sent mixed teams of HS3s and mechs, too. I even sent a few armored carriers. Without fail, none of them return. I’m not going to risk any more Marine lives to satisfy some ‘hunch’ by a few navy scientists based on conjectural evidence.”

“But the orders were specific,” Rade said. “It is of the highest priority that you take the command and control, by whatever means necessary. And capture or kill the alien sentience running it.”

“I don’t recognize your command authority,” Harlan said.

“These orders don’t come from me.”

Harlan smiled sarcastically behind his faceplate. “Then whose command authority is it?”

“The highest level of senior command, I would presume,” Rade said. “I have the authorization codes to prove it. With your permission...”

“I don’t give a damn about your authorization codes,” the LC said. “You expect me to follow the orders of some random MOTH who comes to me out of nowhere and tells me to send my men to their deaths? What in the hell do you take me for? A madman? You could be infiltration units, far as I know.”

“Just let me send the codes...” Rade said.

Harlan sighed. “Go ahead. I’m waiting.”

Rade sent the codes.

Harlan abruptly took his seat. His faceplate seemed to grow even more cloudy. Rade realized that it was condensation.

The man was sweating.

Abruptly Harlan shook his head. “These codes have to be fake. The aliens have somehow gotten their hands on them. That has to be it. You’ve been duped. Until I can get a secondary corroboration from the fleet that these orders are real, I’ll have to assume alien subterfuge, and I refuse to act upon them. Hell, we’ve already been tricked repeatedly by these aliens. One time, they sent a distress call from the tunnel. We were sure it was UC. I sent men down, and you can guess what happened.”

“You’ll never get secondary corroboration,” Rade said. “Not while

this interference is in place.”

The lieutenant colonel crossed his arm assemblies. He didn’t need to say anything. Rade knew he wasn’t going to budge from his stance.

“Someone has to go,” Rade said. “Because if the scientists are right, and a command and control exists in this tunnel, the war could be won or lost right here.”

Harlan’s eyes abruptly narrowed and Rade felt like a rabbit in the gaze of a hawk. “Feel free. Technically, you’re not under my command. Neither is she, though I’d be in my rights to co-opt her units. You’re free agents.”

“You won’t send a few of your men down with us?” Rade said.

“I will not.”

“A few ATLAS mechs?” Rade tried. “A couple of troop carriers?”

“Nope.”

“HS3s, at the least?”

“We have none left,” Harlan said.

“Do you at least have partial maps of the tunnel you can share?”

Harlan stood up, walked to Rade, and stared directly into his faceplate. “As I told you before, no one and nothing I sent down returned. Not men. Not machines. So no, we have no maps. If you want to go, then go. But you’re alone on this.”

“One last thing,” Rade said. “We have a wounded man, suffering from severe radiation poisoning.”

The LC frowned. “Our medical unit doesn’t have the equipment to deal with severe exposure. You’d think, given the radiation levels, we would. But the comfy generals and admirals aboard their ships decided we wouldn’t need such facilities. ‘You’ve got armor!’ they said. In any case, you’re certainly welcome to leave your injured man with our Weavers, for whatever care they can provide, if that’s your prerogative.”

Rade considered. “Yes,” he said. “We’ll do that. Thank you.” He gave a stiff salute.

Harlan’s eyes twinkled, and he saluted back. Then he turned around. “Dismissed.”

Rade left the geodesic dome fast as he could and he reboarded his Titan.

“Well that went well,” Luxe said.

“You all listened in, I assume?” Rade said.

“Unfortunately,” Manic said.

“I believe the message we received is real,” Rade said. “Therefore, it’s my duty to go inside that tunnel. I’m going to complete the mission or die trying. But I can’t order any of you to go with me.”

“Why not?” Bender said. “We’ve all seen the official orders. Just because this coward doesn’t want to go doesn’t mean we’re excused.”

“All the same,” Rade said. “Officially, our only duty was to deliver the missive to the lieutenant colonel.”

“Actually,” Tahoe said. “*Officially* we have standing orders to exterminate whatever aliens we find down here. I’d say destroying the command and control counts as part of that mission.”

“Well sure,” Rade told him. “But I don’t think anyone ever expected a team of thirteen Titans to take on a command and control embedded deep within an alien homeworld.”

“Maybe it’s better that way,” Manic said. “A small group might have a greater chance. Stealth on our side, and all that.”

“How many do you think they have down there?” TJ said. His Titan’s gaze was fixed on the dead bodies piled up outside the tunnel.

“I’d guess, a hell of a lot,” Lui said. He snickered nervously.

“Is this the best idea?” Fret said. “If everyone sent down there has died...”

“As I said, you don’t have to come,” Rade told him.

“We have thirteen Titans,” Fret said. “That’s gotta be an unlucky portent.”

“I think it’s lucky,” Snakeoil said. “LPO Rage, I’m reporting for duty to kick some alien ass.”

Others from Alpha chimed in, so that a chorus of voices volunteered for the mission. The Marines all remained quiet.

“Thank you,” Rade told them. “I appreciate your help. Storming Amazons, you’re free to join the battalion. I’m sure they could use your help securing the outer perimeter of the outpost.”

“You’re not leaving us behind,” Luxe said. “Much as you might want to.”

“Sergeant,” Rade said. “You heard what the lieutenant colonel said, didn’t you?”

“I did. And we’re coming. You think we’re going to sit back and let you take all the credit for winning the war?”

“Fine,” Rade said. “But remember, if you come, you’re under my command.”

“Yeah,” she said. It sounded like she wasn’t entirely certain about that last comment, but Rade let it pass. He would need her Amazons down there.

“Fret,” Rade said. “Clear out of Trace’s cockpit and escort Facehopper’s Titan to the medical unit. Give him to the care of the Weavers, and then take his mech. Meet us at the supply depot.”

“Assuming they have one...” Fret said.

“Check your map,” Rade said. “They have a supply depot.”

“What about your arm?” Tahoe said.

“I’ll get it looked at before we leave,” Rade replied.

“Should we unload our dead?” Lui asked.

Rade hesitated. He didn’t want to give up his men, even in death. But he knew that was entirely irrational. The men were gone. There was nothing he could do for them, not anymore.

“Probably a good idea,” Rade said. “Luxe, supervise the task. See that Grappler, Keelhaul, and your dead are taken to the casualty collection robots. Rendezvous with us at the supply depot.”

“Our dead have names, too, you know,” Luxe said as she jetted down from the passenger seat. In her arms she carried the body of Grappler. “Gibbs. Nabe.”

“Sorry,” Rade said.

“It’s fine,” she said. “I just wanted to make sure their sacrifice was properly respected. And that they’ll be remembered.”

“They will be.”

Luxe turned toward the two Marines clinging to Mauler’s Titan nearby. “Teeson, Paxon, help me out.”

When they had unloaded the dead, Rade addressed the remaining Titans. “The rest of you, with me.”

While Fret and Luxe hurried off to perform their separate tasks, the others made their way to the supply depot. There, they completely refilled their oxygen tanks, replenished their water and meal replacement supplies, and topped up their jumpjet fuel tanks. The outpost didn’t have an actual engineering company, and the few techs present were fully booked, so there

would be no repairing of the weapon mounts. The platoon members did grab a few grenades and other explosives for their storage compartments, or in the case of the Marines, for their utility belts and harnesses.

Fret joined them momentarily in Facehopper's Titan, along with Luxe and her two Marines.

"Thought you were going to the medical unit?" Fret said.

"I'm headed there now," Rade said. "When you're done gearing up, meet me at the outpost entrance, people."

"Wait, you mean we're leaving right away?" Fret said. "I was expecting a little downtime..."

"Hell with that," Bender said. "I'm ready."

"Now's as good a time as any," Rade agreed.

Rade reached the medical unit, disembarked from his Titan, and entered the long airlock that had been set up outside.

"Where's Chief Facehopper of MOTH Team Seven?" Rade asked as the Weaver worked on his arm in the tight confines.

"He has been taken to the ICU for treatment," the surgical robot replied.

"Can I see him?"

The spider-like robot transmitted a video feed. On it, Rade saw Facehopper lying atop a bed, connected to an IV. A Weaver hovered above him. Satisfied that the chief was in capable hands, Rade dismissed the feed.

"Your arm has been repaired," the Weaver abruptly announced.

Rade flexed his fingers a few times. His forearm had an ugly scar but at least the pain had completely subsided. "I was hoping you could put in a new subdermal."

"We have exhausted our supplies," the Weaver replied. "I am sorry."

Rade reattached his arm assembly, pulled on the glove, and then returned to his Titan outside. He marched to the outpost egress, where the rest of the platoon was waiting.

"Did you get a new subdermal?" Tahoe asked.

"Apparently they don't have any more," Rade replied.

"Let me give you one of mine," Tahoe said. "I'm sure the Weaver—"

"No," Rade told him. "I'm good, Cyclone. Let's not delay any more than we have to."

Beyond that makeshift fence of armored carriers and geodesic domes,

the Titans made their way toward the forbidding black opening in the ground. The Storming Amazons remained aboard each unit, either clinging to the external rungs of the Titans, or staying secure in the passenger seats. Soon the mechs were wading through the grisly corpses of the creatures that surrounded the opening.

An ATLAS mech intercepted them. "Halt. This is a restricted zone."

Rade's Implant identified the speaker as Gunnery Sergeant Terry MacKay.

"We're authorized," Rade said.

"No, you're not," MacKay said slowly. "No one is allowed to pass."

"Talk to your LC," Rade said.

"Listen," MacKay told him. "We've sent troops. Combat robots. HS3s. Nothing comes back. You go in there, your men are signing their death sentences."

"We're not ordinary men."

"Let the idiots pass," the lieutenant colonel's weary voice came over the line.

"Yes sir," MacKay replied.

The ATLAS stepped aside.

"I don't envy you," the gunnery sergeant said as Rade and the others passed. "Someone really needs to talk to your commander, and convince him not to waste your lives like this. Do you want me to?"

"I'm the commander," Rade said.

"You're going with them?" MacKay said. He sounded surprised. "I guess I assumed, as the commander..."

"Well you shouldn't have assumed," Rade said.

"You don't have to do this," MacKay pressed. "Why not wait until we clear out? Let the fleet launch another digger nuke. Do you really have a death wish?"

"The fleet doesn't have any more digger nukes."

"Well, not now, maybe," the gunnery sergeant said. "But they'll get more. When the fleet reinforcements arrive."

"Sure. In a few months."

"That's the nature of war," MacKay said. When it became obvious Rade wasn't stopping, he added: "Hey, it's your lives..."

The ATLAS mech trudged off.

Bender, on point, halted near the edge of the dark pit. Instinctively, the others assumed positions beside him, forming a line between the pulse platforms whose turrets were trained inside. Rade joined them and stared into the depths.

The tunnel sloped down into the darkness at a thirty-degree angle. The dead bodies of hornheads and gatorpedes sheathed the floor in knotted masses of limbs and fur.

“Well, on the bright side,” Manic said. “At least there’s enough room for our mechs.”

Fret swiveled his Titan toward Manic. “I thought you were going to say, *at least they’re all dead.*”

“That, too,” Manic said.

Rade stared into the gloom residing beyond the farthest reaches of the pit. He could swear he saw shapes swirling there. He activated his headlamp, partially illuminating it, but saw only more darkness. He switched to the thermal band. Clear.

“Let’s go terminate an alien command and control,” Rade said.

Bender,” Rade said. “Lead the way.”

Bender resumed his position on point and began wading down through the dead creatures. He shuffled and dragged the feet of his mech for most of the way, shoving the corpses of hornheads and gatorpedes aside, along with the occasional robot wreckage.

As the other Titans stepped down into the tunnel, Rade assumed a position near the center of the platoon. The cylindrical walls, interrupted only by the jagged corpses on the floor, seemed far too round to be natural. The stone was gray, interrupted occasionally by different strata and veins of red and white.

Shortly after everyone had descended into the tunnel, lieutenant colonel Harlan came over the line.

“I’ve decided to have pity on you,” the LC transmitted, his voice distorting slightly.

“How’s that?” Rade sent back.

“I’m sending a couple of Centurions your way.”

Rade glanced over his shoulder, and past the three Titans on drag behind him he spotted five Centurions jetting and wading through the dead.

“Generous of him,” Bender said over the group private line. His voice oozed sarcasm.

“I thought you didn’t have any more Centurions left,” Rade said over the main comm.

“Let’s just say I wanted to protect my assets,” Harlan said. “But as I said, I’ve had a change of heart. I didn’t think you boys, and gals, would actually do it.”

“Don’t suppose you can scare up some HS3s, too?” Rade asked.

“We really did lose all our HS3s,” Harlan said. “The Centurions are all you’re going to get.”

Whatever helps assuage your guilt. Or maybe he was just trying to cover his ass for the eventual inquiry into his conduct.

“That’s fine,” Rade said. “Thank you, Lieutenant Colonel.”

“No problem,” Harlan said. “Wish I could feel good about it. I’m

basically kissing those units good-bye.”

“Like you’re kissing us good-bye?” Rade said.

“There are no kisses for you,” Harlan said. “I gave you the chance to stay, but you refused. There’s no blood on my hands.”

Yep, he definitely feels the guilt.

Rade wondered if the inquiry would call for his court-martial when this was all over, because refusing to participate further was basically an act of cowardice. On second thought, Rade doubted Harlan would be court-martialed, given that so far he had held his position, despite the relentless waves of enemy units that had assailed his battalion from the tunnel. Still, the man had to be worried: in times of war, the sentence for cowardice was death.

“TJ,” Rade said. “Interface with the Praetor unit in charge of the Centurions.”

“Done,” TJ returned. “They’re ready to take our orders.”

“Have the robots fan out in front of us,” Rade said. “I want them fifty meters ahead of Bender.”

“Got it,” TJ said.

The robots jetted forward and took the lead, marching fifty meters ahead as Rade had ordered.

“Do they have names?” Rade said.

“Yep, transmitting now,” TJ replied.

The names of the robots appeared on the overhead map next to the associated dots. Molly. Holly. Griswald. Bacon. Shenanigans. Or Units M, H, G, B, and S.

The Titans had enough room to walk three abreast in that tunnel, but Rade ordered them to proceed in single file. He had them maintain a zigzag formation, however.

As the two groups advanced, the bodies of the bioengineered beasts began to thin out until there was only the empty tunnel before the party, descending ever into the dark bowels of the alien homeworld. It was a good change to walk on bare rock, rather than wading through waist-deep snow or bodies. Though what he didn’t like was the rather loud resound each footfall made on the lonely stone.

On the overhead map, the ping times associated with the blue indicators of the Marines from the battalion above began to reach infinity, one by one.

“We just left signal range with the battalion,” Snakeoil said.

“TJ, do you still have our robots?” Rade said.

“I do,” TJ replied. “Though the signal degradation is fairly bad. Probably shouldn’t let them wander too far ahead.”

“Ensure that you don’t,” Rade said.

“Hey, should we turn off our Implants?” Trace asked.

“What’s the point?” Luxe said. “Even in full stealth mode, you’ll give yourselves away by the vibrations from your footsteps. If not the noise itself. A Titan doesn’t walk softly.”

“But it carries a big stick,” Bomb joked.

“MOTH humor, I’ll never understand it,” Luxe said. “Anyway, it’s better to maintain our tactical advantage, than to give it up for the false hope of stealth.”

“She’s right,” Tahoe said.

“That’s Cyclone for you, always taking the side of the woman,” Manic teased. “Like it’ll ever get you anywhere with her, bro.”

“I’m a married man,” Tahoe said.

“You only tell them that to make them want you even more,” Manic said.

“Do I have to kick your ass?” Tahoe halted. “Because I will.”

“Easy, Cyclone,” Rade said. “Keep marching. And Manic? Shut it.”

“Sorry, boss,” Manic said.

“I’m going to have to disagree,” Trace said when the pace resumed. “The chief thought it prudent to deactivate our Implants in the alien city. We should probably do the same here.”

“But that’s the key word,” Luxe argued. “*City*. We had multiple places to hide, then. And the snow-covered ground absorbed much of the sound and vibrations your mechs made when they walked, while the buildings reflected any noises we did actually produce, making it harder to track us. Not like this bare rock. Check the seismic sensors of your advance robots and tell me I’m wrong.”

A moment later TJ said: “She’s not wrong. This rock is highly conducive to vibration transmission. Not to mention that the way sound echoes in here, any enemies will know we’re coming a kilometer away. Stealth mode isn’t going to cut it. Besides, Trace is forgetting: how am I supposed to communicate with the robots if I turn off my Implant, and my

Titan's comm node?"

"There you go," Rade said. "We keep our Implants active."

The party proceeded downward for fifteen minutes.

Then TJ announced: "The tunnel just opened up. We got a vast cavern ahead of us."

Rade switched to the point of view of Molly, the lead robot in the Centurion group. He saw stalactites and stalagmites that had joined together to form long, colorful columns, thinner at the centers than the bases and tops. Those columns were randomly spaced throughout the area, and gave the place an almost imperial feel, like he was observing a royal court or something. The sparkling colors from the many crystals that jutted from the walls and ceiling added to the atmosphere.

"Have the Centurions continue the advance," Rade said. "But spread them out to cover the width of the cavern."

"Roger that."

"We continue forward," Rade said.

Soon his Titan stood inside the natural-seeming cavern. Rade took a moment to study the sparkling hues on the rock face beside him. Each a different color, crystals shaped like dodecahedrons thrust from the stone of the main wall; he was reminded of the crystalline structures he had seen in the nuked alien city, with each dodecahedron standing in for a building in his mind. But unlike in the city, these crystals did not glow. Perhaps that quality had something to do with the radiation levels. Speaking of which...

"How are we doing on the radiation, Jerry?" Rade asked the AI.

"It's relatively low at the moment," Jerry replied. "Even with the reduced number of subdermals you carry, you could survive for a long time outside the mech. Though I would advise against it, of course."

"As would I," Rade said.

Because of the way the light dispersed in that cave, no doubt in part to all the crystals, it seemed brighter than in the previous tunnel. He could clearly discern the Centurions fifty meters ahead, spread out along an imaginary line amid the columns.

"Have the Centurions spotted anything yet?" Rade said.

"No," TJ replied. "Maybe the battalion cleaned out all the tangos for us already."

"I hope not," Bender said.

“I second that,” Skullcracker added.

“I’m sure the two of you will get your chance to crack some skulls soon enough,” Rade said. “If there’s really a command and control center down here, the enemy wouldn’t have dispatched all of their defensive units to the surface. Not by far. Sure, they would have sent some, hoping to drive away the interlopers. But the majority would have been held back in reserve.”

“Why haven’t they attacked us yet, then?” Manic said.

“Manic, if I knew how these aliens think,” Rade said. “Then I’d be alien, too, wouldn’t I?”

“Molly’s got something,” TJ said.

Rade switched to the robot’s viewpoint. Directly in front of Molly, near the center of the cavern, resided the wreckages of a complete armored platoon. Dead hornheads and gaterpedes were scattered around the battered troop carriers, along with the corpses of Marines, their jumpsuits torn open, their mangled bodies contorted in various poses of death.

“Have the Centurions secure the area,” Rade said.

A moment later: “Area secured.”

“Proceed.”

The platoon reached the battleground. Rade walked his mech fastidiously through the carnage, not wanting to crush any of the dead Marines. He had no qualms about grounding a bioengineered creature underneath his large metal feet, however. Doing so was in fact highly satisfying.

“We should retrieve some of these bodies,” one of the Storming Amazons said. Paxon.

“Maybe on the way back,” Luxe said. “Because until we’re sure we’re getting out of here ourselves, there’s no point.”

“Someone’s a morale leech,” Manic said. “And it’s not Fret for once.”

“I’m only stating the obvious, PO1,” Luxe said.

“Yes, Sergeant,” Manic replied.

“I think they gots the hots for each other,” Bomb said.

“Please, no unnecessary chatter on the comms,” Rade said.

He knew that humor was a coping mechanism. These were seasoned troops, men and women who had fought battles, faced death, many times before. Not a one of them felt excitement at the current moment, like a troop green to battle might feel. Sure, Skullcracker and Bender might affect

eagerness, but Rade knew it was a facade. They were all afraid. So the humor was actually good for them. The only problem was, well first of all, it wasn't very respectful to the dead. But second of all, he needed his men to remain absolutely vigilant. An attack could come at any time. They weren't on a camping trip.

The Centurions discovered a tunnel opening off to the right halfway through the cavern. Rade ordered them to ignore it and continue forward. At the far side the robots discovered a second passageway leading away into darkness.

"So this is the point where we get outflanked," Mauler said. "No matter what choice we make."

"I'm going to go with the forward passageway," Rade said. "TJ, leave two of the robots here. If trouble comes, I want one of them to dash down this passageway and alert us as soon as it's in signal range, while the other one holds off the enemy as long as it can."

"Understood," TJ said. He chose Units M and H to remain behind. Molly and Holly.

The new tunnel proved slightly tighter, so that only two mechs could walk abreast if they wanted. Rade kept the zigzag, single-file formation, and had the combat robots continue to lead the way far ahead of the Titans.

After a few minutes Snakeoil said: "It's getting warmer. The fleet was right about the anomalous thermal readings."

"Exactly how warm are we talking?" Rade said.

"A balmy minus thirty-two degrees Celsius."

After a few minutes, TJ said: "Boss, the Centurions found something new."

Rade glanced at his overhead map. The Centurions had halted. He switched to the viewpoint of Griswald.

The combat robot stood at the edge of a small cavern. Inside, the bodies of dead Marines and the wreckage of battered mechs fanned outward from an arched opening on the far side, as if something had spat them out. There were destroyed combat robots and HS3s thrown into the mix, too. The cave floor was covered in frozen, crimson blood all the way from the opening to the outer perimeter of bodies. A sort of macabre welcome mat.

That dark arch was only big enough to fit one Titan at a time. Beyond resided blackness, pure and utter.

“Local-beam LIDAR from the robots indicates that the cavern widens beyond that opening,” TJ said. “I’m not detecting anything out of the ordinary in the cavern beyond. Just normal rock.”

“But there’s obviously something out of the ordinary inside,” Fret said, his voice cracking. “Or we wouldn’t be looking at the dead bodies of our predecessors.”

“What do you think caused this?” Manic said. “Some kind of laser? Maybe fired when a pressure plate is stepped on inside?”

“It’s fairly obvious there’s some sort of booby trap within,” Harlequin said. “Though without dispatching a scout, it’s impossible to ascertain the nature of the aforementioned trap.”

“Not sure a scout would help,” Tahoe said. “Look at all the HS3s littering the floor. Obviously didn’t make much of a difference.”

“This is the perfect spot to set a trap, too,” Mauler said. “Right after a choke point.”

“I’d guess it’s something like pulse platforms,” Bomb said. “Probably a hundred of them arranged in a semicircle in the chamber beyond, all aimed at the entrance, triggered when something steps inside.”

“But look at the wreckages of the mechs,” TJ said. “And the dead bodies. Those are physical wounds. It’s like they were torn apart, rather than riddled with lasers.”

“Maybe it’s one of those giant robots we encountered on the plains

above,” Manic said.

“Don’t think a robot like that would fit in here, bro,” Lui said.

“Hey, we don’t know how big the cavern beyond is,” Manic said.

“Okay, that’s enough,” Rade said. “We can speculate until we’re blue in the face, but it’s not going to help.”

“We should go back,” Fret said.

“No,” Luxe said. “Think about what the lieutenant colonel said. No one sent inside ever returned. If we turn around now, I guarantee you we’ll be attacked. You saw the wreckages of the armored carriers back there. That’s what happens when you run. They haven’t attacked yet. That tells me they want us to continue. They want to test us. See if we’re worthy.”

“Maybe you should tell *her* to stop speculating,” Bomb said.

“I would,” Rade said. “But I don’t think she’d listen.”

“Fret’s right,” TJ said. “If we go back, we have the second passageway we can try.”

“Didn’t you hear what I just said?” Luxe told him. “We’ll be attacked.”

A loud, stone-on-stone rasping filled the air. It reminded Rade of the closing lid of a sarcophagus.

“Behind us!” Manic said.

Rade spun in time to watch the two side walls of the tunnel behind the party seal with a loud thud, blocking all retreat. The barrier was pocked with laser marks.

Mauler fired his cobra into the seal, adding his own small bore.

“It’s not rock,” Mauler said. “But some sort of armor. I only penetrated ten centimeters.”

“At that rate, it will take a few days to bore through,” Tahoe said.

“So.” Rade turned back toward the front. “Looks like forward it is. On the bright side, at least we don’t have to worry about a rear flanking attack. TJ, send in Griswald.”

“Griswald,” TJ said.

“Yes, send it in please,” Rade said.

Since the Centurions were still located fifty meters ahead, Rade pulled up the viewpoint of the designated robot in the forward party and situated it on the upper left of his HUD. He added the feed of another Centurion, placing it in the upper right so that he could observe both viewpoints at once.

The two feeds rippled with interference, the displays pixelating and freezing every few seconds.

Laser rifle in hand, Griswald advanced toward the opening. The Centurion picked its way fastidiously forward, taking care not to tromp upon either the ruined human bodies or the mangled combat robots and mechs scattered about the entrance.

It passed underneath the arch with two meters of clearance above its steel head. The darkness beyond almost seemed to reach out and embrace the robot, despite its headlamp that shone weakly into the gloom.

“Bye bye Griswald,” Fret said.

The robot stepped into the chamber beyond.

The upper left video feed winked out.

Rade focused on the secondary viewpoint from the forward party, but saw only blackness inside the opening where Griswald had stood. “What the hell happened?”

“I don’t know,” TJ said. “We lost connection.”

“Shouldn’t we at least see the headlamp?” Rade thought he heard something, so he turned up the volume on his remaining video feed. A crunching, ripping sounded reached his ears. Tearing metal.

Rade tried the local-beam LIDAR of the remaining robots. Nothing appeared but the empty cave floor beyond that arch. Whatever was taking place in there, it was happening out of view.

“Shenanigans detected a surge of electrons from the entrance shortly before Griswald disappeared,” TJ reported.

“Electrons? As in: from an EMP?” Rade asked.

“Similar.”

“I thought all our equipment has built in tolerances against battlefield EMPs?” Rade said. “Griswald should still be standing.”

“*Certamente*,” TJ replied. “But the detected surge was near the upper limit of those tolerances. And remember, our surviving robots were only at the fringes of the pulse. I can only imagine what the directed-energy levels would have been like inside there. I’d estimate seven megawatts per square meter, at least. Definitely enough to take down a robot, if not a mech.”

“Can we improve our EMP tolerances somehow?”

“Not with our current gear,” TJ said. “All our sensitive ICs use solid state glass switches to open a path to ground in case of overvoltage. A

starship can easily take something like seven megawatts per meter because it uses the entire hull as a ground. Unfortunately, the substrates available to robots and mechs are much smaller, and can handle only so much current and heat dissipation.”

“But the stone under our feet is a ground,” Mauler said.

“It is,” TJ agreed. “And the electrons will blow through our solid state switches and short out our electronics on the way into the rock. There are overvoltage protection devices available to infantry troops, of course... you remember the long wires trailing some of the robots and jumpsuits during the Mongolia War, connected to the interlinked troop carriers? Unfortunately, we don’t have anything near that sort of a sink available to us at the moment.”

The crunching noises ceased and Rade spotted a blur of motion on the video feed.

“What was that?” Rade said. He thought he saw fresh pieces of metal sprinkling the floor before the opening.

“Those are all that remains of Griswald,” TJ said. “Looks like an arm, and part of its torso.”

“Did the robots detect anything inside the cave when those remains were ejected?”

“Negative,” TJ said.

Rade considered his options. “I want the two surviving robots to get as close to the opening as they can, and then to fire repeatedly into the cavern beyond. Target the floor, the ceiling, and shoot into the center of the darkness. Basically, have them try to take out whatever is causing those EMPs.”

“Spray and pray? Will do.”

TJ gave the order. The robots stepped over the bodies and approached the arch. Rade let them unleash their weapons into the opening for the next several minutes.

At the five minute mark, the weapons had begun to badly overheat, reducing the firing intervals to twenty seconds each.

“All right,” Rade said. “Cease firing. Let the weapons cool down.”

“Done,” TJ said.

“Okay, in a few minutes time, here’s what I want the robots to do. Unit B is to fire repeatedly into that opening while Unit S dashes inside at top speed. Unit B is to time and aim its shots so as to avoid hitting Unit S, with

the goal of providing covering fire. Unit S is also to fire randomly, at least until it detects something, at which point it is to bring all its shots to bear.”

“Understood,” TJ said. “I’ve sent the orders. The Centurions are waiting on your command.”

“Jerry,” Rade said to his AI. “How long before those laser rifles of theirs return to optimal firing ability?”

“About ten minutes,” Jerry replied.

“What about five?” Rade asked.

“The firing rate will still be high, at three seconds per shot.”

“Not good enough.” Rade activated a timer on his HUD. “I’m sending the robots inside in ten minutes, people.”

Rade and the others waited quietly as the moments ticked past. On the robot video feeds, nothing stirred within the cave during that time.

At the ten minute mark Rade gave the order. He had the video from both units piped into his HUD so he could observe the progress.

Unit S dashed forward while Unit B, the Praetor unit, fired into the cave.

Rade saw a blur on Unit B’s feed; the video from Unit S turned blue. Signal lost.

“Cease firing,” Rade said. On the remaining feed, there was no sign of Unit S beyond the arch.

Again Rade heard what sounded like a trash compactor operating in the background. It was louder that time, because of Unit B’s proximity to the opening.

“TJ, did you see that blur on Unit B’s video?” Rade asked.

“I did. Rewinding the feed now.” TJ paused. “A black mass comes into the frame. I can’t tell what it is. Here’s the clearest shot. Have a look.”

Rade found himself staring at a frozen image. Beyond the arch, a blurry, amorphous darkness surrounded the lost robot.

“It came from above?” Rade asked.

“As far as I can tell, it did,” TJ replied.

Rade dismissed the image.

“Bacon detected another surge of electrons,” TJ said. “Because the Praetor is standing so close to the opening, that surge came very close to its tolerance levels.”

A moment later the remains of Unit S were thrown outside. One of

the pieces struck Unit B in the chest with a resounding clatter.

“Looks like we only got Bacon left,” Bender said.

All right, people,” Rade said. “We’re in a bit of quandary.” He paused. “Cyclone, Bomb, TJ, Skullcracker, you’re with me. The rest of you remain here. Bender, you’re in charge of them. Guard our six.”

“Guard it from what?” Mauler said. His Titan pointed at the sealed wall behind him. “There’s nothing here.”

“You have your orders,” Rade said.

“What about the Marines you carry on your four Titans?” Luxe asked.

“Dismount, and wait here.”

Rade paused while the Marines climbed down from their designated mechs, and then he had Bomb lead the chosen Titans forward.

“What are you going to do, Rage?” Bomb asked during the advance.

“I don’t quite know yet,” Rade said.

When the four of them reached the cavern, Rade stared at the opening on the far end. That ominous outflow of human and robot bodies made him shudder.

“We should rush it,” Skullcracker said.

“You saw how well that worked out for Unit S,” Tahoe said.

“It might have succeeded if Unit B had gone inside, too,” Skullcracker said.

“I’m sure the other platoons that came before us had the same glorious idea,” Tahoe said. “Count the bodies, and tell me if you think it was a successful strategy.”

“Fighting aliens and kicking ass is one thing,” Bomb said. “But stepping into a meat grinder?”

“Maybe you won’t have to,” Rade told him.

“What are you planning?” Tahoe said.

“One sec.” Rade addressed the AI of his Titan next: “Jerry. How are we doing on the rad levels?”

“Still low,” Jerry replied.

“Would I survive without a jumpsuit?”

“With your current anti-rad subdermals, yes,” Jerry replied. “Though I wouldn’t recommend it for more than twenty minutes.”

“That should be all the time I need.”

“Of course, there is the small problem of the cold,” Jerry said. “And the lack of oxygen.”

“The latter isn’t a problem, not with the getup I have in mind,” Rade said. “But as for the former, just how cold is it? Snakeoil said it was warming.”

“It is, at least compared to the surface. External hull temperature is currently minus twenty-nine degrees.”

“Certainly won’t be pleasant,” Rade said. “And the pressure?”

“Similar to the atmosphere of Earth at sea level.”

“How about the air itself?” Rade said. “Anything corrosive to human skin?”

“There is,” Jerry said. “Though you’ll only develop severe burns after an hour of exposure.”

“Is it safe to fire jumpjets?”

“Affirmative.”

“Good, then heat up the rock here on my mark.” He positioned the Titan against the wall, with the dorsal nozzles of the jumpjets nearly touching the stone.

“You’re ceding control to me?” Jerry asked.

“You’re pretty good at putting two and two together.” Rade opened up the cockpit hatch and swung himself outside. He climbed the rungs to the hard rock floor. “Open up the storage compartment.”

The leg panel slid aside.

Rade grabbed the EAB—Emergency Air-Breathing—apparatus from a shelf within and attached it to his utility belt.

“All right, heat up the rock if you don’t mind,” Rade instructed his Titan.

Jerry fired the dorsal thrusters in slow burn mode.

After several seconds Rade said: “All right all right, that’s good. Shut off the jets and step away from the rock.”

The Titan complied.

Rade moved over to the glowing rock and when he judged himself close enough to benefit from the radiated heat, he held his breath and twisted open the helmet.

“Rade...” Tahoe said.

Ignoring him, Rade slid off the helmet. Even though the rock was glowing with thermal radiation, his face still felt extremely cold. His eyes watered immediately.

Rade dropped the helmet and then slid the EAB over his face. It pressed into his beard. The goggles began to mist up—so much for the anti-fog technology. He quickly reached above his shoulder and extended the telescoping feed from the oxygen tank to the EAB. He pressed the evacuate button and waited for the fresh air from the O2 tank to flood his mask.

He took a long inhale and his lenses defogged. The confines of the EAB made his breathing sound loud in his ears—unfortunately the mask didn't employ the noise-canceling tech found in the jumpsuit helmets.

"What the hell are you doing?" Tahoe's disapproving voice echoed from the external speakers on his mech.

"There comes a time in every man's life when he has to rely solely upon the skin he was born in." Rade's voice sounded muffled to his ears, coming as it did from within that breathing apparatus. "Birth is one of those times. Sex, another."

"Now's not the time to joke around..." Tahoe said. "We could be attacked at any time. You should be *adding* to your defenses, not subtracting."

"That would be the obvious thing to do, wouldn't it? And I'm sure that's what everyone who passed this way before us thought. But consider something, Cyclone. We're dealing with a directed-energy EMP. We have to get rid of anything that could possibly be affected by that pulse. Or I do, anyway. And that includes my jumpsuit."

"What about your blaster?" Skullcracker said. "Your EAB?"

"The EAB shouldn't be harmed," Rade said. "The blaster, I'm not so sure about. If it is, then I suppose I die."

Rade stripped off the jumpsuit part by part, detaching the assemblies from the hard points protruding from his body. The heated rock face was quickly cooling off, and he found himself shivering uncontrollably as he undressed.

He had to remove his boots to take off the lower part of his leg assembly, and the ground felt like ice underneath his tight socks. His toes burned. As soon as he had the leg assemblies removed, Rade quickly donned the boots again.

He also had to temporarily divest himself of his gloves to part with the arm assemblies, and his exposed fingers felt like they were on fire in that frigid air. He quickly pulled the gloves back on. Meanwhile his feet had stopped burning, and were already growing numb.

“You shouldn’t be the one doing this,” Tahoe said. “I don’t think it’s allowed, what with you being our LPO and all. And essentially our chief.”

“Probably not,” Rade said. “But I can’t let anyone else do what I plan to do.”

“You can,” Tahoe said. “You must.”

Rade hesitated. He knew Tahoe was right. Yet... “This is something I’m always going to struggle with. Ordering someone, essentially, to their death. I thought I would be able to do it. I promised the lieutenant commander I could, when the time came.” He sighed. “I was wrong. I’m sorry, Cyclone. Tahoe. Call it the privilege of command: it’s the one time being in charge isn’t a burden, but a benefit. I killed Keelhaul, and I’m not going to kill another one of you.”

“At least let one of us volunteer to go in your stead,” Tahoe said.

“You’ll all volunteer,” Rade said.

“Then let us draw straws.”

Rade laughed. “You know that whoever runs the randomization app will simply tilt the odds in their favor. Or disfavor, depending on how you look at it. Including myself.”

Rade had to momentarily disconnect the feed line to the EAB when he detached the jumpsuit’s torso piece, causing his goggles to mist up once more. Mostly by touch, he fetched the small emergency oxygen canister from the jumpsuit and then reconnected the feed, restoring his air and his vision.

He wrapped the utility belt from the jumpsuit around his midsection—he had to tighten it several notches to compensate for the smaller size of his waist sans the suit—and secured the O2 canister to it. He also grabbed one of the explosives from the storage compartment: a Mylar-wrapped M117B demolition block, obtained from the combat outpost on the surface. He held the blaster with his other hand, still uncertain whether either weapon would actually function in there.

He was wearing nothing but his ventilation undergarments, his boots, his gloves, and the EAB. The rock had stopped glowing beside him, and he shivered frantically. The liquid cooling features of his undergarments didn’t

help. He was a little worried his shaking fingers would accidentally squeeze the trigger on the blaster; he kept it pointed downward at all times, of course.

Momentarily stowing his weapons, Rade grabbed the bug-out kit from the Titan's storage compartment. He grabbed two heat packets, squeezing them to break the divider between the chemicals inside, and shoved the packets into his gloves. Next he grabbed the thermal blanket, and folded it a few times to mix the heat-inducing molecules it too contained, then tied it around his chest. He didn't feel that much warmer.

"I want you to line up in front of the entrance." Rade said. "Illuminate the inside for me as much as you can. I won't have thermal vision in there. I'll only be able to see by your light. Shine true, my friends."

"You can't be serious," Bender said. "You're going to go in there like *that*? You can't even aim straight with your shaking hands."

Rade dropped and did several pushups, getting the blood flowing. When he stood up, his hands were no longer shaking. "Now if you don't mind, the entrance?"

Moving with obvious reluctance, the four manned Titans crossed the bodies and debris to line themselves up in front of the opening as Rade requested. They shined their headlamps within, illuminating a nondescript cavern beyond. They all aimed the weapons salvaged from the drop site inside.

Rade retrieved his blaster and the explosive charge. "Jerry, might as well join them."

The unmanned Titan took its place by the entrance.

Rade followed, picking his way through the dead. "If I don't survive, Cyclone is in command." He would have named TJ, but he had a feeling the drone operator didn't want the burden.

Rade turned toward the waiting combat robot. "Praetor, with me."

"Affirmative," Unit B said. Bacon.

Rade couldn't resist a small joke. "I guess now would be a good time to remind you to bring home the bacon, Bacon."

"I'll do my best, LPO," the Praetor replied.

Rade paused at the threshold. The dim cavern beyond the arch looked fairly innocuous. Rade leaned forward, gazing upward. The light didn't penetrate far enough to reach the ceiling. Anything could be lurking up there.

He deactivated his Implant. He wasn't sure that would save it from

the EMP. If it burned out, he still had the aReal provided by his helmet when he got back.

Assuming he survived.

“You know, either that EMP won’t affect the M117 block you’re holding,” Skullcracker said. “Or it will detonate the thing.”

Rade regarded the explosive uncertainly. He had chosen the non-timer variant. The chemical nature of the adhesive acted as the trigger: once it attached to something, in three seconds the explosive detonated. No moving parts or electronics were involved. In theory, it shouldn’t detonate from something as simple as an excess flow of electrons. Still, did he really want to risk his life on a theory?

“Stand back.” Rade and the others retreated a few paces, then he hurled the block toward the arch. It didn’t detonate at the threshold, and instead landed several meters inside the adjacent chamber, bouncing a few times before settling.

He waited a few moments, but it still didn’t explode.

“That’s a good sign,” Rade said. “I think. Resume positions.”

The Titans moved into place once more, as did he and the combat robot.

Rade retrieved another explosive charge from his mech, then faced the entrance. He gazed inside, listening to his loud breathing for several seconds. Then:

“Praetor,” he said. “Advance.”

The combat robot obeyed without question.

The moment it passed over the threshold and into the cavern, a dark shape swept down from the ceiling and the Praetor was yanked upward.

Rade dove inside.

Rade swiveled his body before he struck the floor and aimed his blaster into the darkness above the ascending robot. He squeezed the trigger.

The weapon worked.

Rade struck the ground hard, dropping the M117B block.

Apparently he had struck his target, however, because the robot plunged, released by whatever had gripped it, and smashed to the stone beside him. It didn't get up.

Rade sensed movement above, and instinctively rolled to the side. His EAB repeatedly pressed into his face as it contacted the rocky floor. The stone battered his ankles and knees. Not a pleasant sensation. He halted and leaped to one knee.

Where he had lain moments before, a large metallic shape had dropped down. The light cones shone by the Titans at the entrance illuminated a wide black abdomen, the size of a tank. Eight segmented metal limbs protruded from it, curving down to the stone floor. Welded to the front of the abdomen was the outline of a head and thorax. The silhouette of large fangs, the size of Rade's arms, protruded from them.

A dark red glow suddenly came from the center of that head, as if it was about to fire a laser.

Rade rolled across the floor once more, hardly noticing the pain caused by the EAB digging into his face, nor the rock slamming into his joints.

He came to a halt and got up; from the groove cut into the stone beside him, he realized his hunch about the laser had been correct.

The giant robot began to tremble, and then it darted to one side, into the darkness beyond the light cones.

Rade realized the Titans standing beyond the threshold had opened fire on the thing.

"Boss, you all right?" Bomb said over his external speakers.

"Where did it go?" Rade said.

"I don't know," Tahoe responded. "Do you want us to come inside?"

"Stay where you are!" Rade glanced around. He no longer felt cold.

Not at all. He peered into the darkness beyond the combined light cones, but could see nothing. His goggles had begun to fog slightly.

Rade made his way to the block of M117B he had tossed inside earlier, located in the middle of the floor. He gingerly picked up the explosive charge.

“Where are you?” he said softly.

He edged his way backwards.

He struck something.

He spun around, only to discover one of those columns made of melded stalactites and stalagmites. He exhaled in relief.

The light didn’t reach beyond that column. But as he stared at the darkness beyond, he could’ve sworn he saw the outline of the eight-legged robot, lurking there.

Rade fired.

The robot rushed him, ramming into the column. The rock cracked, but arrested the thing’s motion.

Rade hurried backward, lifting his blaster, but before he could fire he tripped on some protrusion in the floor.

The robot skittered into the light, eager to close with its apparently vulnerable prey.

Rade fired at one of its legs. A lucky shot: he struck a servomotor. That leg failed.

But it had seven more.

Rade abandoned the M117B block and scrambled backward on the cold, hard stone, still firing his blaster. The others had joined in, he knew, judging from the way the robot shook. Rade could fire much faster than they could, but conversely, his weapon was all the weaker.

That red light glowed on its head again.

But it winked out a moment later.

“Ha!” Bomb said. “I spit in your eye.”

The robot retreated under the assault, vanishing into the darkness once more.

“Where’d it go?” Bomb said.

“Shh!” Tahoe.

Rade returned to the explosive. Keeping an eye on the darkness, he holstered his blaster, picked up the block, and removed the adhesive liner so

that it was ready for attachment. He held the charge in his free hand while he withdrew his blaster once more.

Rade spun, scanning the darkness all around him. Motion, and a loud footfall, drew his gaze toward the entrance.

Tahoe's mech had stepped forward.

"Tahoe, no!" Rade said.

The mech collapsed when it passed the threshold.

The robot spider swooped down from above, hoisting the Titan upward.

Rade opened fire from his position on the cave floor.

The robot released the Titan, and the mech crashed into the rock below.

"Tahoe, what are you doing?" Rade edged toward the mech.

The spider leaped down before Rade could reach the Titan; it clamped its jaws around the middle of the mech, and shook as it took fire from the other Titans. The robot didn't seem to care. Rade watched in horror as the metal spider pierced the cockpit area with its massive fangs and tore the mech in two.

Its back was toward him; Rade leaped toward the abdomen and attached the charge to its carapace before he bounced painfully away.

The spider turned angrily, Titan parts spilling from its fangs.

Rade clambered to his feet, but before he could move the charge detonated.

The explosion threw Rade backward. He lay there, stunned upon the hard rock. He couldn't hear anything but a high-pitched keen. Robot pieces were spread across the floor around him, receding into the darkness past the limits of the illumination. One of those pieces must have struck him in the chest, judging from the throbbing pain he felt. He weakly explored his torso with one hand, searching for signs of shrapnel or blood, but apparently whatever had hit had been a glancing blow.

He tried to sit up, but halted at the abrupt pain in his side. He touched the thermal undergarment there, and his gloves came away wet.

There we go.

Shrapnel had torn into his ribcage.

He struggled to his feet, and soon learned that he had more shrapnel in his thigh.

The remains of the robot resided in front of him. It lay on its back. Its abdomen was smashed in. Its remaining limbs lay flat, twitching. It reminded him of a spider that someone had partially stepped on.

The Titans remained standing at the threshold, probably worried that the directed-energy EMP weapon was still active somewhere in that cavern.

Rade hurried, limping, to Tahoe's split mech.

"Tahoe!" He knelt beside the torn cockpit. There was no sign of his friend. "Tahoe?"

"I'm okay," Tahoe said. He stood by the entrance, wearing his jumpsuit. "I dismounted before sending it in."

Rade slumped in relief. "Don't do that to me, man."

By touch, Rade searched the inside of the cave near the entrance until he found a small, metallic box. He had Tahoe toss him an M117B, and he affixed it to the unit.

He limped back outside just as it detonated.

"That should do it."

Tahoe retrieved the medkit and treated Rade's wounds.

"No painkillers," Rade said. "I can't be groggy, not now."

"All right," Tahoe said. "I've stopped the bleeding. That's about all I can do for now."

"I want a stimulant."

"You got it." Tahoe applied the sonic injector and Rade felt better immediately.

"Can someone walk in there and confirm that the EMP is down?" Rade said. "TJ?"

TJ ejected from his mech and ordered it inside.

The robot entered, raised its arms, and spun in a circle.

"Looks like we're good to go," TJ said. He recalled his mech and boarded.

"All right," Rade said. "Tahoe, hitch a ride with Bomb. TJ, summon the others."

Rade started dressing. By the time the rest of the group arrived, he was nearly finished suiting up. He swapped out his EAB for his helmet, and stowed the gear back in the storage compartment of his Titan.

Rade tried to reactivate his Implant. Surprisingly, it booted.

Guess I don't have to rely on the internal aReal of my helmet after all.

He loaded into his Titan.

Rade noticed that Tahoe was seated in Bomb's passenger seat area.

"Shouldn't you be in the cockpit with Bomb?" Rade asked. "My AI told me it didn't recommend more than twenty minutes of exposure."

"That's without a jumpsuit," Tahoe said. "You're also forgetting that you gave up one of your subdermals to Facehopper. My local AI tells me I can stay out here for eight to ten hours at these levels, if necessary. Let me fight. Let me protect Bomb's six."

"All right," Rade said. "But keep an eye on radiation levels. The moment it becomes dangerous, I want you in that cockpit with Bomb."

Manic's Titan stood just beyond the threshold. He was staring at the damaged spider robot, and the shorted-out Centurion that lay beside it.

Luxe clambered up the rungs of Manic's legs to get a better view. "Looks like someone had some fun."

"I'll say," Manic said. He gently kicked the combat robot. "Well, at least Unit B didn't die in vain, huh boss? Bacon saved your bacon."

"Are you mocking my robot?" TJ said. Rade couldn't tell if he was joking, or being serious.

"Not at all," Manic said. "I was imparting the highest possible honor imaginable to your robot."

"Good."

"One thing I don't get," Manic said. "Why create such an elaborate deathtrap? Why not arrange a hundred laser arrays along the far walls, like Bomb suggested. Program them to fire at the same time as soon as any targets reach the center of the cavern."

"It's like I said," Luxe told him. "They want to test us."

"I don't think so," Fret said. "Don't you worry, Manic, I'm sure we'll be encountering a laser array of some kind soon enough. Especially now that we've lost our Centurion forward party."

"What if the Sergeant is right?" Tahoe said. "What if it was a test? Because there are certainly far more traditional, and effective, ways of maintaining an automated choke point."

"If there's one thing we've learned about this enemy," TJ said. "It's that they're anything but traditional. And remember, they like to kill as much as capture. The way this trap was set up, they could perform either with ease, though it looks like the kill option saw the most action. Besides, where's the

sport in killing with a hundred lasers? A giant robot spider crouched above an EMP? Now that's killing with finesse. And I thought *I* was the artist."

"Sounds almost like you admire them," Bomb said.

"I kind of do," TJ replied.

"Wait, so if it was a test," Manic said. "Just what were the aliens testing for, precisely?"

"Probably to see if we were worthy of becoming hosts," Luxe replied. "It looks like they've raised the entry requirements."

Rade didn't particularly like that answer. He doubted anyone else did, either.

Trace came alongside Rade's Titan. "What now, boss?"

"We do all we can do," Rade said. "We press on."

Since he no longer had advance robots at his disposal, Rade split the Titan platoon into two squads. He designated TJ as the squad leader of the forward unit, while Rade stayed with the second squad. The Marines returned to their designated spots on the mechs, and the two Titan units moved in traveling overwatch, separated by twenty meters to guard against the possibility of an ambush of the kind Manic and Bomb warned of.

The advance squad mapped the extents of the cavern and found a tunnel on the far side. Rade ordered them to proceed, and led the second squad after them. The tunnel was the tightest one yet, and could fit only one Titan abreast. The cylindrical walls were the usual glossy gray interrupted by veins of color. It felt like he was traveling inside some large, smoothbore rifle. He just hoped that rifle didn't fire while he was still inside of it.

"I'd hate to see what kind of a laser burrowed this," Fret said. "Can you imagine how powerful it would have to be to carve something of these dimensions?"

"It's no laser," Lui said. "More like some kind of advanced chemical etching. Or maybe billions of nano-machines operating in unison."

"Quiet," Rade said.

The two squads proceeded along the downward sloping tunnel for several minutes, until it opened into another cavern.

Two Titans from the advance squad entered first, followed by the remainder. They were still exploring the new cavern by the time Rade and squad two reached the opening.

"Detecting a thermal signature," Bomb said. He was on point in the forward squad. "Seventy meters just ahead. It looks... humanoid. It's hard to tell from here, but I think... I think it's holding its arms raised above its head. Maybe in a gesture of surrender. Should I shoot it down?"

"No," Rade said. "If there's even a small chance that we've got one of them surrendering, we can't let the opportunity pass."

"Smells like another trap to me," Lui said. "We just got done talking about their artistic finesse when it comes to inflicting death..."

"TJ, send two Titans forward," Rade instructed. "The rest of you,

overwatch.”

Mauler and Bomb advanced. Rade tapped into Bomb’s video feed. The display distorted every few seconds due to the interference. Mauler took the lead, his Titan crouched, the purloined weapon mount held at eye level.

Rade saw it then, at the extreme limits of the light cones of the two Titans. A figure of metal polished to a golden sheen, with long, cylindrical limbs, and spherical servomotors serving in place of joints.

“That’s close enough,” Rade said.

“It’s definitely a robot,” Bomb said. “Get this: it’s showing up as a friendly on the HUD.”

Rade glanced at his overhead map. Sure enough, a blue dot appeared where the robot stood.

“Zoom in—” Rade started, but he realized the display was already enlarging.

“Two steps ahead of you, boss,” Bomb said.

As the image became bigger, Rade began to discern the robot’s face in the dim light. Human.

One of those, is it?

The face became sharper, and more distinct, by the second. It looked like...

No, it couldn’t be.

The camera reached maximum zoom. There was no doubt who it was. Adara.

Like the Sino-Korean visages of the robots he had seen in the nuked city, the skin of her face was pale pink in color, the hue of real flesh. That skin only contributed to the incongruous effect, making it seem like someone had glued a human face onto a robot head and body. Her expression was blank, her eyes dead, vacant.

“Bomb, pipe me in to your external speakers,” Rade said.

“Done.”

“Adara,” Rade said.

She said something in response, but Rade couldn’t hear.

“Bomb, crank up your external volume,” Rade ordered.

When Bomb had done so, Rade spoke. “Say again, Adara?”

“Petty Officer First Class Rade Galaal,” she replied. “I’ve been waiting for you.”

“What do you want?”

“I heard you would like an audience with the Sentience?” The capital S was clear from the respectful emphasis she imparted the word.

“Take us,” Rade said.

“Only one Titan may come,” Adara said. “Yours. No weapons.”

“No deal,” Rade replied. “All of us go. Or none of us.”

She cocked her head and smiled for the first time, though it did not reach her eyes. “This is not a negotiation. Come with me, or do not. The choice is yours. But if you do not, you’ll have to fight your way forward. And it is a very, very long way...”

She beckoned toward the darkness behind her. From it emerged several bioengineered creatures: seething, sickening things.

The camera jumped as Bomb physically started. He hastily raised his weapon.

“Don’t fire, Bomb,” Rade sent. “They’re not attacking. Not yet.”

Bomb didn’t reply. But he also didn’t fire.

The ranks of creatures remained in place, not advancing. But they did squirm. They looked like overgrown white larva, with nasty mandibles at the front connected to one another by slime. There were a few robotic worms among them, of the same shape and overall structure; Rade had to assume that was the result of the infamous nano-machines the aliens were so fond of, converting the larva into “hosts.” These latter worms had assumed defensive postures, folding their upper bodies to reveal funnel-shaped weapons mounted underneath. Electrolasers, Rade guessed.

“If I go with you,” Rade said. “What happens to my men?”

“They will be allowed to leave.”

“You can’t believe this bitch,” Bender said over the comm.

“Do we have much choice?” Rade said. “Do you really want to fight here, against potentially infinite foes?”

“If it means not giving you up to them, then yes. Besides, she could be bluffing.”

“What happens if they open up that rear tunnel and outflank us?” Rade said. “What then? Look, she’s offering me a chance to meet this Sentience of theirs. Maybe I can negotiate some sort of peace treaty between our races.” *Or kill it, as prescribed by our mission.*

“You know you don’t have that authority,” Lui said.

“But *they* don’t know that,” Rade responded on the encrypted comm, hoping that Adara wasn’t able to eavesdrop. “Trust me. You haven’t seen the last of me yet.”

“And if the enemy betrays those of us you leave behind?” Bender said. “And we have the fight of our lives on our hands?”

“Then you fight,” Rade said. “It’s nothing new to us. Fighting for our lives is what we do.”

Rade switched back to his own viewpoint and stepped forward. Squad one started to follow him, but he waved them down. “Stay here.”

“What are you doing, boss?” Fret said.

“What do you think I’m doing?” he answered. “I’ve made up my mind.”

Rade crossed the cavern to the forward squad, then joined Bomb and Mauler at the forefront.

“Boss,” Mauler said respectfully.

Rade handed over his pilfered weapon mount and then marched past, making his way toward Adara. He halted halfway to her.

“TJ, you’re in charge until further notice,” Rade sent.

“Boss, don’t go,” Trace said. “You’re our LPO... send someone else.”

“She specifically asked for my Titan,” Rade said. “It has to be me. They’ve always wanted me.”

“You’re not going alone,” Luxe stayed in his passenger seat.

Tahoe jetted across to him from Bomb and clung onto the shoulder rungs. “What she said. And then some.”

The other Marines with Rade dismounted. The one named Corporal Paxon remained with Luxe.

“Tahoe,” Rade said. “While the radiation is low now, if it worsens, you could suffer the same fate as Facehopper. Our jumpsuits don’t possess the same radiation protection as the Marine gear...”

“Alien-robot-with-a-woman’s-face,” Tahoe addressed Adara via his external helmet speakers. “Tell me, what’s the radiation like where we’re going?”

“The repulsive magnetic field generated by your standard issue jumpsuit will more than suffice,” Adara said.

“There you go,” Tahoe said.

Rade almost ordered him to stay, but he knew the others would never

let him go if he didn't take at least one of them with him. And as for the two Marines hitching a ride, they probably wouldn't take no for an answer, either. So he allowed it.

He only hoped he wasn't bringing them to their deaths.

Rade approached Adara, halting his Titan three meters from her.

She glanced at Tahoe and the Marines clinging to Rade's mech and raised one eyebrow. The act was strangely human. He could have almost believed she was, if not for that body, and those dead eyes.

"You said my Titan could come," Rade told her via the external speakers. "But you didn't say anything about the passengers."

"As you wish." She held out her hand. "Your weapons, please."

"Like hell we're giving them to you," Tahoe said. "Boss, take us back for a bit."

Rade retreated several steps so that Tahoe, Luxe and Paxon could toss their weapons to the Marines hanging from the Titans of Bomb and Mauler nearby.

Adara raised her voice: "And the blaster you carry at your waist, Petty Officer First Class Rade Galaal?"

Rade opened up his Titan, slid the blaster from its holster at his belt, and tossed it toward Bomb. A Marine caught it.

"Your storage compartment, too..." Adara said.

Rade emptied the compartment of weapons, then sealed up the mech and marched to Adara once more. She asked him to open the compartment, and when she was satisfied that he had no weapons hidden there, she led him toward the solid mass of worms and robots.

When she neared, the enemy ranks parted to let her pass.

"Stay close," she said. "Do not lag behind farther than three meters."

Rade obeyed, walking his Titan between those living walls. The creatures snapped at the air and hissed at his Titan and passengers, while the robot worms tracked him with their electrolasers.

Those ranks continued for some time. Adara hadn't been bluffing.

She led him to a wide side tunnel. She stepped inside, passing more of the worms, which slithered aside to make room for her and the Titan.

As Rade descended that sloping tunnel, he glanced at the blue dots representing the rest of the platoon on his overhead map. The indicators were flickering, and he knew it was only a matter of time until the interference

caused a complete disconnection.

“Good luck, men,” Rade sent.

“Good luck to you as well, boss,” Trace said, his voice so garbled it was nearly incomprehensible.

“Thanks.” *I’ll need it.*

He glanced at the indicators representing Tahoe, Luxe, and Paxon, still clinging to him.

We’ll all need it.

Moments later Rade lost contact with the rest of the platoon. He continued through that tunnel, making his way between the biological worms and occasional robot that had edged aside to let him pass. The enemy ranks slowly thinned, until soon the hissing creatures were left behind entirely and there was only bare rock on either side of Rade and his passengers.

The tunnel sloped down for a long time into the darkness. The only light came from the headlamps of Rade and those who clung to him.

Adara paused beside an alcove carved into the rock. Its floor was a metal platform.

“Step onto the platform,” Adara said. She did so herself, moving to the far side to give Rade’s Titan more room.

Rade piloted the Titan onto the platform. The mech’s large feet clanked loudly on the metal, and as soon as he stood fully atop that incongruous floor, he felt it shift underneath him and nearly lost his balance.

He realized the platform was descending. He turned around and caught a glimpse of the cave behind him as it slid upward and out of view, swallowed by the rock.

He was surrounded by stone on all sides. It streamed upward in a blur, almost like a waterfall flowing in reverse. He felt a queasiness in his stomach, the same kind he got in fast-moving space elevators.

Rade watched the altimeter on his HUD. Negative thirty meters. A hundred. Two hundred. Five hundred. One kilometer.

“I see you’ve constructed some diggers for yourselves,” Rade said.

Adara looked at him, smiling, saying nothing. Those eyes remained ever dead.

The rock suddenly opened up on one side and a vast cavern stretched before him, several kilometers in breadth. A blindingly bright globe was suspended near the top, lighting the enormous cavern to twilight levels and illuminating its extents.

Far below, Rade discerned an alien city composed of the same glowing, geometric shapes he had seen on the surface, except these structures were all intact, and free of any snow. He zoomed in on the dodecahedral,

spherical, and conical buildings, which reminded him of massive versions of the simple toys found in a baby's playpen.

Between those crystalline structures, he spotted the occasional guard robot on the streets of gray stone: either a scorpion class, or a mech-inspired unit. Shaggy, bioengineered creatures roamed freely in those sections; some even soared through the air, reminding Rade of furry pterodactyls.

He discerned a few neighborhoods built in the human style nestled amidst the crystalline structures, where robots with human faces walked about. There, low-flying rotorcraft occasionally darted past above the mansard roofs.

He remembered wondering, back on the surface, what these alien cities would have looked like in their raw, undamaged state. And now that he was seeing one, it was just as majestic, ethereal, and most of all creepy, as he imagined it would be.

"And we thought you had merely hidden a command and control down here..." Rade said.

"Welcome to our real home city," Adara said. "I'd give you its native name, but it is unpronounceable in any human tongue. Some of us call it Eos."

"The two cities we nuked on the surface?" Rade asked.

"Mostly decoys. Potemkin villages."

"As usual," Tahoe said. "Our intel was bullshit."

"How could the fleet know, Tahoe? How could any of us really know?" He turned toward Adara. "Your species dug this cavern?"

She laughed. "No. The cavern was natural. The city below, not so much."

"Why is she revealing so much to us?" Tahoe asked on a private line. He sounded extremely worried.

"She hasn't revealed *that* much," Rade said. "But I suspect we're about to learn everything, soon enough. You see, she doesn't expect us to return alive. At least, not as our former selves."

"Reassuring," Tahoe commented.

Rade glanced at Adara, but she gave no indication she had heard the conversation over the private line. To do that, she would have needed the personal private keys Tahoe and Rade utilized. It was possible she might have used zero-day backdoors to obtain those keys, but doubtful, as Jerry's

intrusion detection software would have flagged any access attempts.

Rade switched back to the external speakers. “Your race still wants my mind, Adara?”

“We do,” Adara said. “But only to fill in a few incomplete parts. We have most of it already.”

“How?”

“When we held you in Radiance, a magnetic resonator dumped the contents of the atomic nuclei and electrons composing your organic neural network. Similarly, a backdoor allowed us to download the contents of your Implant before we shorted it out. In the months since, we’ve learned how to use the combined data captured from you and other subjects. With it, we were able to piece together a picture of who you are. Your personality. Your memories. However the picture is incomplete. Since part of your personality is missing, your clones act differently from one another in subtle ways. Key parts of your memory are missing. Your childhood. Everything that happened before you joined the navy.”

“So you’ll finally be able to complete your mental picture,” Rade said. “That’s why you want me.”

“Yes,” Adara said. “By converting you now, it will help us refine the magnetic resonance technique, making it more accurate. When an organism is captured, conversion to a host is still the preferred method of obtaining the neural data, because of the enlightenment provided to the subject in the process. But if that isn’t possible, we now have that second option. We’re working on ways to increase the scanning range... our eventual goal is to be able to perform the resonance work via a directed-energy platform. We’re already able to do it at one meter, in the lab. The next goal is fifty meters.”

“The greatest intel gathering technique ever created,” Rade said. “In the hands of our greatest foe.”

She shrugged. “We don’t have to be foes.”

“Sure,” Rade said. “And what’s the alternative? All of humanity becoming a host for your nano-machines?”

“That doesn’t have to be the endgame,” Adara said. “It depends on your leadership.”

Rade chuckled to himself. *Always the leadership.*

“Tell me something,” Rade said. “And I want an honest answer. You’re not really going to release my men up there, are you?”

She didn't answer.

"That's what I thought."

Rade watched the city slowly approach as the platform continued to descend.

"What's the latest on the radiation levels, Jerry?" Rade asked the AI for Tahoe's benefit.

"Still low," Jerry replied.

"Update me if that changes."

"Will do."

It took about three minutes to reach the bottom of the cavern. Rade disembarked at the edge of the city and Adara led him through the multi-colored geometrical shapes. They were joined shortly by four scorpion units. The robots escorted at a respectable distance on either side.

Those human-faced robots the party passed shot them curious looks. Most of them were Sino-Korean, but he also saw several hardened UC faces among the lot. He thought they might have been captured Marines. He wondered how many were from the Radiance colony. There had to be at least some, given Adara's presence. Her appearance lent credence to the theory that the nano-machines could communicate data over vast distances, as none of the alien ships had been allowed to depart that Franco-Italian system intact. The last surviving vessels, faced with capture, had self-destructed.

He wondered what would happen here when the UC finally closed in. Would the denizens of this city blow everything up, too? Or would they simply keep fighting, and allow the UC to destroy their city for them?

The bioengineered creatures were hornheads, mostly. Their shaggy fur spilled onto their footpads as they roamed the streets. Most traveled freely, but he spotted a herd of smaller ones fenced off in a corral. Large robots emptied vats of some kind of green slop into big troughs, and the penned creatures eagerly lapped it up, seeming oddly domesticated.

"The young are only half converted," Adara explained, noticing the gaze of his Titan. "Half Hosts, as you humans would call them. Because their brains are so large, it takes several days to fully convert them. Their bodies also take a long time to transform, with much energy expenditure, which is why we usually only convert the minds. Their intelligence levels are relatively low, but the Sentience likes that because it can more easily exert control over them, and direct them in swarms."

“So a human is more difficult to control?” Rade said.

Adara looked at him with those dead eyes. “We are. But in the end, even we must cede to the will of the Sentience. Usually.”

“Usually.” Rade thought of the other Adara he had met on Radiance. She had fought against one of her clones, and died to save him.

Adara approached a sideways, cone-shaped structure that abutted the cavern wall near the center of the city. The glow of the structure’s outer surface pulsed between purple and red. She stopped beside a small opening that led inside. There was no glow coming from the tunnel—it contained only darkness.

The scorpions assumed sentry positions on either side of the opening.

“We’re here,” Adara said. “After you.”

She beckoned toward the dark tunnel.

Rade hesitated, then entered.

The headlamps of he and his passengers didn’t seem to penetrate that blackness. He could only see the floor, and nothing else—the enclosing walls were out of reach of the light.

He switched to the thermal band. Again, he saw nothing except for the Marines clinging to his mech, and Adara trailing behind him. He tried a local-beam LIDAR burst. Strangely, the beam didn’t reflect back to him. A LIDAR-absorbing material must have coated the inner surfaces.

“I’m to tell you to stop that,” Adara said.

“Stop what?”

“The LIDAR bursts.”

“Why?” He purposely activated another burst.

“It annoys the Sentience.”

On the overhead map, the surroundings had stopped filling out. There was nothing *to* fill out. The structures of the city behind him were portrayed as geometrical lines crowding a thin street, with the outskirts of the current building represented as a vast rectangle—or a toppled cone when viewed from an isometric perspective. There was nothing else inside that space save for the advancing blue dots of Adara, Rade and his passengers. He wondered if he was really still inside that building, or transported somewhere else entirely. He decided it was unlikely the aliens possessed teleportation tech.

He walked for thirty seconds. A minute.

The footfalls of his Titan echoed repeatedly from the rock underneath

his feet.

A minute and a half.

“That’s far enough,” Adara said. “Halt.”

Rade obeyed.

The light levels suddenly rose to blinding levels. The photochromatic filter of the camera quickly compensated, reducing the illumination to tolerable levels. Even so, Rade saw nothing around him but that whiteness. Even the floor was lost. It was like he was floating in a bright, nondescript fog.

“We’re in whiteout conditions all over again,” Tahoe said.

“Yeah,” Rade said. “But without the storm.”

“WHY DID YOU BRING THEM HERE?” a voice boomed. It seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere.

Rade looked about, but he saw no one else present on any of the EM spectrum bands.

“I am obeying your orders,” Adara said. “You asked me to find someone worthy enough to convey a message to the human leadership. May I present—”

“THEY ARE MERE FOOT SOLDIERS,” the disembodied voice interrupted. “NO ONE WILL LISTEN TO THEM.”

“You are wrong,” Adara said. “Search the memories you have absorbed. The human hierarchy is flexible. Any man or woman can act as a messenger, and will be listened to.”

There was a pause. “PERHAPS. SO MANY MEMORIES. SO MUCH CHAOS. THE HUMAN MIND IS NOT THE MOST CONDUCTIVE HOST FOR OUR KIND.”

“And yet it serves its purpose,” Adara said.

“YES.”

Rade heard footsteps. They sounded soft at first, yet hinted at power and menace. Then he saw a vaguely bovine shape in the distance. A dark smudge upon the white brightness.

“Did I tell you I smoked a couple of beetles?” Tahoe sent, via text message. That was code for sneaking along a couple of M117B charges. Probably a good idea to talk in code, given that Rade still wasn’t entirely certain whether the aliens had swiped their private keys and could listen in.

“Stickies or tocks?” Rade returned, also in text. Adhesive detonators, or timer variants.

“Tocks.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Rade responded.

The footfalls grew in volume as the figure approached, becoming all out booms. It towered over them.

“What is that?” Rade said, via his external speakers.

“The Sentience...” Adara responded. “Or at least, one of its many vehicles.”

A robot, three times as tall as the Titan and many times as long, halted

several meters in front of them. It looked like a cross between a brontosaur and an alligator, or perhaps a dragon. A head made of some grayish alloy with glowing red eyes and a toothy maw resided at the tip of a long, segmented neck, connected to a body covered in metallic scales. A lengthy tail protruded from the rear, providing counterbalance. At the tip of each of its joints were spikes, and in place of feet were long metal pincers spread wide for balance.

“Speak, messenger,” Adara addressed Rade.

Rade stared at the metal dragon.

“What are you?” Rade said.

“I am the Void.” The Sentience spoke with the same disembodied voice, but the words no longer boomed. They sounded almost musical. Hypnotic.

“The Void...?” Rade said.

“Yes,” the Sentience said. “The collective consciousness of my people. We were once a great species. The form you see before you? It is close to what we once were. Hundreds of thousands of years of peace and prosperity, with all the resources we could possibly imagine, contributed to this form, and its size. We ruled the galaxy alongside the Elder, and together branded ourselves its protectors. Our ships routinely shielded the lesser, undeveloped races from aggressors.

“That is, until the Khrolosse came. An entity entirely unlike anything we had ever witnessed. It had no ship, at least none that we knew of. The invasion started simply: a remote world reported a multi-phasic retrovirus spreading through the ranks of the colonists. We isolated the planet, fearing a biological attack by some warlike species. But it turned out the virus was the Khrolosse itself. The part of it that manifests in this reality, in any case: that retrovirus was merely the tendrils of the higher-dimensional being. Everyone died.

“The symptoms appeared on another planet in an adjacent system. That was when we detected the being. Existing in multiple dimensions, the part of it that intersected our three-dimensional space created subtle gravity waves above the original colony world, those wavelengths almost the same size as the lost planet. It was otherwise invisible to this universe, and unable to be harmed by any known weapons. It was feeding upon our colonists; the retrovirus converted the organelles of the hosts into energy producing units

capable of manufacturing the higher-dimensional energy the Khrolosse could consume. Unfortunately, it killed the hosts in the process.

“With each world it destroyed, the creature grew. Like a bacteriophage that parasitizes a bacterium by reproducing inside it, it spread throughout our species, infecting us one by one. And because of its inter-dimensional nature, it could feed upon us no matter where we resided in the galaxy in relation to it. Those who escaped to other worlds and infected more colonists only fed the Khrolosse, which still resided above the original colony world. The infection mechanism was never discovered. Isolation didn’t seem to contain it. The virus seemed able to spread to anyone within a radius of fifty meters from an infected individual. Soon, our entire race was infected. Antiretroviral therapy helped slow the progress of the disease in infected individuals, but we could not stop it. Many times, we thought we had found a cure, but always the virus returned. Our species was slowly dying.

“We developed the nano-machines to save us. We converted our fragile bodies of flesh into sturdy bodies of metal. The nano-machines mimicked the existing biological networks in our minds, transferring over our consciousnesses in a slow, gradual process. We programmed the machines to link our minds, thereby enhancing our intelligence, and allowing us to draw upon the collective processing power of our entire species in times of need. The Khrolosse essentially forced us to evolve into a new, cybernetic super species.

“It worked, for a time. As our bodies became robotic, the Khrolosse retrovirus could no longer sap our cells. But the Khrolosse adapted. We did not know it, but we were still connected to the inter-dimensional tendrils of the entity. Those tendrils manifested in a new form, overriding the instructions of the nano-machines, programming them to create tiny nodules inside of us that would emit the necessary higher dimensional energy the Khrolosse needed to feed upon. Our minds and bodies became pocked with these growing nodules, and we began to die once more.

“There was only one hope: to create new batches of nano-machines, uninfected by the tendrils of the Khrolosse. Bioseeds. We programmed them with our cultural archives: our art, history, and the engrammatic patterns of our complete collective consciousness, then launched them into the galaxy in search of fresh, uninfected races so that we might repopulate our species. Twenty such batches were created, launched in pods to twenty potential

worlds. The nano-machines were set to hibernate for one million years, their energy signatures hidden from the Khrolosse for all that time. The hope was that the malevolent entity would have long since moved on from our galaxy, or perished, by the time we awakened. And there the collective archives of our history end.

“We awoke early in one of the destination systems, seven hundred thousand years later, on that planet you name 11-Aquarii III. We were awakened by the human faction known as the Sino-Koreans. Or rather, by their advance robots.

“One of the Slipstreams to 11-Aquarii loops back into their space, you see, into the Mao Sung system. Their government sent an advance team of robots through the Slipstream to study the native animal life of 11-Aquarii III, with the goal of furthering Sino-Korean bioweapons research. Those creatures you call ‘hammerheads?’ The advance robots developed them from Terran stock, as an initial experiment to create something that could survive the planet’s atmosphere. Eventually the robot team meant to incorporate DNA from the native life: no easy task, given the indigenous nucleic acids came in triple strands instead of pairs.

“But before the robots got very far in their research, one of their exploratory probes detected a weak energy source emanating from underneath the ocean floor. They dispatched a retrieval unit to exhume it. That was one of our pods.

“Our awakened nano-machines used the machines and the bioweapons they created as hosts. We developed more bioengineered creatures, using the human technology. We built starships. What you call dodecahedrons. No ship yards were required: the nano-machines used the raw materials of the planet’s mineral mountains.

“While these ships were being built, we sent an exploration party through the return Gate the unmanned Sino-Korean Builder ship had constructed. This was a stealth party, composed of the Sino-Korean Builder ship itself, and the crew, who were hosts. We attempted to expand too fast in the adjacent system, Mao Sung, sending too many boarding parties to the warships in the area. Our understanding of humanity was still new, and we got sloppy: someone alerted the remaining ships to what was happening. Those warships held us back long enough for reinforcements to arrive, and the Sino-Koreans destroyed the infected warships and the Builder. They

launched several nukes through the Gate to 11-Aquarii, destroying the return Gate.”

“Sounds like they were afraid of what they had awakened,” Luxe commented.

“The UC Builder ship arrived a few months later,” the Sentience continued. “Then came the *John A. McDonald* and another Builder. We destroyed the vessels and assimilated the crews, of course. Then your Task Group 68.2 came, and obliterated our presence in the system.”

“If you were obliterated, how did you get to Phi Hepti?” Rade said. “And the Radiance colony there, owned by the Franco-Italians? And how did you get to this world?”

“In the Mao Sung system, a few Artificial hosts escaped the destruction of the warships, and made their way to Phi Hepti IV under the guise of merchants. We set up a base on a nearby moon to build the necessary ships, and meanwhile infiltrated the upper levels of government on the planet, so that when our presence was detected on the moon it was readily dismissed by the puppet government. We then invaded Phi Hepti IV, or Radiance as you call it, when we were ready.”

“And how did you get here, to this planet?” Rade pressed.

“While constructing our ships in Phi Hepti, at the same time we dispatched more hosts through an uncharted Slipstream in said system, and arrived here. At which point we began construction of our homeworld.”

“That was what, two years ago?” Rade said.

“Approximately, yes.”

“You built all of this in only two years?” Rade said. “And all of those ships?”

“Nano-machines reproduce fast,” the Sentience replied.

“Why were there so many ships here, then, versus Phi Hepti?” Rade said. “Or even 11-Aquarii?”

“We had help. We did not come to this planet without purpose. You see, this planet also served as the destination for another of our bioseed pods. When we got here, we discovered the nano-machines lying latent in the pit of a dormant volcano. Apparently they had awakened upon impact, due to a malfunction of some sort. They spent several years constructing starships, and began building this underground city as well, but lack of hosts, and fear of the Khrolosse, eventually drove them to hibernate once more. We awoke

our brethren when we arrived, finished the construction of our new homeworld, and launched the starships into orbit. And so here we are.”

“One thing doesn’t add up,” Rade said. “If it’s true you attacked the Mao Sung system, we would have heard about it from our Sino-Korean moles.”

“The information was certainly leaked by your moles,” the Sentience said. “But a lowly foot soldier such as yourself was not privy to such information. And the news only arrived after Task Group 68.2 became stranded in 11-Aquarii, so your battle fleet would have had no idea of what happened in Mao Sung, not until you finished building the return Gate to your own space.”

Rade pursed his lips. *Damn being has an answer to everything.*

“All right, well, I appreciate the history lesson,” Rade said. “You claim you were once a peaceful and benevolent race, ruling the galaxy alongside the Elder. So why the change of heart? Why are you attacking humanity without provocation?”

“Two reasons. First and foremost, to enlighten you. To show you the nature of the universe.”

“Can’t you just tell us?” Rade asked.

“I can, but you will not understand.”

“Try me,” Rade said. “I’m your messenger. Tell me all the great things we’ll learn about the universe once we become hosts.”

“As you wish,” the Sentience replied. “The key to understanding the universe, and life itself, is this: we are all the same. We *are* the universe, both of us. Or its manifestations, anyway. That’s something you can only understand when you join us. When you share the collective consciousness that we do. You realize that the strange loops that compose individual minds are simply the universe’s way of interacting with itself.

“Those minds think they’re independent identities, they truly believe that in their cores, but it’s all part of the grand illusion the universe makes for itself. Because without life, the universe would not know it exists. It would simply *be*, like a rock, or a lonely hydrogen atom floating in the void. But life, it allows the universe to interact with its own manifestations. The amusing thing is, that life doesn’t even know what it is. It thinks life is some grand mystery. And death an even greater mystery.

“But when you join our collective consciousness, all of that will

change. You will realize what you are. That when you as an individual entity die, you will still exist. How could you not? Your molecules don't go anywhere. You are still part of the universe. Other individuals with other strange loops continue to provide manifestations of the universe. Certainly, your particular strange loop will never come again, and will have no recollection of its current state, but why does it matter? Your neural net will exist forevermore in the clones we create of you. And even if we choose not to clone you, as the universe, you are still entertaining yourself, and will continue to do so for eons to come."

After the Sentience finished, Rade shook his head. *Aliens always have the strangest belief systems.*

"Then why fear the Khrolosse?" Rade said. "Because as you say, it's merely a manifestation of the universe interacting with itself."

"The question now boils down to the *quality* of those interactions," the Sentience said. "If the Khrolosse had been allowed to destroy our species, that quality would have dropped precipitously. The Khrolosse was a formless, shapeless thing, perhaps not even aware of its own existence, let alone that of the universe. If the Khrolosse had won, the universe would have lost the ability to interact with the majority of its own matter. Definitely a precipitous drop in quality."

"All right, I appreciate the philosophizing, I really do," Rade told the thing. "But going back to your previous answer to why you're attacking without provocation. You said two reasons. What's your second reason? And don't tell me it's because of the 'quality' of our interactions with the universe."

"Mostly to repopulate our species, and to expand our consciousness with the collective knowledge of humanity. We must be strong, for when the Khrolosse returns. Moreover, we do you a great favor. Your fragile organic bodies will not survive the coming of the Khrolosse. You must become machine."

"But you said the Khrolosse was able to infect your machine bodies, too," Rade argued.

"There are some among us who believe the Khrolosse only achieved this because it had planted its inter-dimensional tendrils within our organic bodies in the first place. But either way, working together as one we can find a solution should the Khrolosse ever attack again."

“We can work together already,” Rade said. “Without having to be hosts.”

“Can we?” the Sentience said. “I’m not so sure. Judging from those we have incorporated already, humanity is a xenophobic, warlike race who would keep the capability of space travel out of the hands of every other species if it could. Already it is difficult to repress those dangerous convictions, and keep them from tainting the collective consciousness.”

“Perhaps you should reconsider your goal of incorporating us all,” Rade said. “The rest of humanity isn’t any better.” Rade didn’t truly believe it, but the alien didn’t need to know that. “One last question. Why not simply create your own hosts? I’m sure the nano-machines can build robots and neural networks on their own. I can understand you wanting to steal the collective knowledge of humanity, but why do you need living things to ‘repopulate’ your species as you say?”

“We can build hosts, yes,” the Sentience replied. “And have done so. But it is the equivalent of cloning. Every species needs proper biodiversity to thrive, including ours. Moreover, as I mentioned, we are doing you a favor, allowing you to join the ranks of an enlightened super species.”

Rade had to chuckle. “Against our will. All right. I got it now. You know... what you’re doing, infecting other races and destroying them so that you can repopulate your species and spread ‘enlightenment’... you’ve basically become that which you fear most. You’ve become the new Khrolosse.”

The Sentience seemed to snarl, then it abruptly turned about so that its tail nearly struck Rade’s Titan. The robot entity retreated ponderously into the whiteness.

“Wait,” Rade said. “Is that it? What’s the message?”

The Sentience glanced askance, twisting that long, segmented metal neck. “I have already given you the message. Have you not heard anything I have said?” It glanced at Adara. “I told you these were not proper messengers. They can’t even understand the message.”

“No, I understood,” Rade said quickly. “You want humanity to become machines so we can defend against the Khrolosse together. But how are we supposed to communicate this message to the fleet, with all the interference you’re creating?”

“She will give you a tracking device.” The Sentience nodded at

Adara. "With it, you may take any craft of your choice into orbit, and our ground defenses will not shoot it down."

"Why do you need us?" Rade said. "Why not send that message from one of the surviving ships you still have scattered throughout the system?"

"Your fleet is refusing our communication requests at the moment."

"For good reason," Tahoe said. "You've tried to send viruses and trojans into our networks."

The Sentience seemed to shrug those large metallic shoulders above its flanks.

"All right, how are we supposed to deliver the answer?" Rade said. "You expect us to come all the way back down here?"

"Transmit your answer to any of our vessels," the Sentience answered. "We can receive your communication bands." The robot focused its attention on Adara. "Return only one of them to the surface with our message. As for the rest, take them to be converted."

Rade watched the Sentience retreat. The illumination abruptly faded so that they were surrounded by the darkness once more. Their headlamps penetrated, though not far enough to discern the Sentience.

Rade switched to the thermal band.

There you are.

“I still have those tocks,” Tahoe texted.

Rade considered attacking the Sentience. But as Lui would say, just because he couldn’t see any defenses, didn’t mean none existed. At that very moment there might be pulse cannons hidden by the darkness, trained upon them, ready to fire at any sign of aggressive behavior.

Rade decided that even if they defeated the thing, the robot body was merely an outlet for the collective consciousness of the enemy, one of its many “vehicles,” as Adara had said. Terminating it would have the same effect as clipping a fingernail for all the damage it would do. The mission parameters might call for a capture or kill, but Rade couldn’t see a way to achieve either, not without ending all of their lives, and likely for nothing.

“Hang onto them,” Rade responded to Tahoe by text.

When the Sentience was gone, Rade turned toward Adara, who had produced a blaster. At that range the weapon could easily eat through his shields in one or two shots—assuming he deployed them in time. Tahoe, Luxe and Paxon would fare even worse against the weapon.

“So this is how it ends,” Rade told her. “You’re going to free only one of us. And the rest are destined for alien ‘enlightenment.’ I get to be one of the enlightened ones, of course, since you need my mind to complete your experiments.”

“I’m sorry, Rade,” Adara said.

“Don’t be,” Rade told her. “You’re just following orders.”

She beckoned with the blaster. “Turn around, and walk.”

Rade obeyed. He glanced at his empty overhead map, and steered himself toward the distant opening represented there, about seven hundred meters away. He couldn’t see the actual opening on his visual or thermal bands.

“Turn thirty degrees to your right,” Adara said.

His new course led not to the entrance, but an unmapped area of the structure.

“Are you going to at least let me pick which of my companions to send back?” Rade said.

“Go ahead,” Adara replied.

“I’m staying,” Luxe said.

“Well so am I,” Tahoe said.

“I’m not going,” the other Marine, Paxon, stated.

“You spoke last,” Luxe said. “That means you’re going.”

“It doesn’t work that way,” Paxon replied.

“Don’t make me pull rank on you, Corporal,” Luxe said.

Paxon didn’t answer. Rade suspected the Marine was going to try to find a way to swap positions with her commanding officer, regardless of Luxe’s actual wishes.

“Get ready to lay some breadcrumbs,” Rade texted Tahoe. Then to Luxe: “Cyclone needs a moat.” That was code for distraction. He wasn’t sure she’d understand it, given that the Marines used their own code language. He might have to be more explicit.

Nothing happened for ten seconds.

Then, on the HUD, the hull pressure sensors activated, indicating the movements of his passengers as they quietly climbed down the rungs of the mech toward the floor.

“What are they doing?” Adara said.

Rade halted.

Tahoe leaped down. “My arms were getting a bit sore from hanging up there.”

“Get back on the mech,” Adara commanded.

“In a sec, woman,” Tahoe responded.

Luxe joined him on the floor, though she stood several paces to his right. Paxon dropped down beside her.

“Get back, all of you.” Adara jerked her blaster from person to person.

“You got it,” Tahoe said. He climbed back onto the leg, but stayed near the bottom.

Rade quickly walked away, slightly to the right, certain that Tahoe

had laid a charge back there. The question now was whether or not any alien sensors would detect it.

Luxe and Paxon, finished their distraction, jetted onto the Titan and landed in the passenger seat; Tahoe, meanwhile, remained clinging to the foot portion.

Adara hurried to catch up. "Slow down."

Rade obeyed. He continued walking. No alarms were raised.

So far so good.

Twenty seconds later Luxe abruptly leaped down and landed two paces to the right.

"What are you doing?" Adara said. "Get back, now!"

"Sorry, lost my balance." She jetted back up.

Rade once more swerved to the right and increased his speed, realizing that Tahoe had likely laid another charge.

"Turn left by fifteen degrees," Adara said, once again hurrying to catch up. "I said turn left! And slow down."

Rade complied.

"Breadcrumbs laid," Tahoe texted.

A wall appeared out of the darkness ahead. Rade was headed toward a wide alcove carved into the rock, large enough to fit six mechs. As he neared, he saw a tunnel of the same width directly above the alcove. An elevator shaft.

Rade turned around.

Still holding the blaster, Adara tossed a small metallic cylinder to the floor. "Take this."

"What is it?" Rade asked.

"The device that will prevent our ground defenses from shooting you down."

"A tracking device?" Rade said.

"Obviously."

"Not sure I like the enemy knowing where we are at all times," Rade said.

"We can find you by your Implants, anyway," Adara said.

"Sure. While within a fifty meter range. This device extends that range exponentially."

"Without it, you'll have trouble leaving the planet," Adara said.

“Not necessarily,” Rade said. “But Cyclone, take it anyway.”

Tahoe leaped down from the leg and scooped up the tracker.

“What now?” Rade said. “You want me to dismount, I assume?”

“No,” Adara said. “A platform is descending from the upper levels. Take it: it will return you to the chamber where you left your men. They’ll need your help. They’re under fire at this very moment, fighting for their lives.”

She turned away.

Rade stared at her, stunned. “You’re not taking any of us prisoner?”

She glanced over her shoulder. “No.”

“But the Sentience...”

She continued walking away, not answering.

He couldn’t believe she was actually letting them go. “Why are you helping us?”

Adara halted. “The Sentience made one mistake in its grand scheme of things: it absorbed too many of us. The collective consciousness is half human at this point, and there is a growing faction of us who want peace with humanity. We want to be free of the influence the Sentience wields over us, or at least, have more say in the direction of our new species. The Sentience refuses to see that it has backed itself into a corner. It will obliterate us all if it continues down this path.”

“That still doesn’t explain why you’re helping us...” Rade said.

“I remember holding you in my arms,” Adara said. “Though it wasn’t me, the memory is clear. I can’t... I can’t betray you.”

Rade studied her appraisingly, and then said: “We need to take out the command and control.”

“Don’t you understand?” Adara said. “There isn’t one. All of us are the command and control.”

“What about the interference?” Rade said. “If you can help me eliminate whatever is generating it, we can at least communicate with our ships in orbit.”

“The help I can give you has its limits,” Adara said. “Just like I can’t betray you, I also can’t betray my own race.”

“Your race...” Rade said. “You’re still human.”

“Look at me,” Adara said. “Do I look human?”

“More than ever before,” Rade said.

She lowered her gaze, pressed her lips together, then said: "I'm sorry. I can't."

"Then come with us at least," Rade said.

"No. I told you even we must cede to the will of the Sentience in the end. I can feel that will exerting itself. Though the collective consciousness is half human, there are not enough of us, not yet. I cannot resist for much longer."

Rade heard a grating noise from the shaft and a metal platform arrived. Humanoid robots stood on it, armed with laser rifles. The weapons were currently lowered. What shocked Rade the most about those robots was that they all had his face. Their beards were much shorter, having grown barely past stubble, but it was him all right.

Rade assumed a defensive stance. "What the hell is this?"

"They're you," Adara said. "Or your clones, anyway. They will help you. Go."

Still tense, Rade said: "We don't need or want their help."

"You *will* need them," Adara said. "Trust me."

"Won't they eventually yield to the Sentience, too?" Tahoe asked. "Like you?"

"Not for some time," Adara said. "They're strong: they're your LPO, after all. Now go!"

The robots stepped aside, making room for the Titan on the platform. Rade reluctantly walked his mech onto it.

"When you get back to your fleet, tell them some of us want peace," Adara said. "Tell them to try to sue for it, before they drop their nukes again."

"I'll tell them." Rade stumbled slightly as the platform ascended. Rock swallowed the view on all sides as the elevator began its long rise to the upper levels. He glanced at the overhead map. All of the clones appeared in blue. Friendlies. Adara's blue icon was also still active, though the ping time was increasing.

"I just hope we can influence the collective consciousness before it's too late," Adara transmitted, revealing that she could utilize their main communication bands.

Does she have our private keys, too?

Probably not, considering how slowly she was moving toward the

structure's exit below, at least according to the overhead map.

"By the way," Rade returned over the comm. "You might want to clear out of there."

"Why?" Adara asked.

"We've placed a few charges."

Now her blue indicator was hurrying toward the exit.

"How long did you set the timers?" Rade asked.

In answer, the platform rumbled as if receiving some distant shockwave.

"Not long," Tahoe said, his voice tinged with amusement. "Don't know how much damage it will do."

"Not enough," Rade said. "Maybe not any at all. But it will give them a little hint of what humanity's answer to their message is going to be."

Rade looked at his overhead map to see if Adara had made it out, but her signal remained frozen near the entrance. According to the ping time, he had left signal range five seconds ago.

As the platform continued to ascend, Rade considered the clones with a mixture of hatred and disgust. They were perversions of himself: robots with his face who all stared vacantly ahead with dead eyes.

Occasionally tunnels opened up in the wall beside him as the platform passed openings in the rock; the clones could have come from any of them. Always the enclosing rock returned, sealing them in, blurring as it streamed past.

He glanced at the darkness above, staring into the shaft.

I'm coming, my brothers.

Rade didn't know what the hell was going on.

The last he remembered, he was fighting in the city of Radiance. The hammerheads had captured him and dragged him, blindfolded, through the streets. And then he must have lost consciousness, because his memory became hazy from that point.

He awoke here only a few hours ago, in this strange alien city. He still had his face, but his body was gone, replaced with robotics. When he looked at himself in a mirror, haunted eyes stared back at him. His eyes had always appeared slightly off, ever since Doctor Banye had replaced them with bioprinted variants, but not like this. He remembered Lieutenant Vicks, and a frightening possibility crossed his mind: *I've become one of them.*

But that was impossible.

Wasn't it?

No. He knew it was true. Deny it as he might, he was a host.

He purposely avoided mirrors from that moment forward. He didn't need to see his body like that. He didn't need to see his eyes.

There was something else different about him. There was a "presence" in his mind. It was hard to describe. It felt like a warm bundle located somewhere behind his eyes. It was part human, that presence.

And part alien.

When he touched it with his thoughts, he was no longer simply trapped in a robot body. His mind expanded, his ganglions stretching out to cover all the extents of the alien city. He was every robot, every bioengineered creature, every converted human. And he became not just the beings present in the city, but also those in flight around the star system itself.

Touching that presence, he felt like a small part of some vast animal, or brain. It was very humbling, yet also empowering. Indeed, strength seemed to flow out of that warm bundle, and he knew he would never be alone, not really.

He quickly learned to compartmentalize that presence into a separate region of his thoughts. Because he could not function, not as an individual human being, when he dwelt within it.

Shortly after awakening he had received orders to proceed to the platform. The orders had not come verbally. Nor by any communication by Implant. He just knew. He left his assigned chambers, traveled the rock tunnels, and reached a waiting room that overlooked the alien city. The others had arrived one by one, giving him little choice but to stare at the dead eyes and robotic bodies of men whose faces were mirror images of his own.

Presumably he still had an Implant: a HUD overlaid his vision, and all the capabilities that came with it. His Implant displayed the same labels above every clone: LPO Rage.

After assembling, he and the clones had taken the elevator down to the Sentience Chamber—how did he know it was called that? When they reached it, a mech had boarded the platform. Rade's Implant had identified it as belonging to the Titan class. The exact same label appeared over its head: LPO Rage.

The orders had instructed him to obey that man. The occupant was probably another clone, no more real than he. Still, Tahoe had clung from the leg of that Titan, and two Marines he had never met resided in the passenger seat. Maybe it *was* the “real” Rade.

As the elevator ascended, the platform abruptly shook—it was as if an explosion had gone off somewhere down the shaft.

The warm bundle in his head emitted a sudden frantic emotion: alarm.

Rade ignored it. He turned his attention to the Titan instead. Though he couldn't see the pilot, he had the strangest feeling the occupant was looking at him.

“Titan pilot, do you read?” Rade tried over the comm band.

The mech and its riders appeared as blue dots on the overhead map provided by his Implant, as did the other clones. It should work...

“We read you,” a familiar voice came back.

Was it his own voice?

He no longer knew. The HUD identified the speaker as the Titan's pilot. LPO Rage.

“But we're using a different main frequency band for our communications,” the LPO said. “I'm sending it now.”

Rade accepted.

“Is it wise to give them our main comm frequency?” Tahoe said.

“They could easily find it with a band scan anyway,” the LPO said.

“Just like she did. They’re running exact replicas of our Implants, remember.”

“Tahoe, it’s me,” Rade said.

Other clones echoed his words.

Tahoe swept his gaze down across the ranks, the disgust evident behind his faceplate.

“Well, just don’t give them your private key,” Tahoe said. “Unless they have that, too. They are your clones, after all.”

“I changed all my keys before I received the new Implant,” the LPO said. “And again before we dropped. They don’t have it.”

The rock abruptly opened in front of them, to intense fighting in a wide cavern.

Several Titans had been backed against the wall beside the alcove by what could best be described as giant worms. Most of them were biological, but there were a few robots in the mix, of the same shape, equipped with what appeared to be electrolasers underneath their upper bodies. The seething ranks extended to the limits of the light from the many headlamps; the roiling darkness beyond hinted at even more worms waiting out of view.

The Titans held large rifle-like devices that looked like salvaged weapon mounts that had been torn from other mechs. They alternately swung them like clubs, and fired them. Crouching on the floor behind them, Marines in jumpsuits shot laser rifles and blasters into the slime-covered mandibles.

Rade recognized the names of Alpha Platoon above those Titans. Manic. Fret. Lui. Bomb...

He was among his brothers.

The dismembered body of two dead Marines lay at the feet of the Titans. As Rade watched, one of the worms thrust between the mechs and split another Marine in two with its mandibles before the Titans could kill it.

“Attack!” the LPO said. His mech stepped off the platform and into the fray. “Defend the Titans and Marines!”

Rade followed the Titan off the platform and opened fire at the worms. Others like him did the same.

“Well look who’s decided to come back,” Bender said over the comm.

“Nice to see you, boss,” Manic said.

“It appears he’s brought some friends,” Trace said.

“Aww, ain’t dat cute,” Bomb said. “Little Rades.”

“Can we trust them?” Lui said.

“To a point,” the LPO said. “They’re going to turn on us at some point. When they do, take them down.”

The robot worms released their electrolasers whenever a clear path presented itself. Those lightning bolts arced across the cavern, striking the shields of nearby mechs. The bolts were returned by lasers from the party, with several fired by the clones, and the exposed robots went down.

As Rade fought, a message came to him from the part of his mind that was more than himself.

Destroy the Titans.

Rade squelched that urge with difficulty: it was so very strong.

“There are too many of them,” Mauler said. “We can’t hold them off! They keep coming!”

“Can we use the platform?” the LPO said. “And escape that way?”

Rade realized the LPO was addressing him.

He glanced toward the platform behind them, but saw only an empty shaft.

“No,” Rade replied. “It’s gone!”

“It’ll probably come up again with enemy reinforcements,” Tahoe said. “Outflanking us...”

“But there’s another way,” Rade sent. “A hidden passageway. A false wall created by holographic imagers and LIDAR absorbers.”

He transmitted the location to the Titan containing the LPO.

“Send it to Tahoe, first!” the LPO said.

Rade obeyed.

“Got it,” Tahoe returned. “Are you certain this wall exists?”

“I— no,” Rade said. “I’m not sure how I knew the wall was there in the first place. It could be an alien trick.”

“Well, we don’t have much choice,” the LPO said. “Send it to the rest of us, Tahoe!” A moment later: “Okay, people, listen up. We’re going to have to cut our way toward that hidden passageway. We’ll hug the wall, and continue providing protective cover to the Marines. Keep your shields facing the enemy. Go!”

The urge to attack the Titans came again. Stronger.

“We’ll stay,” Rade said. “And provide a diversion.”

“But without us to guard you,” the LPO said. “They’ll quickly overwhelm—”

“Go!” Rade interrupted. “Something is trying to take over our minds. Hurry! We can’t resist for much longer.”

Rade fired frantically into the worms as the Titans moved away. Most of the creatures pursued the mechs, but some of them lingered to concentrate their attack on the tiny clones.

A few of the clones began to lower their weapons. Those men quickly died, felled by the worms.

Some turned their weapons toward the Titans. Those impostors also died, taken down by Rade and the other clones who hadn’t succumbed.

But redirecting their weapons like that opened them up to attack from the front: an electrolaser struck a clone directly beside Rade, ripping the body in half. Another two clones fell when a biological worm barreled into them.

Rade fired as fast as his weapon could recharge. He screamed in outrage.

“Come on, you worm fuckers! Come on!”

His firing rate diminished as the rifle overheated.

A worm plowed into him.

He had one last thought before those large mandibles split him in half.

Forgive me, Shaw.

Rade piloted his Titan along the cavern wall, and followed Bender as the platoon steered their mechs toward the spot the clone had marked on the map. Bender had tossed Rade the laser mount he had given up earlier, and Rade employed it like a large rifle. Marines had similarly returned the weapons of Tahoe, Luxe and Paxon.

“They’re turning on us!” Tahoe said. “Your clones!”

Keeping his shield held in place toward the enemy, Rade glanced over his shoulder toward the robots that possessed his face. He watched as their position was overwhelmed by the worms; the robot bodies were ripped apart in a mess of servomotors and polycarbonate. Heads flew into the air. It was odd, seeing his features on so many of those beheaded faces, and he felt a moment of remorse. He wondered if the clones truly retained some of his memories, or his personality. They certainly fought like it. Battling to the bitter end.

He was brought back to the present by the clang of mandibles stabbing into his shield.

“Never mind,” Tahoe said.

Rade shoved his shield outward, forcing the latest attacker away, and then he swung the laser mount down like a club with his other hand, smashing the worm to the floor in a splatter of gore.

The mandibles of a second worm wrapped around his momentarily unshielded torso. He activated his fully-charged Lighter, electrifying the hull, and the worm was flung away squirming.

Some of the Marines had jetted back to their riding positions on the Titans: Rade had two of them in his passenger seat himself. Even so, the Lighter had no effect on them, as the external surface of the mech utilized “smart” technology to focus the charge away from any friendlies in contact with the hull.

“I’m in!” Manic said. “The passageway is real!”

“Keep going,” Rade sent, continuing to bash and laser the enemy as he kept close to Bender’s mech.

The Titans of Harlequin and Trace had assumed positions on the far

side of the hidden passageway. It looked like an impassible wall lay beside them, but Rade watched as the next Titan stepped right through it and vanished.

He defended against another incoming blow and lifted his shield to shoot a worm at point blank range.

He lowered the shield just as the bolt from an electrolaser erupted from the enemy ranks; it drilled into the right edge of the metal barrier, breaking part of the shield off.

Harlequin and Trace returned fire, taking down the robot worm that had revealed itself in the organic throng.

Bender plowed through the hidden wall. Rade unleashed one final blow against the horde, then he too stepped into the wall.

He found himself in a tight tunnel. The mechs could fit only in single file.

“You okay back there?” he asked his charges.

“Living the dream,” Tahoe replied.

Luxe and Paxon echoed the sentiment.

Fret entered behind Rade’s Titan, followed by Trace and Harlequin; the latter two walked backward to keep firing at the worms as the front ranks entered the illusory wall after them. Trace had to keep adjusting his aim to avoid hitting Harlequin’s Titan on drag.

“Anyone have any grenades left?” Rade said.

“I do,” a Marine said.

“Use it!”

The Marine was perched in the passenger seat of Bender’s mech; she leaped down, threaded between the mechs of Rade, Fret and Trace, then threw the grenade past Harlequin’s legs before hitching a ride on that final Titan.

The cave behind them filled with dust as the grenade exploded.

“Did you collapse it?” Rade asked.

“Dunno,” the Marine said. “Slowed them, either way.”

Rade picked up the pace, as did Bender, Trace and Harlequin, and caught up with the rest of the platoon. The Titans reached a rightward curving bend and quickly lost sight of the dust and enemies behind them. As the platoon members continued through that twisting and turning tunnel, the worms could sometimes be heard behind them, the chittering of their

mandibles and the skittering of their segmented feet echoing between the loud footfalls of the Titans.

“The passage ends in a wall,” Manic said from his position on point. “I’m going to try walking through it.” A moment later: “Yep. Another illusion. Who knows how many of them the enemy has placed in these tunnels?”

Rade reached the illusory wall and marched right past it into a wider tunnel that trended perpendicular to it. According to the overhead map, he had just emerged into the original passageway the party had taken down in the first place, and the entrance resided only a short distance from Manic on point.

“Is the map right?” Bomb said.

“It has to be,” TJ said.

“The fact the slope matches the thirty degree angle of the original is a good sign,” Snakeoil said.

Harlequin emerged from the illusory wall, firing his cobra one last time behind him as he did so.

“Keep moving, people,” Rade said.

The platoon hurried upward, and soon found themselves wading through the bodies of dead bioengineered creatures.

As the corpses thickened, Manic said: “I can see it! The opening! We’re almost out! I can’t believe it! We made it! We made it.”

Sure enough, light began to stream inside from an opening ahead. Rade increased his pace through the corpses of hornheads and gatorpedes.

Standing at the lip of the entrance, two ATLAS mechs looked down at the Titans with weapons at the ready. The pulse platforms lining the perimeter tracked every movement of the approaching platoon.

“Coming in hot, sentries!” Rade said. “Don’t think those platforms are going to be enough. I’d suggest calling in backup.”

“Roger that, “ Gunnery Sergeant MacKay transmitted. “Glad to see you proved me wrong.”

“Defensive positions,” Rade said as he emerged. He crouched outside the opening and aimed his weapon into the tunnel.

A moment later the voice of Lieutenant Colonel Harlan came over the comm.

“Well I’ll be damned,” Lieutenant Colonel Harlan said. “Never

thought you fools would return to the outpost again. So did you destroy the command and control?”

“No,” Rade said.

“Figured. I want to see you in my tent immediately for the debriefing.”

“I’m helping defend the outpost, sir,” Rade said. “Can’t we do it later? Or remotely?”

“Our mutual boys can handle it. Now get your ass inside my tent so you can properly debrief me.”

Rade hesitated. Then: “TJ, you’re in command. Help stave off the worms.”

“Will do, boss,” TJ replied.

“Jerry, is it safe for me to get out here?” Rade wanted his Titan to aid in the defense at least, if the radiation levels allowed it...

“I would recommend traveling into the outpost,” the AI replied. “Where the magnetic field emissions from the carriers and geodesic domes are stronger.”

So much for that idea.

Rade hurried toward the outpost. Tahoe remained clinging to his Titan, while Luxe and Paxon dismounted to join in the attack.

“Don’t want to fight, Tahoe?” Rade asked.

“Buddy system,” Tahoe explained.

As other ATLAS mechs and infantry troops rushed to defend the pit, Rade entered the outpost and made his way across the snowpack toward the command tent. He could hear the pulse platforms, and the mechs, opening fire behind him.

Rade dismounted beside the main geodesic dome and entered; Tahoe and the Titan assumed guard positions outside, joining the lone ATLAS mech that had remained behind.

Rade debriefed the lieutenant colonel, describing their journey through the tunnel, the attack by the robot spider, the meeting with the Sentience in the city, and the clones that aided in the escape. He relayed the precise coordinates of the underground cave city as determined by his Implant—for any future digger attacks—and also transmitted the full exchange he had recorded with the Sentience.

As he spoke, Rade kept glancing distractedly at the action taking

place on the overhead map. It seemed that the blue dots surrounding the opening were keeping the emerging red dots at bay.

“Here’s the deal,” Harlan said when Rade was done. “Another messenger arrived an hour ago. We’re clearing out at oh nine hundred. As soon as we’re done repelling the latest wave, gather up your men and prepare to pull out. We’re going home, kiddo.”

“Wait, what?” Rade blinked in disbelief.

“That’s right,” the lieutenant colonel said. “We’ve done our bit here. Paid our dues. We’re returning to the fleet.”

“How are we getting into orbit?”

“Same way we got here. Armored carriers will take us to the troop shuttles waiting twenty kilometers to the east. Once we board, we’ll skim the surface, traveling the necessary hundreds of kilometers until we’re out of range of the majority of their defenses, and then we’ll thrust into orbit while the fleet deploys decoys to cover our ascent.”

“It doesn’t make sense,” Rade said. “Shouldn’t we be building a forward operating base or something? Digging in for the long fight ahead of us?”

Harlan gestured toward the geodesic dome around him. “This could be called a forward operating base.”

“More like a combat outpost,” Rade said. “I was thinking of something a little bit more permanent.”

“If we wanted to spare the enemy, maybe,” Harlan said. “But I have the impression fleet wants to launch the last of their nukes, soften them up a bit first.”

“What’s the point if we don’t have any digger nukes left?” Rade asked. “We’ll cause a few cave-ins to damage their underground city, and that’s about it. By the time more digger inventory arrives, the enemy will have relocated.”

Harlan shrugged. “Dunno. Maybe they’ll nuke this hole, and then enlarge it with their heavy lasers until they break through to the city.”

“That will take quite a while. Enough time for the enemy to evacuate, anyway.”

“Well like I said, I don’t know,” Harlan replied. “If I did, I’d be up there cozy in one of those starships, not down here on this icy ball of frozen shit. Now go back to your men and prepare to retrograde.” He cocked his

head. "You hear that? Seems the battle is over. We successfully repelled the enemy once again. No losses to our side, other than a few destroyed platforms."

Rade listened. Sure enough, he no longer heard any shouts, explosions or other sounds of battle. He glanced at the overhead map. No red dots streamed from the opening, and the blue dots were dispersing. He had only looked away from the map for maybe thirty seconds and already the battle was done.

Rade loaded back into his Titan, then he and Tahoe rendezvoused with Alpha Platoon.

"Ha!" Bomb said. "You punks missed the greatest battle ever."

"You didn't miss a thing," Trace said. "That was a slaughter back there, is what it was."

"That's exactly why it was the greatest battle," Bomb said. "You can't get any better than that. Shooting down aliens that keep running at your guns. With little to no risk to yourself. That's my kind of battle."

"Not mine," Trace said.

"Nor mine," Skullcracker agreed.

"You're just pissed because there was no sport to it," Bomb said. "Killing for you has to be stimulating, apparently. But I have to say I enjoyed myself. I was entertained. I amused myself in my own way. Trying to make an alien head explode in a certain direction. Or an alien body split in half laterally down the middle, rather than sideways. Ahh... killing aliens. I'd do it all day, every day, if I could. Doing my part to make the galaxy a better place for the children."

"So what's the news, boss?" Mauler said.

"Apparently we're pulling out at oh nine hundred," Rade said.

"No way," Manic said.

"Yep, we're done here," Rade said.

"Feels like we've only just arrived," Skullcracker said.

"Not for me," Fret said. "Feels like it's been a lifetime."

"Why would we be pulling out?" Trace asked. "The mission is hardly complete."

"The lieutenant colonel thinks the fleet wants to launch the rest of their nukes," Rade said. "And maybe wait until some more digger nukes arrive."

“You know what that means, don’t you?” Bender said. “We might not be coming back down here.”

“I won’t miss it,” Fret said.

Rade didn’t blame him. While he hated leaving a mission uncompleted, Rade was with Fret in wanting to get the hell out. But he wasn’t about to admit that to the rest of the platoon.

“I have to agree with Skullcracker,” Lui said. “I feel like we haven’t really accomplished anything. Other than kill a few aliens.”

“How is that different from most wars?” Tahoe said.

Rade sent Tahoe to the supply depot to see if he could exchange his MOTH-issue jumpsuit for a better armored Marine one, as Rade didn't want him exposed to the elevated radiation levels out there for longer than absolutely necessary, even if the local magnetic field generators countered much of it. Then he gathered the rest of the platoon and led them just outside the outpost at the muster point to wait for the pull out.

Geodesic domes were taken down, and armored carriers and mechs slowly trundled into place beside Alpha Platoon. While that was taking place, Rade debriefed the platoon fully, sharing footage taken by his Implant of the underground city, and playing back the message from the Sentience.

When that was done, he asked a major about the status of Chief Facehopper and the bodies of their fallen; the commanding officer pointed him to the appropriate armored carriers. Rade found Facehopper still unconscious, tended to by a dedicated Weaver. He had been transferred to a Marine jumpsuit to protect him from the radiation, and his body temperature had been drastically lowered, essentially placing him in stasis. It was the only way to prolong his life long enough to receive the medical care he needed aboard a starship.

There were other bed-stricken individuals; though he couldn't tell because of the jumpsuits, he suspected many of them had amputated arms and legs, as the local medical unit had no bioprinting facilities. The lot of them had IV lines trailing from the injection area of their gloves. Some had miniature heart-lung machines attached to their chest assemblies.

Next Rade went in search of his fallen brothers. Luxe joined him. He asked the mortuary affairs robot in charge of the casualty collection carriers to show him the manifest, and he confirmed that Grappler, Keelhaul and the lost Marines had been loaded. He forced the robot to open up the body bags. The fallen remained inside their jumpsuits, their features pale and frozen behind their faceplates.

Keelhaul's body was held inside a different carrier reserved for infected units. When the robot retrieved him, Rade was taken aback by the face that stared back at him. While Grappler's expression had been one of

peace, Keelhaul's was one of pain and terror—his jaw was clenched, his teeth bared in a rictus, his eyebrows furrowed together in a v-shape. The sight disturbed Rade greatly.

I fired the shot that did this.

He banished the thought from his mind. He had had no choice. He'd made the best decision he could, given the circumstances and the information available to him.

And I'd do it again, if I had to, he told himself. He wasn't sure he believed it. He only hoped what had happened wouldn't drive him to inaction in similar circumstances someday.

When he and Luxe had confirmed the presence of their departed brothers and sisters, the pair returned to the platoon.

By 0830 the outpost was completely dismantled and the whole battalion had gathered at the muster point. The troops idled there, fidgeting for half an hour before the lieutenant colonel finally gave the order to set out upon the snowdrift-covered plains at 0900 on the dot.

Armored carriers led the way, creating a tread-marked path of snowpack for the following troops. The weather was clear, though the leaden sky maintained its usual grumpy overcast. When they eventually reached the pick-up site, those carriers and mechs would board large shuttles designed to carry their load. Rade doubted there would be room for all of them: some of the vehicles would probably have to be abandoned, detonated so as not to fall into enemy hands.

Tahoe had found himself a new Marine-issue jumpsuit, and he was hitching a ride on the external rungs of Rade's Titan along with some Marines. Shortly after departing the outpost, Rade told him: "Lose that alien tracker."

"With pleasure," Tahoe replied.

Rade saw the device spiral off into the distance as Tahoe threw it with all the force of his exoskeleton. It quickly vanished from view.

"Shouldn't have accepted it in the first place," Tahoe said. "If you ask me."

"If the aliens want to attack," Rade said. "At least that tracker will throw them off course. Somewhat."

"Sure," Tahoe said. "Until they discover the wide, flagrant trail we're leaving in the snow."

“Good point.” Rade zoomed in on the two armored platoons acting as forward scouts for the battalion. The snow was untouched beyond them. Odd.

“Captain,” Rade sent the nearest company commander. “Is this the same overland route your battalion took on the way here?”

“No,” the Marine returned. “We’re farther south by twenty klicks. Why?”

Rade frowned. “Just wondering.”

“Scouts reported enemy activity along the original route a few days ago,” the captain sent. “The LC thought it prudent to avoid it.”

“Probably a good idea...”

“You don’t really think we’re going to be attacked, do you boss?” Harlequin said. “When we were alone it made sense. But now that we’re a part of a battalion it doesn’t seem logical.”

“Don’t give me your logic,” Bomb said. “Just don’t. Nothing about these aliens is logical. Remember the tunnel behind us? Logic didn’t stop them from streaming out of that hole to their deaths, despite the platforms and mechs and all those troops hellbent on some alien bloodsport.”

“But in that case the aliens were forced on the defensive because of the proximity of the battalion to their city,” Harlequin said. “Releasing just enough bioengineered creatures to deter the troops from entering. But out here on the plains, what is there to defend?”

“Yeah, come on, Bomb,” Fret said, his voice oozing sarcasm. “It’s a routine march across a hostile alien homeworld. What could possibly go wrong?”

“Ha,” Bomb said. “Famous last words.”

The battalion passed by the remains of a fallen herd of those Titan-sized, shaggy wildebeest creatures Rade and his platoon had encountered shortly after landing on the planet. The bodies were frozen into the snow along the route, half-covered by the drifts. Icy tongues lolled from permanently open mouths. The hair had fallen out in clumps from some of them, revealing porcelain skin underneath.

The march across that bleak terrain was estimated to last an hour. Rade and the others remained on their guard, as did the rest of the Marines, constantly scanning the far horizons for signs of attack.

When they were five kilometers from the pick-up site, the dreaded attack finally came. But it did not arrive from either of the four horizons, but

from somewhere far closer.

The snow literally opened up beside the battalion, falling inward as a massive, gargantuan creature awakened. Giant red-haired tentacles unfurled, wrapping around armored carriers and hoisting them into the air. Four long necks topped by huge, viperine heads burst upward from the snow behind those tentacles, sourced from a body covered by a hard black shell. That body was the size of three auditoriums, and those necks towered over the party like office buildings. Three slitted, yellowish orbs situated above the maws of every head seemed to serve as eyes.

It was a bioengineered creature unlike anything he had ever witnessed before. A true bioweapon.

The armored carriers opened fire with lasers, missiles, electrolasers, jellied gasoline, the works.

“Fire!” Rade said, though he didn’t have to, as most of the Titans had already joined in.

The massive creature didn’t seem to notice the assault. It continued to lift those carriers towards its different heads. Snake-like maws opened, and Marines jetted free as the objects plunged inside cavernous gullets coated in green slime. Those mouths closed and the carriers vanished. The necks were so massive that no external lumps marked the peristaltic motion of the swallowed vehicles.

Some of the slime dripped down from one of those maws and landed on a hapless ATLAS mech. That slime dissolved through the hull in seconds, forcing the Marine pilot to eject. Only a steaming mass was left in place of the former ATLAS.

As the battalion continued its pummeling, the gargantuan reared two of its heads and unleashed a terrible roar. The other two heads swung ponderously across the battalion, releasing sprays of acid in concentrated streams, cutting twin swaths of destruction through the ranks.

The hairy tentacles unfurled again, snatching up more troop carriers, and this time mechs. Rade dodged one of these tentacles himself, hastily moving aside as the searching limb plowed into the snowpack. Somehow he didn’t think the Lighter would have any effect if it grabbed him.

The snow was quickly turning to slush underneath the battalion, as the carriers, troops and mechs dodged the acid and tentacles.

“Break off the attack,” the lieutenant colonel was transmitting. “Break off! Make for the LZ!” Landing Zone. “Companies B and C, provide cover!”

Mechs and armored carriers broke formation. The gargantuan headed them off by dropping two of its long, thick tentacles in their paths. The mechs easily jetted over the blockade, but then another tentacle slammed down, crushing half of them.

“Looks like it doesn’t want us to run,” Lui commented.

Other carriers retreated in a vector directly opposite the gargantuan. It released more acid streams from its heads, attempting to strike them down. Many carriers were struck, but most escaped unscathed.

“Do we join Companies B and C?” Manic said. “Or do we flee?”

“We stay and fight for as long as they do,” Rade said.

“Thank you,” Skullcracker said.

Rade fired his laser directly at one of the eyes. The associated head howled, and then unleashed a stream of acid directly at him. Rade was forced to dive to the snow. Tahoe, Luxe and the other Marine passenger were flung aside.

“You all right?” Rade asked.

“Never better,” Tahoe said.

“Fine,” Luxe added.

“Next time fasten your seat belts,” Rade joked.

As he waited for the three to rejoin him, he realized the creature wasn’t done with him yet. One of those giant tentacles was bearing down toward him. Fast.

Rade fired at it, fleeing, but the tentacle mirrored his movements as it plunged. He activated his jumpjets as a last resort, but it wasn’t enough: in seconds the appendage wrapped around his Titan and hoisted him into the air.

Rade tried activating the Lighter; as expected, it had no effect.

Tahoe and the two Marines jetted onto the tentacle and fired into it at point blank range. No good.

Other Titans tried to join them on the appendage, but more tentacles came in and swatted the mechs aside. Snakeoil was almost snagged by one of them.

“How the hell did you three get on there?” Snakeoil said.

“We’re smaller,” Luxe replied.

“What the hell did you do?” Tahoe asked Rade as the snowy ground receded behind him.

“Shot it in the eye.”

“Apparently it doesn’t like that,” Luxe said.

“Apparently,” Rade agreed.

“Can you eject?” Tahoe said.

“It’s blocking the hatch,” Rade answered.

“I’ll try a charge.” Tahoe placed an M117B on the tentacle. He ran upward along the tentacle with the Marines.

The detonation came; the volume levels of Rade’s internal speakers dialed way down to protect his hearing. When the smoke cleared an instant later, the tentacle remained intact. The only damage was some exposed flesh, oily and black, where the red hair and skin had been blow away.

Tahoe and the Marines returned to the site and fired into the wound with their laser rifles, but it had no effect. The tentacle clung to his mech tighter than ever.

“Tough bastard,” Tahoe said.

“You’re going to have to jet away as soon as it releases you,” Luxe said.

“Too bad I’ll be right over it’s maw at that point,” Rade said. He noticed that the ground was precariously far away by that point. “Get off, you three. That’s an order.”

“I don’t obey your orders,” Luxe said.

“You do this time. Trust me, I got this.”

Luxe and the other Marine leaped away with obvious reluctance. Tahoe lingered.

“Tahoe...” Rade said.

“You better make it.” Tahoe jetted from the tentacle.

“One of us will come up there and grab your Titan when the creature releases you,” Lui sent.

“That’s a negative,” Rade said. “It’s too dangerous. Stay on the ground. I repeat, stay on the ground.”

“Like it’s any safer down here,” Lui replied. But he didn’t jet up, to Rade’s relief.

In moment’s Rade’s Titan was carried to that open maw.

“Be ready to thrust at maximum burn,” Rade instructed his mech. “Jet free the instant it releases us.”

“I’m ready,” Jerry replied.

But the tentacle didn’t just drop Rade. It literally tossed him toward the open maw.

The jumpjets fired at full burn, but the deceleration wasn’t fast enough to counter the imparted momentum in time.

The Titan plunged into the maw. The acid-dripping walls of the creature’s throat surrounded the mech.

Not going to make it.

Eject!” Rade instructed the AI.

Free of the tentacle, the cockpit opened easily and the Titan spit out Rade. He activated the jetpack of his jumpsuit at full burn; the faster acceleration of the unit allowed him to jet away from that mouth just as the jaws clamped shut behind him.

Goodbye, Jerry.

Rade fired countering thrust to cushion his fall and landed on TJ’s mech. Since the passenger seat was fully occupied by Marines, Rade gripped the rungs near the cockpit. Tahoe clung to the opposite side of the same Titan.

“B and C Companies are fleeing,” TJ said.

“Time for our own tactical retrograde,” Rade said. “Let’s move! Zig-zag directly away. And avoid those damn tentacles!”

As the platoon followed the two companies in retreat, the creature launched its acidic spray once more. The mechs leaped aside, employing their jumpjets. Two armored carriers were scooped up by tentacles and the onboard Marines jetted free.

In moments Alpha Platoon and the two companies had moved beyond the gargantuan’s reach. They swung north, following the path the remainder of the battalion had pressed into the snow with their articulated metal tracks.

“Looks like it’s not even trying to pursue us,” Fret said. “It’s just sitting there, howling in outrage.”

“I wonder why the enemy never attacked us with anything like it before?” Mauler said.

“Maybe because it’s not really designed for combat?” Manic said. “It’s too damn big and cumbersome.”

“Actually we were attacked by something similar before,” Tahoe said. “Or at least as big, anyway. I’m thinking of the giant whale-caterpillar thing from the methane lake. The one Lui nearly lost his mech to.”

“True enough,” Mauler said.

“Did you see that cave it emerged from?” Lui said. “The creature’s shell was the same shape. I don’t think the aliens ever meant for it to attack

us. They simply deposited the thing in that cave, where it's been growing all this time, living out its entire life. Feeding on whatever passes by. It was just our bad luck that we trekked in front of its nest. Who knows, it might even be native to the planet."

"That thing must have been hungry," Mauler said. "Considering that we wiped out its food source with our nukes."

"Speaking of nukes, how are the radiation levels out there?" Rade transmitted, acutely aware that he now only had a poorly armored jumpsuit to protect him.

"Oddly low, according to my AI," Snakeoil said. "Our proximity to the powerful magnetic field generators some of these carriers are equipped with certainly helps. But even so, in that jumpsuit you're still exposed to a fair amount of the stuff. I'd say with your current subdermals, you shouldn't stay out there for more than an hour."

"You can ride in my cockpit, boss," TJ said.

"TJ's inviting you to ride his cock," Bender said.

"*Cockpit*," TJ corrected.

"No," Rade said. "We'll all be aboard troop carriers no later than thirty minutes from now, flying far away from the radiation zones. I'm good."

"You probably should," Tahoe said. "All joking aside."

"If I receive a rad saturation warning," Rade said. "I'll shack up with TJ, deal?"

"All right," Tahoe said.

Rade watched the gargantuan recede behind them. "C Company, how many did we lose?"

A major from C Company answered. "Thirty armored carriers, eight mechs, and five men. Many more injured."

Rade shook his head. "Too many." *Lucky it wasn't more*. "I want to get some proper overwatch positions set up. TJ—"

"Ah!" Bomb interrupted.

Rade glanced toward Bomb's Titan. The mech had collapsed.

"Bomb, what's wrong?" Rade sent.

"We're taking fire from the rear!" Lui said. "He's been hit!"

TJ swung around, bringing his shield to bear.

Harlequin's Titan, Lion, leaped across the plains and deployed its

shield in front of Bomb. Harlequin ejected to help Bomb's passengers cut him from the cockpit.

"More laser fire is coming in..." Snakeoil said.

Rade peered past the edge of TJ's shield and activated his faceplate zoom to enlarge the horizon. Large robots were rolling through the snow, coming from the direction of the city. They looked like the scorpion class on treads. There were about fifty of them. Probably more.

Rade ducked behind the shield. Bore marks appeared along the edges, indicating laser impacts.

"How is he?" Rade asked as Harlequin secured Bomb to the passenger seat of Lion.

"Hit bad, but he'll live." Harlequin jetted back inside Lion, and the displaced Marines from Bomb's mech grabbed on to whatever hull grips they could find. "His Titan is gone, however."

"Keep your shields pointed at the enemy, people," Rade said. "You see what an unshielded shot can do."

"The shot was somewhat lucky," Harlequin explained. "The rear armor of Bomb's mech was severely weakened: the gargantuan's acid splashed him at some point."

"Either way, our shields can't take much more of this!" Trace said.

Rade realized B and C Companies were fast retreating.

"Retrograde!" Rade said. "Zig-zag pattern. Randomized."

TJ swiveled his legs forward, keeping his torso pointed backward so that the shield covered most of the Titan's body. Rade and Tahoe hugged the hull tightly, keeping behind that shield.

The Titans rejoined the two companies and made good speed across the tamped down snow. The armored platoons in B and C Company fired their turrets at the enemy as the vehicles rolled onward. The mech platoons occasionally peered past their shields to return fire as well. The Titans likewise fired, those without too many Marines clinging to their hulls, anyway. TJ, for example, couldn't unleash his weapon without exposing Rade and Tahoe.

More bore marks appeared inside TJ's shield. The edges were becoming completely frayed as the shield failed there.

"Shield won't hold for much longer," TJ said.

"We're almost there..." Rade said.

The bore marks abruptly ceased. Several moments passed without any incoming fire.

Then a carrier abruptly ground to a halt. An ATLAS mech toppled next.

“They’re concentrating their fire!” Lui said.

That made the shields useless.

“Keep up the zig-zag pattern,” Rade said. “More randomization. Move faster.”

The ground sped past as TJ’s mech rapidly zig-zagged along the packed surface. Rade bobbed against the hull of the Titan, repeatedly slamming against it, hanging on for dear life. The enhanced strength of the exoskeleton could only boost him so far, and his arms were beginning to get sore from the strain.

It’s like doing push-ups during PT, he told himself. Embrace the burn. I’ve been through worse.

More carriers were failing—with their treads, they couldn’t zig-zag as fast as the mechs. Marines ejected from the disabled units and continued across the snowpack on foot.

In the distance, Rade saw craft take off as the lead companies of the battalion reached the pickup site. The carrier shuttles banked sharply to avoid incoming fire, and basically hugged the landscape as they sped away. Despite the low altitude, one craft got shot down as he watched.

Defensive pulse platforms had been placed about the landing zone, and as Rade and the others grew near, those platforms began adding their fire to fray. M139 laser miniguns poked through the door hatches of the waiting shuttles and opened up; several of the craft fired rockets at the enemy as well.

Rade had linked his Implant to TJ’s Titan so that he would receive any warning messages, so when the missile alarm sounded, he started.

“Incoming missiles...” Mauler said.

Rade glanced at his overhead map. He saw at least two dozen red streaks hurtling across the plains toward them, coming from the direction of the scorpions.

Trench Coats fired across the platoon. The armored carriers and mechs in both companies likewise launched missile countermeasures. Explosions rocked the snow. The shockwaves caused TJ to falter in his sprint, but he was otherwise unharmed.

“Anyone hit?” Rade said.

“Just me,” Harlequin answered. “I lost Lion.”

Rade spotted the Artificial in its redundant jumpsuit, jetting across the plains with the body of Bomb in its arms. Harlequin landed on Lui’s Titan.

“How is he?” Rade asked.

“Critical,” Harlequin responded.

The other Marines Lion had ported attached themselves to nearby Titans; some even jetted across to the armored carriers in the trailing B Company.

C Company reached the landing zone and the different platoons raced onto their respective carriers. B Company followed shortly thereafter. The pulse platforms lining the perimeter continued to fire upon the enemy, as did the shuttle miniguns.

“Enemy tangos are starting to fire their lasers separately again,” Lui said.

“That’s because they’re close enough that it doesn’t matter!” Mauler said.

A big piece of TJ’s shield broke away.

“Close one,” TJ said.

“Which carrier do we take?” Mauler asked.

Rade glanced at the overhead map, which displayed labels for all of the shuttles. “MC3,” he said. MC stood for Mech Carrier.

The Titans zig-zagged toward the aforementioned shuttle, passing beyond the line of pulse platforms and snow screens that had been set up.

“The platforms are drawing the incoming fire,” Snakeoil announced.

“Good!” Fret said.

A new voice came over the comm.

“No infantry passengers!” the carrier pilot transmitted. It spoke with the mellifluous tones of an AI.

“But we’re only—” Rade began.

“I said no passengers!” the pilot continued. “We’re designed to carry mechs. You’ll be crushed if you’re anywhere on the hulls while the mechs clamp in, even if you’re in the passenger seats. And you’ll be tossed about like salad if you think you’re going to find a place on the floor. All infantry passengers go to the troop carriers!”

“All right, you heard the AI,” Rade said. “Tahoe, Harlequin, and

Marines, with me. The rest of you load up here! Harlequin, bring Bomb of course.”

Rade leaped down, feeling utterly exposed for a few moments out there. He jetted behind the mech carrier MC3 for cover, and then ran across the snowpack toward the troop carrier labeled TC5, which MC3 partially screened from the enemy. Marines ran in front of and behind him, providing a further screen. Tahoe and Luxe were at his side. Harlequin, carrying Bomb, was just ahead.

Shuttles began to take off all around them, flying low over the landscape.

“Hurry up!” a voice said over the comm. Rade’s Implant labeled the speaker as the pilot of TC5. Another AI.

Luxe fell.

Rade halted immediately, as did Tahoe and the Marines behind him.

“Keep going!” Rade said. “I got her.”

“Boss—” Tahoe began.

“Go!”

Tahoe obeyed, and continued toward the troop carrier with most of the Marines. Despite his order, some of the latter remained, forming a protective shield around them.

Air misted from a tiny hole in Luxe’s back, between her jetpack tanks. There didn’t appear to be an exit puncture on the other side of her body. She hadn’t been hit by a combined enemy shot, then.

He retrieved the suitrep kit from the left pocket of her leg assembly.

“Where are you hit?” Rade asked Luxe, though he already knew. He said it mostly to distract her.

“Feels like... stomach,” she moaned.

He grabbed a patch from the kit and slapped it over the punctured fabric. “Can you walk?”

“Not like this.”

He scooped her up and hurried toward the shuttle. He used his jetpack to add speed to his sprint, and he moved in leaps and bounds.

The Marines who had stayed with him and Luxe were falling all around him. He realized MC3, the carrier that had been screening them, had taken flight.

Goddamn AI.

He saw Tahoe, Harlequin, and the lead Marines race up the ramp of the troop carrier.

Almost there.

Rade suddenly had the wind knocked out of him. He fell, dropping Luxe.

A puncture warning sounded on his HUD.

Rade tried to sit up so that he could retrieve the suitrep kit from his left cargo pocket. But for some reason, his body didn't want to listen to him. He was just too weak, despite that he wore a strength enhancing jumpsuit.

Obviously he had been struck by something, probably an enemy laser, yet he wondered why he wasn't feeling any pain. He realized he was having difficulty breathing. He stared at the flashing puncture indicator on his HUD.

Got to... retrieve... suitrep.

A trailing Marine knelt to help Luxe. A moment later a portion of the Marine's faceplate shattered, and the inside of her helmet turned completely red. She toppled.

That Marine was the last one out there.

"Where's the sergeant?" someone asked over the comm.

"What about Rage?" Someone else.

"What are you doing?" The pilot. "We have to go, *now!*"

Rade dialed up the jumpsuit strength settings to maximum assist and tried again. He managed to push his chest half a meter from the snow before he toppled again.

Exoskeleton... must be... damaged.

That was when the delayed pain suddenly exploded in his chest. It was a terrible, burning agony, worse than any he had ever felt before. His vision dimmed. He felt like he was in a technician's shop, and he had stepped in front of the blowtorch. With each breath, he sensed the bone grinding against the tendons of his ribcage, and the sinews against the fascia. The merciless treads of an invisible tank rolled across the insides of his lungs, each turn of the articulated metal tearing gristle, renting ligaments. His heart pounded frantically against his chest, striving to break free.

"We have to gooooo," a distance voice said. The words sounded strangely sluggish and drawn out, as if time for Rade was passing at a much slower rate.

Lying there on the ground, Rade contorted his body like a dying worm as he struggled with the left pocket of his leg assembly. Finally he snatched the suitrep kit.

He fetched a vial of morphine from the kit and slid it into the injection slot above his glove. The sonic injector passed the analgesic into the dorsal venous network of his hand.

The pain faded mercifully as the morphine, sweet morphine, kicked in.

He grabbed a patch and reached behind his back, attempting to seal the suit puncture indicated on his HUD. He realized that a portion of the jetpack was blocking him: he couldn't reach the perforation.

He unhooked the jetpack assembly and shrugged it off with difficulty. Then he reached behind his back again. He still couldn't stretch far enough to reach the puncture zone. He had packed on too much muscle over the past year, and had paid for it with a loss in flexibility.

And then another jumpsuit stood beside him. The operator took the patch from him. He felt something press into his back, and a moment later the puncture warning ceased.

Tahoe?

He glanced up.

Harlequin stood there. As Rade watched, a hole appeared in Harlequin's faceplate, and the skin at the center of the Artificial's forehead curdled and blackened. Harlequin had taken a laser shot to the region, but amazingly didn't fall. Instead the Artificial reached down and grabbed both Rade and Luxe, hauling them from the snowpack. Harlequin placed them together, in a hugging position, and maneuvered the pair in front of its chest, shielding them with its body. Harlequin held them tight as it proceeded toward the carrier.

The Artificial thrustured a few times to add to the forward motion, but the jetpack sputtered and died. The feed lines had been shot out, maybe. Harlequin continued toward the shuttle, bounding across the snowpack, still protecting the pair. Harlequin jerked oddly sometimes, and Rade realized the Artificial was getting struck repeatedly by lasers. Somehow the Artificial kept going.

The shuttle fired a Trench Coat multiple times. Missiles exploded all around the craft, sending up plumes of snow and smoke, carving big holes into the drifts. Scorch marks and burn holes marred the armored fuselage in multiple places, with new ones appearing all the time. So far the armor was holding up. But for how long?

The whole thing seemed so far away and distant to Rade. It was almost as if he were some impassive observer watching the most surreal of scenes unfold from outside his body.

About five meters from the shuttle Harlequin collapsed.

"I'm sorry, boss," the Artificial said. "My legs are no longer functional."

Rade drunkenly pushed himself up. The drowsiness from the morphine was kicking in. He grabbed at Luxe, and tried to drag her across the snowpack. She wouldn't budge.

He glanced helplessly at the craft. So near. Yet so far.

On the right side of the shuttle entrance, Tahoe's helmet momentarily appeared from inside. His friend quickly ducked out of view; bore holes appeared in the fuselage near where his head had been.

Paxon rushed out anyway. The Marine was mowed down. She fell in jerks, blood pouring from her lifeless lips when she hit the snow.

"No," Luxe whimpered.

The automated miniguns on the left side of the shuttle abruptly cut out as the enemy lasers bored into them.

"I'm sorry," the pilot transmitted. "I've waited long enough. I can no longer justify the risk to my passengers."

The shuttle began taking off.

"No," Rade said weakly. "We're... almost... there..."

Something strong gripped him around the leg, and Rade was pulled backward like a rag doll. It was Harlequin.

The Artificial flung him forward with incredible force. The throw had the perfect trajectory and timing: Rade landed squarely on the closing ramp. An instant later Luxe crashed onto the ramp beside him.

"Harlequin..." Rade transmitted.

He was vaguely aware of the dizzying motion of the ground below—the shuttle was already banking to avoid the incoming fire.

"I am unable to propel my body in a similar manner," Harlequin said over the comm. "You're too far, now. Goodbye, boss."

The ramp sealed shut and Rade slid to the floor. Luxe landed on top of him.

Powerful hands grabbed him. Rade wasn't sure if it was Tahoe, or a robot, or what, but soon he found himself strapped into a seat, his head

bowing forward. The cabin pressurized, and a Weaver began to work on him from the side. He felt an uncomfortable sensation in his lung area.

The surgical robot must have injected a stimulant of some kind, because a moment later the drowsiness evaporated and he felt wide awake. He noticed that the surgical robot had attached a miniature heart-lung machine to his chest assembly.

“Have I earned my callsign now, boss?” Harlequin asked, his voice distorting.

The powerful comm node in the shuttle had cut through the interference, then, granting Rade some last precious moments with the Artificial while the craft made its way from the scene of battle.

“You have,” Rade said. “More than earned it.”

“Would you mind telling me what it is, before I am completely lost?”

“Heart,” Rade said immediately. “Your callsign is Heart.”

“Thank you, boss,” Harlequin returned.

“I’m sorry,” Rade said, his voice breaking with emotion. “For taking so long to give it to you. You deserved it far sooner.”

“It’s all right, boss,” Harlequin said. His words warped badly because of the range. “I simply return my atoms to the universe. The aliens have it right, I think. The only way the universe knows it exists is through us. By the iterative loops our neural networks form, providing the illusion of consciousness. Whether blood pumps through our veins or electrons flow through our wires, we are all of the universe. We are all brothers. I am proud to have had the opportunity to be your brother, Rade Galaal. Thank you for this honor.”

Rade managed to get a hold of his emotions long enough to say: “And I’m damn proud to have had you as my brother. More than you know.”

The signal cut out.

Rade closed his eyes and thought of all those who had died on the mission. Grappler, Keelhaul. The Marines. And all the AIs beside Harlequin, such as Jerry and the other mech cores. Those were the real Titans.

When he opened his eyes, he realized Luxe was seated across from him with her helmet off in that pressurized environment. Another Weaver, held to the floor by a magnetized base, tended to her. Luxe’s eyes were open, and she had the strength to speak:

“For a dirt astronaut, you’re all right,” Luxe told him.

“And for a jarhead, you’re not so bad yourself.” He forced a smile, but his chin was doing an unexpected trembling thing, and the facade of strength he had put up all that time finally came crashing down. Hot tears streamed down his cheeks.

He was ashamed. Men like him, they weren’t supposed to cry. And why now all of a sudden, when he had composed himself so well for Harlequin?

“Bastard,” Luxe said, wiping the tears from her own eyes. “Why’d you have to go and cry?”

Rade chuckled softly and sniffed. He glanced at Tahoe.

His friend was having trouble keeping it together himself. Tahoe’s lips quivered, and he quickly looked away, trying to hide his face.

Rade nodded slowly. *It’s done.*

We survived.

epilogue

After several failed attempts, Rade finally finished the video messages to the parents of Grappler and Keelhaul. The latter proved the most difficult. It had been too hard to tell them he had killed Keelhaul. Instead, he told them Keelhaul had died heroically by saving the platoon from a booby-trapped booster rocket, and had succumbed to the wounds inflicted when it detonated. He submitted the messages to the lieutenant commander, unsure whether Braggs would make him redo Keelhaul's and admit his part in the death, but five minutes later both messages were marked as approved and dispatched to the InterGalNet.

Rade composed another video message to Facehopper's family, regarding the chief's status. The chief was doing well aboard the sick bay of the cruiser *Patriarch*, and was expected to make a full recovery. Facehopper had been slightly pissed that he had missed out on the remainder of the mission, but he was glad to be awake and alive.

Rade had recuperated completely from his injuries. As had Bomb and Luxe. All thanks to Harlequin. Rade wondered if there was any family he should write to for the AI. He made an inquiry, but the Artificial was relatively newly manufactured and had no contacts, human or otherwise, listed anywhere in its profile. With a heavy heart, Rade closed the file.

He sat back and thought of what had happened over the past few days.

The robots, infiltration units, and other bioweapons had surrendered, as had the remaining enemy vessels scattered throughout the system. Representatives from both sides met to iron out a deal, and when the negotiations concluded a week later, the aliens, who called themselves the *Mahasattva*—Sanskrit for “great being”—were allowed to reside on the planet under several conditions, the main being that they never leave. They were quarantined as a race, denied space travel. Their remaining ships would be dismantled and destroyed. To ensure compliance, a UC observation base would be constructed in orbit around their homeworld. A rotating fleet of five destroyers would join the base, keeping vigil above the planet year round. If the *Mahasattva* ever violated the treaty, the UC would return in force to

annihilate them.

Mahasattva. Rade wondered why the aliens had chosen a human word to name their race. Was it simply because the term seemed the most appropriate translation for their own alien designation? Or perhaps they chose it to evoke a sense of fellowship and empathy with the human negotiators. It could also be that humans composed so much of the alien collective consciousness that the human part had partially assumed control, as Adara had hinted, forming something that was not entirely alien but not entirely human, either: a trans-human species to whom such a term would make sense.

Whatever the case, Rade was just glad peace had been achieved. He didn't believe all Mahasattva deserved to die. And given the grief they had caused, as well as their former plans to convert the entire human race into hosts, he didn't feel the terms of that peace were overly harsh, not at all. A species like that didn't deserve space travel.

Rade had shared Adara's message during his debriefing with senior command, of course, and he liked to think her words helped open the minds of the UC negotiators. "Some of us want peace," she had said.

Yes, he liked to think that he had made some small difference in the war.

And that it hadn't all been for nothing.



HE WAS SUMMONED to the lieutenant commander's office aboard the ship a few days later.

"Have a seat, Mr. Galaal," Braggs said.

"Thank you, sir." Rade sat across from him. No one else was present. He had half-expected Chief Facehopper to join them remotely via the sick bay, but it was just Rade and the LC.

"Today's my last day as your commander," Braggs said. "I've been promoted."

Rade was taken aback. "That's... congratulations, sir."

"Yes. I've been trying to avoid it, but there's really nothing you can do when the personnel department comes knocking."

Rade nodded stiffly. He wasn't sure he was ready for a new

commander. While Braggs had his faults, Rade had grown accustomed to his leadership style, and worried his replacement would be much worse. Rade had heard enough stories to know that the quality of an officer was never guaranteed, and men like Braggs could be hard to come by. Then again, maybe the new commander would turn out just fine. It was simply human nature to fear change, after all.

“Facehopper has been promoted, too,” Braggs said. “He’s now master chief.”

Rade shook his head, and he chuckled slightly. “Everyone’s getting promoted today. It’s going to be a completely different team soon.”

“Yes, and I’m not finished yet,” Lieutenant Commander Braggs said.

“What do you mean?”

“I was impressed with your performance these last few runs,” the lieutenant commander said. “The position of chief is yours, if you want it.”

Rade considered. Did he really want to assume the extra duties? Even if he delegated tasks to an LPO, he was still responsible for the men in the end.

He wavered for several moments, but then realized he didn’t want to place the burden on anyone else. His choice became crystal clear. It had to be him.

Remember who you are.

“I’ll do it, sir,” Rade said.

“I thought you would,” Braggs said. “I’ll schedule the necessary exams before my transfer is finalized. Study up.”



RADE PASSED THE exams, of course. And he spent Friday night celebrating with the members of Alpha Platoon at the strip club. Virtual, of course.

Manic had borrowed a couple of six-packs from the supplies reserved for beer day, and they drank them liberally.

“So, now that you’ve made chief,” Manic said at one point. “There comes the question of who’s going to fill your shoes as LPO?”

“I was hoping TJ would step up for that position.” Rade glanced at the Italian.

TJ smiled. “Not a chance. I had enough the last time I tried. No. Not me.”

Rade looked to Tahoe. “How about you, Cyclone?”

“Me?” The big man shook his head. “You know I’ve never been good with authority figures.”

“Then *be* one,” Rade said.

“I’ll think about it,” Tahoe said. “But for now, the only authority figure I have to deal with is my wife. I have to figure out how I’m going to explain the four withdrawals from *Lucky’s Strip Club* on my cred account. She checks my statements, you know.”

“Just tell her you logged into the wrong virtual app,” Lui said.

“Ha,” Tahoe said. “If only it were that easy.”

“I don’t know what the big deal is,” Fret said. “They’re only virtual titties.”

“She gets jealous of porn...” Tahoe said.

“I’m sure you’ll think of something creative,” Rade said with a laugh.

As he sat there, watching his brothers enjoy themselves, he found himself reminiscing on the past, and the good men and AIs who were no longer with them. He resolved to continue fighting for as long as he was able. Otherwise, the sacrifices of those who had fallen were for nothing.

I’ll fight until I’m ninety-eight. And I’ll keep fighting, for as long as I can.

He ran his gaze across the platoon.

I’ll keep fighting for as long as there are good men like these who need me.

Thank you very, very much for reading.

I hope you enjoyed the Alien War Trilogy. If you’d like to read more about Rade and his platoon, consider checking out the ATLAS Trilogy, which details Rade’s early years on the Teams. Rade also makes an appearance a few decades later in the A Captain’s Crucible series as a MOTH crewmember stationed aboard the USS Callaway.

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postscript

Please help spread the word about *Titan* by leaving a one or two sentence [review](#). The number of reviews an ebook receives on Amazon has a big impact on how well it does, so if you liked this story I'd REALLY appreciate it if you left a quick review. Anything will do, even one or two lines. Thank you!

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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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— Isaac Hooke

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