

The Threshold

Reese

Novus Cayla Reese shifted uncomfortably in the Galaxy drop seat and was rewarded by her exosuit biting into a new piece of tender flesh. The aircraft hummed noisily to itself as it gently rocked and bucked at random all the while supplying the passengers with stale air that was at once too hot and too cold. It was fitting that the inside of the Galaxy was so repulsive, considering that exiting the aircraft normally involved dropping through a small hatch beneath the seat to be wrapped in a protective sheath of nanites that would briefly bind to armor and, by generating a gravitational field to oppose the planet's, allow for a painful, if not usually fatal, landing. This time, though, she would take the more pedestrian loading ramp after the aircraft carefully landed at a prepared landing zone.

Had she been a veteran, she would have recognized how unusual this was. The average Galaxy supporting a major campaign touched the ground just long enough to load passengers and then spent the entirety of its life, often measured in hours, in the air. They were not flown gently and casually, but were instead pushed beyond the limits of their design criteria. On the rare occasion that an aircraft survived long enough to require maintenance, catastrophic damage to engine mounts and stress fractures along the frame were as common a malady as the holes and gouges of bullets and flak. Most of the time these aircraft were flown immortal demigods, but this one was far from the nearest warpgate and major link to the rebirthing matrix. Immortality was suspect at best. The pilot chose to fly safely and predictably. He was not a gambling man.

The Novus did not know any of this, though - at least not the way a veteran might. Her service had only included the five Galaxy drops required during Sovereignty advanced infantry training. Nano-construction and rebirth ensured those drops had been live fire exercises, but the defense batteries were not operated with the sort of vengeful desperation of a Skyguard in the field. The training guns maintained a cycle rate well within specification. In combat it was not unusual to see a Skyguard fire until the barrels glowed white; catastrophic failures of the weapon were common. The training gunners shot to kill, true, but they didn't try terribly hard.

She had graduated from training three months ago, and the service tag on her arm showed she had participated in the recent campaign on Indar. She had not yet served long enough that she wore customized armor, and, like most junior soldiers, she opted to wear an exosuit extensively reinforced with composite plating painted in dark grey and deep purple. The effect of the armor was that she appeared larger than she actually was. At 180 cm tall and over 100 kilograms, the suit added five centimeters and more than 40 kilograms to her weight, making for an imposing figure. Outside of the armor, she would be well with Auraxian norms.

Her record showed that she accounted well for herself thus far. During a week of combat among the coral and dunes near a major Vanu excavation site she had only been killed twice - a rare feat at this stage of the war. In any other conflict, she would be considered a hardened veteran, but, as the war for Auraxis stretched into its second bloody decade, she barely qualified as having been trained. The Novus was well aware of her lack of experience, though, more so as she saw countless campaign markers inscribed on armor as she glanced around the Galaxy.

Centurion Brendan Matthews sat at the head of the aircraft. He had joined the Sovereignty military shortly after the cold war between the New Conglomerate and Terran Republic escalated into an exchange of various weapons of mass destruction. While there were formidable defenses against such things, it threatened two centuries of terraforming effort and laid waste to a number of important Vanu archeological sites. The Novus was only a child at the time, but the Centurion watched the exchange with horror and realized something needed to be done. His armor no longer expressed his campaign record. When the Novus asked, Matthews simply responded, "After your twelfth campaign you stop worrying about what you've done because you're just going to do it again tomorrow." He said it with an edge that told the Novus that this was not resignation, but something harder.

Across from the Centurion were Adepts Sheffield and Waits. They had served with the Centurion for more than a year, and their easy back and forth bickering reminded Reese of trips she had taken with her family as a child. Both men were of similar build and shared the same sandy brown hair cut in an

approximation of a high and tight. Were it not for the names, the Novus might have assumed they were brothers. The current topic of discussion was about the relative merits of Sheffield's VX29 compared to Waits's own VA55.

"The Polaris weighs almost 10 kilos. You can barely move and shoot!"

"Oh, and your Corvus is any lighter? The focusing array alone weighs more than the entire barrel of the Polaris!"

"The Corvus needs that. It uses more plasma mass and imparts more energy on the shot. What does all that mass do for your Polaris?"

"It helps keep the barrel on target. Not that you know anything about accuracy - you shoot like some unenlightened Republic recruit."

"Gentlemen, both of your weapons are fine." The Centurion cracked a small smile before adding "But if my VS54 ever runs dry, I'm taking your 'X29, Chef."

Adept Sheffield made an elaborate show of shielding his Polaris from view. "Over my dead body. With all due respect, of course."

The trio continued their banter, clearly far more accustomed to the downtime and discomfort of long range military travel than Reese was.

On Auraxis, there were three basic ways of getting from one point to another. The first was through mundane means familiar to soldiers throughout history. They would travel by foot or inside one of the fighting vehicles fielded in the great global war. The second was through the warp gates - ancient relics of the Vanu who once occupied the planet. The massive structures had the capacity to teleport whole companies of troops and their vehicles to any linked warp gate. The most unusual was through

a process known as redeployment. If a soldier died on Auraxis and they were in range of the rebirthing network, their consciousness would be saved into another alien device known as the matrix. It could then be transferred to a replacement body built from a template created when the soldier was first scanned into the system. The body could be constructed at any one of the hundreds of rebirth facilities. At some point a soldier, realized they could simply commit suicide and allow the system to route them to their new destination. In the early days of rebirth, soldiers had to rely on a manual method of self-termination. Now, each soldier carried a thought activated suicide module expressly built to allow a painless death. For large scale movement of troops, the Sovereignty preferred to use mundane transport or the warpgates rather than travel via the rebirthing matrix. The organic mass used to build new bodies was always limited and better spent replacing combat losses than moving tens of thousands of troops.

Centurion Matthews was tasked with leading a security detail for Praetor Jacob Daniels who currently sat stewing in the front of the plane. He had not spoken to anyone since he arrived at the dusty landing zone on Indar hours ago with a specialist in tow. Bored, Reese pulled up the Praetor's record on the Sovereignty military extranet. At 45, he was younger than he appeared, and his thinning hair and crooked nose was enough that Reese would have guessed he was well into his 60s. His appearance and the way he hunched as he sat reminded her of a bird from ancient Terra she had learned about - a 'Vulture'.

The specialist sat across from her. Her nameplate simply said 'Dsc. Brandt'. An extranet search only revealed that that her first name was Katelyn and that she was 34. Reese considered the woman from the corner of her eye. She had removed her helmet upon boarding, but, beyond stowing her weapon at her side and placing the helmet on her knee, she had scarcely moved. Only the occasional blink and the slight movement of her chest under the infiltration suit revealed she was anything other than a statue. The Disciple's dirty blonde hair was cut into a short bob. Her piercing blue eyes and high cheek bones would probably have ensured favorable placement in the eugenics program were it not for the war. The woman had a brutal scar on the right side of her face that

seemed to continue under her armor. Reese thought it impressive that the woman still managed to be attractive in spite of the defects.

Disciple, do you mind if I ask how you got that scar?" she asked as she shifted uncomfortably.

The disciple turned slightly and seemed to consider her response before flatly saying, "No."

The statement hung in the air for a moment. Reese quietly began to fear she had offended the woman and stammered out "I...I meant no offense."

"I am not offended. I do not mind if you ask about the scar".

Taken aback by the literal response Reese hesitated before asking, "So, how *did* you get that scar?"

"A Prowler exploded while I was taking cover beside it."

That didn't make any sense to the Novus. No combat injury was left to simply heal. The body's pace could not possibly match the war's appetites. Even if you were too injured for nanomedicine, there was always rebirth.

"I thought that with rebirthing...When did that happen? I mean, why do you have a scar?"

"9 October, 2846. Nanomedicine was unavailable."

"But the Sovereignty wasn't in the war then!"

The Disciple turned her attention from the Novus back into space in front of her. "I wasn't part of the Sovereignty then."

Before she could continue Novus Alvarez, a dark haired young man who went through training with Reese, leaned over. "If you've been fighting that long, why are you only a Disciple?".

Disciple Brandt turned towards the interloper when the Praetor finally spoke, "She is a Disciple because that is the maximum rank allowed a Sentinel. The Disciple operates under my *direct* authority."

Deflated, Alvarez sank back into his seat. Reese was stunned. She knew Sentinels existed but had never met one before. She wondered what could have happened that would make the Disciple want the emotion regulator array and extensive implants installed. You could barely call the result a person.

As the Galaxy droned on she glanced over to the small exterior view feed. They were still above water - the East Hossin sea she hoped - and that meant the flight would carry on for some time. Reese fidgeted in her seat again before giving up on comfort and instead slumped back and closed her eyes hoping to doze off for part of the flight.

Reese awoke with a start as the Galaxy seemed to drop away beneath her. It took several seconds to realize that the aircraft was merely conducting a standard combat landing - a maneuver that required a very rapid loss in altitude. She barely managed to brace before the Galaxy's powerful lift jets fired and pressed her uncomfortably into the seat as the ungainly aircraft shed speed. It drifted the last meter to the ground as though it were a sheet of paper and not a forty ton war machine.

Centurion Matthews rose to his feet and removed his Orion from the mount point in one fluid motion.

"Everybody up. Grab your weapons" When that ramp drops I want a clean combat deployment. Just because we own the place doesn't mean it's safe out there."

Waits and Sheffield complied quickly while Novus Reese struggled to unlatch her Solstice.

“Novus, is there a reason why you have us waiting inside a parked Galaxy?”

Reese felt the blood rush to her face as she struggled to pull her carbine free before remembering where the release latch was. Finally able to free the weapon, she pulled on her helmet before slapping a battery into place, verifying it had made contact.

“No, Centurion.”

“Glad to hear it. You’re up front.”

Reese hurried to the rear of the Galaxy and accidentally clipped Disciple Brandt in passing. She was about to apologize only to realize that the Disciple had seemingly failed to notice. Brandt simply pulled her custom Phantom to her shoulder and activated her cloaking device.

“Remember people - rebirthing is flaky here. Don’t do anything stupid.”

Matthews signaled the pilot who dropped the rear door, which landed on the pad with a dull clank. Reese and Alvarez hustled forward into air that was hot and heavy with moisture; it stank of mold and rot. The late afternoon sun beat down upon the pad as she lowered to a crouch and scanned cautiously. She noticed that the facility was only in a small clearing, and many of the surrounding trees towered over the elevated pad. Below the pad, Sovereignty soldiers clad in light exosuits painted sickly shades of green and yellow moved purposefully about.

“Clear.” she said using the squad’s subvocal communication channel.

Matthews and the Adepts quickly moved down the ramp before signaling for the Praetor to follow. As they moved inside, Reese and Alvarez quietly stood and followed them. It was only once they arrived at a lift that would take them into the heart of the station that Reese realized Brandt was not with them.

“Brandt is not joining us?”

Praetor Daniels glared back before responding icily, “The Disciple is not your concern.”

Reese dropped the issue as the lift arrived at the bottom of the facility where they were greeted by Archon Phillips.

“Jacob! I was told we were expecting a visitor from Sovereignty command, but I didn’t know they were going to send you!”

The Archon reached out and offered the older Praetor his hand. The Praetor’s icy exterior melted as he smiled and grasped the Archon’s hand warmly.

“Who else would they send? Your Primarch and I worked together on the rebirth project. They wanted me here to take a look at what you’ve been working on all these years. The last project report is nearly a year old so the Council thought we could save you the work and just do an inspection.”

“So you’re here for the tour, eh? Well, I’m sure we can accommodate you. Our operation is small, but the Primarch knows how to run a lab.”

Archon Phillips gestured towards the door and led the team outside. The sun attacked the green canopy but the choking lattice of branches and vines only allowed the narrowest shafts of light to dapple the ground. In spite of the relative shade, the heat at ground level was even more intense and Reese realized she would regret wearing the heavy exosuit.

As they briefly toured the sprawling facility, Archon Phillips played the part of guide. The facility was, like most Amp stations, little more than a set of high output fusion generators attached to a large scale nano-fabricator. According to him, the generators themselves were the key reason why his detachment bothered to keep the facility running as it provided the power necessary to run the operation. The station was a relic and was nearly two centuries old. The core of the station, dropped on Hossin from orbit, was the remains of one of the colony ships that brought humans to Auraxis, and the large fusion generators were used to power one of the first generation of atmosphere processors.

Over the decades, the many crews who manned the station fought a constant battle against the encroaching marsh and jungle that sought to reclaim the space. Once the primary stages of terraformation were complete, the day to day operation of the station came under the care of the fledgling New Conglomerate. Eventually, it powered their first operational rebirthing tube. When the Sovereignty launched operation Vidar, they seized the station along with the rest of the continent.

The team arrived at a small garage near a gatehouse where a heavy nano-mesh shield shimmered insubstantially. Archon Phillips looked towards the Praetor. "I'm sure you did not spend ten hours crammed inside that relic to hear the history of a power plant." He said, gesturing in the direction of the now empty landing pad. "Is your team cleared for top level R&D?"

The Praetor shook his head and said "No, these fine young people are my security detail."

"Then I'm afraid I will have to ask you to leave them behind."

Archon Phillips motioned a young soldier over. "The Lictor here will show them to our auxiliary barracks. I'll arrange a security detail to escort you to the labs."

Praetor Daniels pulled Centurion Matthews close to him and whispered something into his ear before turning back to the Archon with a smile. "Lead the way!"

Reese watched as the Archon and Praetor walked off together. It seemed strange that Command would assign an infantry escort for a flight. She turned towards the Centurion, who was turning a small object over in his hands. She recognized it as a military issue Optical Neural Network . They normally housed the low level AIs that managed various aspects of Sovereignty vehicles and allowed them to operate efficiently with minimal crew.

“Centurion, if they had combat troops here, why did they need us?”

Matthews considered the small crystal device for a moment before sliding it into a pocket. “I have no idea. Our orders came directly from the Council.”

Matthews

The Harasser’s heavy tires bit deeply into the moist earth as the vehicle slowed to a halt. Centurion Matthews stepped out into the Marsh and surveyed the facility. While several of the buildings still had power, little had been done to keep the swamp at bay and entire buildings were engulfed by the creeping advance of massive briars.

He told the squad to pull the heavy transport cases inside the most intact barracks building. Like most veterans he was unused to the idea of sleeping and eating as he rarely lived long enough for his latest nano-constructed body to suffer the drag of fatigue or the pain of hunger and so the idea of eating a meal was novel - even if it was the result of nanomachine construction using a base reaction mass of amino acids, carbohydrates, vitamins and minerals. He had once been told that the nanoforge contained in the cases was little more than a miniaturized variant of a rebirthing tube.

Matthews followed his squad inside the building, directing them to assemble the forge in the lower room. As they began uncrating the machine, he continued up the narrow stairs into the dormitory. The walls in the upper floor glistened with moisture, and the bare bed frames were stamped with the

same NS logo carved into most of the structures on Auraxis. He walked over to the window and looked out across the swamp. The fading light was already casting long shadows. The marsh was coming to life with bioluminescent insects chirping and buzzing just out of view while rustling ferns told of larger things lurking in the dusk. He reached back and confirmed the ONN was still nestled in its pouch. The last thing the Praetor told him was to keep the device safe. If he was going to keep anything safe, he'd need to post a guard.

He turned away from the window and walked back down the stairs just as laughter burst from the room below. Matthews glanced at the time. Both he and Alvarez had been on duty for more than 24 hours.

"Listen up." He said as he walked in on his team. "Since we're out on the perimeter and we're the only ones here, we need to post a guard. Chef - you and Waits are going to have first watch with Novus Reese."

Waits groaned at the order. "50% watch on Hossin, sir? Isn't that a little excessive? I mean, we do own the place." He said.

Matthews grinned. "Think of it as an opportunity to commune with the wildlife, Adept. You can even take your ration with you on watch - it'll be like a camping trip!"

"Camping?" Asked Sheffield.

"You know," said Matthews, "where you sit around in the dirt slapping at bugs."

"That's not a very attractive suggestion," said Sheffield.

"It wasn't a suggestion, Adept," Matthews said with a wink. "Now, what's on the menu?"

Eris Protocol

Brandt

Disciple Brandt settled cautiously into a draw overlooking the main entrance to the labs. Most of the facility was buried, and so there was very little to see on the surface. Woodman ASE appeared to be nothing more than a handful of buildings in a small clearing surrounded by a wall that bristled with heavy guns.

The Praetor had directed their pilot to quietly drop her and the stowed Flash well away from the facility. She had spent the last hour picking her way closer to the labs while constructing a small network of listening devices and sensors. Combined, they gave her a live feed of the security system inside the lower labs. Normally, such a system would take days to infiltrate. While the arms race between white and black ONNs was always fierce, the ones on Hossin had not been tested in a decade. She had forced a way inside in seconds.

Brandt followed the Praetor through the facility on the cameras while absentmindedly downloading the massive stores of research data. It was mostly nanomachine programming, white papers on control signal theory, and reams of data on the theoretical quantum level interactions of rebirth. She did not examine any of it in detail. Sovereignty command had not received any research update from this outpost in more than a standard solar year; requests for an update had repeatedly been brushed off. Her orders were to take the data using whatever force seemed necessary. Other than bullying a naive security AI, no force had been necessary.

Eventually, the Praetor came to a pristine white lab where he was greeted by a man with deep wrinkles on his face and silver hair. Brandt recognized him as Primarch Allan Wright, leader of this remote research enclave. He was a legend in the Sovereignty. He worked on the rebirth project and was there when the Sovereignty leaked the data to the rebels. He was one of a the few who escaped the reprisal. He helped build the Sovereignty from a vague philosophical movement into a political

force and eventually pushed for militarization. The Sovereignty of today would not exist were it not for him.

The Praetor and Primarch were clearly visibly agitated. Curious, she activated the room microphones used to record research progress throughout the day. It seemed strange that this facility would feature such weak security when well-trained modern ONNs were widely available, but dismissed the thought as paranoia.

“You answer to the Council, Allan!”

“The Council?” The Primarch sneered that last word. “What has the Council done except allow this farce of a slaughter carry on year after year?”

“Have you forgotten that our numbers have increased tenfold in that time? That we can now field an army nearly as large as the oligarchs?” The Praetor was visibly angry now. “Or the number of archeological sites we have secured long enough to fully study? Or the fact that we continue to keep the Republic from wiping this planet clean of human life?”

“How many of those converts are Sentinels, Jacob?” It was a sobering question.

Sentinels were people who wanted out in a world consumed by war, where death was only a minor inconvenience. Brandt only barely recalled why she had volunteered to be so modified. The memories of her past would edge their way in on the corners of her consciousness like a dream remembered in mid afternoon: the flitting memory of a sister, a cafe, a young man screaming in chorus with the choking silence of others she had killed. Her memory was a series of bullet point highlights remembered and forgotten in machine gun succession. She had met others of her kind, and it was always the same. They were people without history.

“That isn’t relevant and you know it. Our numbers are growing faster than the fascists or the oligarchs. Eventually we will be able to field a large enough army to force them to the table.”

“Why would you think that matters? Did we submit when our army was only a tenth of what the Republic fielded?”

“And so this madness is better? Have you learned nothing from Drexler? From our own research? How is your plan better than letting the Republic vitrify the planet?”

The string of rhetorical questions hung in the air for a moment. The Primarch seemed distracted for a moment.

“I told you to come alone.”

Brandt’s ocular implant screamed a warning that her connection to the rebirth network was offline. At nearly the same moment, her feed into the security system was cut as her ONN closed all connections in the face of counter intrusion efforts along her entire network. Left with only the surface sensors she had placed before taking to her perch, she closed the dead feeds and tried an ad-hoc connection to the Praetor’s ONN hoping to glean something about what was happening inside the lab.

The handshake completed just as a squad of Sovereignty soldiers in heavy exosuits burst from a building below. The biometric sensors in the Praetor’s suit registered nothing but a flatline. The ONN began a burst transmission to her own before cutting off.

The Praetor was dead and, if her sensors were to be believed, was dead for good. She grabbed her Phantom and crept back up of the hill before checking what the Praetor’s ONN had sent in that final burst. It was an ONN decryption key and a code phrase she knew of but never seen used: Eris.

She paused at the top of the slope and quickly took aim at the tall radio antenna. Steadying herself, she fired three shots into its transformer. Lowering the weapon, she turned and began a dead sprint back to the flash. It wouldn't take them long to notice the failure, but maybe it would delay them long enough to warn the Centurion.

Reese

Reese lounged against a wall of the small guard shack at edge of the decrepit compound. She was half paying attention to a screen showing the feed from the perimeter sensors. To no one's surprise, almost half of them had failed, and the communications line between the facility and the rest of the enclave, already shaky, had gone down almost an hour ago. She had reported this to Matthews, but he didn't seem particularly concerned and said that enclave's garrison could easily handle their own security. So far, only some of the larger wildlife had appeared on the sensors. With little else to do, she checked her link to the rebirthing station. It was still offline. Troubled by the implication of even temporary mortality, she turned her attention back to the sensors.

"What's the longest you've been disconnected from the rebirth network?" she asked.

The sudden question startled Adept Sheffield, who had been paying very little attention to the window which provided a commanding view of the western approach to the base. He glanced back at her before answering. "The network has only been running for, what, ten years or so? I'd say that means about twelve years."

Reese rolled her eyes. "I meant on duty."

Sheffield was quiet for a moment and then replied. "I don't think it's happened before. I don't think a Sovereignty soldier has ever actually, you know, . . . died". He spoke that last word with distaste. He, like Reese, had lived much of his life in a world where death had been conquered. People didn't

die anymore - at least not in the Sovereignty. Even the basic concept was anathema. People didn't need such base motivation anymore - it was beneath them.

"Don't worry about it. We'll be out of this dump by tomorrow, I bet." Waits seemed to be talking to the marsh outside his window more than anyone in the room.

"Well, I got to eat an actual meal, and in just a few hours I'm going to sleep in an actual bed. That almost makes this trip worth it." Sheffield said this with a sort of jovial confidence that caught Reese off guard and she chuckled briefly.

"I don't think what we had was actual food, and, if it was, I'm glad I don't have to eat it most of the time."

They took up an easy and idle conversation. Unnoticed, at first, was a flicker on the sensors that disappeared almost instantly. Minutes ticked by and the reading appeared again, closer this time.

Waits turned back towards the windows and froze.

"See something out there?" asked Sheffield.

Waits didn't immediately answer as he flicked through IR and EM vision modes trying to confirm he had seen anything. "Maybe." Waits said.

Waits visibly relaxed. "Looks like a Magrider and a couple of Sunderers out there. Just a patrol."

"And they didn't have the courtesy of telling us?" asked Sheffield.

"Should we wake the Centurion and let him know?" Reese asked.

Sheffield shook his head and said, "Nah. Let him sleep. He'd probably just berate that patrol leader anyhow. Besides, they might not even know we're out here in this dump."

"We should let them know we're out here, though. Just in case." said Waits.

Reese flicked through the channel list on her communicator and saw no active feeds. It wasn't hugely surprising as small units tended to operate using relatively obscure channels to avoid crosstalk. She opened the line to general the Sovereignty operations channel and sent a short message. A minute ticked by without receiving any kind of response, so she sent the message again.

Waits turned back towards the window. The vehicles were plainly visible now even without light amplification. "Well, they've stopped." He said.

There was still no response and so Reese began composing a message for broadcast on all known Sovereignty channels in the sector when she was interrupted by a priority message.

The Praetor has activated the Eris protocol. All local friendly forces suspect. Observed local garrison moving towards your outpost. Advise immediate extraction by fastest means available.

Reese barely had time to react to the message before the back of Waits's head exploded outward. Plasma fire streaked into the small room, snapping as it passed. Waits had barely hit the ground before Sheffield had his Polaris in hand and rushed towards the window, wrapped in the subtle glow of a nano-mesh shield.

"Check him." Sheffield said, pointing to Waits's prone form.

Reese quickly moved over to the bleeding man while pulling up his biometric readout. His triage module gave grim news - emergency procedures were online and keeping his heart beating, but he had suffered severe damage to much of his brain. She didn't need the triage module to tell her that

last part - she could plainly see the damage from where she crouched. She reached into a small pocket in her armor and pulled out a medkit. Reese injected the cocktail into a specialized receptacle in Waits's armor which fed directly into the triage implant buried above his heart, and his bleeding slowed to a trickle.

Sheffield brought his weapon to bear and ripped a burst into a growth of ferns near the building. With nothing more she could do for Waits, Reese called the Centurion.

Matthews

The night hung hot, heavy and silent. Centurion Matthews struggled to collect himself. He could be forgiven for being slow to rouse - like every combat soldier on Auraxis, he was not used to sleeping. He first became aware of the heat when sweat began trickling down his back. The oppressive silence closed in around him - something he only noticed when it was suddenly breached by the unmistakable staccato whine of a VX29 discharging in a long burst.

Experience born from hundreds of campaigns brought the Centurion to his feet before he consciously registered the sound, while in the same motion he reached for his Orion. His hand touched bare flesh and recoiled at the sensation - he could scarcely recall a time when he was not wearing a reinforced exosuit much less when he was last without the wicking liner worn beneath it.

Another long burst, this time from a Solstice, tore through the silence as Matthews struggled to into the exosuit, not even bothering with the liner. He looked over at Novus Alvarez who had not bothered taking off his much lighter armor. "What the hell is going on?"

"We just got a priority message stamped by Disciple Brandt. She says the Praetor has declared Eris protocol."

Matthews was stunned. Eris protocol meant that their hosts had betrayed them. They were being shot at by Sovereignty troops. Clipping the heavy chest armor into place, he powered on the motive systems when another long burst from a Polaris was drowned out by the loud low thud of a heavy particle cannon shot. As he slid his helmet over his head, he heard Novus Reese shouting on the the squad channel.

Reese

Reese dragged Waits's still form into the lower room, leaving a crimson smear in her wake. She released her grasp on the armor's drag handle and Wait's body fell limply to the ground. Sheffield crouched behind a rusting console as he calmly pulled the dead battery from his Polaris and slapped a new one place. Another explosion rumbled through the building, and a wave of heat rushed down the stairs as the Magrider pumped another round into the room above them.

"You cover that door to the right." Sheffield said, pointing.

Sheffield had barely gotten the words out when the door violently exploded inward. Reese didn't even wait for the dust to clear before firing a short burst through the door. Sheffield followed that by gently tossing a grenade through the wreckage. He quickly brought his machine gun back up and fired a burst through a window at a target Reese couldn't even see. The grenade exploded and knocked a stunned man directly into view. Reese hesitated for a fraction of a second before she pulled the trigger and held it down. The man's shield quickly visibly collapsed under the punishment, and the rounds bit deeply into armor and flesh.

Behind her, Sheffield began another burst which came to an abrupt end as he staggered away from the window and dropped to his knees. Reese turned to look when she saw movement out of the corner of her eye. She began to swing her carbine around, but she suddenly felt very heavy. Her right side felt as if it had been hit with a club. She could see the shooting soldier but couldn't make her body respond to bring her weapon around. Fighting through the pain, she focused on the enemy

soldier. Her left arm jerked the weapon around and she fired. Her burst stitched it's way up the heavy exosuit's form. The soldier staggered for an instant and collapsed. Reese toppled over.

Outside she heard more commotion and struggled into a sitting position to begin reloading her carbine. The searing pain in her abdomen quickly subsided as her triage implant kicked in, delivering painkillers and coagulants directly to the wound. She glanced over at Sheffield. He wasn't moving.

Her heart was racing. Waits was almost certainly dead. Sheffield might be. Not the normal inconvenient sort of dead so common in this war; this was the gone forever kind. She struggled to collect herself, raised the carbine towards the door, and waited.

Matthews

Matthews crouched low in the back of a Harasser as Alvarez eased it around a corner until the gatehouse was in view. There were three bodies on the ground outside the nearest door. Flipping on IR, he saw several more near the far corner of the building, clearly massing for an assault.

Matthews activated his subvocal communicator. "Waits, Sheffield, either of you there?"

"Waits is dead. I think Sheffield is too." Answered Reese.

Matthews considered his options. He could hold back the infantry, but the PPA attached to the Harasser would be all but useless against the Magrider lurking in the swamp. Eris protocol demanded that he break contact as quickly as possible and report the situation. Anywhere else and that is exactly what he would do, but with the rebirth indicator still worryingly showing as offline he couldn't just leave his team to die.

He handed Alvarez the ONN. "I want you to cover me with the PPA. If I go down I want you to get out of here as fast as you can. Try and link up with Brandt and get whatever is on that ONN to command."

Matthews eased the Harasser's door open and started towards the gatehouse. He tried to keep low and out of sight but had only managed to cross half the distance when he was spotted. Matthews activated his nano-mesh generator just as a plasma round splashed against his shield. Behind him, Alvarez opened fire with the PPA and the corner of the gatehouse disappeared in a green haze. Reaching the gatehouse door, he stood just out of view and pounded on the side.

"Reese, hold your fire. I'm coming in!"

Matthews ducked inside the now dark room while Alvarez continued his bombardment. Inside, the unmistakable smell of ozone common on Sovereignty battlefields. It mixed with other familiar odors - iron, charred flesh, and the acrid stink of vaporized composite armor.

Reese had lowered her carbine into her lap. Matthews checked Waits and verified that the man was dead. Staying low, he moved to Sheffield, who was slumped against the wall. The rounds had fully penetrated his exosuit and the meat sandwiched in between.

"Can you move?" He asked, turning to Reese.

Reese nodded weakly and attempted to struggle to her feet before collapsing. Matthews hurried to her side and helped the woman to her feet. Reese clung tightly to her carbine as she leaned against Matthews for support. The two of them rushed through the door and quickly covered the distance back to the Harasser. He pushed Reese into the shallow bed of the truck before flinging the door open and climbing into the cab.

“Turn this thing around. Head out through the west gate. Don’t stop for anything.” Said Matthews as he readied the gunner controls.

Alvarez turned the wheel sharply and slammed on the gas. The engine screamed as the tires struggled for traction, flinging grass and mud into the air behind them. The Harasser nearly turned in place as the back end of the vehicle quickly whipped around. Alvarez straightened the wheel and started racing towards the west gate of the facility.

They had barely cleared the gate when an explosion rocked the vehicle to the side; warning indicators lit around the cabin. Matthews saw the Magrider several hundred meters off the road in the swamp. Having narrowly missed the shot, the Magrider turned to pursue them.

“Get us off the road.” Shouted Matthews. “If we can just get out of the line of sight of the Magrider we will be fine.”

He glanced at the warning indicators before silently emphasizing *if*.

Invictus

Brandt

Disciple Brandt picked her way carefully through compound. Her sensor network was silent. Building by building she confirmed the reading. Nothing moved. No one left alive.

She arrived, at last, at the gate house. She found Waits in a shallow puddle of blood, already cold and congealed. The trail of gore from the upper room told her he was probably the first one to get hit. Sheffield was propped in the corner. His Polaris was empty. The wounds across his torso were probably mortal; the shot through the eye killed him.

They had not died easily.

Brandt pulled up a map. They had probably left through the eastern gate. Based on the damage to the building she guessed they were pursued by a Magrider. If they were smart, they would try to lose it in the hills to the north. If they were smart, they'd try to run for the biolab.

Brandt carefully removed the small identity tags from the two fallen soldiers. A memory of a scene of carnage on the top of a mountain barged into her head and disappeared as she tucked them into a pocket. Brandt left the gatehouse at a jog.

She hoped the Centurion was smart.

Matthews

The Harasser's drive train warning flashed urgently as the vehicle groaned to a halt. Matthews swept the ridge behind the vehicle with the PPA and relaxed. For the moment, nothing followed.

"Alvarez, pull the repair kit. See what you can do with this thing. I'm going to check on Reese."

Matthews climbed into the bed of the Harasser where Reese was lying, clutching an oozing wound on her side. Several spent medkits lay in the bed. The sudden shift of the vehicle caused her to flutter her eyes open for a moment. She glanced at the Centurion for a moment before closing her eyes again.

"Hey kid. How you doing?" said Matthews.

Reese opened her eyes but did not answer immediately. Matthews moved to her side. He gently pulled her hand away from her wound. The neat round hole seemed inconsequential. He disconnected the catch on the front plate of her exosuit and peeled it aside. The wicking liner beneath was damp and sticky. Matthews pulled out his knife and gently cut the material aside. The edge of the wound was ragged and burned. Her stomach had a yellowish-purple tint. Matthews pulled off his gauntlet and reached behind her back, feeling for bleeding. He pulled his hand away; it was clean.

"Is it bad?" asked Reese with a slight quaver in her voice.

"Just a scratch, Novus." he lied.

He hopped out of the truck bed and went back to the cabin hoping to grab a more comprehensive medical kit. The storage space meant to hold it was empty. Swearing to himself, he climbed back in

the bed of the truck and pulled a small can of liquid bandage from a pouch. He carefully sprayed the fluid over the wound, which quickly set to match the flexibility of the skin.

“Centurion, I think you’ll need to take a look at this.” Alvarez said from beneath the vehicle.

Matthews snapped the chest plate back on Reese’s armor. “You’ll be fine, Novus. Just take it easy.” Matthews only slightly regretted the lie.

Climbing out of the truck bed again, Matthews crouched by the side of the vehicle.

“The transmission is cracked and leaking lubricant. The frame where we took a hit is actually shattered. The only thing holding the entire right side of the truck is this armor plate” Alvarez said as he pointed to the mine guard.

“So patch it.”

“We can’t. The maintenance kit is gone.”

Matthews was shocked. The default Harasser template came equipped with a basic maintenance kit. That meant that their “hosts” had removed it before handing it over to them.

“What should we do, Centurion.”

Matthews did not answer. He stood and walked away from the Harasser, pulling his gauntlet back on. They had been betrayed. The stolen kit was as much proof of that as the dead men he had left behind. Thousands had died under his command, but he’d never lost a man before. He punched at a tree in frustration. Even under the power of his suit’s artificial musculature, the tree did not yield. He looked towards the inky blackness above; the alien sky was hidden by the high canopy. He wished he believed in a natural afterlife.

His thoughts raced back to the moment. What was left of his team needed him. He pulled a map overlay across his heads up display. The only long range communication anywhere close to them was in the biolab. It was a relic - a towering domed structure built in the earliest days of the colony which once served to protect the stranded colonists from Auraxis's hostile atmosphere. All the biolabs were linked by an unsecured hard line communication network. It was never used for official communications since anyone at one of the old facilities could listen in, but with the Harasser on its last leg, it would have to do.

He turned back towards the vehicle. Matthews forced the memories of Waits and Sheffield into a special recess of his mind reserved for fond memories. He couldn't help the dead. He hoped he could at least get Alvarez and Reese out of this mess alive.

Matthews forced the door of the Harasser open and craned his neck back, hoping to see the shimmer of a working gravity lift. The air stubbornly remained still. He climbed out of the truck and walked to the bed. Reese had shifted into a sitting position.

"Are we there yet?" Reese asked with feigned indifference.

"Yeah," said Matthews, "We're here. Looks like we will have to take the stairs, though."

Reese shut her eyes and sighed heavily. This particular biolab was more than a hundred meters off the ground.

"Think you can walk?" asked Matthews as he lowered the Galaxy's gate.

Instead of answering, Reese slowly pushed her way to the truck edge where she paused with her legs dangling.

“Here, let us help.” Matthews said, moving closer.

Reese pushed her way out of the truck bed as Matthews and Alvarez helped lower her to the ground. She leaned heavily against Matthews, breathing in small gasps. Finally she answered, “I’ll manage.”

Matthews passed Reese to Alvarez and then walked back to his seat to grab his Orion. Almost automatically he went through a weapons check. The small holographic projector that acted as a sight flickered to life. He returned to the rear of the vehicle, grabbed Reese’s Solstice, and passed it to her.

He turned towards the biolab and gestured with his machine gun. “I’ll take point. We’ll clear our way to the top. If I run into any trouble, Alvarez is going to drop you and move up to support me. That means you’ll need to watch our back.”

The two nodded in understanding, and the three of them entered the narrow base of the structure. Inside, they found that only the emergency lighting was turned on. Biolabs like this had their own small generators. Though sufficient to run the facility, the system normally routed power only to the living spaces. Slowly, the trio crept up the stairs. Matthew kept his LMG carefully pointed to the front as they ascended. As they reached the pressure doors at the top he held up a hand, signaling them to stop.

Reese suddenly bent over and gagged, vomiting across the stairs. Matthews couldn’t help but notice it was frothy and pink.

“Alvarez, set Reese here.” said Matthews, pointing at a corner.

“Reese, Alvarez and I are going to clear this place. I need you to watch these stairs. Can you do that?”

Reese pulled her carbine into her lap and painfully replied, “Still in the fight.”

Brandt

Brandt had been following the fresh tire tracks for more than an hour when she saw the Harasser nestled among the brambles beneath the towering dome. She climbed off the Flash, grabbed her Phantom, and approached the truck cautiously. It was a wreck and visibly slouched to one side. One side of the vehicle was covered in scorch marks. The composite armor was melted in places with deep pits and gouges in others.

Stepping away, she looked toward the gravity lift. It was clearly offline. Annoyed, she pulled the small magnifying sight from the top of her rifle and powered on the holographic sight. Holding the weapon ready, she moved into the base of the tower.

Finally close enough to use her short range transmitter, she keyed her subvocal mic and said, “Centurion Matthews, this is Disciple Brandt.”

“This is Matthews. Glad you’re here. Novus Reese is covering the top of the stairs. Meet me at the top. I need to know what the hell is going on.”

Brandt thought it odd that the Centurion chose to not respond on subvocal. She quickly moved to the top of the stairs, neatly stepping around the small pink pool at the top. Reese unsteadily lowered her carbine back into her lap. Only then did Brandt realize Reese was wounded. The image of a bright blue sky and a smoldering ruin flashed through her mind.

Brandt placed her hand on Reese's shoulder and gently squeezed it before moving into the main facility.

Matthews

The New Conglomerate had stripped the biolab before leaving. They took the heavy nanoforges that gave the domes their strategic value. The armories were empty. Even the smaller nanoforges like the one they had left at Bravata had been carted off. The only thing they had left behind was the fusion generator, and that had only been left behind because extracting it would require carefully dismantling much of the superstructure.

Matthews had gathered everyone in the communications room. Reese was propped against the wall. Alvarez was fishing through the ruins of a console. Most of the gear had been removed or smashed. As far as he was able to tell, the facility still had a link into the old colony communication network but no easy way to patch into it.

"Disciple Brandt." Mathews paused to carefully consider his words before he continued. "What the hell is going on?"

"The Praetor declared Eris Protocol."

"I just left two dead men in the swamp. Reese was gut shot. Our Harasser was wrecked by a Magrider. I didn't need your message to tell me that Sovereignty soldiers are shooting at us." Matthews careful, calm voice cracked as he spoke. "I want you to call the Praetor. I need to know what the hell we've gotten ourselves into".

"The Praetor is dead."

Matthews was momentarily stunned by the news. "Dead? How?"

Brandt shrugged and said, "I don't know. My feed cut just before it happened."

"Your feed of what?"

"Internal security AV at Woodman ASE."

"What were you doing at Woodman?"

"Following the Praetor."

Matthews sighed heavily and rubbed his eyes. He hated talking to Sentinels. They interpreted everything so literally. He'd need to try a different approach.

"Disciple, tell me everything that has happened to you since we exited the Galaxy."

Brandt quickly ran through her story. How the Galaxy had dropped her away from the station. How she had planted the listening devices. What she heard of the Praetor's last conversation. She mentioned the ONN decryption key when Matthews stopped her.

Matthews raised an eyebrow. "He gave you an ONN key?"

"He did not. His personal ONN passed it to me moments after he died."

None of it made any sense to Matthews. Why send an ONN one way and give the key to a person hours away? According to Brandt's story, up until the Praetor died, their hosts had been congenial and even their sabotage was minor. They had been sent to the barracks with a small template nanoforge after all and, had he noticed the missing kits, he could have easily printed replacements. If

they had really intended to kill them from the outset, their escorts would have remained at the base and shot them in their beds.

“Do you know why the Council sent us as escorts?” Matthews asked at last.

“I would assume it is because they expected resistance to the Praetor’s visit.”

“Okay. So why was the Praetor here? Why did he bring you along?”

“The Council had not received an update from the research outpost. The Praetor believed that there was a chance that the information would not be freely shared. I was brought to ensure that it was.”

“So, what were they working on?”

“The Praetor did not explicitly say.”

“You said you downloaded a massive store of their research data and had access to their cameras and microphones. Not even a guess with all of that?”

“I’m not a scientist. I was there to collect the data, not assess it.”

Right. She’s not actually a robot, she just sounds like one. Matthews thought to himself. Still, he didn’t believe her possession of a code was coincidence. He stood back up and motioned for Alvarez.

“Novus, I want you to work with the Disciple and see if you can get any part of this communication system up and running. Unless you feel like taking a thousand kilometer swim, we need to let command know we’re here.” He reached back into a pouch and pulled out the ONN the Praetor had

given him. “While you’re at it, see if that decryption key goes with this ONN. I want to know what’s on it.”

Matthews began to walk from the room when Alvarez finally spoke and asked, “Where will you be, sir?”

He turned back to look at Alvarez and Brandt. “I’m going to pull the PPA off the Harasser and drag it back up here. We might have lost them for awhile but I’d bet anything that they’ll notice us calling for help.”

Brandt

Brandt had left Alvarez to sort through the mess of cables in the communications room. They had found a live line into the old communications backbone. Now all that needed to be done was to try to feed it through something that could do two way communication. If all else failed, he could just wire it directly into the short range transmitter in his helmet which was simple enough that he shouldn’t need the help.

A search of the facility confirmed what they already knew - there was no ONN interface. It was unsurprising considering the technology was in its infancy when the war truly started, and only the Sovereignty seemed to believe there was true value in an artificial neural network. The devices could be conceivably trained for any task. The one she carried was a Mark 9 electronic intrusion model - a cutting edge piece of hardware used to force access in secure systems.

While all of the empires had managed variations on the light bending active camouflage technology that and full body suits that suppressed thermal signature and sound, each fielded them with a different twist. The Republic’s infiltration corps rose from the ranks of their long range surveillance detachments and designated marksmen - at least officially. Unofficially it was the secret police and the assassination teams that really pressed for the technology. The NC preferred using their

infiltrators for ambush and sabotage thanks to the grassroots asymmetric nature of the early war. The Sovereignty had long suffered a huge numerical disadvantage, and so they prized knowing exactly what was going on around the planet. Their infiltrators prioritized intelligence and counterintelligence. That's why Brandt had a Mark 9 electronic intrusion ONN and her equals were using the same miniaturized NS cryptosystems they'd had for years now.

She carefully peeled back a tab on her armor and ejected her personal module before inserting the one the Centurion had given her. As expected, it was encrypted, and so she dutifully applied the key the Praetor had given and waited. She was not prepared for what she saw. A Magrider ONN only required a few hundred thousand links. Her state of the art electronic intrusion model had several million artificial synapses. This one had more than a hundred billion.

Brandt activated the squad channel on sub-vocal and said, "Centurion, meet me in the communications room. You'll want to see this."

Matthews finally made his way into the communications room, sweating profusely. Trying to dislodge the PPA from it's mount using only improvised tools was clearly taxing work. Brandt motioned him towards a screen that had several feeds running into her armor.

"How familiar are you with ONN design, Centurion?" she started.

"Not very." he admitted.

Brandt slipped her electronic intrusion ONN into place and pulled up a visual diagram of the nano-scale lattice of nodes and connections. She zoomed in on a small segment and revealed the apparent solid cube was an intricate mesh of nodes and fine connecting lines. "This is the current

Mark 9 electronic intrusion ONN. It's the most complex one I've ever seen and mine has, at current count, three million processing nodes and 18.7 million artificial synapses."

She pulled the ONN and replaced it with the one given by the Praetor. "This is the ONN the Praetor gave you. The key does allow me to access its contents, but first, look at this." She pulled up the visualization and again began pushing in for a detailed shot. This time the image remained solid.

"I don't follow." Matthews admitted.

"This ONN has 4 billion processing nodes and 102.4 billion artificial synapses."

Matthews blinked tiredly. "So? What does that mean?"

"This ONN is thousands of times more complex than the AI brain at the heart of state-of-the-art hacking hardware."

"So what does it do?"

That was the question. Simply knowing something was fantastically complex was one thing. Even if she had the skills to understand the science behind the device fully, there was no way to know. "I don't know. The only way to find out is to turn it on."

"So what's the problem? I asked you to find out what was on the damn thing an hour ago."

"I don't think you fully understand. This ONN is as complex as an advanced organic brain. Not human by a long shot, but whatever it is it is packed with data and training. The only way to turn the thing on is to do it from inside my suit where it is wired directly into my nervous system. The prospect makes me uneasy." She hesitated to say that last word.

“I thought Sentinels didn’t get scared.”

Brandt should have expected that. When a Sentinel accessed an ONN, they were literally attaching an independent mind directly to their central nervous system. She already had a pair of relatively small ones that routed signals around her amygdala implanted deep in her lower brain. It was the first upgrade the Sovereignty surgeons had installed and, though the implant process only required hours, it took weeks to fully come to terms with an alien mind acting within her own head. Most infiltrators interacted with their hacking ONN through VR interface. Sentinels instead controlled them directly. Upgrading to a new version of an ONN took time while the organic and synthetic brains learned how to effectively communicate. This was potentially the smartest ONN she had ever encountered.

“If I turn on this ONN it will be wired directly into my nervous system - directly into my brain. I don’t know what it is going to do when it gets access. Before they started issuing the hack kit without the counter-intrusion training, brain damage was a common side effect of attempting to link them with a Sentinel. You don’t have people to spare, Centurion. I just want to confirm you want me to do this.”

Matthews stared hard at her. “Worst case is you die?”

“Worst case is I go insane and try and kill you.”

Brandt watched Matthews as he considered this, but she already knew what he was going to say. “Disciple, I’m going to need your weapon, your side arm, and your knife.” he said at last. He reached back for his Orion and pointed it at her chest. “I need to know why I lost two good men and why I’ve got an adept bleeding to death in the next room. If the answer is somewhere in that ONN, I need to know. You understand, right?”

The way he sneered that last question told Brandt he wasn’t particularly concerned with her response. She did understand, though. She pulled the battery from her rifle and set it gently on the

ground before doing the same with the snub nosed revolver she carried in a holster on her back. The shells clinked as they hit the floor and rolled in random directions. Finally, she pulled her knife out, placed it on top of the pile, and then stepped away.

“I understand.”

She closed her eyes and booted the ONN. Information and unprocessed images boomed across her mind. The race of sensation flowed chaotically. In an instant the stream of light and sound stopped and became focused - almost as though it was appraising her. Then the ONN began probing.

This was what she had feared. She tried not to resist knowing that if this was a counter-intrusion program resistance could be fatal. The probe became more urgent. As she tried to remain calm she suddenly realized that she was having to try and remain calm. She was afraid. The probing effort was even more vigorous - she could tell it was looking for something, but the awareness was dim. She remembered blinding pain and a medic screaming at her to look at him. This memory did not fade like they always did. She clung to it as an anchor as her consciousness slipped away.

Matthews

When Brandt activated the ONN she almost immediately seized. Every muscle strained visibly through the infiltration suit. He kept the Orion pointed at her for a moment when she went slack and collapsed. He rushed to her side. She wasn't breathing.

He ripped off his gauntlet and pressed against her neck for a pulse. Nothing.

Matthews turned to Alvarez and screamed, “Check the clinic for a crash kit!”

The Adept simply stood there in shock. “Alvarez! Now!”

Alvarez tore from the room and Matthews began apply CPR. It took three compressions before he remembered the artificial musculature lying underneath his composite armor. She couldn't die on him. She might be a damn robot, but she was one of his for the moment. He didn't keep track of time beyond counting compressions and then pausing to offer a breath. He didn't know how long he had been at the effort but his arms were burning when Alvarez returned breathlessly.

"They didn't have a cart. All I could find is this adrenaline shot."

Matthews dimly recalled that application of adrenaline was one of the steps the triage unit would take in a medical emergency. He had no idea how it was applied though.

"Does it have instructions or something?"

Alvarez turned the package over in his hands and read quickly. "It gives lots of ways to apply it. Intravenously, through the lungs if they're 'intubated', or directly into the heart."

"What the hell is 'intubated'?"

"I have no idea, sir. They...They didn't teach me how to do anything beyond apply medkits and liquid bandages."

Matthews considered the options. He didn't really know what the shot would do. He was pretty sure he couldn't find a vein to save a life. To take one, maybe. CPR clearly wasn't helping and it wasn't like anyone with medical knowledge was just going to show up. He motioned for Alvarez to hand him the kit and quickly tore it open. Inside was a syringe with the biggest needle Matthews had ever seen attached. He gripped it firmly and raised it over his head he remembered the infiltration suit. If it was anything like the ones the Republic infiltrators wore, the needle almost certainly wouldn't go through; it was hard enough to press the matter disrupting knife he carried through one.

He fumbled along the side of Brandt's hip, looking for the nearly invisible release that would let the wearer pull the top portion of the armor off. After a few moments he found it and quickly tore the surprisingly heavy material aside and was quickly struck by two things. First, Brandt apparently eschewed the wicking liner and wore nothing under the suit. He had been around female soldiers long enough that the nudity was hardly a surprise. What gave him pause was that her entire right arm had been replaced with a cybernetic model. A heavy plate of nanoweave covered most of her chest; it had been molded to roughly conform to the shape a female figure. He was pretty sure he couldn't drive a needle through nanoweave, and, even if he could, did she even have a heart underneath?

"Sir! The monitor - look!" Alvarez pointed excitedly at the screen. Matthews had forgotten that Brandt had attached the system so that they had a live feed of the ONN interface. The screen was blank except for two lines.

ONN Research Assistant AI v. 1.2b.

CO-PROCESSOR NOT FOUND - USING ORGANIC PROCESSOR

'Organic Processor?' Did it mean her brain? Suddenly, he was struck by an idea and rolled the unconscious woman slightly so he could see where she had plugged the ONN into place. There was a second slot!

He scrambled to his feet, grabbed the hack module she had set aside earlier, quickly plugged it into place, and waited. For a moment, nothing happened. Then Brandt's eyes snapped open and she gasped, which quickly turned into a scream.

She quickly sat up and looked around in a wild panic. She saw the discarded handgun and lunged for it. Before Matthews could even react she had the weapon in hand and swung it in his direction while still lying on the floor. Almost by instinct he activated the nanomesh generator in his armor and

reached for the Cerberus at his hip. He brought it to bear and trained it carefully on the prone woman's center of mass.

"Brandt! Put the gun down!" he shouted. Only then did he remember that she had unloaded the pistol. It seemed like an eternity ago, but he glanced down and confirmed the shells were still lying on the ground. "Brandt. Put down the weapon". This time saying it gently.

The look of rage in her eyes faded into fear and finally recognition. She dropped the weapon and then sat up. It was only then she noticed that the top part of her armor was hanging on by a sleeve. She sat upright and shuffled back against the console where she huddled with her knees against her chest and started crying.

Sentinels didn't cry - Matthews knew that much about them. Their eyes might water in response to injury, but they didn't cry. They couldn't cry. He kept his pistol trained on her while edging towards the pile of guns and brushed them aside with his foot.

Handing his Cerberus to Alvarez, he said, "Keep this trained on her. Don't shoot unless she gives you a good reason."

He slowly approached Brandt and stopped at what he estimated was the length of her lunge before crouching down. "Disciple Brandt. What's going on?". She did not immediately respond. "Can you hear me?" he tried hopefully.

Her sobbing began to fade for a moment and she looked up. "I can hear you." She said it almost meekly.

Matthews was at a loss. "Should we remove the ONN?" He asked.

Brandt's complexion hardened in an instant. "No. I think this was supposed to happen."

“What do you mean this was supposed to happen?” Matthews asked. Any plan that required seemingly dropping dead before getting into an Auraxian standoff seemed like a lousy one.

“The Praetor’s ONN is processing through the research data I grabbed at the labs. I think I know why we’re here.”

Matthews heart skipped a beat before he asked, “What?”

“They’re building a nanoweapon. They made Grey Goo.”

If his heart and skipped a beat a moment before it nearly stopped at the news. Grey Goo - a self-replicating, fully automated nanomachine that would simply tear apart anything around it in order to build copies of itself. People had thought it impossible to build the sort of smart nanomachine necessary for such a weapon to work. No one really tried that hard, of course - it wasn’t much good as a weapon. He knew of various attempts to build engineered nanotech driven viruses, but these were never adaptive and thus had been easy to deal with. Humans had developed the means to wipe out human life on Earth nearly a millenia ago, but the worst they could ever manage was to singe a planet. Grey Goo was apocalypse grade weaponry.

“How? I mean, when can they launch it?”

“I don’t know. The AI is still processing the data.”

This wasn’t a matter of saving his team’s lives anymore. Not if they really had Goo.

“Alvarez, I need you to get that message out as soon as you can. We need to let command know. Shout it to anyone who’ll listen. Brandt - I’ll need you to help him with encryption. Strongest stuff you

have. Last thing we need is that kind of weapon falling into the hands of the Republic. They might just be stupid enough to use it and try to evacuate to Tauaxis or something”

Sierra Rangers

Valeriya

Lieutenant Ava Valeriya hated being stuck on the *London*. She hated the ubiquitous dull grey paint job of the interior. She hated how it bucked and rocked and hummed at all hours and conspired to keep her awake at night. She hated how she had to duck to get through doorways even though she was only 170 cm tall. She hated that her shift consisted of sitting around in a hanger staring at her beloved Valkyrie where it was chained on the deck. Most of all, she hated that she never got to fly.

If she was honest, the *London* wasn't a bad ship. It was a converted missile cruiser built sometime in the 60's. The once formidable payload of thermonuclear missiles it carried were spent in the first minutes of the war and had never been restored. Nukes proved wildly ineffective against the separatist forces who had buried themselves hundreds of meters below the surface of Auraxis. It collected rust and parasites in port for years. Eventually, it was given a new lease on life the missile tubes were stripped and replaced by a small hanger and a complete rebirth system. With the inclusion of an advanced electronic warfare suite, the *London* was able to serve as a forward listening post and special operations launch point, and it did its job well.

Her problem was that the ship was at anchor in the East Hossin Sea. Nothing happened within a thousand kilometers from where they sat, so her bird stayed grounded. Hossin was only 60 kilometers to the east of the ship, and the Republic had kept an eye on the continent since well before the war began. The observation post had made sense, once. Hossin was the impenetrable fortress of the separatist forces. Then, the Sovereignty entered the war with a bang. Somehow, they knocked out the separatists' access to the Hossin warpgate and managed to utterly disable the Republic's orbital weapons platforms in the same day. Hossin was dead.

She started her shift as she always did, beginning with a meticulous inspection of her aircraft. It was a rare C model Valkyrie. Unlike most aircraft in it's class, it was a gunship as much as a transport. She ran her hand along the G-30 attached to the chin. It was an almost ancient weapon based on the thousand year old design of a gatling gun. It fired heavy 30mm shells that could cut through six inches of standard steel like it was paper; it fired more than fifty of them in a second. Attached to the sides of her ship were a pair of Brimstone class rocket pods. Each pod carried 32 6cm flechette rockets. The rockets would explode into a shower of ultra-dense, fin-stabilized needles shortly before impact that were devastating against exposed infantry. She sighed to herself and ran through a check of the weapons. Like yesterday, they were in perfect working order. Like yesterday, they were unloaded.

Her Valkyrie was special in other ways as well. Buried inside the passenger compartment was a state of the art Angel ECM suite. In passive mode it made the Valkyrie virtually undetectable by any commonly deployed sensor systems - even the ones the Sovereignty used. Turned on, it threw out massive interference across most of the EM spectrum. It could jam personal communicators at almost 20km and was even strong enough to confuse the hell out of Tomcats within half a kilometer. Rather than an open passenger bay, her ship had composite armor doors heavy enough to shrug off a direct hit from anything up to an Annihilator. Similar composite armor had been placed across the aircraft and, while she regretted the loss in speed, she was often thankful for the protection it offered. Perhaps the most unique thing about her ship was that it was nanoforged in 2855. She had flown it since 2857. Retrofitting to the C model had been done by hand.

She climbed inside the small cockpit, and, though it was cramped, she instantly felt at home. It smelled of leather, steel, and old sweat with a hint of lavender. She lovingly ran a hand across her instrument panel and stopped briefly at the name she had painted on top of the NS logo after her 50th sortie - *Freya*. The fragrance and the naming were frowned upon by the Republic who preferred to keep vehicles spartan and professional. She paid the regulations little attention, though, and her superiors had long stopped questioning the habit. She had flown more than a thousand sorties in this ship. She wasn't sure if it was the record, but it had to be close.

She had only started her checks of the flight systems when the PA system in the hanger crackled to life.

Rico

Tech Sergeant Keir Rico sat at a rough approximation of parade rest. The sun was already sitting high above the coral spires east of the base. It was hot enough to sweat standing still in spite of his exosuit's best attempts to keep him cool. The platoon murmured quietly around him. No one seemed to know why they had been called to formation. Lieutenant Camilla had not yet arrived to take control, so SFC Collins stood at the head of the group making small talk. Unlike Rico, Collins was not approximating parade rest and was instead acting as the model found in whichever field manual covered drill and ceremony.

SFC Collins looked over his shoulder and snapped to attention before bellowing, "Platoon - atten-SHUN!" In an instant, the various discussions stopped as the formation snapped to the position of attention. This time, Rico wasn't approximating a position at all and was instead doing his best impression of the model from the manual. The Lieutenant had earned her reputation as a righteous bitch when it came to protocol.

First Lieutenant Katerina Camila strolled to the head of the formation and gave it a hard look. Rico was unwilling to stop trying to impersonate a statue long enough to glance around and see if anyone was out of line. She seemed satisfied for the moment and said, "At ease." The formation outwardly relaxed.

"Alright 2-2, I've got good news, and I've got bad news." The Lieutenant paused for effect, and Rico fought the urge to roll his eyes. She was fond of using canned phrases like that one.

"The good news is that we have a mission."

Almost inaudibly the platoon started whispering to itself. They'd been stuck at this base for more than a week now with nothing to do. The Sovereignty presence that had fought them tooth and nail for more than a month had simply vanished without a trace. With no major hotspots, second platoon, second company of the Sierra Ranger Regiment had sat around the base roasting and bored. Everyone was ready to move out.

"The bad news is that we're going to Hossin."

The Lieutenant paused to let the whisper raise to a conversation. Hossin was a dead continent. Rebirth didn't work there. Everyone knew that. SFC Collins was far less forgiving, and he tersely shouted "At ease!" to the platoon. The conversation quieted but did not quite stop. The hard glare he gave the few still talking quickly silenced them.

"As you know, the warpgate has been offline since the Sovereignty entered the war. Rebirth doesn't work there. At 0845, intelligence picked up a heavily encrypted signal from an old biolab. The boys in intel haven't cracked the encryption, but they think it's a Vanu distress call. Hossin is supposed to be dead. Command wants us to check it out." She paused again to let the news sink in.

Command wanted to send people to Hossin? That place was supposed to be a death trap even without anyone hiding in the marshes trying to kill you with a plasma rifle.

"This only requires a small team. I'll be leading it, but considering the circumstances I'm not going to order anyone to go. I need three volunteers."

LCPL Iona raised his hand, as did Sgt Hemming. Both of them were trained for infiltration and wore the tight fitting Republic stealth suit. Rico had always joked that they looked liked gimp suits. Rico raised his hand as well. Without rebirth, they'd need a medic. As second platoon's resident Doctor Feelgood, he figured he needed to go along.

“Rico, Iona and Hemming, stay here. The rest of you, dismissed!”

The platoon melted away back towards the cool shade of the barracks. SFC Collins looked towards the Lieutenant, and she nodded curtly at him. Collins jogged towards the barracks, yelling at a private.

“Leave your gear here. We’re going to redeploy to the London. I’ll meet you at the gate in five. We will be getting a more in depth briefing once we get to the ship.”

Rico hated redeploying.

Apocalypse Grade

Brandt

Brandt stalked back up the long stairs. More than a dozen sites had acknowledged their distress call, and, while several of those were held by Republic or Conglomerate forces, the one that troubled Brandt was the old Amp station they had landed at. She wished they had taken the time to actually try to sever that particular link, but then they would likely notice that as readily as they had the message. The fools making a doomsday device knew they were still alive, and the odds were good that they'd show up sooner or later to finish them off. Her money was on sooner.

She peered into a small, dark room. The Centurion and Alvarez were still asleep. Matthews had tried to send Brandt to rest, but she had refused, offering to set up a perimeter network of motion sensors in order to patch the holes left by a decade of neglect. They needed the sleep; she was afraid to try. Every time she closed her eyes there was a new scene of carnage playing. They weren't being quickly blanked out. She didn't know why, but assumed it had something to do with the AI busily churning through the research data.

She pulled up the AI interface and again issued the query she had asked four times already. 'How long until the Goo is ready?' The AI quietly chirped the same response it did before - 'Unknown.' She mentally discarded the interface and instead pulled up the sensor readout. Nothing big enough to trip them moved. She kept walking until she reached the communications room. No new sites had responded to the alert, and, so far, they had not received any response from Sovereignty command.

She turned away from the room and was going to head back down the stairs when she heard quiet sobbing from the adjacent room. She had forgotten about the young woman since they moved her to a decrepit cot in what was once the break room for the operations section. She walked into the dimly lit room and saw Reese pawing at her side. There were no tears in her eyes, but their redness spoke volumes. The painkillers were wearing off, and she was feeling the full effects of her injury for the first time.

Walking in, she quietly pulled a short stool to the side of the cot. She said nothing for a moment and instead simply observed. In spite of all the scarring across her suit, it looked like only one round had actually made it through. She wasn't sure if you'd call that lucky or not. Abdominal injuries were notoriously painful. Virtually every movement of the human body would ask that damaged part to do work. Briefly, she remembered trying to sit up in a bed while wrapped in bandages. She remembered wanting to scream but couldn't. It was hard to scream when the needed muscles are held together with sutures and glue.

She reached out with her left hand and hesitated before placing it gently on her chest. Reese's eyes focused on Brandt's face. Brandt saw Reese subtly clench her jaw. She doesn't want me to see her cry. "Do you mind if I take a look at the wound?" Brandt asked.

Reese swallowed heavily and nodded her head. Brand released the clasp holding the heavy chest armor in place and peeled it aside. It had been bandaged, but a dark liquid was flowing slowly from the edge. Brandt had seen wounds like this before; the young woman had been shot in the liver. The fact the wound still bled along with the color were bad signs. It was probably fatal without real medical help. Before the nearly ubiquitous NS medkit existed, this kind of injury could kill in hours.

"Is it bad?"

Brandt realized she had simply been staring at the wound. It was bad. *How do you tell someone that they will probably be dead in a day?* she thought. She ignored the rhetorical question the moment and simply detached the clasp on the other side of the Novus's chest plate, peeled it away, and set it to the side. Breathing was probably hard enough without it. She turned back to the and saw the fear in Reese's eyes. The animal part of the young woman's brain probably knew the truth.

"If you're still breathing, how bad do you think it is?" The Novus did not laugh or smile, the fear did not fade. *She knows.* Brandt's expression softened and she reach down for Reese's hand. "Yeah, it's bad. It's gonna hurt like a bastard."

The tears that had been held back started to flow freely. "It's my fault, you know." The words almost tumbled out of Reese's mouth. "I wasn't watching the feed. Waits died because I wasn't watching the feed. Chef died because I couldn't even watch one damn door. They wouldn't have gotten Chef if I'd watched the door."

Brandt squeezed Reese's hand firmly. Survivor's guilt from a woman in a three way race for an unpleasant way to die. If she didn't bleed to death and avoided infection, toxic shock would almost certainly kill her. "How could you know?" Brandt asked at last.

Reese didn't respond at first. She again opened her eyes and looked at Brandt. "Am I going to die?"

Probably. Brandt thought.

"You're still breathing. You're still awake. You're a fighter. I'm not a doctor, but I wouldn't count you out yet." Brandt was pretty sure it sounded exactly like a lie; she'd never been any good at lying. "Remember when you asked about my scar?" Brand gestured to her face with her free hand. "Like I said - a prowler blew up while I was crouched near it. Whole magazine just went off. They say I was thrown ten meters in the blast."

Brandt recalled little about the incident. She was in a narrow pass on Amerish when her column was ambushed - that much she remembered. She didn't really know what had happened until a rocket struck the side of the Sunderer she was riding in. The passenger compartment had been compromised by the blast and a young man near her had been thrown violently to the floor. He didn't move. She punched the release, opening the rear door, and made her way out of the vehicle. She

crouched just behind the prowler and fired her AMR at a muzzle flash when her world went white. When she woke up, the first thing she really remembered was the taste of blood.

“The medics told me that my arm was just a shredded chunk of meat when they found me. Part of my jaw was blown completely off. I’d been up there for almost a day when a relief column rolled through. The only reason I made it was that anyone who looked at me figured I was already dead” She tried to fight against the returning memory of the screams of a man who had caught fire. He had not been as quick exiting the Sunderer as she had. “They had to replace the arm. The eye is also a fake. Third generation optics - first one the Republic built that included IR. An infection set in, and they had to replace the lung, too.” She tapped against the heavy plate on her chest. It made a dull hollow sound. “I made it out. What you’ve got there is just a scratch.”

Reese didn’t seem to be comforted by the story. Without breaking her gaze she simply said, “If I don’t make it, tell my mom. She needs to know.”

Brandt should have been prepared for that. She had seen plenty of people die screaming their last breath to spouses and children they’d never see again. This was just a kid who wanted her mom to know that she’d fought well. She wanted them to be proud, hoping that pride would help fill the hole. Brandt knew it wouldn’t, but willed a hard expression. “Kid, I’ll do everything I can to make sure you can tell her yourself.”

Brandt reached back and pulled out an empty injector and a small, clear vial. She opened Reese’s hand and placed both of them in her palm. “That’s my only medkit. I know it hurts, but I need you to hold on to that. We’re probably going to get hit before anyone comes to bail us out of this mess. If the shooting starts, I’m going to need you to use that so you can watch my back.”

Reese nodded and closed her hand around them. She pulled them close to her chest and closed her eyes. “Still in the fight.” she said it weakly. She didn’t sound like she believed it.

Valeriya

Lieutenant Valeria lounged in the small briefing room. Colonel Mahesh talked quietly with his intelligence officer, Captain Seong. The Colonel was the highest ranking TR soldier in more than a thousand kilometers and was intensely proud of that fact. She had to constantly suppress the urge to point out that he was only being compared to the two hundred crewmen of the London. Colonels were, in her experience, a dime a dozen. All of them seemed more worried about making that jump to General than they were about their mission. Their troops almost didn't even warrant consideration.

For once, Valeria was willing to let her opinion of the man slide. The briefing room meant that there might be a mission, and she could take Freya out to stretch her legs. Neither the Colonel nor his lackey from intelligence had told her why she had been summoned to the room, though. They seemed willing to wait. She overheard snippets of conversation - something about a Vanu distress call on eastern Hossin. Even though she relished the idea of getting to fly, she didn't see why they'd care about a distress call from the cultists. She'd just as soon let the bastards burn as she would lift a finger to help them.

The door to the room suddenly flung open and four people walked in. The lead, a Lieutenant, walked forward and stopped in front of the Colonel, exactly three paces give or take a few centimeters, and threw a crisp salute. "Sierra Rangers 2-2 reporting, sir!" It was by the book.

Valeria had worked with the Rangers before. Usually, it was just routine insertions and extractions. Their strategy rarely involved the need for the sort of firepower a Valkyrie-C could provide. As far as she could tell, all they did was snoop around or, occasionally, ambush some hapless unit.

Colonel Mahesh sharply returned the salute. "Thank you for coming on such short notice, Lieutenant. Were you briefed before you arrived?"

“Only the bare minimal details, sir. Intel picked up a VS distress call on Hossin and thought it was important enough to check out.” The Lieutenant had remained at attention since she dropped her salute.

The Colonel gestured to the open seats in front of him and said, “Please take a seat.” He waited as the four soldiers found a place in the middle of the small room before continuing. “Lieutenant, what do you know about Hossin?”

The Lieutenant seemed to consider her response carefully before she responded. “It was a Separatist outpost early in the war until the cultists did something to kick them out.”

Colonel Mahesh turned toward Captain Seong. “That’s basically right, Lieutenant. The Sovereignty somehow disabled the warpgates on the continent. The New Conglomerate tried to hold out there for a few months until they gave up on it and pulled back to their underground cities. It was a damn shame, too. We had the Conglomerate on the ropes. I’ll let Captain Seong fill you in on what we know.”

The Captain stepped forward and pulled a small device out of his pocket. He pressed a button and the rear wall slowly transitioned to show a map of Hossin. He cleared his throat and began “Hossin is supposed to be a dead continent. In 2847, the Vanu Sovereignty entered the war, and their first act was to disable all three warpgates on Hossin. Since then, the continent has been almost completely quiet. We have maintained an LP here since then and have never detected anything beyond the occasional Galaxy - never anything that really required a closer look. Yesterday, at approximately 1300 local time, we picked up a Galaxy flying low and steady across the sea - the only blip in a year in fact. At approximately 0545, our listening post at the Andvari Biolab on Esamir picked up a signal from Zotz biolab.” Captain Seong pressed a button on his remote and the map zoomed on the eastern segment of the continent, highlighting the area. “Intel hasn’t had any luck cracking the message. It bears top of the line VS encryption. Intel thinks it is a distress call. The message

repeated on loop for more than an hour. We need you to look into it.” Captain Seong paused briefly before asking, “Any questions?”

The Ranger Lieutenant raised her hand and asked, “Any idea what kind of forces we might expect to run into?”

Captain Seong pressed a button on his remote, and the map zoomed back out to show a series of small purple dots concentrated near the center of the continent. “We’ve never heard a peep out of the continent. In the last three years we’ve detected a total of thirteen Galaxy class transports. Based on their trajectory when we lost contact, they were probably headed here toward Ixtab Amp Station” He pointed to a spot near the center of the map. “Of those thirteen Galaxies, we have only detected 7 of them leaving. Or best guess is that the VS might have up to a company operating on the continent.”

While the Rangers didn’t seem phased, the news shocked Valeria. The London hosted her Valkyrie-C and four Mosquito class air superiority fighters. That command had let thirteen Galaxies slip through without even trying to stop them seemed insane.

The Ranger Lieutenant made a brief note on her PDA before looking back up and asking, “What’s our plan?”

Colonel Mahesh took a step forward and said “You will insert south of the facility via a Valkyrie-C gunship piloted by Lieutenant Valerya here. The Valkyrie will act as x-ray for the duration of the mission and will loiter to provide extraction or close air support. This is purely a fact finding mission, though. I’d prefer it if you could get us the intel without firing any shots.”

Valerya sighed internally. X-ray duties meant she would be expected to simply hover above the tree line and act as a radio way station between the London and the Rangers. Still, it was a mission, and that meant she’d actually get to fly.

“Any other questions?” The Colonel’s question was met with silence. He again turned to Captain Seong and said, “Show them to the armory.” Turning back to the rangers he simply said, “Flight leaves at 0830. Dismissed!”

X-Ray

Valeriya

Lieutenant Valeriya watched the pair of privates as they carefully loaded a Brimstone rocket into the tube. Combat reloading was never done one tube at a time. Usually ground crews would simply drop the pods entirely and bolt fully loaded ones into place. On the other side of the aircraft, Corporal Jennings kept careful watch as the long belt of 30mm ammunition was fed into the enormous magazine. That magazine was why the C model Valkyrie was rare since there was only room for a pilot in the front. The rear could still seat six soldiers in full heavy exosuits, but only three could ride comfortably. One of the Rangers was going to have a bad flight.

She glanced over at the entrance to the Hanger. The Ranger Lieutenant walked in like she owned the place. Rangers were accustomed to being given a wide berth when pursuing their duties. Valeriya had found that their officers in particular had trouble recognizing the proper chain of command. The fact that she relished correcting them of their misconceptions was why she was a year past her due promotion to First Lieutenant and still wore the gold bar of a junior officer. The chain of command gave her latitude on her Valkyrie but promotion was about politics. She had never been any good at politics.

She carefully watched as the Lieutenant inspected her team's gear. If she found any faults, she did not make it obvious. She turned and began to walk toward the Valkyrie. Valeriya waited to see if she would actually walk across the yellow line. Ground crews treated that line as though it was sacred - no one would be allowed to cross it without the express permission of the Crew Chief. Master Sergeant Watkins was the morning shift crew chief. The man was short but somehow managed to be physically imposing. He had nearly two decades in service before rebirthing and his face had taken on the hard lines of a life of labor in the harsh corners of the world. Valeriya liked the man because he knew that any mistakes from his men could easily cost a pilot a trip to the rebirthing tubes or an aircraft that couldn't be spared. He was staring daggers at the Ranger Lieutenant, seemingly daring her to cross the line.

The Ranger Lieutenant crossed the line. Her foot had been on the ground for a fraction of a second when the Master Sergeant shouted across the room. "Hey!"

The sudden noise stopped the Lieutenant mid step and she looked over as the Master Sergeant charged across the room. "Lieutenant, what the hell do you think you're doing?"

The Ranger was briefly stunned but she quickly collected herself upon noticing the man's rank. "I'm going to put my men on that bird, sergeant." She injected enough venom into that last word to make it clear that she believed she was in command of the situation. Valeriya smiled to herself.

"No you're not." The Master Sergeant glared at her through narrow slits.

"Need I remind you of my rank, Master Sergeant?" She was digging her grave at this point.

"Lieutenant, the bird is being loaded. I have not cleared the bird for departure nor have I cleared it for passengers. Since you are not the OIC of this hanger nor the commander of this ship nor the admiral of this fleet your rank means nothing in here. This is my hanger. Move your ass to the other side of the yellow line or I will have you removed."

The Ranger flushed and hesitated before stepping back. Watkins held his stare for a moment before he turned sharply and walked back to his station. Valeriya choked down a laugh. Lieutenants were the only ones stupid enough to try and pull rank on a crew chief. The men behind her were clearly struggling to keep from laughing themselves. She shook her head and looked down at the small flight computer.

A short time later, Watkins called Valeriya to his station and handed her a small tablet. Together they walked to the Valkyrie and methodically went through their pre-flight checks - something she'd done often enough that she could do them in her sleep. Even though pilots tended to lose aircraft at a rate

that would have bankrupted the Republic before nanoforging, it still maintained the tradition of the pre-flight check whenever time allowed.

The failed defense of Mao Tech Plant in 2847 was one of the few times Valeriya had heard of that pilots were allowed to skip them when a last last flight of Mosquitos had been thrown directly at the advancing New Conglomerate. Three of the pilots were shot down in the effort. Captain Kyle Jackson, the squadron commander, died when he slammed his Mosquito into the rebirthing tube supporting the New Conglomerate offensive after emptying every ounce of firepower at his disposal. Thanks to the effort, the Republic was able to destroy the spawn tube at Mao and evacuate to the newly stable front line in the north. The remaining three managed to evade NC patrols for days until a search and rescue team pulled them out. All six pilots earned medals for their service. Captain Jackson was posthumously awarded the Grass Crown. Their exploits were immortalized in the based on real events military action film Loyalty 'Till Death.

Valeriya had no intention of a last stand so she happily went through the checks. Once completed, Watkins raised his hand and gestured to the four Rangers, shouting, "Lieutenant - now you may cross my yellow line." He turned to Valeriya and said simply, "They're all yours."

Once the Rangers collected in front of the Valkyrie, Valeriya saluted Lieutenant Camila who returned it sharply. "Alright Ma'am - I'm going to transfer a copy of the flight plan for today. We will depart from the London and travel to Hossin at 200m until we are 10km out, at which point I'll drop us to nap of the earth for the remainder of the flight. I'll be dropping you approximately 3 kilometers south of Zotz biolab and then return to x-ray station approximately 5km west of the lab"

She turned and pointed to her Valkyrie and said, "Have any of you flown in a Valkyrie-C gunship before?" The assembled group shook their heads. "This ship is slow for the class but has a G-30 canon on the nose and rocket pods loaded with light anti-personnel rockets. It carries heavy armor - nothing like a Liberator but enough that small arms doesn't punch right through like it does on the dedicated transport model. If you run into trouble, I'm two minutes out with enough firepower to nuke

a grid square.” She flashed a smile before continuing. “If that isn’t enough to bail you out, Colonel Mahesh has authorized a flight of two Mosquitos for close air support and they will be hot and on deck by the time we depart. Response time for the Mosquitos will be approximately fifteen minutes.”

Lieutenant Camila was scanning the flight plan and seemed to only be half listening. “There are three marked extraction zones. Do we have confirmation that they’re viable?”

Valeriya shook her head. “No Ma’am. Still have not gotten any kind of response from the intel boys who are supposed to be checking the imagery. You may have to use your judgement on this. I can make *Freya* here dance for you but even I will need at least a six meter gap in the canopy to work with.”

“*Freya*?” Camila asked with a raised eyebrow.

“My ship.” Valeriya said, gesturing behind her. “Named her after my fiftieth sortie without getting her shot out from under me.”

“You’ve flown 50 missions without being shot down in this thing?” Camila seemed impressed.

Losses of the J model Valkyrie were incredibly common. Command liked them because dedicating a massive Galaxy to move squads around the battlefield was seen as an enormous waste of resources. Valkyries required far less mass and energy to construct. Valeriya had wondered if the Valkyrie would still be in service were it not for rebirth. They had earned a reputation for being little more than elaborate caskets.

Valeriya grinned. “A few more than that, Ma’am.”

Rico

Rico looked down as enormous trees rushed past less than a meter from the bottom of the Valkyrie. The pilot had only just let them slide the heavy doors back. The Lieutenant wanted them open for the entire ride since the crew space of the vehicle had no climate controls and with the doors shut temperatures could rise above 60 degrees once the engines started firing. Their suits were enough to keep them alive but it wouldn't be comfortable. The pilot said no - apparently having the doors open rendered the fancy stealth systems almost useless.

Rico was drenched in sweat. He pulled out the small straw linked to a water bladder and took a long pull. It was warm and flat - nearly pure H₂O generated by the London's onboard desalination plant. Heavy exosuits could actually be configured to reclaim moisture lost through sweat and urine and would recycle it for later consumption. He was wearing a light exosuit which discarded every non essential component in order to lighten it enough to allow a soldier to wear it without needing the cumbersome artificial musculature required by the heavier model. Everything from the heavy shield generator down to the water recycling system was removed leaving little but plates of composite armor and the most basic battle computer. Rico never liked the idea of drinking his own urine even if it had been processed to the point that it was as clean as the water the London had provided.

"Two minutes to LZ." That was the pilot on the subvocal channel.

Rico looked over at Lieutenant Camilla and she signaled that they should prepare to drop. The ship only had three proper seats. She had spent the entire flight standing and holding onto a grab handle. The only safety precaution was a length of cable clipped through the lift ring of her jetpack.

Rico removed the harness that held him tightly against the seat and pulled his SABR out of the clip. He reached down and grabbed a magazine, slipping it into his rifle with practiced ease.

"Thirty seconds!"

Rico pulled back the charging handle on his rifle and released it, letting the bolt slam forward. He stood from his seat and grabbed the handle near the door. Rico dipped his head into the jet stream racing by the aircraft, only seeing unbroken treetops as the Valkyrie lifted slightly to crest a small hill. Suddenly, he saw a gap in the canopy and, on cue, the Valkyrie pulled upward, firing its powerful lift jets to shed speed. A fraction of a second later, their pilot leveled off and cut the lift jets entirely. Rico's stomach fluttered as the aircraft plummeted through the gap. He strained against the handle as the jets fired again, bringing the Valkyrie to a stop a half meter from the ground.

Rico jumped out of the Valkyrie, ran several paces, and took a knee with his rifle at the ready. Though he couldn't see him, he knew Iona was to his left. Behind them, the Valkyrie's engines whined and he glanced toward it as the nose lifted to the small gap in the trees. The main engines fired, sending the ungainly aircraft lurching through the canopy. Their pilot bragged that she could make a Valkyrie dance. Rico believed her.

They waited in the jungle. Rico strained his ears trying to hear any sound that might indicate someone had seen them drop. They waited for ten minutes and he didn't hear anything - not even wind blowing through the towering trees. Hossin was spooky quiet.

"X-ray, this is Sierra 2-2 actual, radio check, over." The sudden sound of the Lieutenant's voice on his radio startled him.

"2-2 actual, this is X-Ray. I hear ya loud and clear, over." The pilot's reply was crisp. "2-2, I've got the London on comms so this is officially a party line."

"Roger, X-Ray. 2-2 actual, out."

Rico couldn't see the lieutenant, but he was willing to bet the pilot's reply annoyed her. She had served in the Republic Infantry when she first received her commission. Shortly after being promoted to First Lieutenant, she had volunteered for Ranger service. Rico had joined the Rangers

right after finishing the Republic's combat medicine course and had quickly found the Rangers carefully tread the line between professional and insubordinate. Their job often required operating well away from any friendly force and the Republic Army's practiced professionalism was one of the first things a new Ranger forgot. Rules that kept the team alive and let them complete a job were kept; anything else was discarded. The Lieutenant was having trouble adjusting to this new way of doing business.

The Lieutenant gestured to the north; the Rangers stood and began making their way to the biolab.

Incoming

Matthews

Matthews left Reese in the room. Brandt told him that Reese had blacked out an hour before. *At least a bit of mercy.* He thought. The woman's triage unit was reporting grim news - she had the start of a nasty infection. With only an estimated six hours until circulatory collapse, the infection was unlikely to be the thing that killed her. The medkits had greatly slowed the bleeding, but it hadn't been stopped entirely.

Alvarez poked his head out of the communications room. "We just got a message back from the Council. They want to speak with you."

Matthews tried to push the image of the pale dying woman from his mind and followed Alvarez back inside. Brandt was already inside. A familiar grainy image filled the screen - Paragon Stefan Astor, Chairman of the Military Council. He was flanked by Paragons Scott and Briggs - the chairs of the Political Council and Science Council respectively. Briggs may as well have been the founder of the Sovereignty. Matthews hadn't even heard of anyone meeting the man. This wasn't a call from the Council. It was from the Technocracy itself - the ruling body of the Vanu Sovereignty.

"Centurion Matthews, we have received your report. It is most distressing. The research data you provided indicates that the nano-weapon is operational and could be deployed at any time." Paragon Astor gestured to Briggs at his side.

Paragon Briggs quickly began speaking with the odd lilting accent common in the colonists of the spires of Amerish. "The preliminary analysis shows that this is not "grey goo" in the classical sense. What they've come up with is a way to hijack the control signal linked to the rebirth system. Every one of us has at least a few billion nanomachines inside - if nothing else from our most recent rebirth. From what we can tell, when the weapon is activated, the pirate control signal will force those nanomachines to self-replicate. Left unchecked, the replication could persist and consume

everything until the warpgates themselves are torn apart. Naturally, we are scrambling to grab everything we can, but pulling back on several fronts is proving difficult.”

Matthews asked the obvious question. “How long until we can expect reinforcements?”

Paragon Astor hesitated before responding. “36 hours.”

Matthews had tried to maintain a careful composure since the first shots were fired. He’d held his emotions in check when two of his men, his friends died. He’d kept them well hidden when he realized Reese was as good as dead. The fear and grief that had chewing at the back of his mind quickly turned to fury. “36 hours? With all due respect, Councilor, we’ll be dead long before that. Half the team you sent are already dead. I’ve got a Novus bleeding to death in the next room!” He very nearly shouting at the screen.

Brandt had moved to his side, unnoticed, and touched him gently on the shoulder. The sudden contact startled him and his rage faded slightly.

Paragon Astor’s normally hard expression softened. “Centurion, I cannot begin to understand how difficult this has been for you or your team. That makes what we are about to ask about to ask that much harder.”

Paragon Briggs began speaking. “The weapon is ready for deployment, but the warpgate network is not. The network has a brief reset twice per orbital period when Auraxis crosses the edge of Doramir’s Van-allen belt. If they are going to broadcast the signal, they would need to upload it during one of those windows. Given that their secret is out, we believe they will use the next crossing. That happens in just under 28 hours.”

Paragon Astor hesitated. In his normal broadcasts his voice carried a certainty of purpose that he was clearly struggling to find now. "Centurion, I. . . We need you to take your team to the NC's original rebirth facility. A place they called Nason's Defiance. Do anything you can to delay them."

Matthews was almost at a loss for words. "Councillor, right now there are three people at my disposal. Between the three of us we have a few light guns, a broken Harasser and a PPA with half a charge. What do you think we could possibly do?"

"We don't know. The entire VX team is working to try and find something we can use but right now you three are the only option we have."

Paragon Scott broke his silence. "Centurion, if you cannot find a way to that facility, if you can't find a way to delay that deployment, everyone on this planet within a few hundred kilometers of any warpgate is going to die."

At that moment, an alarm began wailing quietly. Matthews turned back to Brandt who stared blankly into space. Moments later her eyes focused on his face. "We've got incoming. Galaxy class dropship approaching from the west."

Matthews turned back to the Councilor and shook his head. "Councilor, I don't know what we can do, but as long as any of us are still breathing, we will do what we can."

Briggs nodded solemnly. "That is truly all we can ask, Centurion. May Vanu guide you."

Matthews cut the feed. "Any ideas?"

Brandt looked at Alvarez and then back at Matthews. "My Flash holds two. I don't know how far that Harasser will make it, beat up as it is."

Matthews considered the idea of running but quickly dismissed it. "Wouldn't work. No way we'd lose that Galaxy. The only road out of here is exposed for at least 10 kilometers. If it has a half decent sensor suite I don't know if we would be able to escape it even if we made it to the tree line."

Alvarez finally spoke up. "We could try and make it on foot."

"And go where?" Brandt's question was a natural one. "You want to try and run through a swamp for almost a hundred kilometers and then pick a fight when you get there?"

Matthews considered the choices. They could try and hold their position inside the dome. The tight confines could give them an advantage but without knowing how many people were on the Galaxy it probably wouldn't do them much good. The idea of a last stand didn't appeal to him, given the circumstances. That Galaxy was the real problem. There was no way they'd be able to make a run for it without being spotted.

"I don't suppose you know how to fly a Galaxy, do you?" Matthews asked Brandt.

"No. Give me 20 minutes in a cockpit and I can probably figure out how to turn it on, though."

"I was afraid of that. I think our only way out of here means taking down that Galaxy. I don't see that happening unless they land it directly on that pad and even then I don't think the PPA would do much." He reached back and pulled a heavy cylinder from a pouch. "I've got three of these AV grenades, though. They should punch right through the armor of that Galaxy. If one of us can get close enough to stick an engine, that could keep them out of the air for a bit. Might buy someone the time to get out."

"I'll do it." Brandt said it softly.

Matthews shook his head. "Can't let you do that. You have the best shot of any of us of getting out of here and you're the only one with any experience at this behind the lines bullshit."

"That's exactly why I'm going to do it. What are you going to do? Charge through them with your nanomesh turned on and hope for the best? It has to be me - I might actually get close enough to stick it."

Matthews knew she was right. He sighed heavily and then nodded in agreement. "Pick your perch outside. Alvarez - I'm going to need you on the PPA on that balcony. Don't fire until I do. I'll be on the ground here. We're going to try and draw them in, and maybe they'll be stupid enough to land. If Brandt takes down the Galaxy, make your way down as quickly as you can. Whoever is the first one to the Flash, give everyone else one minute to arrive. If a second comes down, take them and leave immediately. Anyone behind is going to get in the Harasser and run as hard and as far as it will go - see if they can draw their attention."

Matthews pulled the other two grenades from the pouch and handed them to Brandt before walking over and retrieving his helmet. Brandt stowed the grenades and was about to pull on her helmet when Matthews started to walk out of the room.

"Where are you going?" Brandt asked.

Matthews looked back at the infiltrator and gave a sad smile. "I'm going to go and see if we can wake the Novus. She's not going to make it out of here so the least I can do is give her a chance to die on her feet."

Brandt left her helmet off and grabbed her rifle. "Let me. I made her a promise."

Valeriya

Lieutenant Valeriya was bored. Every hour the Rangers had sent an update to the Ops officer on the London, but so far all she had done was park her Valkyrie on a small ridge. The ship didn't have a climate control system. The humidity seeped in through every crack where it conspired with the heat to make the wait as unbearable as possible. The cooling vest under her flak armor was doing its best to keep her body temperature down but did nothing to stop the sticky layer of sweat forming across her skin. It didn't help that the place stank of rot. The discomfort compounded the boredom which in turn reinforced the discomfort.

Glamorous life of a gunship pilot. I get to sit in a sauna that smells like it was built in a sewer. She thought.

Her radio crackled to life. "X-Ray, this is *London*, come in. Over"

Valeriya sat upright in her chair and keyed her radio, "*London*, this is X-Ray."

"We're seeing something odd on the low level radar on our side. Can you confirm?"

She grumbled internally. The Valkyrie-C included a powerful set of sensors, but turning them on negated having the stealth suite since active sensors required blasting all kinds of EM into the sky and seeing what it hit. It was like painting a giant bullseye on your back. She reached over and turned off stealth before turning the scout sensors online. Eyeing the feed for a moment, she keyed her radio again "London, this is X-Ray. My scope is clean out to 20km. Over"

"Negative X-Ray. The blip we've got is showing at approximately 40 km west of you. Can you give us a focused sweep, from 080 to 095? Over."

Valeriya set the sensor to narrow sweep mode and waited for the results. The array emitted a nearly inaudibly quiet high pitched whine as it swept a section of the horizon with a tight beam of mixed radar and lidar. A blip appeared on her screen - 42 kilometers away on heading 087. She tagged the

blip and the whine was replaced by a much quieter hum as the sensor antenna made small motions to cover the tiny space where it had seen the object. After a brief moment, the one object became eight. They were moving fast directly towards the London.

Valeriya keyed the radio again, "London, this is X-ray. Confirmed, I see 8 objects moving towards the London." The scout radar beeped and the anomaly flashed from the unknown blue to red. Frantically she turned the Radio back on, "*London*, I show that they're Scythes."

"Acknowledged, X-Ray. Stand by."

The response was far too calm for Valeriya's liking. The *London* only maintained light point defense guns. Of the six aircraft normally stuffed inside, two of them had been left on deck with the engines running loaded for CAS. She quickly began spinning the engines of the Valkyrie back up. The quiet whine of the scout suite was replaced by a low rumble as the engines were fed power. She was running through the weapons screen when her radio sprang back to life.

"X-Ray, this is *London*. Maintain standoff distance. Be prepared to conduct SAR. I say again, maintain distance and be prepared to conduct SAR."

Valeriya resisted the urge to swear into the radio. "Negative, *London*. Request permission to assist."

A new voice came across the radio. It was Colonel Mahesh. "Denied. I want you to stand by for SAR. Dig in, update the Rangers, and monitor the emergency channel. *London* out." The Colonel had said the word with enough finality that she wasn't going to argue.

As she reached over to switch the sensors back into passive mode she paused. Two of the Scythes had broken away from the formation and were moving directly towards her. She turned the sensors back to passive, bringing the Angel stealth suite back online.

“*London*, this is X-Ray. Be advised that I have two contacts heading directly for me. Over.”

“Understood, X-Ray. Do what you need to stay safe. Over.” Whoever was on duty in operations clearly had nerves of steel. *Of course, if they die, they’ll be in range of a rebirthing tube.* She thought.

“Acknowledged, *London*. X-Ray, Out.”

She squinted out the window to the west. The sky was clear - for the moment. With nothing else to do but sit and hope, she called the Rangers.

Apoptosis

Rico

Rico decided the mud was what he hated the most. The heat and the humidity were bad, and the festering stench that clung to the swamp stood as reasonable proof of the insanity of the colonists who chose to live here, but the mud was something else entirely. Every time he set his foot down the mud climbed across the boot and took hold. With every step it would pull to keep the foot trapped only to finally release its grasp with a wet squish and a splash leaving a heavy black ooze that clung to his boot, weighing down his steps. If he paused, even for a moment, he would sink deeper, making it harder to take the next step. As he took another labored step, he decided that the swamp was, in fact, trying to kill him.

Normally, a small Ranger team like this could cross a kilometer in around twenty minutes if they were trying to not draw attention. If pushed, he knew that he personally could run a kilometer in under three minutes in full gear. The weekly Sierra Company 'fun runs' taught him that. It also taught him that the Rangers didn't seem to understand what the word 'fun' meant. Making their way to the Biolab should have only taken an hour. The team had been trudging through the swamp for three and still had not seen the structure. Rico decided that he wanted to slap whichever Operations officer chose the LZ. Not that he would, of course. How could you maintain a listening post 80km away and not know that your LZ was in the middle of a damn swamp?

The voice of their pilot on the radio snapped Rico out of the fantasy. "Sierra 2-2, this is X-Ray."

Ahead the Lieutenant signaled a stop. "X-Ray, this is Sierra 2-2, go ahead, over."

"The *London* is under imminent threat of attack. A squadron of Scythes is heading right for them." She had said it calmly enough that Rico's first instinct was that she was attempting a poorly conceived joke.

Lieutenant Camilla clearly assumed she had misunderstood. "Say again, X-Ray. Over."

"The *London* is under imminent threat of attack by a squadron of Scythes." This time, their pilot was slightly less calm. Rico decided he preferred the other version. A squadron of Scythes was one of those giant red flags of a major VS operation. Rico shifted to pull a boot from the mud. What the hell would the VS want in this sewer? It was a rhetorical question, of course. Finding the answer was the reason he was standing shin deep in murky water trying to not get sucked down by mud.

"Can the *London* repel the attack?" The Lieutenant asked the question with the sort of disbelief you'd expect. Who the hell attacked a boat parked next to a hellhole like this?

The pilot did not respond immediately. When she did she hesitated and said, "Unknown."

Unknown wasn't a word Rico liked to hear from a pilot. Pilots he knew tended to be the sort who acted as though they knew everything.

"Give me your best guess, then." It was clear to Rico that Lieutenant Camilla was not a fan of the non-answer either.

"Given that they only have light point defense guns and two of the four Mosquitos on board are loaded for CAS, I don't think so." The assessment was blunt and to the point.

"So what the hell are we supposed to do about it?"

"Dunno, ma'am. I'm supposed to lay low and help with search and rescue if they call. You probably aren't going to have any air cover out there so stay safe." The pilot paused for a moment before continuing. "Listen - I've got a pair of Scythes sniffing around for me. I'll monitor this channel but I can't guarantee you'll get a response."

Lieutenant Camilla swore under her breath. Rico switched to her private channel. “So what do you want to do, ma’am?”

“No air support and no guarantee of an extraction bird. There really isn’t anything we can do but continue the mission and figure out how the hell we’re going to get out of here along the way.”

Rico nodded to himself. It was the right call. “Can’t argue that. Plus, we know that the comms in that old biolab work and are being monitored by friendlies.”

Camilla switched back to the squad’s channel. “We’re continuing the mission, Rangers.”

“I was afraid she was going to say that.” Sergeant Hemming said to Rico on a private channel.

Rico grinned to himself before replying, “Another glorious day in the Rangers.”

Reese

Cayla Reese was eight years old and she was running on a hot, white sand beach towards the ocean. Her parents lagged behind, and when she turned to see them they smiled proudly. She was shocked by the cold with her first step into the water which seemed to bite down to her bones. Undeterred, she waded in deeper. Suddenly, the ocean floor dropped away and, in a moment of surprise, her head dipped below the waves. She struggled forward hoping to, again, find secure footing, but something seemed to be pulling her away from the shore. Gradually, she became aware of a cramp in her side which quickly began to sting. Panic welling inside her spurred her to greater action and she swam furiously towards the shore only to find it receding in the distance. Her parents continued watching with the same contented smile while standing in the same spot on the shore.

Beneath the waves she felt something grab hold of her and then began shaking her about. Again her head dipped below the water. She thrashed wildly toward the surface. For a moment it seemed as

though her efforts were in vain and the surfaced seemed just out of reach. The burning sensation turned to pain as something screamed for her attention, but she blocked it out and kicked violently for the surface. She broke the surface and began gasping for breath.

“Reese?” The word was faint - almost as though it was carried to her by the waves themselves. She again looked towards the shore but didn’t see her parents. The sun had been replaced by the pale light of Doramir. On the shore in their place was a smoldering husk of a Vanguard and the water around her burned with hundreds of small fires. Bodies were strewn carelessly across the beach, their mangled forms a twisted parody of the sunbathers she had just run past minutes prior. In the back of her mind was a glimmer of recognition - as though she’d seen the scene before.

Something grabbed hold of her again and began shaking - more forcefully this time. Again she heard her name - not in the distance this time but from somewhere closer. A twisted form stirred and began to rise. It was a young woman with an arm hanging by a shred of meat. She oozed blood from a dozen different gashes across her chest. The figure looked across the surf, seemingly directly at her.

An instinct buried deep in her mind screamed that she should run, that she should get away, that the figure trudging slowly towards the surf shouldn’t be. She ducked beneath the waves hoping to hide. Something grabbed her strongly by the shoulders and forcefully pulled her back to the surface. It was the figure from the beach staring at her with the remains of a lifeless eye. She opened the ruined remains of her mouth and shouted, “Reese!”

Suddenly Reese awoke with a start and tried to move to a sitting position, but the instant she started moving something moved and slipped in a way that it shouldn’t. For a fraction of a second she marveled at the odd sensation and then the pain hit. She tried to scream but her mouth far too dry and all she managed was a whimper. Slowly her vision cleared, and a figure came into focus. It was Brandt. The woman gave a thin smile down at her and set a small object on the table next to Reese. Reese looked over and saw that it was the spent injector. The pain in her side retreated back to the quiet part of her mind. It was still there but it did not claw at her for attention.

“Water.” Reese croaked.

Brandt shook her head. “Wish I could, but you don’t give water to someone who’s been gutshot like that. Just makes things worse.”

Reese didn’t know what could possibly be worse. Slowly, a hazy memory returned. When Brandt had given her the injector she had said to wait until the enemy arrived.

“Are they coming?” she asked. Reese hated how pathetic it sounded.

“Yeah. A lot of them.”

“How long do we have?”

“Thirty minutes if they try to bypass the blast door. Ten if they try and cut it. Maybe five if they try and blow it open.”

Reese slowly pushed herself into a sitting position and looked down at her side. The leaking bandage had been replaced and most of the blood and sweat had dried. Her wicking liner was stiff and glossy. The flesh around the edge of the bandage was puffy and a shade of angry red. Brandt placed her helmet on the table and reached down to grab the heavy chest plate of Reese’s armor. She gently helped Reese put the armor back on. Once joined, Reese felt the artificial musculature power on. The weight of the armor seemed to disappear in response.

“Do we have a plan?” Reese finally asked.

Brandt was in the middle of a quick functions check on Reese’s Solstice carbine. She paused for a moment before pulling the battery clear, glancing at the charge counter and then reinserting it.

Satisfied, she powered on the small holographic sight and handed the weapon over. “They sent a Galaxy. I’m going to try to disable an engine to give you guys some breathing room. You, Matthews and Alvarez are going to hold out inside until that happens, at which point we’re going to make a run for it.”

Reese gritted her teeth in preparation for the pain and slid carefully off the table. Suddenly dizzy, she leaned back against the table. Her wound flared distantly with pain. The dizziness was replaced by instant nausea. She turned her head in the side and vomited a thick dark liquid onto the floor. She stared at it for a moment in confusion. She wasn’t a medic but even she knew that if you were throwing up blood something was terribly wrong.

“How long do I have?” Reese asked quietly. She looked up into Brandt’s eyes.

After a brief pause Brandt finally said, “Your triage unit says a few hours.”

The news did not come to a surprise to Reese. “Guess I should put them to good use, then. Where do I need to go?”

Brandt grabbed the younger woman gently, leading her out of the cramped room. Outside, she saw Matthews carefully checking his Orion. On a balcony overlooking the small square, Alvarez was running through the standard test for a PPA. She didn’t even know it was possible to pull one of those off a vehicle. Alvarez stopped and looked down at her for a moment. He didn’t say anything. Reese didn’t blame him.

Reese had asked herself so many questions since the first shot had been fired. In the end, she had narrowed it down to just one. “Do we at least know why?”

Matthews continued his function check. “Why, what?”

“Why I’ve got to die here. Why Chef and Waits are dead.”

Brandt and Matthews exchanged a glance. Matthews narrowed his eyes for a moment and then nodded. “The Research enclave here developed a self-replicating nanomachine. We think they plan on launching it in the next day or so.”

A self-replicating nanomachine? It was the doomsday boogeyman she had heard about as a child - a weapon capable of destroying the entire planet. “Can we stop it?”

Brandt continued shuffling Reese towards a barricade and did not answer at first. “Maybe. If we can break out of here, we are going to head to Nason’s Defiance and try to delay them until the cavalry gets here.”

“How?” Reese asked incredulously.

They reached the barricade and Brandt gently released her grip. “I don’t know. We have to get out of here first. One problem at a time, kid.”

Brandt turned and began walking away. Reese hesitated before asking, “You’ll tell my parents if you make it out of here, right?”

Brandt turned back and looked over her shoulder with a sad smile. “Of course.”

Reese squeezed the reassuring plastic grip of her carbine. If they were going to try and run halfway across the continent they couldn’t bring her along. It never occurred to her that she would die in this war.

Rico

The swamp had grown shallower by degrees as the Rangers approached the biolab. Rico had tried to scrape the worst of the mud off, but the black ichor clung tightly to his legs and steadfastly refused to do anything other than spread around. The ground beneath his boots was only marshy, quietly squelching with every step.

Gradually, their scattered line came to a break in the tree line and paused, the biolab visible across another stretch of marsh. Rico crouched and looked up at the towering structure. He briefly wondered how they managed to keep it from sinking into the swamp. In spite of the best efforts of the long dead engineers responsible for that minor miracle, the lab was clearly derelict. Moss clung to the supporting columns and brambles wound their way up one of the legs. It looked like the swamp was trying to pull the lab down. The nearest airpad had been raised until it was flush with the dome.

“Looks like the power’s on.” LCPL Iona was staring at a screen strapped discretely to the inside of his wrist.

Rico surveyed the open expanse between the treeline and the base of the lab. If it was like the other labs he’d been to, there would be a staircase leading up in the central column. He guessed it was at least 200m to that column though - a long way to walk in the open.

“Hemming, Iona - see if you can tap into the sensor net inside the lab. See what we can find out before we go walking inside.”

The two infiltrators whispered an affirmative and activated their cloaking devices as they quietly jogged into the open. Rico quickly lost sight of them entirely. He pulled up his own battle computer on his visor and watched their two dots move swiftly across the map. Minutes ticked by and they slowly traced their way around the edge of the lab. They came to a sudden stop and then paused for a time.

“Got a feed. Internal security - there are a few cameras still working inside.” It was Sergeant Hemming. He quickly shared his connection with the rest of the squad. Rico flicked from camera to camera and saw room after room haphazardly stripped of anything of value.

“The North and South pads are closed tight. The west pad is open but the airlock is sealed.” Iona said as he quickly ran checks on the various systems. “No tagged movement inside the lab but it looks like the grid might be down in some areas.”

“I’ve got something - west dock area.” Lieutenant Camilla paused for a moment. “Looks like a VS in a heavy exosuit.”

Rico flipped through the cameras in the area. “Looks like there is another on that balcony.” He squinted at the screen. It looked like the young man was crouched behind a PPA. Both he and the heavy were pointing their guns at the door. “What the hell are they doing?”

“Looks like they set a trap to me. Close two of the pads to direct them to the center. Leave the doors closed so that the prey doesn’t know it’s a trap until they kick the door down.” Hemming would know. He’d spent three years in a line unit as a company scout. His entire career was an in depth study of the art of the ambush.

“How the hell could they be waiting for us?” Lieutenant Camilla vocalized the question Rico was asking himself.

Rico suddenly realized that the swamp was no longer perfectly still when he became aware of a high pitched whine in the distance. It was getting closer. He quickly recognized the noise - it was a Galaxy. “They aren’t waiting for us. It sounds like a Galaxy is incoming.”

He craned his neck backwards trying in vain to see through the trees but saw nothing through the narrow gaps in the canopy. "Iona, Hemming, fall back to the treeline."

Rico glanced back at the security feed. The heavy was crouched behind a barricade, leveling some kind of weapon at the airlock.

Hemming and Iona were nearly halfway across the gap when the noise of the Galaxy's engines became a dull roar. The giant machine landed heavily on the pad. Even 300 m away Rico could hear the landing struts of the Galaxy groan in protest. He squinted up at the aircraft and realized it had been painted a deep purple.

"Lieutenant - that's a god damn cultist dropship!"

"I see it, Sergeant. Move your asses out there Hemming. It looks like the VS just got reinforcements."

The two infiltrators sprinted the last 100 m faster than Rico had ever seen anyone run in his life.

"X-Ray, this is 2-2 actual, come in, over."

The communications line remained silent. Rico looked back to the security feed and noticed an unexpected shower of sparks flying from the airlock door. The VS on the pad were cutting their way in. Slowly realization dawned on him. "I don't think the guys in the lab are getting reinforced. They're making a stand. If you were being reinforced, you'd probably open the door."

Lieutenant Camilla looked at Rico and then glanced back at her own screen. She sighed heavily. "Iona - I want you to set up a data capture on all the feeds we have access to. Hemming, I want a sensor grid watching our flanks out here. Rico, pull back about 50m into the swamp and watch the

rear.” Lieutenant Camilla pulled the charging handle back on her carbine and glanced into the chamber to verify it was loaded. “We seem to be stuck here so we might as well see what happens.”

Rico stood and moved deeper into the marsh. He had made it 40m when he froze, dropped to his stomach, and scrambled towards the roots of a massive tree. “Lieutenant, there is a Magrider back here.”

Rico dismissed the feed from the lab and called up his map and tagged the location of the Magrider. Moments later the first sensor sprang to life. A dozen red dots appeared on his map. *How in the hell did they get behind us?* Rico’s mind was racing as he tried to force himself to calm down.

“Iona, Hemming - try and move into a position of enfilade on that line. I want you to cover Rico and then break contact. Rally point is 400m northwest.” The Lieutenant added a tag to the net.

Rico pressed himself deeper into the mossy earth and watched as the line of dots grew steadily closer.

Brandt

Brandt had barely managed to find a spot to crouch when the Galaxy burst through an opening in the trees and hurtled towards the pad. She dared to hope for that it would miss, but the pilot rolled the vehicle to the side, shed some speed, and, disappointingly, managed to slam the craft on the pad. The pad shuddered, and the heavy support arms below groaned in protest, but held.

For the space of a few heartbeats, nothing happened. The sound of the hard landing had just faded again into the uncomfortable silence that seemed to cling to the swamp when the rear door of the Galaxy crashed open. Twenty soldiers wearing full exosuits painted a sickly green color poured out of the back and rushed towards the sealed airlock door. One of them crouched mere meters from where Brandt was hidden.

One of soldiers moved to the control panel for the door. He pressed the release request to no avail. Brandt smiled to herself. She had personally cut the control lines after shutting the airlock behind her. The man looked back and shook his head.

Two figures wearing lighter exosuits wheeled a large plasma torch out of the back of the Galaxy. Just behind them were a pair of Mechanized Assault exosuits. Within moments they had the torch in place. The airlock door was rated for hard vacuum but was no match for the plasma torch. White hot molten metal dripped down the door. She quietly tagged the 24 soldiers on the team's battle map.

Matthews

The shower of sparks spraying from the door stopped suddenly and Matthews calmly raised his Orion, pointing it towards the door. Something battered against the door, moving it moved only slightly. It struck again, harder, and the cut piece shifted visibly. A third blow hit the door with a mighty smash, sending it flying inward nearly a meter before crashing to the floor. The Max that Matthews assumed was responsible ducked through the opening and menaced the empty corridor with a pair of Blueshifts.

Matthews glanced to Reese. She was leaning heavily against the barricade with her carbine pointed down the corridor. "Steady." he said across the subvocal channel.

The Max stepped into the corridor and moved cautiously forward. More soldiers flooded in behind it and wordlessly fanned out across the corridor.

Rico

Rico crawled as far into the root system at the base of the tree as he could. Hemming and Iona were still moving into position. The nearest contact was only a few meters from where he sat - close

enough that he'd be able to hear them were it not for the fact that the sound of his own heavy breathing filled his helmet. He tried to force himself to be calm reasoning that he'd been in thousands of firefights already. A small voice in the back of his head reminded him of the Colonel's briefing. Rebirth probably wouldn't work out here.

Rico took a deep breath and slowly raised his SABR quietly flicking off the safety in one smooth motion as a shadow fell across the small opening. A woman wearing an exosuit painted a dull green walked slowly into view. He placed the small red crosshair on the back of her neck and gently rested his finger against the trigger.

"We're in position." Said Hemming across the radio.

"Call your targets." Lieutenant Camilla said from her perch in one of the smaller trees.

Rico tagged the woman in front of the opening. His tactical map flickered as Iona and Hemming chose their targets.

"We go on three." Lieutenant Camilla almost whispered it.

Rico applied the barest pressure to the SABR trigger as Camilla counted down. At the count of two he stopped breathing. At one he pulled the trigger until the first telltale click.

"Fire!" The Lieutenant's command was lost to the noise of Rico's SABR barking out its trademark two shot burst. The first round deflected harmlessly against the woman's shield. The second hit slightly higher but similarly deflected, causing the the shield to collapse. In the brief moment before he fired again, he heard Hemming's SOAS chattering in the distance. The woman just started to turn towards his spot when Rico pulled the trigger a second time. The two rounds struck the woman in the thin armor protecting her neck. The powerful rounds penetrated with ease. She collapsed where she stood.

To his left, Rico heard the sound of a cultist rifle. Green flashes of light streaked into the trees. He quickly scrambled to his feet and edged around the tree with his rifle at the ready. Suddenly he came across a young man in the middle of pulling a battery out of his weapon. Rico's sudden motion caught his attention. The young man looked up, his eyes widening in fear. Rico pulled the trigger again and the young man pitched backwards. He glanced at the tactical map and turned towards the remaining readings. Seeing nothing, he leveled his rifle at waist height and emptied the remainder of the magazine into the brush.

"Rico! Move your ass to the rally point!" Lieutenant Camilla's shouting filled his helmet.

Without pausing to see the effects of his burst, Rico turned and started sprinting - reloading as he ran.

Matthews

Matthews waited until the last soldier was in the narrow corridor and was certain Alvarez would have a good line of fire. He squeezed the trigger of his Orion, and the weapon bucked as the first shot exited the focusing array, streaking towards one of the approaching soldiers. He held down the trigger and swept across the advancing line. In nearly the same moment, Reese opened fire with her carbine.

Alvarez opened fire with the PPA. In the extreme close quarters, the effect was devastating. Those soldiers still exposed fell almost instantly - their armor melting in the intense heat. In moments the entire corridor sprouted small fires as everything combustible burst into flame. Those that had survived the opening volley rushed into whatever cover they could find.

The soldier in the Max suit opted to press forward instead. Matthews quickly swung his Orion towards it, dumping what was left in his magazine into it. Chunks of heavy composite armor and nanoweave were torn away but did nothing to slow the juggernaut. The Max raised its guns and

returned fire. Most of the heavy plasma rounds tore into the barricade but two found their mark. The first simply splashed against his shield but the second slipped through the momentary gap left by the first with much of its energy, hitting him squarely in the chest. Small shards of the armor flew away as the plasma boiled a crater into it. By instinct he turned on his Nanomesh Generator and ducked back into cover.

Brandt

Two soldiers remained outside, ducked near the Galaxy. Brandt swore quietly over her choice of hiding spot. Only one of the two soldiers was clearly in her view. If she shot him, it would alert the other who might be able to delay her long enough for the pilot to take back off.

She carefully moved around the edge of the tall loading ramp blocking her line of sight. Reaching the edge, she paused for a moment and observed. The pilot was in his seat, intently watching something. Brandt guessed it was probably a feed of the battle inside the dome. The furthest soldier wore the markings of a Sovereignty medic. The other wore no special markings of any kind.

She collapsed the stock on her rifle and slung it hurriedly across her back with the bare outline of a plan. She quietly drew her knife from its sheathe and squeezed it tightly enough to turn on the disruption field. Staying as low, she crept towards the kneeling soldier. The light noises of her padded boots against the landing pad were easily overwhelmed by the chaos inside the dome. Less than a meter away from the man, the barrel of her rifle banged against a weathered Nanite Systems transport case. The man jumped and started scrambling to his feet as Brandt lunged forward with the knife. The sudden movement caused the strike, aimed at the man's neck, to miss its mark. The man's armor did little to slow the blade, though, and the stroke left a wicked gash across his back. The man cried out in pain and surprise. Brandt reached out and grabbed the now flailing soldier roughly by the the collar and jerked him towards her as she drove the knife to the hilt in his back. The medic was already turning to level his rifle at her as she reached back for the underboss tucked away in its holster. The medic was faster, and fired a burst that silenced the dying man's shouts. She freed

the underboss from its holster and snapped a pair of shots off in return. The heavy slugs easily penetrated the medics shield but merely cracked against his armor, knocking him to the ground. Brandt dropped the dead man at her feet, activated her cloak, and sprinted off behind the Galaxy.

The medic sprang back on his feet and swept his rifle from across the landing pad in a panic. *He must be new at this.* Brandt thought. The cloaking technology wasn't particularly effective at short range. She worked her way around the far side of the Galaxy, moving carefully as the pilot had barely managed to land on the pad itself; she did not relish the idea of an 80 m fall into the mud below. She paused for a moment when she passed the stubby wing to prime and toss the first grenade. She rushed to the rear of the Galaxy and leveled her underboss at the medic who as he shuffled backwards towards the airlock door. As her cloak fell there was an instant of regret before she pulled the trigger. The subdued thump of the grenade detonating was accompanied by four shots from revolver. The medic was driven backwards, his compromised chestplate offering little resistance, and fell to the ground.

Brandt briefly watched the body as she reloaded the revolver. The man did not try to rise to his feet. She snapped the cylinder closed and rushed up the ramp into the Galaxy and found the pilot struggling out of his seat. He did not even notice Brandt until the first shot hit his shield. He reached for his sidearm as the second round struck the light composite armor plate on his chest. He stopped for an instant when the plate proved insufficient to stop the slug. Brandt fired a third round which caught the man under the eye. As he dropped to the floor, Brand tossed a second grenade into the cockpit.

She paused for a moment to replace the three spent rounds. As she left the Galaxy she tossed the final grenade on the remaining engine. She holstered the revolver and pulled her rifle from her back. "Matthews - the Galaxy is disabled!" She did not even bother with subvocal. Anyone inside the dome was probably too busy fighting for their lives to overhear.

The World Comes Apart

Valeriya

"I'm hit." Jennings said it calmly. Valeriya always admired pilots who still managed to sound like they were masters of their destiny as their aircraft broke apart around them. There was a certain absurdity to that sort of defiance.

She strained against her harness and scanned the sky. It was still clear.

"Jennings is down." Hastings, said, not pausing to dwell on that fact. As the only fighter still in the air there wasn't time.

Somewhere in the belly of the *London*, Valeriya knew Master Sergeant Watkins was scrambling to get Josipa's Mosquito in the air. It wouldn't matter. The aft walker battery had been knocked out in the opening minutes of the engagement and the periodic damage reports from the *London* were grim. It was taking on water faster than the pumps could clear it and the engineering teams were already taking casualties while fire teams were losing the fight on the second and third decks. The *London* was dying and there was nothing she could do about it.

Valeriya's lock warning system started screaming as something painted *Freya*. As she applied power to the engine and her Valkyrie shot into the sky, she looked to the east and saw a pair of specks on the horizon. She'd definitely been spotted. As she turned the Valkyrie hard towards the jungle she keyed her radio. "*London*, this is X-Ray. Be advised, I've been engaged by a pair of Scythes. I've got to move."

Hastings voice came across her radio. "Good luck. See you when it's done, yeah?" His voice was strained. High-G maneuvers would do that to you.

As Valeriya reached over to switch the Angel stealth suite to active mode she responded, “Kick some ass out there, Hastings.” She switched to active mode and her radio became a roar of static. Unless someone had the time to pick her out of the sky and tightbeam a message, she wasn’t going to talk to anyone.

She strained to turn in her harness. The Scythes were closing quickly. Maybe she could lose them in the trees. Valeriya settled into her seat and tightened the straps down. *Maybe.*

Rico

Bolts of plasma streaked through Rico’s peripheral vision. He sprinted just past Lieutenant Camilla. As he raced past her, she emptied an entire magazine behind them. He kept running for several meters before stopping at the fallen remains of a massive tree. He turned, leveling his rifle. As soon as the Lieutenant ran past him he started looping two round bursts randomly into the swamp. A heavily armored soldier burst from the brush in the distance. Rico swung the rifle toward the running form and poured the rest of his magazine at the figure. The soldier dropped suddenly into the line of brush. Rico couldn’t tell if he’d actually killed the man or just given him incentive to crawl.

“Claymores!” The Lieutenant shouted it to the infiltrators.

Rico looked over and saw Hemming struggle to pull one out of the large pouch on his side. He fiddled with it for a moment and glanced hurriedly around for a place to set it. Rico quickly reloaded his rifle, dropping the mostly spent magazine into the marsh, and turned to sprint again.

The Lieutenant came across the squad’s subvocal channel and said, “Hasty ambush. My position.”

Rico kept running. His breath was ragged and his legs burned from the effort. Seeing the Lieutenant with her carbine leveled into the swamp, he quickly moved behind a nearby tree. Hemming and Iona appeared moments later and similarly leveled their weapons into the swamp behind them.

The green streaks of plasma suddenly intensified and Rico instinctively ducked closer to the tree. It was suppressing fire. The VS were hoping to rush them.

A half dozen forms sprang to their feet and began sprinting in their direction as the fire continued from their flanks. Rico glanced at the Lieutenant who, by all appearances, was simply spending a day at the range. Rico looked back at the rushing figures and narrowed his eyes trying to guess the distance. It seemed as though the rushing soldiers had passed the mines when Lieutenant Camilla shouted, "Now!".

The earth erupted in a roaring, shattering explosion of dirt, decayed leaves, jagged plastic, and hundreds of tungsten bearings. The six men were flung violently into the air, their stunned bodies torn as if made of paper. Leaves and branches fell into the roiling debris like rain as the Rangers rose and opened fire. The assault was momentarily broken and Lieutenant Camilla urged them to continue on to a new rally point.

Rico turned to run towards the new marker and had only made it a hundred meters when plasma fire erupted from a band of ferns in the distance. Rico ducked his head and swerved towards the nearest tree. He looked to his left and saw several of the green streaks splash against Hemming's shield. The man took another ungainly step before crashing to the ground. Iona stood and moved towards the fallen Sergeant. He only managed to take two steps when dozens of green streaks screamed through the air around him. Iona collapsed to the ground.

Hemming was writhing on the ground, seemingly trying to get back on his feet. "What the hell are you doing, man? Stay down!" Hemming shot Rico a confused look for a moment before nodding dumbly.

Lieutenant Camilla was crouched low behind the massive root of a tree. Great chunks of wood were being blasted off around her by the lethal green darts that zipped angrily through the air around them.

She was shouting something over the radio but Rico couldn't hear it over the sound of the world coming apart around him.

Fait Accompli

Matthews

Matthews glanced around the corner of his barricade and confirmed that the Max wasn't moving. Massive holes had been melted into the thick armor and in places it still glowed dim orange. Vaporized composite armor and artificial muscle was rising from the large figure.

"Alvarez! I'm going to make a run for the stairwell. give me some cover!" Matthews shouted it into the radio before glancing down to confirm his weapon was ready. He closed his eyes for a moment and took a deep breath. Before he was even conscious of it he was ducking low and running at a dead sprint towards the dim stairwell. He took three steps before he bothered to open his eyes. Behind him, the PPA screamed a massive stream of plasma into the flames and smoke pouring out of the killzone.

He ran past Reese who was ducked behind her barricade, shakily pulling a spent battery from her carbine. He made it to the door and stopped just inside where he dropped to a crouch, leveling his Orion at the corridor. "Alvarez - move! I'll cover you."

The young man released his grip on the PPA and snatched his carbine before leaping from the short balcony. As soon as Alvarez hit the ground, Matthews started spraying a long burst down the corridor. In seconds, Alvarez had crossed the gap. "Reese, Brandt - we are leaving!"

Matthews waited for a few heartbeats when Brandt's voice came back across the radio. "Just go - I'm cut off and you can't afford to wait for me to sneak through."

Matthews heard a short burst from Reese's Solstice just outside the door. "I'm only going to slow you down. Go - I'll try and buy you some time."

Matthews did not pause to reflect on the words. Brandt knew how long it would take and if she said it was too long he had no reason to disagree. He'd known they wouldn't be able to take Reese - he was grateful that she knew it too. Together, Matthews and Alvarez hustled down the long square spiral staircase to the bottom. It had taken them ten minutes to climb to the top when they arrived. Matthews made it to the bottom in thirty seconds.

Valeriya

The lock warning on Valeriya's hud screamed for attention. At short range, the stealth suite didn't do much to inconvenience targeting systems. She quickly rolled the Valkyrie on its side and pulled back hard on the control stick. An elephant sat on her chest, crushing her into her seat as she turned the heavy machine almost 90 degrees, darting behind a massive tree. The lock indicator stopped crying for the moment.

Valeriya considered her options. *Freya* wasn't built for air combat. Neither weapon system on board was guided and the heavy nose canon was tuned for a grouping the size of a Sunderer at 400m. The Scythe was considerably smaller and more mobile. Still, of the two weapon systems it was the only one that would be of any use.

Her radio flared to life, her heads up display indicating it was the emergency channel. "X-Ray, this is 2-2. We are under heavy fire. I've got two men down. Request ETA on extraction!" The Ranger's voice was punctuated by sporadic bursts of automatic weapons fire.

Valeriya winced as she rolled the Valkyrie into another hard turn around a massive tree. The *London* was probably doomed. She was having trouble following the battle reports but gathered the damage control teams were completely overwhelmed. Even if she could extract herself from this dogfight, there wasn't much hope of saving the ship now.

"2-2, this is X-Ray. I'm heavily engaged with cultist air support. Can you hold?"

The Lieutenant did not answer immediately - probably not a good sign. "Negative, ammo is running low and it won't be long before these guys figure out we can't stop them if they rush."

A small voice in the back of her mind told Valeriya that she was screwed. The lock warning wailed again. As she rolled her aircraft for another hard turn she keyed her radio "Understood, 2-2. I'll be there as soon as I can."

She needed to bait that Scythe in closer. She pulled back on the throttle and the boxy aircraft quickly shed speed. Before she could think better of it, she switched the stealth suite back to passive mode and flicked on active sensors, hoping the Scythe would feel confident enough to get close if it could consistently see her.

She continued weaving between the trees even as she conducted a slow turn towards the Biolab. The closer Scythe was trailing at just over 1200 meters. When she glanced again several seconds later, it had closed to a kilometer. Spying a particularly large tree, she gently maneuvered behind it, cutting forward thrust entirely before rotating her aircraft 180 degrees.

She held her breath while she watched the range counter tick down. At 800 meters she flicked on the head tracking targeting for the G-30 and a ghostly overlay washed across her HUD. Slowly, she released her breath as the Scythe closed to 600 meters. When the range counter ticked down to 300 meters she flicked the Valkyrie nose upward as she rolled it to the side, firing the vertical thrusters in the same motion. As she cleared the tree, she saw the Scythe looming white hot against the swamp. Blindly guessing at where she should lead she squeezed the trigger. *Freya* vibrated with a low buzz as a stream of bright red tracers left from the gun mounted below her feet. Unable to react in time, the Scythe flew directly through the stream, the heavy 30mm shells shredding the light armor with ease. Too late, the Scythe tried to turn away but the heavy shells had done their work well. The brief controlled turn quickly became a wild spin. Valeriya watched it for a moment as it flitted to the swamp below, trailing heavy black smoke.

She didn't wait to see it crash. Valeriya turned the Valkyrie back towards the biolab and pushed the throttle all the way forward.

Brandt

Brandt carefully stepped through the remains of the airlock door and into a scene that roughly matched what she imagined hell would be like. Fires raged along every flammable surface and an oily black smoke filled the closed space. At her feet, half dozen mangled bodies were strewn along the corridor and gore had been splashed across the walls and floor.

She heard a burst of fire from a carbine a few dozen meters away and instinctively dropped into a crouch, swinging her rifle towards the noise. She quickly pulled up the tactical map. The smoke and fire was clearly interfering with the reading. She dismissed the map and stood. If anyone was still shooting, Reese was probably still alive.

Brandt activated her cloak and began moving deeper inside the dome. She paused at juncture in the corridor and slowly eased her way past it. Satisfied the corridor was empty, she started to turn back down the main path when a heavily armored woman burst into corridor. Brand quickly turned her rifle towards the form, spending a fraction of a second convincing herself it wasn't Reese before pulling the trigger. The first round spent its energy against the shield. The three that followed left massive holes in the woman's chest armor. She fell with a look of pained surprise on her face.

Brandt kept moving to the open courtyard Matthews had chosen for the ambush. She had to admit the location was well chosen given the damage they'd been able to do in a handful of minutes. A carbine screamed a short burst only to be answered by a long reply from something much heavier. Brandt hadn't seen the remains of any Maxes but one of them was a likely culprit for the return fire. She moved quickly and reached the final juncture.

The courtyard was a scene of carnage. The nearly unrecognizable remains of five soldiers were collected just in front of her. Brandt assumed they had tried to breach while Alvarez still manned the PPA. Another half dozen prone forms were splayed across the space. A large man popped his head and shoulders above a planter that was home to a long dead collection of ferns, leveling his rifle at a barricade on the far side of the courtyard. His burst was cut short by three shots from Brandt's rifle. The man crumpled behind the planter. Brandt held her rifle on target for several seconds before she was sure.

"Reese - you there, kid?" Brandt had activated her subvocal line. No reason to let the Max eavesdrop.

"Still here." Reese's reply was short and pained. The painkillers were starting to lose their edge again.

"I'm coming in from the direction of the airlock. Hold your fire." Brandt waited for a moment and saw the young woman peer carefully over the barricade. It wasn't until they locked eyes that Brandt felt confident in taking the next several step into the open.

Only a few paces into the open space, Brandt saw Reese's eyes open wide and the woman quickly tried to raise her carbine above the barricade. Brandt followed her gaze to the right and saw an enormous figure racing towards her at an inhuman speed. She turned her rifle towards the giant and snapped off a pair of shots that buried themselves harmlessly in the heavy armor of the charging Max. Reese's shouted warning was cut off by a tremendous crash as the Max slammed into her with an extended arm. She felt something crack deep inside her chest as she was lifted from her feet and hurled across the courtyard like a ragdoll.

Rico

Rico managed to crawl to Hemming and was dragging him slowly back behind the temporary safety of a tree. Lieutenant Camilla helpfully emptied a magazine from her carbine, momentarily slowing the seemingly endless streams of plasma.

“Loading!” Camilla shouted to no one in particular. With plasma fire streaking mere inches above his head, Rico wasn’t particularly inclined to try and return fire.

The reduction in fire proved to be a passing thing. Within seconds hot green streaks snapped past Rico’s head. Crossing the last few meters to the tree seemed to take an eternity. Rico rose slightly and dragged Hemming behind a quickly vaporizing root.

Rico reached back for his medical applicator and quickly surveyed the damage. Hemming had been stitched from his hip to his shoulder. The wound at the hip was shallow; the one to his shoulder had passed through muscle and bone with enough energy to leave a ragged hole in his back. As he pulled the applicator free, Rico took a moment to glance at the biometric readout for the squad. Iona had flatlined while Hemming quietly shook at his feet.

Rico grabbed the wounded Sergeant gently by the head and pulled the heavy facemask away. He set it carefully to the side and turned back. There was a defiance in the man’s eyes that barely masked the fear. “Still think I’m silly for wearing nanoweave?” Rico cracked a smile that Hemming bravely tried to return without success. “Hemming, you’re going to be alright.”

Lieutenant Camilla was firing her carbine in short bursts beside him. Rico was pretty sure they were fucked but he wasn’t going to tell Hemming that. As he carefully closed the Sergeant’s wounds with the medical applicator he glanced over to where Iona had fallen and prayed to whatever god would listen that the *London’s* rebirthing tubes still worked.

No one should die alone

Reese

The Max strode forward as Brandt struggled to get back on her feet. Reese pointed her carbine at the Max's exposed back and pulled the trigger. For an instant it seemed like the Max was simply going to ignore the salvo when it turned towards her. It paused in a moment of indecision before trudging quickly into cover.

Brandt managed to make it to her feet and reached down to grab her rifle. As she picked it up she realized that the barrel itself was twisted well out of line and tossed it back to the ground. She activated her cloak and limped quickly out of view of the Max. "Reese, do you think you can make it up to that PPA if I draw the Max off of you?"

Reese was pulling the spent battery from her carbine when Brandt asked the question, forgetting that the rapid discharge of power left it hot enough to scald. She tossed it away when the heat seeped through her heavy glove. As she rummaged through her ammunition carrier in search for a fresh battery she responded. "Yeah. I think so."

Reese wasn't sure she believed that she could. She'd need to cross most of the courtyard and climb a set of stairs. Finally she found a battery and fumbled as she tried to place it in her carbine. She didn't realize how badly she was shaking before that moment. She had barely managed to slide the battery into place when the Max decided to reappear firing both of its heavy weapons into her barricade, throwing small globs of melted plastic and aluminum splinters into the air.

Reese heard three barking shots from a slugthrower and as suddenly as the Max had started shooting, it stopped. "Reese - move it!" Brandt shouted to her on subvocal.

Reese had no idea how the woman had managed that feat. Reese rose from her position only to find fatigue tugging at her legs. Reese tried to will them to move quicker without success. The Max fired

again and Reese winced expecting one of the heavy plasma rounds to tear through her at any second. Spurred by this new fear, she managed to go from an unsteady walk to a staggering run. Two more shots from the heavy slugthrower briefly silenced the Max.

The expected shot never arrived and Reese crossed the threshold of the small building without breaking her stride. As she turned to move up the narrow staircase, she lost her footing and fell to the stairs. There was no pain when she landed, just the curious feeling of something slipping out of place inside her. Something in the back of her mind her argued that she should just lay right here and catch her breath. It pointed out that thanks to the armor, the stairs weren't all that uncomfortable. Another three shots from the slugthrower silenced the voice.

Still in the fight. Reese repeated the statement like a prayer as she hauled herself back to her feet. She looked down at the carbine in her hand before dropping it to her feet with a clatter. With both hands free she slowly hauled herself to the top floor and staggered toward the balcony. When she reached it, she looked out onto the courtyard as though she were dreaming. The Max had lost interest in her for the moment and was methodically moving around the far edge of the open space.

Reese grabbed the PPA and swung it towards the giant figure and squeezed the trigger. The PPA remained silent. She dumbly looked at the status screen and saw Alvarez had seemingly left the weapon on safe. She struggled to remember how to disengage the safety when Brandt fired several more shots from her sidearm.

Valeriya

Valeriya raced towards the biolab, skimming some of the trees at less than a meter. What was left of the *London's* battlenet chattered with news that Hastings had caught a missile after taking out two Scythes. She decided if she ever met the man again, she'd buy him an entire case of beer. Josipa had barely made it out of the hanger before his Mosquito was shredded. The entire defense of the London now rested in a single operational Walker and the guns that whatever was left of the crew

could pull from the forge. Even if they managed the unimaginable fortune of driving off the remaining Scythes, the *London* was doomed. All that remained undecided was if the ship would die from the fire torching through her lower decks or if the massive breaches below the waterline would drag the ship down instead.

The emergency channel popped to life again. “X-Ray, this is 2-2.” The Ranger Lieutenant shouted something incoherent and there was a short burst of weapons fire. “X-Ray - got an ETA for me?”

Valeriya glanced over at her map and did some quick math. “2-2, I’ll be on your position in seven minutes.”

“Understood X-Ray, 2 - “. The Lieutenant’s response was cut short by a pained shout of surprise. Her breathing came in short gasps while a weapon echoed in the background. “I’m hit!” She managed to cough out at last.

One of the Rangers swore quietly across the channel. “Just stay down, Lieutenant. Listen, X-Ray I don’t mean to rush you but I don’t think we’re gonna last seven minutes.”

The feed of the *London* battlenet cut off abruptly. Valeriya wasn’t sure how you’d cut the entire net without killing every last person on the boat. Valeriya pitched the nose of her Valkyrie down and activated the vertical thrusters to squeeze as much speed as was possible from her aircraft.

“Understood 2-2. I’m moving as fast as I can.”

Matthews

Matthews stood slightly against the foot pegs as he raced the Flash across the roughly packed road leading west away from the Biolab. He glanced over his shoulder towards the pad and saw the Galaxy was still sitting there smoldering. In moments, they were a half kilometer into the thick jungle and he loosened his grip on the throttle; the wail of the flash’s engine quickly quieted to a buzz.

“Brandt, you there?” Matthews hadn’t heard from Brandt since she said to go without her. He was met with silence. “Brandt, Reese, do you copy?” No response.

Matthews hung his head for a moment before turning over his shoulder. “Looks like it’s just us, Alvarez.”

“What the hell are we going to do?” Alvarez was clearly bordering on a panic.

Matthews thought for a moment and realized he didn’t have any idea. “We’ll think of something.”

The emergency channel chirped with a subvocal message. “Busy. Will contact on this station if I make it out.” Matthews decided that he shouldn’t press the issue.

Matthews considered the options. There were only two of them, and they had little more than a pair of personal weapons and a dwindling supply of batteries. Simply rushing into the fortress at the heart of the swamp would be suicide. If they were going to have a chance to do anything, they needed heavy weapons. In a moment of honesty he realized he’d almost certainly need more men. That’s when he realized there might be a solution to at least one of those problems. Matthews quietly prayed to whatever god might be listening that the traitorous bastards didn’t have the good sense to pick up the nanoforge he’d left behind at Bravata PMC.

Matthews was lost in thought for a moment. He did not see the half dozen soldiers barely concealed in the brush when they rounded a sharp bend in the road. Alvarez shouted a warning that was lost among the strobing light and high pitched whine of rapidly discharging plasma weapons. Without even thinking, Matthews activated his nanomesh and cracked the throttle back open to full. Several rounds splashed against the heavy shield while still others punched great holes in the light chassis of the flash. Matthews only realized that the shield had collapsed when something hot tugged at his arm.

Seconds passed in an eternity of light and noise. Matthews cut the bars hard to the left to follow a sudden tight turn. The flash's center of gravity shifted slightly. Matthews spared a moment to glance back at Alvarez and saw the young man slumping to the side, threatening to fall from the vehicle. He reached back, grabbing Alvarez roughly by the collar and pulled him upright.

"Alvarez! Hold on!" Matthews realized he was shouting across the squad channel. The young man did not respond. "You alright back there?" He asked, this time somewhat calmer.

"I think so." Alvarez responded drowsily.

"Are you hit?" Matthews asked.

"What?" cCame the dazed response.

"Are you injured? Did you get shot?" Matthews pressed.

"I. . . I don't know." cCame the response.

Matthews backed slightly off the throttle and turned back for a longer glance. The front plate of the Alvarez's armor had bulged and cracked. There were a pair of neat round holes in the right side of his chest that were leaking a pink foam.

Oh no. Thought Matthews.

"I've got you, Alvarez - just relax!" Matthews said as he cracked the throttle back open to full. He couldn't afford to stop this close to the ambush.

Brandt

Spent brass fell from the Underboss to the ground with a quiet clink. As she stuffed a half moon speed loader into the empty cylinder she glanced over at the approaching Max. She had three rounds of .357 AP before she'd need to resort to just trying to beat the Max to death with the heavy pistol.

It's not going to be enough. She thought. That she was about to die did not frighten her. The AI that suppressed her sentinel implant package had returned enough of her memory that she knew there was no one left behind to care. Her family had died in one of the countless terrorist attacks before the war really started. Her lover had died on Searhus in the first nuclear strike. She had seen friends die one by one in the years before rebirth. She was already dead - rebirth just didn't let it stick. For a fraction of a second she entertained the thought of simply putting the pistol to her head and pulling the trigger.

They wouldn't want that. She said to herself. Not yet. She leveled the revolver and took a deep breath. With only three shots she'd need to make them count. She'd be dead soon enough.

She burst around around the narrow doorway when the Max was only a few meters from the door, squeezing off a shot that struck it in its heavily armored head. Before she could fire a second time, there was a bright flash and a wave of intense heat washed over her. She quickly ducked back inside the door as PPA fire splashed against and around the Max.

As suddenly as it had begun the fire stopped. Brandt glanced back around the door and saw the Max had fallen onto its face and was struggling to stand. She rushed from cover and slammed her boot directly against the back of its head, forcing it to the ground. She placed the muzzle of her revolver directly against the bubbling composite armor and fired twice. The Max stopped moving.

Brandt looked up at the PPA and saw that it was now pointed almost directly at the dome itself. She raced across the opening and rushed up the stairs. She paused for a moment to snatch Reese's discarded carbine, stuffing her empty revolver back into its holster. She saw Reese as she reached

the top of the stairs. The young woman was sitting against the balcony, resting her head against the low wall. Brandt moved over to her and crouched at her side.

Reese's eyes fluttered open. "Did we get it?" She asked.

"Yeah, kid - we got the bastard." Brandt said as she silently linked with the triage module. She'd started bleeding internally again. The previous prognosis of a few hours had been cut. It estimated she had less than an hour before circulatory collapse.

"Come on, Reese. We've got to go." Brand tried to pull the young woman to her feet to no avail.

Reese waved her off. "Just go."

Brandt felt tears welling in her eyes. "Can't do it. I made you a promise."

Reese shook her head weakly. "I'm already dead. Leave me."

Brandt slung the carbine across her back and reached down to grab the woman by the arm. She crouched low and pulled Reese across her back and slowly stood.

"What the hell are you doing? I said leave me!" Reese protested.

Brandt trudged towards the stairs and simply said, "I'm not going to let you die alone." She paused for a moment before adding, "No one should die alone."

It took Brandt nearly five minutes to carry Reese to the bottom of the tower and load her into the Harasser. She carefully strapped her into the seat and climbed in.

"Where are we going to go?" Reese asked.

“Southwest - through the hills for a way before we link up with the main road.” Brandt had agreed to the plan because she didn’t think it was particularly likely it would come to pass. She didn’t think the Harasser could possibly take the strain of another off road jaunt.

No reason to complain now. Tthought Brandt as she activated the engine. She scanned the treeline ahead and saw a path that seemed relatively clear of trees and rocks. Before she could think better of it, she pressed the throttle to the floor. The Harasser’s engine screamed in protest at the treatment as the truck launched from the shallow mud.

They had only crossed half the distance when she realized her error. Plasma fire streaked from the treeline and crashed into the Harasser. She held her course for several seconds while desperately looking for an alternate path. The only road she could see was the one to the west that Matthews had taken. It would have to do.

Brandt jerked the wheel sharply to the right and for a moment the Harasser began to turn. Something in the front of the vehicle snapped. The Harasser pitched violently downward into the shallow water.

Gunship Rescue

Rico

Rico managed to drag Lieutenant Camilla behind the tree with Hemming before the Harasser had come screaming out from beneath the dome. For an instant, he thought that it belonged to the cultists that had them pinned down until the Sovereignty soldiers opened fire on it. He realized it wasn't attacking - it was running from the fight. When the Harasser lost control and began tumbling violently across the swamp, he paused for a moment to thank whatever poor bastard had been driving the thing because it had at least bought them a few seconds of confusion.

He turned back to continue his work on the Lieutenant. Her wound was nearly as serious as Hemming's. The expert system in his medical applicator estimated it would take the better part of an hour before they'd be in a position to do much more than lie on the ground.

A sudden break in the fire caught his attention. The Galaxy had come to a rest a few dozen meters away on its roof where it stood between the VS right flank and his tree. Rico decided he wasn't going to thank the driver; the cover the vehicle provided worked both ways. It wouldn't take long for the cultists to realize that fact and move close enough for grenades and there wasn't anything that Rico could do about it.

Before he could return to his work, he saw a slender form crawl slowly out of the window. It was a VS soldier dressed in a deep grey infiltration suit rather than the bile green color of the soldiers they'd been fighting. He squinted and realized she was dragging a body from the wreck which the infiltrator propped against the vehicle before crawling back inside. She reappeared with a carbine in her hands. The infiltrator stood for a moment and pointed the carbine into the tree line, firing a short burst at a target he couldn't see.

The woman reached over with her free hand, grabbed the body, and started tugging it towards the tree Rico was hiding behind. He put down his medical applicator and grabbed his SABR. A quick

glance told him that the weapon was empty. He patted across his ammunition carrier only to realize that they too had been depleted. He gently set the weapon back on the ground. He glanced back up and saw that the infiltrator had already covered most of the distance to his tree. He fumbled for his side arm. It wasn't there. In horror, he realized he must have lost it during the mad dash.

Thinking quickly he tried to roll Hemming on his side so that he could grab the repeater he kept in a holster on the small of his back. Hemming groaned in protest. Rico looked up in a panic and realized the VS infiltrator was right on top of him. The woman dropped the body she was dragging and spun quickly on her heel, leveling her carbine directly at him. Rico threw himself on top of Hemming. He was certain he was about to die but thought that there might be a small chance Hemming would keep his mouth shut and play dead.

Rico gritted his teeth and waited for the inevitable but the infiltrator seized him roughly by the armor and pulled him onto his back. The woman glanced down at him and then gestured to the body at her feet.

"I don't know what you're doing here, Ranger, but I'd appreciate it if you could look after my friend here."

Rico was at a complete loss for words. The woman clearly noticed his indecision. "For the moment, I'm not here to shoot you. Given the mess you've collected behind your tree I figure you're shooting at the same people who are trying to kill me."

Rico glanced over at the body and realized it was a young woman. He slowly reached down and grabbed his medical applicator for a quick scan. She was still alive but wouldn't be for long. He pulled the pack from his back and rummaged inside for a large bottle of biomass. As he adjusted several settings on his medical applicator he looked over at the infiltrator who was crouched next to her friend, pulling a small device from one of the pouches. The infiltrator glanced over at him. "Is your weapon empty?" She asked.

Rico nodded as he slid the biomass canister into the applicator.

“Where is the Lieutenant’s weapon?” She asked.

Rico paused for a moment and pointed to the adjacent tree.

The infiltrator followed his gesture and said simply “Wait here.” She activated her cloak and ran over to the fallen weapon, returning with the weapon moments later. She crouched by the Lieutenant and pulled a magazine from her ammunition carrier and considered the weapon for a moment before thrusting it towards Rico. “Take the weapon, Sergeant.”

Rico paused his work for a moment to reach out and grab the rifle. He looked up at the woman in confusion for a moment before placing the rifle on the ground next to the wounded Sovereignty soldier. “I have to ask - what the shit is going on?”

The VS infiltrator laughed bitterly and simply said “If we’re still alive in ten minutes I’ll let you know.”

Valeriya

Valeriya saw smoke rising above the trees before she ever spotted the Biolab. She slowly backed off the throttle and keyed her radio. “2-2, this is X-Ray. I’m on station. Still alive down there?”

She did not get an immediate answer as she approached the large gap in the trees. The source of the smoke became immediately clear when she saw a mostly intact Galaxy belching smoke on a landing pad. She had no idea how the Rangers had managed to bag a Galaxy kill since none of them carried anything heavy enough to pose much of a threat to the heavily armored aircraft.

Valeria activated her G-30 gun camera and switched to thermal, slowly scanning the swamp below. There were a handful of bodies lying still on the pad and the twisted remains of a Galaxy near the treeline. She shifted her slow orbit slightly to get a better look at the Harasser when she spotted a staggered line of soldiers among the trees.

“X-Ray, that’s the best news I’ve ever heard.” The Rangers reply was briefly muffled by the sound of an explosion.

“2-2, I see a lot of movement down there. Can you turn your IFF transponder to emergency?”

A ghostly blue triangle appeared above a figure kneeling among three prone forms behind a tree. A fifth was lying nearby, shooting.

“I see ya’ down there. I’m going to have to run this close so get as far into cover as you can.” Valeriya said as she carefully marked the line of infantry. “Hang tough, Ranger.”

Valeriya dipped the nose of her Valkyrie and applied power to the throttle. When she closed to optimal range she gently squeezed the trigger and two dozen six cm rockets leapt from their pods, racing toward the treeline trailing fire and smoke.

Matthews

Alvarez was panting like he’d just run 400 meters at a sprint as Matthews slowed the Flash to a halt. Matthews carefully stepped off the vehicle and gently pulled Alvarez off, carrying him to a soft bed of young ferns. It was only when he set the man on the ground that he grasped the truth.

Alvarez was dying.

Two rounds had hit him in the back with enough force to go through both plates of armor. A third had barely stopped on his chest plate but only after passing through his spine. Matthews realized he was only alive because Alvarez had shielded him with his body.

Alvarez's struggling breath came in short gasps. Matthews carefully pulled off the man's helmet. A scarlet smear ran from his nose down to his neck and his skin had taken on the pale complexion of a person deep in the throes of shock, his brown eyes dilated wide and staring without focus at the canopy above. Matthews knew there was nothing he could do. He sat there and cradled the dying man in his lap as his breathing became ragged.

It took Alvarez almost fifteen minutes to die. After his last choking breath, Matthews simply sat and held the dead man. Slowly he started to stand and it wasn't until he looked back toward the dark road with blurry eyes that he knew he was crying.

They were not tears of sadness but rather an expression of rage that had been building in his chest since Reese said that Waits had been shot in a panicked voice on the radio. It seemed almost a lifetime ago and it hadn't even been a day. There was the hatred of the separatists who murdered his team and hoped to kill the world. He had never hated the Republic soldiers he had fought or their fascists cousins in the New Conglomerate. They were unenlightened and they fought against the progress of man that was so obviously necessary out of fear. The separatists had no such excuse. They knew the truth and still they had descended into barbarity and madness.

He hated command. They were smart enough to realize they might need to send armed men to this miserable swamp and yet failed to recall that this team would be outnumbered many times over if violence was necessary. To send an armed team implied they knew there was a chance for bloodshed but to send so few was criminal. Their folly had doomed them all.

The hottest spot of his anger was reserved for himself. One by one his team had died. Each death was a monument to his weakness as a leader. Waits and Sheffield died because he put three rookies

on first watch. Reese died to cover his escape. Brandt died in his place. Alvarez had died because he unknowingly shielded Matthews body with his own.

For a moment Matthews wanted to scream out into the swamp but did not. Whatever force might exist in the universe was clearly not on his side. There were men with guns almost sure to follow him. The universe, meanwhile, simply observed with the same disinterest it had when the Republic and the NC were exchanging nukes in their best attempt to usher in the long awaited apocalypse born of fire promised so long ago.

Matthews had no illusions about his odds. To stand here was to wait for death - to follow his orders was to actively seek it. He pulled off his helmet and wiped the tears and mucus from his face with a dirty glove. He did not notice that he simply replaced it with smears of dirt and blood; even if he had he wouldn't have cared. Matthews replaced his helmet before leaning over to snatch the small identity tag from Alvarez's armor. He climbed back on the Flash and pointed it back down the dark road leading west. He knew he was racing to certain death. He hoped he was running towards his absolution.

Brandt

The Ranger medic had only given her the barest warning before the jungle exploded with fire and noise. *Brimstone strike. Ballsy.* She thought as she carefully lifted her head above the root to observe the effect. Even with rebirth, the TR rarely liked running the weapons closer than 80m. The rocket payload was hugely unpredictable, simply exploding like a shotgun just before impact. They were the epitome of a dumb weapon with nothing more than a timed fuse on the burst charge calculated by the launcher and programmed into the rocket just before launch.

The incoming fire had stopped for the moment. Many of the smaller trees had been shattered and the more massive trees bore great scars. Scattered leaves were settling into the dust. "We need to move." She said, turning to the Ranger.

The Ranger looked at her incredulously. “We? I mean this with all due respect but the only reason I didn’t shoot you in the back is because I spent my ammo on your friends over there.”

“They’re not my friends.” Brandt said. “We’ve been in a running gunfight with them for eighteen hours, now. They killed a member of the Council and at least two people on my team.”

“It sounds like I should be thanking them, then.” The Ranger said, chuckling. “I don’t think you have a better argument for high treason than that.”

Brandt glared at the man for a moment before realizing that the gesture would be lost on him. She pulled off her helmet and resumed the glare. “Sergeant, you’ve got a dead man and two wounded soldiers. You know as well as I do that these bastards are still crawling in this god forsaken swamp. The odds of you dragging your team to a viable LZ before they find you and kill you is effectively zero. We’ve got a better chance of getting out this alive if we work together.”

The Ranger was silent for a moment before he deflated. “The pilot thinks she can squeeze the bird in about 300m west of here.” He said with a sigh. “How do you want to do this?”

Brandt considered it for a moment before answering. “We move one of your wounded and the Novus here, first. Then we come back for your KIA and the Lieutenant.”

The Ranger shook his head. “No deal. We move my wounded first and leave your soldier here for the second trip.”

“Can’t do that. What incentive do you have to wait around? You might just leave your dead man and hang us out to dry.”

“Who in the hell do you think you are?” The Ranger said this with a careful calm that Brandt guessed covered a building rage. “I don’t owe you or your soldier a damn thing. I want to get my people out of here. All of them. Rangers don’t leave anyone behind.”

Brandt knew she was bargaining from a position of weakness but she’d hoped the Ranger hadn’t figured that out yet. He was the only one with a ride, after all. “Fine, we move your wounded first.”

The first trip was exhausting and left Brandt and the Ranger panting. They’d completed the trip in silence, carefully placing the two wounded Rangers in heavy brush at the edge of a small clearing. She could tell the medic wasn’t comfortable leaving them alone. As he stood and began walking back into the jungle, he glared at Brandt.

She realized she’d need to tell the man the truth.

“They built a nanoweapon.” She nearly blurted it out.

The Ranger kept moving into the jungle. “What?” He asked, not even breaking stride.

“There was a VS research enclave here. They built a self-replicating nanomachine.” She would have held her breath were it not for the fact that she had just hauled a 65 kilogram woman almost a half kilometer through shin deep mud.

The medic stopped in his tracks and looked over his shoulder. “Goo? You’re telling me they made Grey Goo? Bullshit.”

Brandt shook her head. “They stopped reporting on their research a year ago. My team was sent to get an update. When they caught us digging around in their system, they killed one of the founding members of the Sovereignty and we’ve been in a running fight ever since.”

The medic turned to face her. "I don't buy it. If they built something you bastards would trip over yourselves using it."

"A few years ago, I might have believed that, too. But no matter what the Sovereignty does with people, the people in charge think this planet is sacred. They aren't going to unleash a weapon like goo. They've never even launched a nuke for god's sake." The Ranger wasn't swayed by the explanation.

"Look, you want to haul me in to your superiors, fine. I don't know why they built goo but Briggs himself thinks they're going to try and use it. I'll tell you everything I know about where you need to hit them stop it." Playing to the hero complex that seemed to spring up in the hearts of all the young people still fighting the war was the only card Brandt really had to play.

"Why would you do that? Can't your people handle it?" He asked.

Brandt shook her head. "They're going to deploy the weapon in just over a day. Most of the Sovereignty military is tied up in a fight with the NC on Amerish. They can't get anything here in time."

The Ranger was clearly wavering.

"Sergeant, please. We're sitting at the threshold of armageddon and right now, you're the only other person with a gun who might be inclined to stop it."

The Ranger turned and continued slogging to the tree where he had left his dead friend. "When the extraction bird gets here, I'll call it in. You, I'm going to hand over to the boys in intel."

Brandt silently called up her own triage unit and confirmed her killswitch was working.

From the Ashes

Valeriya

Valeriya watched the dim blue triangle move slowly through the thick canopy. The massive trees almost completely obscured the ground below except for a few narrow gaps. The Ranger had told her to expect six passengers - including three wounded and one KIA. She had never airlifted a KIA before but then as far as she knew no one had actually died on Auraxis since the siege of Mao tech plant early in the war. A body wasn't little more than an empty shell. Being asked to pull a dead man from a swamp wasn't what concerned her, though. She had only dropped four people off. Who were the other two?

"X-Ray, I'm at the LZ. Ready when you are." It was the Ranger medic. She felt a twinge of regret that she didn't know the man's name.

"Acknowledged. I'll be there in 30 seconds." Said Valeriya, rolling the Valkyrie into a turn towards the clearing.

She gently hovered over the gap and slowly reduced the vertical thrust of *Freya's* engines until she started to sink through the space. Something scraped along the tail of her aircraft, prompting her to gently feather the throttle, shifting forward a few centimeters. The heavy branches passed close enough to her cockpit that Valeriya was able to see the veins on the leaves. When something snagged, she held her breath and cut the vertical thrust entirely and was reward with a hollow snap from below. Valeriya activated the thrust again to control the rest of her descent to the marshy ground.

Valeriya turned back in her seat when the door was flung open and watched as two of the Rangers were shoved inside. There was a woman with the medic and even through the mud and grime her affiliation was unmistakable, sending her reaching for the repeater she kept strapped in a cross draw

holster on her chest. “What the fuck is she doing here?” She screamed at the medic as she leveled her sidearm at the woman.

The ranger looked tiredly to the woman before answering “She’s a prisoner.”

The two turned from the open door and jogged back to the tree line. No Sovereignty soldier had ever been captured alive. She quietly stuffed her pistol back into its holster and wondered why this one would allow herself to be captured. She hoped the Ranger knew what the hell he was doing.

She barely had time to turn back in her seat when the window to her right cracked in a spider web pattern as a plasma round smashed into it. Within moments, small rounds were splashing against the exposed side of her Valkyrie. Valeriya frantically activated the gun camera on her G30 and turned to face the muzzle flashes in the tree line, spotting more than a dozen figures scurrying just out of the nose gun’s arc.

Swearing to herself she lifted the aircraft a few centimeters off the ground and smashed the rudder to the floor, sending the Valkyrie into a rapid turn. She squeezed the trigger for the G30, and her Valkyrie was shoved back several meters as she fired a long burst into the trees. Another spider web appeared on the front screen while the clattering sound of small arms against the Valkyrie’s thick skin of the Valkyrie drowned out the throaty roar of her own canon.

The Ranger and his prisoner were running across the open space and Valeriya could see the hot streaks of plasma fire as it snapped through the air around them. The woman was carrying a still form across her shoulders and was well in the lead. She tossed the figure into the Valkyrie and turned to fire into the tree line. She saw the Ranger fall heavily as though he had tripped on something in the shallow water. When the man tried to stand he fell back into the mud.

“I’m hit!” He shouted. He waved frantically towards the Valkyrie. “Just go!”

The woman in VS colors was already sprinting towards the fallen man. She grabbed him by the arm, hauled him to his feet, and dragged the man as he limped desperately to keep up. When they reached the Valkyrie, she shoved the man into the aircraft. If Valeriya had been surprised before she was stunned when the woman turned back for the still form still lying in the marsh.

The small arms fire from the line of trees intensified. *She's not going to make it.* thought Valeriya. As if to punctuate the thought, a heavy green anti-vehicle round screamed from behind a tree, narrowly missing her.

She knew the G30 wasn't going to give enough cover. She flicked over to the brimstone pods and hesitated on the trigger for a moment. *To hell with it.* She said to herself. She squeezed the trigger and sprayed another dozen small rockets into the jungle.

The woman was only a few meters from Freya when she seemed to stumble. The man she was carrying was tossed into the mud but she quickly reached down to grab him by the collar and started dragging him. Reaching the side of the aircraft, she struggled to push the infiltrator into the aircraft. The Ranger medic painfully reached out and grabbed the wounded man, pulling him into the Valkyrie before offering a hand to the Sovereignty soldier. She fell into the crowded passenger compartment as small arms fire splashed against *Freya* with renewed intensity.

"Close the damn door!" She shouted behind her.

She didn't even wait for them to finish as she turned her ship away from the line of infantry. *No way I'll have the time to squeeze back through that crack.* She thought to herself. She pushed the throttle forward and raced toward the opposite tree line.

The clatter of small arms slowed and finally stopped when she darted behind a massive tree. Slowing to a safer speed, Valeriya maneuvered carefully between the trees until she spotted a gap of

light above. She leveled the nose of her ship towards the opening and, within moments, burst above the canopy.

In the relative safety above the treeline she finally noticed the flashing warning indicator. *Freya* was leaking fuel and the ship's right engine was clearly struggling. She reached over and turned the engine off, hoping to avoid a fire. They'd need to land soon to patch the leak or they wouldn't make it far. Not knowing where to go, she turned her ship to the south near where she'd dropped the Rangers hours earlier. There was an old agricultural complex there where she hoped she'd be able to find a spot to land.

As she limped the wounded Valkyrie towards the site, she turned to look into the passenger space. The sovereignty soldier had her hand pressed tightly against her shoulder. The Ranger medic was gritting his teeth while he tried to close the fist sized wound that had appeared in his thigh. The smell of blood hung heavily in the tight space.

"Get the *London* on the line." Said the medic. "Tell them to throw everything they've got at the old Nason facility."

"I lost contact with the *London* almost 20 minutes ago. Not even an emergency transponder." Valeriya was fairly certain that the lack of an emergency broadcast meant that the entire crew had been killed.

"So call Command, then." The medic said, clearly frustrated.

"With what? *Freya* only has a short range radio. Even if I dump every ounce of power I've got into it, the range is only a few hundred kilometers. Nearest friendly anything is sitting on Indar right now."

"So what the hell are you saying?" The medic asked.

“I’m saying that we’re on our own. I don’t even have the fuel to fly us to friendly territory unless you think you’re up for a swim.”

The medic didn’t respond and they flew the rest of the way in tense silence.

The old agricultural facility had nearly been consumed by heavy creeping vines. The only clear space to land was the roof of what Valeriya guessed was an old dormitory. She unclipped her harness, pushed the canopy open, and clambered out onto the roof. As she walked around the right side of the aircraft she realized just how bad the damage was. Hundreds of pockmarks dotted the heavy composite armor. The relatively light armor around the engine housing had been breached in several places and a clear liquid trickled from it.

She pulled open the heavy door to the passenger compartment and reached for the heavy maintenance kit. The medic shifted painfully and nodded towards the container. “Need help with that?” He asked.

Valeriya shook her head. “Nah - I’ve got it.”

“Thanks for coming back.” The medic said sheepishly.

Valeriya shrugged. “You were the only people I was in a position to help.”

The medic gestured to the wounded sovereignty soldier. The woman crawled over to him as he readied his medical applicator. After a brief scan he said “Mostly cybernetics under here.”

He set the medical applicator at his side and pulled off his heavy pack. After a few moments of rummaging, he pulled out a small scale nanoforge. He picked his medical applicator back up and gently pulled the small nanoforge free from its housing and slid the new one into place.

“I’ll need you to take your armor off.” He said simply.

The sovereignty soldier carefully pulled off her helmet. Blood had matted her hair to her face. She unfastened the top of her armor and slowly peeled it away, struggling to free it from her damaged arm.

Valeriya whistled at what she saw. The flesh that remained on her chest was covered in a dozen scars, some clearly the result of serious wounds. A purple mass was spreading across her ribs around a strange lump. Blood leaked from the lower edge of the composite plate that covered almost half her torso. Just below her shoulder, a ragged hole dribbled a pale blue liquid. The thing that most surprised her was the remains of a tattoo just above her left breast of a pair of crossed spears in front of a shield. It was the symbol of the Terran Republic’s Ranger corps.

Valeriya shook her head in wonder that the woman was still able to move as she lowered the repair kit to the ground and cracked it open. She listened as the medic went to work. “You’ve got three broken ribs, a concussion and some tearing around your implant. I can make the arm work again but it’s going to be a patch job.”

Valeriya pulled the repair tool from its case and grabbed a small wrench. As she pulled the bolts off an access panel on the engine she heard the medic ask “But before I fix anything, you’re going to tell me everything you know.”

Σ

Alyss

Alyss Rodriguez shifted uncomfortably as the unfamiliar suit chafed her neck. The air in the reception area was uncomfortably cool and lacked any perceptible smell. She surmised that this facility was fully sealed and the air carefully filtered and recycled. The small grey room was home to a single desk made of a polished black granite with streaks of purple auraxium that glinted under the soft lights. A young man sat behind the desk carefully balancing an appearance of disinterest in the fact that Alyss was waiting with an obstinate refusal to even pretend he had anything better to do. There seemed to be an almost ironclad rule in the NC that the higher ranked the executive, the more aloof the assistant would be. Her own assistant was a temp who rotated between nearly a dozen other Deputy Directors. The woman was obnoxiously friendly to strangers and always eager to please.

Alyss absentmindedly glanced down at her wrist and for a moment was surprised that she had a small and sleek VI personal assistant rather than the rugged boxy battle computer she was used to wearing. Junior executives like her spent most of their time in the field either leading major operations or small special projects, but still split their time in the various regional corporate offices. She was unused to the idea of attending meetings in a climate controlled room and dressed in a crisply tailored suit. For most of her adult life, meetings happened huddled behind a rock where the participants hoped to scratch out a hasty plan in the dust or mud before a grenade called an early recess. The screen of her PDA was devoid of any helpful information, though, and still showed little more than the link lost symbol.

She resigned herself to once against staring at the desk and wondering how many years of her salary it had taken to pay for such an extravagance. She was waiting to meet with the Board of Directors but the memo that called her here did not specify a final destination - they simply directed her to the Amerish warpgate. She'd spent half a real day hopping between gates and she hadn't recognized a stop for the last six jumps. She had no idea where she was but given the wait and the decor, she got the impression this was the last stop.

The man at the desk glanced over at his screen. "The Board is ready for you, miss Rodriguez."

Alyss Rodriguez stood and took several careful steps, hoping to recall how to walk in the short heels her assistant had laid out for her to wear. Confident she was not going to trip for the moment, she briefly wondered who thought putting small stilts on the back of a shoe was a good idea. Given a choice, she'd have worn the heavy armored boot of her normal uniform. Her assistant shot down the idea saying that black with gold trim would clash with the slate gray of her suit.

The man at the desk pressed a button in front of him as she reached the door, causing them to swing open with a nearly inaudible hum. They were far thicker than she would have thought - at 30 cm they would be more at home sealing a vault than they were here. There were two men on the other side of the door clad in heavy combat exosuits painted a bright blue. Neither man wore visible markers of name or rank. They eyed her suspiciously while they cradled their weapons with threatening nonchalance. She stepped past them and turned to see if they would follow. One of the men simply pointed down the corridor that stretched into the distance. She gave the man a slight nod and continued walking.

She had walked a few dozen meters when she realized there was another door that had been raised into the ceiling. This one was more than a meter wide. Near this massive door was another smaller door as unassuming as the one she had stepped through moments before. Rodriguez guessed that there would be more men with guns behind that door. She passed four more of these massive seals before reaching the door the men had pointed to.

Alyss took a moment to try and collect herself. Not only had she never met with the elusive Board of Directors, she'd never even heard of a person who managed the feat. The closest she had ever come was when she was handed orders printed on physical paper authorizing the formation of a small team of engineers and infiltrators. They had specified that she was to find the best of the best, bring them together and train them for anything and everything. The search had taken almost two

months. She had examined thousands of dossiers and conducted more than one hundred personal interviews before narrowing it down to 30 men and women. She collected the candidates into teams and moved them to the worst fronts she could find to see how they worked together. In the end, she narrowed it down to her allotted 11, returning the rest to their units without explanation.

For six months she drilled with them, fought with them, and often died with them. By the end, they all knew each other as fully as they knew themselves. After their last operation where they'd spent two weeks behind the VS lines on Amerish without taking a single serious casualty, she decided they were ready. They held a small ceremony and she handed each of them a small blue pin with a gold greek capital sigma emblazoned on it.

She released them on leave for a week but they had all spent that first night together to celebrate. Alyss did not remember most of what had happened beyond the moment that Mike, a CQB specialist infiltrator she had pulled out of a line unit on Esamir, suggested they do shots of high proof alcohol made in the old style. She woke up the next day with a hangover bad enough that she considered a suicide induced rebirth with a very much nude Mike with her in her small bed. She later learned that she and Mike hadn't been the only ones to shack up together that night. Davis and Vivian, the team's two pilots, had also spent the evening together. Alyss later found that it wasn't the first time, as the two apparently interpreted the phrase "preventative maintenance" very liberally. Harris and Nick, both expert marksmen, found themselves together in the morning.

After sending Mike away and finding a medic to cure at least part of her hangover, she submitted her final training report to the board. Unlike the rest of her team, Alyss stayed put, waiting for the response. She didn't have any family to visit. Her parents had both been taken by the secret police when she was thirteen and her brother had been shot for the crime of holding a sign at a rally protesting a curfew when she was fourteen. By the time she was sixteen, she was a messenger for a resistance band in Connery. She made her first kill when she was stopped at a checkpoint on Indar with a truck bed full of weapons six months later.

Three days after sending the training summary, she received the memo ordering her to this meeting. She had sent word to her team, telling them they'd need to report to the nearest warpgate in three days. She had spent that time alternating between worry and wonder at the opportunity this meeting presented. She took a deep breath, reached out, and pressed the small button next to the door. She was not prepared for what she saw.

The door opened to a long breezeway. Where the corridor behind her was sterile and plain, the space in front of her was lavish. Pale golden light fell from soft lights in the breezeway's roof and played off the polished surface of the auraxium infused marble pillars and flooring. She leaned over the short railing and saw that the path was suspended a few meters off the mossy floor of an enormous cavern. Blue lights were placed along the edges of a narrow band of clear water that bubbled playfully into a distant lake.

More impressive still was the looming structure that seemed too large even for the cavern it was built in. She guessed it rose more than 100 meters from the floor of the cavern. She had first thought that the building itself was a light blue before realizing that there were massive banks of lights shining across its face. At the center of the building near the upper floors were a blank space as though someone had carved the distinctive eagle shape of the New Conglomerate directly from the solid block of glass and metal and then trimmed it with bright gold lumifiber bands. Alyss had no idea how much it had cost to build the structure in the space. She had grown up in a city built into an old auraxium mine on Amerish. Digging out the space for a single family dwelling could cost decades worth of wages leaving most to simply jam as many people into the small spaces as possible. To build this building here and to leave so much space unfilled in the cavern was extravagant beyond her ability to comprehend.

She turned away from the railing and continued along the lit path to the building. A handful of people in suits more expensive than hers lingered around the base of the building. Some assembled in small groups while others seemed content to brood alone. On her way through the door she saw a tired young man point a small applicator to his eye and press a button. When she was a kid she was

warned about the dangers of the highly addictive amphetamine the applicator contained. The street name for it was “Red Eye”, a nod to long distance early morning commutes as much as it was to the brief eye inflammation the drug would cause. The medical name for it was some unintelligible gibberish that Alyss could never remember. The TR used to arrest people on the spot if they suspected they used the drug and more than one person affected by allergies who was too poor to have the condition properly treated had spent weeks in the re-education as a result. Now, they put the same drug into medkits, handing them out to soldiers to use however they wanted. She knew first hand how potent the drug could be. If she hit even a few weeks on a body before rebirth her she would start to crave the rush medkits gave.

She shook her head at the idea that someone would willingly take such a thing as she stepped into the lobby. Men and women moved busily through the open space. She walked to the only person sitting still - a middle aged woman seated behind a desk under a sign that advertised her as a source for information. The woman looked up at Alyss’s cheap attire suspiciously. “Can I help you?” She asked.

I’m here for a meeting with the Board. I’m Deputy Director...”

The woman held up a hand to cut her off. “Ah, yes. They’re expecting you. Center Elevator.”

Alyss walked to the indicated elevator and stepped inside. The ride was brief and any sound the elevator made was hidden by the generic music that played softly on hidden speakers. The doors opened into a small room with the same marble and auraxium floor she’d seen in the first waiting area. Two people wearing heavy armor stood in front of impressively large wooden doors while a stern looking man sat at a desk. The man at a desk wore a dark suit rather than heavy armor but Alyss was entirely certain that was little more than a facade. He carried himself like a career soldier. The man gestured for her to walk forward.

“Please step over here and place your arms out from your side.” The man said as he walked around his desk holding a small wand in his hand.

She did as he asked and he quickly ran the wand across her body. After a few moments he seemed satisfied and placed the wand in his pocket. Alyss started to put her arms down when the man glared at her. “Not yet.” He said simply. He moved in closer and began carefully patting her down.

She’d been patted down many times before by Republic police but there had always been a sadistic element to the search. Virtually every form of contraband would appear on scanners and so the need for a groping physical search was theoretical at best. This man moved quickly and carefully, neither neglecting nor lingering anywhere. A theoretical danger was apparently more than the man was willing to risk.

At last the man was satisfied and stepped back saying “She’s clean. Let her in.” He said to the guards.

The two men pulled open the doors and Alyss stepped inside.

The Enemy of My Enemy

Matthews

The flash's engine coughed as the vehicle sputtered to a halt in a wide draw. It had done this twice before. Matthews guessed that its radiator had taken a round during the ambush and the small ONN housed inside kept killing the engine to prevent catastrophic failure. He had considered overriding it each time only to remember it would probably fail completely in a few kilometers. If he wanted to have any chance to make it to Nason's Defiance, he'd need to keep the vehicle limping for as long as possible.

He climbed off as he had the last two times, shifting the vehicle before shoving it up the other side of the draw. Even with artificial musculature helping, it was difficult work and he was soon panting heavily and pouring sweat. The sudden strain left his arm burning where it had been grazed by a plasma round in the ambush. Matthews had managed to drive the Flash more than twenty kilometers from where he left Alvarez before he even realized that he'd been wounded. When he pulled over to examine the wound he realized how unimaginably lucky he'd been; it was barely more than a scratch. He walked away with a half centimeter deep channel on his arm because Alvarez sat behind him and absorbed most of the fire. He focused on the stinging pain rather than dwell on the man who'd died in his arms.

After twenty sweaty minutes that only earned him a quarter kilometer, he climbed back on the Flash and flicked the ignition. The engine quietly rumbled to life. The ONN, unsatisfied that the problem had not been resolved, helpfully chirped a reminder that it was unsafe to operate the vehicle in its current state. He shifted it into a low gear and eased on the throttle.

Brandt still hadn't called. He had to assume she hadn't made it out of the Biolab. Matthews still didn't know what he would be able to do. Even hoping that the traitors had left the forges at the old PMC barracks seemed like a desperate long shot.

If he had the platoon he'd led on Indar for the past year, they might have a shot at breaching the perimeter of the Nason's Defiance. Even if he had the full team he arrived on Hossin with the day before, it would be a suicide run.

That's when Matthews realized the option he'd been avoiding all along. This wasn't the kind of fight he'd walk away from - he'd died in enough fruitless assaults that it was obvious. Even if the traitors filed into his gun one by one, he simply didn't have the ammunition. What he needed was a small nuclear device and a distraction sufficient to get close enough to use it.

The old fortress was likely shielded against nuclear strike but, like all such shields, they did little to stop someone from simply walking through and delivering it personally. That job fell to the armed men and women that manned its walls.

If the forges were still there, he'd have his bomb. He had no idea what he'd use for a distraction and hoped he'd come up with a good answer by the time he arrived.

Alyss

Alyss walked into the large armory where Sigma had gathered. "Gather 'round, people." She said.

The group collected quickly and quietly. That was a part of what made Sigma different from most of the NC. The last time she was a squad leader, collecting her team before a drop and then quieting them was often an ordeal that betrayed the fact that most of the NC grew out of bands of resistance fighters and small communal militias. Even after more than a decade, the NC was really two separate armies that happened to wear the same colors. On the one hand there were the corporate PMCs - professional men and women under arms who fought for a paycheck as often as they did for the Cause. On the other were the irregular volunteers, most of whom served in local garrisons near their homes. They were the ones who nearly universally took up arms for the Cause. Equipment had long been standardized and there had even been attempts to offer formal training but in the end, the

irregulars would seemingly always be little more than a roughly coordinated mob. They were the bulk of the NC field army, undeniably it's beating heart, but they were a tough crowd to wrangle.

"We've got a mission. It's a big one." She said. "We're going to Hossin."

"Hossin?" Asked Strottmann. "There's nothing there but a dead swamp. The VS kicked us out of there in '47 when they stabbed us in the back and took down the warpgates."

"Yep, but the Board thinks we can fix it." Alyss said with a smile. "Apparently, they didn't break anything with their sabotage mission. There was an exploit in the network then that would let you disconnect a system from the rebirth network. It's been patched since then of course. All the VS did was stroll in and flick a switch. All we need to do is go there and flip it back."

The collected group murmured quietly to itself for a few moments. Alyss was happy to let them talk. They might be the most professional group she'd ever been a part of, but news like this was going to cause excitement. Hossin was the ironclad stronghold of the NC for the first years of the war - their shelter against the storm of Terran rage that followed the disastrous battle of Searhus. It was where they built the field army they sent to Indar and beat the TR in open battle for the first time. It was a dirty and terrible hellhole that no one in their right mind would want to live in and only the insane would try and attack. In many ways, it was the place that best defined the NC's key strength in the war - they were willing to go anywhere, fight anywhere, and live anywhere if they thought it would help them win the war. Taking back Hossin was like recapturing your hometown, except this time it was everyone's home.

Mitchel, an engineer who cut his teeth repurposing Nanite Systems made mining equipment for combat, raised his voice above the quiet chatter and asked "Why now, ma'am? I mean, couldn't we have done this any time?"

“Because we weren’t ready until now. The Board doesn’t trust anyone else with this job. They wanted the best.” Said Alyss.

“That sounds like bullshit to me.” Said Davis, their dedicated Galaxy pilot.

Alyss shook her head. “The Board thinks we might run into trouble. They were cagey about the details but from what I gathered they think there might still be a few VS there running a research station out of one of our old labs.”

“Oh, that’s just wonderful.” Said Nicholas, a scout she’d pulled from his job as company first scout of an Esamir Munitions PMC battalion. Unlike most of the mercenaries, he had joined for the Cause. His parents had been killed before the war and most of his check went to ensuring his brothers and sisters stayed out of the Mattherson orphanages. “So we’re supposed to launch an assault on Hossin, probably the most defensible place on the planet, with just the twelve of us?”

Alyss laughed. “They’ll never expect it.” She said simply. The group chuckled with her. It was true. If Hossin was defended, they wouldn’t have any reason to expect an attack.

“One more thing I need to tell you.” Alyss said. “Hossin is currently disconnected from the rebirth network. Anyone who dies there is dead-dead.” The quiet chatter stopped almost immediately.

“Shouldn’t we bring a medic?” Said Vivian, their backup Galaxy pilot. “I mean, Mike can’t seem to stop getting shot every time we run into the VS.” The group broke into laughter at the jab. Mike was a fine CQB specialist but the man liked to run very close to the enemy and it tended to cost him.

“That’s a good point!” Said Alyss. “Hey, Mike. I’m gonna need you to slip some nanoweave under your combat pajamas, buddy.”

“Hey - fuck you, ma’am!” Said a blushing Mike.

"I hear you already did!" Shouted Natalie, another CQB specialist she'd found running sabotage operations on Amerish with the 32nd Irregulars. Mike punched Natalie playfully in the shoulder.

Alyss raised a hand to silence the laughter. "We're going to Hossin via a blind orbital drop. That means we're going in low in a HART. Do what you need to prep your gear and meet me back here at 0100. We're scheduled to take the Daedalus up at 0145 and I want to do a gear check before we board." She paused for a moment before adding "And Mike - just watch yourself out there. Your KDR can't take the hit."

Mike rolled his eyes and said "Whatever you say, mom." The group broke into raucous laughter. This time Alyss didn't try to quiet them. She simply smiled, shook her head, and walked over to the small arms nanoforge to pull her gear.

Rico

"How do we know if she's telling the truth?" Asked Lieutenant Camilla.

The Lieutenant was resting in the shade against a wall. Her wounds had mostly healed but she'd still be tender for a few hours. Hemming had given up trying to remain still and was instead pacing slowly nearby.

"We don't. But she did save my life. Hell, she probably saved all of our lives." Said Rico with a shrug.

The Lieutenant chewed her lip and glanced at the flex cuffed woman. She was leaning over and talking to the wounded soldier. Rico was surprised he'd managed to stabilize the woman. She'd lost almost half of her blood, a nasty infection and a critical case of sepsis. It would still be several hours before she'd be up for moving around and even then if she wanted to run she'd probably need a

heavy dose of stims. The infiltrator claimed the young woman had been hit late the previous evening when half her team was killed in an ambush. He knew what VS plasma weaponry did when it hit unprotected flesh and he was certain that the wound the young woman had sustained was from just such a weapon. If it was a ruse, it was certainly unusually cruel to one of its conspirators.

“Do you believe her?” Asked Camilla.

Rico sighed and ran a grimy glove through his matted hair. “She could have shot me or left me to die in the swamp. Hell, I told her to leave me and she didn’t. I think she’s desperate and I think she’s telling the truth about what happened to her friend but the rest? I don’t know. I thought goo was a myth.”

“Just because we never built it doesn’t mean it can’t be done. Look at all the bullshit they throw at us every day. Their tanks float. I’ve seen them shrug off a RAMS shot to the heart without a shield to slow the round down.” Hemming said as he continued to pace. “If she wanted us dead, we’d be dead already.”

Camilla looked at Rico and then over to Hemming. “So, let’s say she is telling the truth about all of it.” She glanced at the battle computer on her wrist. “Let’s say that in just over 24 hours they really can deploy goo. What are our options?”

Valeriya had been listening in on the conversation. “I can drop you right on top of them but beyond that I don’t know how much good I’ll be. Freya here only has a dozen rockets left and about a half drum for the G-30.” She thought for a moment before adding “And they probably have at least three operational Scythes.”

“And between the four of us we have enough ammo to kit one person.” Rico added.

“Okay, let’s assume we can fix the ammo problem. Then what?” Asked Camilla.

“We know the VS are on their way. All we really have to do is keep them from launching during that window, and by the time the next one opens up it will be too late. So why don’t we wait as long as possible, hot drop as close as we can, and try and hold them out of the launch center?” Rico said. It was a simple plan but with their numbers simple was really all they could manage.

“How long do you think you can hold?” The question came from Brandt. Rico didn’t think the woman could hear their quiet conversation. “Five minutes? Ten?”

Rico considered the question. If the intel reports were to be believed, the VS troops on Hossin had at least a hundred soldiers and they had an operational rebirthing tube. Even if was old they’d likely be at full strength when it came time to launch the attack.

“If we move quick, I’d say it would take two minutes for the local garrison to respond. We can probably hold that off for awhile. Once they collect their strength, I’d say our survival time is about as long as a grenade fuse.” Said Hemming. It was a sobering assessment. A frontal attack would be suicide.

“So what would you propose?” Sneered the Lieutenant. “There are only four of us.”

“Six.” Countered Brandt. “I’m not going to stand around and wait for those bastards to melt the planet.”

“Four. We won’t be taking you, traitor.” The Lieutenant emphasized that last word.

Rico had told the Lieutenant about the Ranger tattoo on the woman. Camilla had been so enraged by the revelation that she nearly executed both of the prisoners on the spot.

“Traitor? To what, the Republic?” Asked Brandt. “I lost everyone I ever cared about fighting the Republic’s war when you were in grade school. I was there from the start and the Republic ground me into dust for the courtesy. No, the Republic betrayed me.” Brandt nearly spat the line. “I was through fighting this damn war and they didn’t even have the decency of letting me die. ‘Loyalty Until Death’ they said. Bullshit. I died more than a thousand times before I stopped counting. Once you’re in the rebirth network you don’t get to unplug. They don’t tell you that, though.” Brandt added that last part with a hint of sadness. “The VS offered to take the pain and put it in a box where I could forget it.”

Camilla spat on the ground before replying simply “Still a traitor.”

“How many people have you seen die, Lieutenant. I mean really die? I saw my mother bleed to death when she got caught in a bomb placed by some kid who’s parents had been kidnapped by the Secret Police. I watched the man I love turn into meat when he caught a rocket in the back. I’ve seen friends screaming for their mothers while they tried to hold their guts in. I’ll wager you’ve never had to do any of that. Until you watch everyone you’ve ever loved die, you don’t get to judge me you self righteous bitch.”

The Lieutenant started to struggle to her feet but Rico held out his hand to stop her. “How dare you!” She screamed. “I’ll have you shot for that insubordination.”

“No, you won’t.” Said Hemming quietly.

Camilla glared at the young man. In most circumstances, what Hemming had done would almost suicidally stupid. Lieutenants were rarely secure in their authority and often resorted to the harshest punishments allowed by the law to punish anyone who would dare question it. Here, though, what could she really do? They were stuck here for the foreseeable future and if nothing else would likely be hunted down and shot by the VS eventually.

“Ma’am, the four of us can’t do this. I don’t think six of us can either but it gives us a better shot.” Rico said gently.

“But she’s a traitor!” Camilla protested.

“She also saved all of our lives and took a bullet on my behalf. That’s as much as anyone’s ever done for me in this war.” Rico replied.

The Lieutenant was silent for a long moment until she finally said “You know they’ll toss us in re-education for this, right?”

Rico knew she was right. The camps had existed nearly as long as humans had been on Auraxis but with rebirth the historic levels of cruelty were almost casual. Now the education consisted of little more than a few cycles of being tortured to death with the exact number of deaths specified by the infraction. He looked towards Brandt for a moment before he cracked a small smile. “If we make it out and there is still a commissar left to care, I think I can live with that.”

Hemming stopped pacing. “I can too, ma’am. Besides, we’ve got to make the bastards pay for Iona. And the *London*.”

Valeriya tossed her wrench back into the toolbox and walked over to the group drenched in sweat. “We’re screwed no matter what, here. I’ll take any edge we can get.” She looked at the woman still tied beneath the tree. “Besides, I think somewhere in there she’s still a Ranger.”

“Why?” Asked Camilla.

“Because she went back for Iona. Rangers don’t leave people behind.” Valeriya said simply.

Alyss

The rest of Sigma was already assembled in the armory when Alyss strolled in. She was carrying her heavily modified LA1 slung across her back and was wrapped in a similarly customized heavy exosuit. For years, she modified her suit by hand, stripping off segments that would catch or bind and carefully applying tape on the various hanging straps and loose bits. She had done the modifications so many times that she could strip her armor to the essentials in the dark given even a few minutes to work. She no longer had to bother with making the changes herself, though. Mitchell, Sigma's NS tech specialist, managed to sneak her modifications into the forge system as a custom template. When he managed to provide the rest of the team with similar services he had all but guaranteed his spot.

She slowly walked down the line looking at gear. It was a formality for her sake. She never questioned why Mike carried his Tempest strapped across his chest or his LA-8 in a cross draw holster turned upside down. Or why Taylor, a former Vanguard crew chief, opted to carry a chopped down LA39 with spare shells hanging from elastic loops strapped around her forearms. She merely wanted to make sure she knew what the team was carrying so that she could put them to the best possible use in the field. Satisfied she turned to face the assembled squad.

"Some of you might not know the significance of what we're about to do." She said. She'd practiced what she would say dozens of times since she'd gotten the directive from the Board. She knew why Hossin was important, of course. It all went back to the first Indar campaign. The NC had built an army in secret on Hossin for nearly a year before they poured through the southeastern warpgate. For months, they threw themselves at the Republic's lines. Alyss died more than a hundred times before the defenses finally crumbled. Each time the pain faded into dull blackness only to snap awake and naked in a rebirthing tube on Hossin made the place feel more and more like home.

"Ten years ago, we had the Republic on the ropes. We smashed their armies and drove them from the field on Indar. We were inches from victory." She paused for a moment when her voice quaked

subtly. “Then we were stabbed in the back. We lost our fortress and hundreds of our friends in the disaster. For nearly a year after, all we could do is run. We’ve never been able to field an army like that since. We’re spread out across this world in a dozen pockets. Day after day we fight and die to hold the line against cultists and fascists.”

Alyss looked across the squad. Besides her, only Harris, Vivian and Jace were on Indar when Hossin fell. Jace stared hard at the ground while Vivian locked eyes with Alyce. Jace stared at nothing in particular. Nearly half his squad was mid rebirth at the time. They’d died in an ambush by a Republican rear guard as they advanced through the ruins of Mao and he had spent a decade blaming himself for not seeing the poorly hidden line of claymores.

“I’d thought that we’d be fighting this war until Luminaire went supernova. There are too many fronts. All of us are spread too thin for anyone to win. Today, I can see another path. Today, we are going to take back Hossin. We’re taking back our home. I can’t say how long it’s been since I’ve had any hope that the war could be won.” Alyss again paused. When the offensive fell apart and the NC dispersed countless small fortresses, the hope she had so carefully guarded since her earliest days in the resistance had died.

“With Hossin back in our hands, we will once again have a place to build our strength. Ten years ago we proved that we can win this war. Today, we take that first step.” Alyss took a moment to unsling her Anchor; she was not above a bit of flourish. “The suits think the place is defended by the people who swindled us out of it. Those poor bastards forget we built those walls.” She tapped the pin on her chest. “But that doesn’t matter. We are Sigma. The wall that could keep us out hasn’t been built yet.”

The rest of Sigma murmured in assent.

“It’s gonna be a blind drop. That means we go in low and fast in a HART. It’s gonna be a bumpy ride. No rebirth when we get there, either. I don’t think there is a more dangerous place in the world to

drop into right now, but with you people at my back, I'd jump into hell itself. Now." She said, pausing long enough to look at each of them in turn. "Mount up."

The group turned and sprinted toward the *Daedalus*. Alyss walked behind them with a smile.

Matthews

Matthews sat huddled inside the base of a massive tree on the downward slope of a hill overlooking the old PMC compound. The Flash surprised him by running out of fuel before the engine failed. He had to hand it to the engineers at Nanite Systems - their gear was simple and low tech, but it was remarkably reliable. He had told himself that he'd stopped here so that he could observe the derelict base but that was only part of it. He had only managed six poor hours of sleep in the last two days. Even were it not for the fact that he had just trudged several kilometers through the rocky hills he would have been exhausted.

He had not seen any movement from the compound in fifteen minutes and the road leading east towards the old Amp station and the research enclave was silent. He took the opportunity to pull out the remaining ammunition supplies from his various pockets and confirmed what he already knew. The battery in his Orion had a partial charge and he had one in reserve. He carried a total of four batteries for his Cerberus including the one snapped into the power slot. It was possible to recharge spent batteries of course, but it required adapters, a forge, and a fusion generator. He had none of those things.

Matthews quietly stuffed the batteries back into their pockets for easy access and returned to his careful vigil. He still saw nothing moving or out of place. He sighed quietly, wishing he had access to Brandt's more advanced sensors capable of detecting things protected by active camouflage.

No use wishing for things he didn't have.

Matthews carefully stood from his hiding spot in spite of his body's tired protests. There would be time to rest when he was dead. For now, he still had a very long way to travel on foot. Holding his Orion low, he hustled down the hill and to the perimeter of the compound.

He paused at the east gate and peered inside. The Harasser's tire tracks from his escape the previous night were still clear in the soft dirt. The guard house where Waits and Sheffield died still bore the scars of the fight except the bodies had been removed. Probably melted down for the rebirthing tubes. He had never considered it particularly strange that a compound like this was returned to like new condition within a few hours of a battle being resolved. He had never really needed to consider the permanence historically associated with violence before. Rebirth was ubiquitous by the time he joined, and while he had seen countless men and women torn apart in battle it never stuck.

Occasionally, he'd kill someone on the other side only to see them hours later. For the first few months, it was odd enough that he would stop as his brain tried to make sense of it. Only now did he realize that this was one of the first psychological hurdles this endless war would heap on its immortal warriors. Mental illness was incredibly common in the ranks. Depression was common enough to no longer even qualify as a condition but merely a facet of the life of a soldier. What surprised psychologists most was how reliably personality disorders and psychosis was inflicted on once healthy minds. Sociopathic tendencies were common, leading to some believe that the condition could be trained given extreme conditioning. Forgetting that the target at the other end of the gun was a person was easy when pulling the trigger meant little more than a few moments of pain or the slightly disorientating inconvenience of rebirth for the victim.

Matthews still did not see anything moving and so ducked his head and sprinted into the compound. In moments, he reached one of the outermost buildings and his sprint slowed to a creeping walk as he approached a door. He shouldered the Orion and carefully edged around the door frame until he could see clearly in the dim space. Only partly convinced the structure was clear, he stepped inside and swept the room with his weapon and saw nothing. He spent several more minutes ensuring the

remainder of the rooms were similarly empty before moving back down to the door he had entered from.

It took him nearly half an hour to clear the buildings leading to the old dormitory. He didn't even dare hope the forge would still be present as he crossed the threshold into the lower level. This building, like the others, was seemingly still abandoned. He reached the final door leading to the room where they had placed the forges, where they had gathered to enjoy what turned out to be their last meal. Matthews suddenly realized that he was holding his breath. He quickly stepped into the room.

The forge was still there, silently sitting in the corner where they had left it.

Politics and Religion

Reese

Reese didn't know what to think as she slowly walked a dozen yards behind the Republic medic. She had been surprised to wake and find Brandt hovering over her. Brandt told her not to worry and to simply rest and that she had managed to find help. When she was finally well enough to do anything more than lie on her back and struggle to stay awake, Brandt had told her about the Harasser wreck and how she came across the stricken Ranger team.

Reese had asked Brandt why she would do such a thing but still didn't understand the answer. She had said "TR soldiers are just fighting for what they think is right. They've got as much a stake in this problem as we do."

Reese had been raised to believe the TR was full of jackbooted fascists - monsters barely worthy of being called human. Before the campaign on Indar, though, she had never actually encountered Republic soldiers that she could recall. On Indar, they upheld their reputation perfectly. Her first death was the result of a nearly two hour bombardment by a collection of prowlers sitting on a ridge far enough away that she couldn't even see them firing. She didn't even know she had been killed until she rebirthed. The second time, a soldier dropped from the sky on a jetpack and shot her at almost point blank range with a shotgun. The attack was badly aimed, though, and most of the shot collected in her hip. It surprised her enough that she didn't even think to try to use her own weapon until she'd already fallen to the ground and at that point the young man had jumped on top of her with a knife drawn. She couldn't say how long she had struggled with the man before he managed to press the knife through her heavy chest armor. That second time she woke screaming in the tube.

When the medic stopped by to check on her, she was nearly surprised to find him soft spoken and their short conversation implied a dry sense of humor. He hardly seemed like the monster he was supposed to be. It was almost like there was a man under that crimson armor. In her short interactions with the Rangers she was just as surprised to find that they were just as worried as she

was about really dying and just as angry about their dead. Aside from a slightly different accents the only thing that set them apart from her seemed to be the side they fought for.

Two of the Rangers, the medic named Rico and the infiltration specialist named Hemming, had been drafted. Even their pilot, Valeriya, had been conscripted. Only their leader, Camilla, had volunteered for the war. No one she knew in the Sovereignty had been forced to fight - they had done so willingly. But then she had joined to fight an enemy that seemingly didn't exist. She was simply fighting other men and women rather than the terrifying monsters that haunted her bedtime stories.

The five of them searched through the overgrown remains of an old Tech plant, hoping to find an intact nano-forge but thus far had found nothing of use. Brandt had managed to patch them both into the Ranger's battle net. Reese didn't know it was possible, but she was told it was simply a matter of having the right encryption and being invited. That, and being invited.

At last, the team arrived at the facility's massive central structure. The Ranger Lieutenant, an uptight young woman named Camilla, raised a hand to signal a stop and then made a gesture Reese didn't recognize. When everyone else started jogging to her she decided that it probably meant rally and so followed them. The idea of using a hand gesture in an era of subvocal communication boggled Reese's mind. If you could communicate with a thought, why waste time and energy with a movement of the arm that could easily be missed?

"This is a big building and we don't have a lot of time so I think we're going to need to split up." Said the Lieutenant. She pointed to Brandt and said "You're with me. We'll cover the south end" Camilla then looked at Rico and said "You take the other one. Search the north end Hemming, I want you to run through the top deck. These old tech plants seem to be all the same so there likely won't be anything up there unless they left a heavy forge or the defensive guns."

As quickly as they had gathered, they dispersed, and soon Reese found herself alone with the medic. They moved through the building in silence for a time, peering into empty rooms and prying open empty crates. When the NC left, they seem to have taken everything of value with them.

Rico finally broke the increasingly uncomfortable silence. "So, how are you feeling?" He asked without looking up from the large crate he was rummaging through.

Reese had tried to ignore the fatigue that hounded her and the stiff soreness in her abdomen. "Not great." She admitted. "Breathing is a bit uncomfortable and I feel like I need to sleep for a few days."

The man stopped digging for a moment, stood, and pulled out his medical applicator. He walked over and pointed it at her for a few moments before clicking his tongue. "Not surprised about the tenderness. You still have some tearing of your mesentery. You were also short about two liters of blood when your friend dumped you on my lap and I could only spare enough mass to replace one of them. Normally I wouldn't let someone go in your condition but..."

The two of them continued through their half of the facility when Reese finally asked "So how bad was it?"

Rico peeked into an empty closet and said "Pretty bad. The round you took went through your armor like it wasn't there and stopped in your back. Some of the fragments spread out in your abdomen but the real damage was that it tore through your liver. Bad case of sepsis, the start of a nasty infection and a lot of blood loss." He turned towards her before saying "Honestly, I'm surprised I managed to save you. Usual protocol for someone in your condition is to do nothing and just let you rebirth."

"So why did you? Try and save me, I mean." Said Reese.

Rico shrugged. "Your friend was there with a gun. It didn't seem like I had much of a choice."

Reese smiled. "Friend? You mean Brandt? I only met her yesterday. We barely spoke before I got hit."

"Hell of a thing, then. I saw her drag you out of that Harasser after it flipped. I figured you'd known each other for years for her to do something like that considering the circumstances." Rico said. He stopped in front of a heavy door and pressed the button to open it. The door buzzed angrily, refusing to budge. He activated his radio and said "We've got a locked security door down here. I need one of you cloaker dirtbags to come over here and see if you can get it opened."

Hemming's voice buzzed across the radio. "Why do you have to say things you know will hurt me? I'll be down there in a few."

Rico leaned against the door and looked at Reese. "So, if she isn't your friend, why did she carry you out of there and drag you out of that wreck?"

"I don't know." Said Reese. "I was pretty sure I was going to die. I'm still am, I guess. I figured she'd be the one to make it out of this place alive if any of us did, though. I asked her to find my mom and tell her what happened. She said she'd do whatever it took to make sure I could tell her myself." Reese blinked back tears. "The last thing I remember her saying to me before I woke up is that no one should have to die alone."

"How long have you been in the field?" Rico asked.

"Three months." Said Reese.

"Three months? Shit, how old are you?" Asked Rico with a snort.

"18. I joined on my birthday" She said.

Rico said nothing for a moment before exhaling heavily. “You joined? You mean you volunteered for this shit?”

“Someone has to. I mean what’s the alternative, letting the Republic decide what people are ready for? Three hundred years of peace and the moment we get through the wormhole it’s martial law and curfews and public executions.” Reese countered. “Why did you join?”

Rico laughed. “I told you already, I was drafted. They closed down my medical school and a Commissar came around picking people out of the crowd.”

“You could have said no.”

“The only way you can say no is if you’re willing to join up with the NC or the VS, and by that point they only way they’d accept refugees is if they were willing to wear the colors. Sooner or later, everyone in the Republic will end up fighting. One way or the other.” Rico said.

“In the Sovereignty, you could work on the research teams or in a field hospital. They don’t make doctors serve on the front lines unless they request combat duty.”

Rico laughed bitterly. “I don’t believe that Vanu is the way to the future. I mean, if they’re so great then where are they? We’ve been here 200 years and all we’ve found is ruins. As for the NC, well, that one is even easier. The Republic was at peace for hundreds of years. The minute we hit the other side of the wormhole, though, they decided the laws they had always followed didn’t apply any more and have spent every day since trying to shatter the Republic. I don’t even understand why.”

Reese was stunned. The technology of Vanu was all around them. What they’d found had already allowed them to take nanomachines from technical curiosities to the point where they were ubiquitous. It was the technology of Vanu that allowed researchers to develop rebirth. “How can you

say that Vanu isn't the way? Look around you. Your gear was built by nanomachines. Your friends are still alive because of them. What about rebirth?" She sputtered.

"Do you really think that stuff is a boon for humanity? How long do you think this war could have lasted without rebirth or without nanomachine manufacturing?" Rico said.

"You shouldn't talk politics or religion, man." Hemming said.

The sudden intrusion startled Reese and she turned and looked at the man as he sauntered over to the door. Hemming quickly pried the cover off the control and busied himself with the wiring inside. "Nothing good comes of it." He said without looking up.

Reese knew the man was right. Clearly, a Republic Ranger wasn't going to convert on the battlefield. If he couldn't see the light, he would have to be crushed. She wasn't sure why, but the thought drained her.

"Besides." Said Hemming. "For the moment we're need to concern ourselves with stopping your wayward friends." Hemming clipped something into place and the door began to slide open. "Right?"

Reese clenched her teeth tightly. "Those bastards might wear the purple but they are not my friends."

Rico reached inside the surprisingly spacious room flicked on the light and whistled at what he saw. Reese shifted so she could see inside. Racks loaded with dull grey weapons filled the space. They'd found an armory that the NC had forgotten to take.

Hemming slapped Reese on the back. "Speaking of wearing purple, I think it would be best if you could slap some red on your suit there. Don't want anyone mistaking you for one of them, eh?"

Express Elevator to Hell

Mitchell

“Hey, Mitchell, how ya’ holdin’ up?” Asked Taylor, with a grin.

On his second day in the Sigma trials, the team had spent several hours circling Auraxis at low orbit in a HART. He’d never had much of a stomach for zero-g and when they were finally cleared for a hot drop directly into the perimeter of a Terran battalion, the wild bucking of his drop pod broke through his meager resistance against the building nausea and he’d vomited mid drop. Both he and his pod were evenly coated in what remained of that morning’s chow. The drop was a disaster. Three members had their pods destroyed in flight and half the squad was down within thirty seconds of landing. The rest of them had held on long enough for Mitchell to plant the small auraxium charge he carried which blasted a two hundred meter hole in the Terran defenses. He and Taylor had been forced behind the same tiny rock for almost ten minutes before they were finally overrun by a Terran squad. When Taylor made a comment about the smell, Mitchell made the mistake of telling him what had happened.

Taylor had never let him live it down.

“Fine.” He lied.

The *Daedalus* was rocking wildly. They were on the terminal phase of the flight and the pilot had dipped the ship well into the atmosphere. Usually, drops from a HART were done just below a low orbit. According to the flight plan Alyss had shared, they were going to drop from a mere 80km.

“Man, why do we gotta drop from so low?” Asked Jace.

“No beacon.” Said James.

“So?” Said Jace.

“The pods don’t have anything to lock onto. Auraxis’s orbital gravity is screwy because of all the auraxium. You drop from orbit without a beacon to lock onto and the odds of hitting anywhere close to where you want are nil. Dropping low reduces drop error is all.” James explained.

“One day, you’re going to have to tell me why you seem to know everything, Strottman.” Shouted Alyss.

James laughed across the squad channel. “If I could tell you why auraxium causes the gravity fluctuations, I’d be a rich man.”

“All I want to know is how much longer are we going to be stuck in these pods.” Said Mitchell.

“Why don’t you look out the window and see where we are?” Said Taylor.

The rest of Sigma laughed at the jab. “Man, shut up Taylor. All you did that drop was hide behind a rock until that Max came over and kicked you in the head.” Said Mitchell.

“Hey, don’t get snippy with me, man. You could always look at at your battle computer. It is linked to the Daedalus, you know.” Said Taylor.

Mitchell had kept his eyes closed since the *Daedalus* lit its engines. Not having any visual frame of reference seemed to help with the nausea. He cracked an eye and glanced at the computer strapped to his wrist. With just over half an hour to go, he screwed his eyes closed and swallowed hard against the rising taste of salt.

The half hour ticked by in an eternity.

“Two minutes to drop.” Said the *Daedalus*’s pilot.

“You heard the man, Sigma. Lock it down. If I find out one of you got brained by your own weapon because you forgot to strap it in before the drop, I’m gonna make you clean Mitchell’s pod.” Shouted Alyss.

Mitchell finally opened his eyes and glanced around. His Tempest was clipped in place next to him but he gave it a test shake just to make sure. The weapon didn’t budge. Satisfied, he grabbed the straps of his harness and pulled them down as hard as he could.

“One minute.” Said the pilot.

“Release the safeties.” Said Alyss.

Mitchell reached to the side of the pod and lifted the small plastic cover that protected the safety switch. He took a deep breath before flicking the safety off.

“Green across the board. Anyone having second thoughts?” Asked Alyss.

“I’d take an express elevator to hell if it meant getting off this ship any sooner, ma’am.” Said Mitchell.

The comment earned a chuckle from Mike. “Pretty sure that’s exactly what we’re doing.” He said.

“Ten seconds.” Said the pilot.

As if on cue, the door to his pod snapped shut and a heavily padded harness slammed down across Mitchell’s chest, locking him into place. A robotic voice counted backwards from ten. At eight, the pod shifted slightly as it dropped into the final staging chamber. At five, something hummed beneath his feet. Mitchell knew that this was the HART’s outer door sliding open. At three seconds, there was

a loud click from above as the pod was disconnected from the *Daedalus*'s life support and fuel system. At one second, a quiet whine started building as the capacitor bank for the launch rail charged.

The voice reached zero and, as if on command, an invisible elephant sat on his chest as the pod was fired from the *Daedalus* with 20g of acceleration for a fraction of a second. Mitchell dared to look out the thin view screen for a moment and saw a dull green mass rushing towards him.

"Godspeed, Sigma." Said the pilot as the HART burned away.

Ten seconds into the flight, the pod fired its maneuvering thrusters, flipping it right side up. Seconds later, the drag fins snapped open and mild vibration quickly turned into violent bucking. Normally, the drag fins would stabilize the pod and smooth the ride. Mitchell opened his eyes again and looked at the instruments. One of the fins hadn't deployed.

He was wildly off course.

He reached over for the manual controls and activated his voice line. "I've got a problem." He said.

Mitchell struggled to correct his drop pod's course. At five thousand meters from the ground he'd drifted almost 40 kilometers from the rest of Sigma and had burned through most of the fuel for his pod's main engine. The computer was screaming a warning about burn rates that he couldn't ignore any longer. He reached over and slapped the autopilot causing the main engine to roar to life as it tried to shed speed.

Mitchell looked at the altitude reading as it counted down far too fast. He closed his eyes and tried to relax even as the pod filled the space with fast set crash foam and the inertial dampeners quietly hummed to life.

Enough to Start a War

Brandt

Lieutenant Camilla had not said a word since splitting up. Brandt was fine with that. The Lieutenant was young and new. Worse than that, she was a true believer. Brandt had known hundreds of men and women just like her. Most of them had the belief torn out of them by inches in the life and death reality of combat.

Before rebirth, survival was more important than politics. The few who somehow retained their belief in the cause became the battalion commissaires. The posting was a death sentence in all but name. Being quick to administer brutal corporal punishment and summary execution for slight infractions was a bad habit to combine with leading the charge against some enemy stronghold. Fratricide was a more common cause of death in the ranks of the commissars than enemy action. Brandt never understood why they kept the commissars around after rebirth. It took a special kind of sadist to try and encourage heroics among immortals by inflicting arbitrary violence on them. The best she had ever come up with was that they were still around because the position had always been there - just another rotten and crumbling institution made irrelevant for the Republic to cling to. The Lieutenant was clearly gunning for a commissar posting, even if she didn't know it.

"So, who are you, anyway?" The Lieutenant asked, breaking Brandt's reverie.

"What?" Asked Brandt.

"Before you switched sides. Rico thinks you were a Ranger." She said.

"I was. 1st Company '45 to '51." She said.

The Lieutenant turned toward Brandt, her eyes wide with surprise. "1st Company? As in 'Heroes of Heartbreak Ridge'?"

Brandt winced at the title. In 2846, a company from 3rd Amerish Infantry Regiment was cut off in a mountain stronghold by a combined operation consisting of elements of three of the NC's constituent corporations: Esamir Munitions, Genuidne Dynamics and Auraxis Firearms. Terran Command had tried sending three different relief efforts. Two of them were on the ground, but the narrow passes of central Amerish were ideal for ambush and both efforts were turned back after sustaining heavy casualties. The third was an airborne insertion. Poor weather and heavy NC anti-aircraft resulted in a bad drop. Only 60 of the 300 soldiers dropped ended up inside the Terran perimeter. The repeated failures to break the siege is what earned that otherwise unnamed section of a mountain its name.

1st Company was tasked with trying to break through the NC ring by taking a treacherous route through the mountains in the middle of the night. Command failed to account for the fact that an Amerish winter at 4000 meters was as brutal an obstacle as a well defended battle line and believed the trip could be completed in a few hours. The plan called for 1st Company to launch an assault under the slim cover of darkness while the rest of 3rd Amerish pushed up two different passes while the NC were distracted but the Rangers were still struggling through the mountains at the appointed hour. Since they traveled in complete radio silence to ensure the attack was a surprise, neither the Rangers nor the 3rd were aware of the problem the timing issue caused and the assault was turned back with ease. It was midday before the Rangers reached their assault position and, believing they were supporting a much larger effort, they streamed down from the top of the mountain, directly into the NC position.

The PMC troops were utterly stunned by the audacity of the attack, and the Rangers managed to wedge an opening in their lines. They held the gap open for more than an hour while the survivors limped through and then held a rear guard to slow the NC pursuit. The 3rd Amerish, still licking their wounds after the last assault, scrambled to react, eventually managing to meet what remained of the stranded company and the Rangers. After a brief battle, the PMCs pulled back. There was no profit in trying to grind away at the Republic lines in a set piece battle.

The rescue cost the Rangers dearly. They were light infantry and fought unsupported against a superior mixed force of infantry and armor at close range; they sustained 70% casualties. Nearly a quarter of the Rangers who set out died crossing the mountains or in the desperate fighting after. Brandt lost four of her friends that day.

“If you can call it that. Victims of command incompetence is what I’d call it.” Said Brandt.

“You were there?” Said the Lieutenant with barely concealed awe.

Brandt nodded. “I was a corporal. That meant you were a team leader back then. No idea if that’s still how it works. First time I was wounded, though. Grenade fragments in my back and leg. Infiltration suits didn’t have shields back then.”

“My dad was there. He was a commander in 3rd Amerish. He said he’d never seen anything like it. It’s why I went to Academy on Esamir and volunteered for Ranger duty.” Said Camilla.

An Army brat with delusions of grandeur. Almost worse than being a zealot. Though Brandt.

They walked together in silence for a few minutes. They had been on the far side of the massive facility when Rico had called with the good news about the armory.

“So, why’d you do it?” Camilla asked.

It was a long story. If she really traced it, it all came back to the first Battle of Indar. She’d seen first hand just how brutal war was, and then, one day, people stopped dying. She joined the army because someone bombed a cafe and killed her mother and sister. The lust for revenge burned out quickly leaving only the loyalty to the men and women she served with.

Most of them gave everything for the Republic. Of the 150 people in her training cohort, only 60 survived the nuclear exchange on Searhus. By the first battle of Indar, the first major military operation backed by rebirth technology, there were only twelve of them left.

After the disaster, the Republic stopped waiting for volunteers and began conscription. They discarded the idea of putting an entire cohort into the field as a single unit and instead split old units apart to place veterans in the ranks of the rookies. She had never been able to integrate with the new breed of soldier. They had never known death. They would never know the creeping fear that dogged every step on a patrol or the panic that followed the searing pain of a gunshot wound. War had become little more than a game. Rebirth, fight, die. Repeat until the end of time.

The pointlessness of that new war rendered all that previous sacrifice meaningless.

“When they split up the veterans, I was moved to a line unit as a company first scout. I tried to resign and pointed out that they didn’t need the manpower. They said no - ‘Loyalty ‘till Death’ and all. Bounced around line companies for a few years. Never did make any new friends. Couldn’t relate to the new blood. I asked one of our medics if he could pull me from the rebirth network and spent six months in re-education for the trouble.” She said.

“You wanted to die?” Camilla asked in a horrified tone.

“No. I just didn’t want to do this anymore” Said Brandt, gesturing to nothing in particular. “And I didn’t want to remember.” She added. “When I got hit on Esamir in ‘56, I didn’t bother triggering rebirth. I just stayed there in the snow until the VS patrol found me still breathing and dragged me off.”

“Torture?” Asked Camilla, probing for some reason she could understand for treason.

“No. They patched me up and left me to myself. Better bed than I ever had in the Republic. Then they sent in someone to talk to me. I guess they figured if you don’t actually suicide after a few days you don’t want to go back. They asked me why and and I told them. Seemed like they understood. They came back the next day and offered me entry into the Sentinel program.” Brandt paused for a moment to wonder why she was telling the woman her life story. She certainly hadn’t done anything to earn it.

“Sentinel? You mean the robots?” Said Camilla.

Brandt bristled at the description. Lots of people saw the Sentinels as little more than machines with an odd attachment to organic parts.

“Not robots. Not entirely at any rate. They install a bypass in your brain. It lets you forget stuff. Anything that triggers an emotional response gets edited.” She explained. “The only catch is that you had to fight for the VS. I said yes.”

“But why turn your back on the Republic?” Asked Camilla, clearly too dense to drop what was obviously a touchy subject.

“Because there was nothing left for me to fight for.” Brandt said firmly.

Camilla wisely dropped the subject and the two of them walked the rest of the way to the armory in tension filled silence.

The armory itself was nearly a miraculous find. Brandt had only dared hope they would find an overlooked weapons locker. It was disservice to call what they found an armory - it was an entire wing of the facility. Mulac Tech Plant was home to one of the largest nano-forges on the continent - one of the few big enough to construct the enormous Vanguarders that the NC had used to such devastating effect on Indar. It had also seemingly been used to construct the various personal

weapons used during that campaign and replacements had been stockpiled. Row after row of the finest weapons the NC could build or buy filled the space - thousands of guns and millions of rounds of ammunition. Enough firepower to start a war.

The group split up to browse the racks. Brandt came across Hemming who was staring at a collection of scout rifles. He looked up at the intrusion before turning his gaze back towards the weapons.

Brandt grabbed one of them and examined it closely. The two scout rifles the NC commonly employed looked nearly identical from a distance. A quick glance at the stamp showed it was an AF-18 - the light caliber variant of the platform. She'd never liked the idea of the light scout rifle. Seemed to miss the point. She placed the rifle back on the rack. Hemming was still staring absentmindedly at the weapons.

"Something wrong, Sergeant?" She asked.

He shook his head. "I don't actually know anything about most of these." He admitted.

"You fall asleep during enemy weapon's familiarization week or something?" She said.

"They don't do that anymore. Official training is only three weeks long and the rest is on the job." He said. "Wish I'd paid more attention to what the NC were using."

Maybe it was the long experience as the resident veteran of Terran line units. Maybe it was because the young man had faced death once and survived and was rightly terrified of doing it again. Brandt didn't know where the urge came from. She simply found herself pointing to various weapons on the rack and explaining their merits and flaws like she still wore her old Master Sergeant stripes.

Wings of Fortune

Matthews

The oppressive heat of the swamp began to fade as Matthews jogged deeper into the hills toward the bright green AR waypoint that seemed to blaze from the setting sun. He had already started to regret his choice to build the heavy S1 plasma cannon strapped to his back. Knowing that his suit actually carried the burden did nothing to convince his back and shoulders of that fundamental truth. He focused on that burden because the smaller one was still too terrible and final to wrap his mind around.

After he had forged the batteries and the launcher and the other small and trivial pieces of equipment used to fight this war he had activated a failsafe on the forge. A fusion or fission device was simply not possible - fissile materials were not part of the standard mass-load. The failsafe took what remained of the auraxium core that provided the power to the nanomachines and constructed a bomb. He didn't understand the process - he only knew that it was possible. The bomb was impossibly small and fit into an armored carrier strapped below the launcher on his back. It was also tremendously powerful. The half kilogram pure auraxium sphere inside the bomb carried the potential energy of a fission bomb orders of magnitude larger.

The bomb had two detonators. One was a simple button on an unassuming black stick the size of his thumb that he carried on his armor. The other was his triage module. Getting through the gates of the compound at the heart of Hossin seemed like an impossible task. If he somehow made it through their shields, finding time to manually detonate the bomb seemed impossible. Safer to put it on a deadman switch. The physical one was just a small accommodation for what he knew to be a foolish hope - that he'd be able to plant the bomb and reach minimum safe distance before detonating it.

Matthews tried to ignore the fact that the bomb existed. The bomb was a problem for later. The rocky hills were problem enough for the moment and the distance he still needed to travel on foot the more pressing one still. No sense being reduced to atoms if he couldn't get the bomb into place.

He crested the latest hill and paused for a moment to catch a breath before jogging down the slope. He had just started deliberately plodding his way up the next hill when he saw something streaking through the sky in his peripheral vision. Matthews snapped his head to follow the object in the distance and blinked in disbelief.

It was a drop pod; it was dropping far too fast.

He sprinted to the top of the next hill and watched as it screamed through the sky until it was lost behind the trees at least a kilometer to his north. He accessed his battle computer AR overlay and it quickly provided a rough guess of where the pod had fallen, marking the area on his map just south of an old infantry command center. Their tour guide had mentioned in passing that the security team still used the facility as it acted as the western perimeter of the enclave. Surely they would notice the pod.

It was too early to reasonably hope for reinforcements, but the pod had not broadcast any IFF on the way down. If it was another traitor, they would have been singing their presence to any sensor that might listen. Running silent meant black ops. Or a systems failure. Still, he reasoned, there was a chance that someone on that pod was on his side in all of this. If they were still alive.

He considered the map for a moment before plotting new route through the marked crash zone. The terrain was easier to the north, but put him uncomfortably close to the traitors earlier than seemed wise. Still, two soldiers had a better shot of delivering the bomb than one.

The thought of the bomb strapped to his back made the decision for him. He would go two kilometers out of his way in the hopes of finding someone to aid him in the mission. If he was honest with himself, he made the detour because those two kilometers put triggering the bomb a few minutes further away.

Alyss

Alyss had been in more drops than she could hope to count but had never seen one go as badly as the one she just experienced. Mitchell's pod had deflected wildly off course, and the rest of them had been scattered across a few square kilometers. None of them landed anywhere near the intended site. Alyss marked a rally point in the remains of an old arboretum. She'd gotten an acknowledgement from everyone except Mitchell.

Nicholas and Jace had arrived first - hardly a surprise given they had more than a decade of experience as spotters and scouts between them.

"Either of you hear anything from Mitchell?" She asked.

"Just when he said he was having a problem on the drop." Said Jace.

The rest of Sigma trickled in over the space of an hour. Vivian was covered in mud. When asked what happened she simply muttered something about walking through a swamp like a peasant. Harris laughed at the insult and pointed out she could have refused the assignment to Sigma.

Alyss raised her voice above the wave of laughter and asked "Has anyone heard from Mitchell?"

A few said no; the rest shook their heads.

"Vivian, work with Harris and Nicholas to figure out where his pod went down." She said.

"For the rest of you - if you checked your map you'll have noticed the bullshit drop. We're about 70 clicks east of the mark. I don't know about the rest of you, but I don't really feel like walking that far. The question is, do we have a better option?" She asked before glancing to Strottman. "What about you, Strottman? Know anywhere we can catch a ride?"

Strottman shook his head. "We stripped everything of value out of here that we could in the time frame - the grav lifts and forges were some of the first things out. Any constructed vehicles were used to carry the rest."

Alyss sighed. She did not relish the idea of a long march through the swamp. The trip could take days and the Board expected results well before that.

"What about that Galaxy wreck at the biolab?" Asked Taylor.

Alyss turned towards the young woman. "Galaxy wreck?"

"It was on the pad, I think. It was hard to tell, but I saw it on the way down. It was still smoking." Taylor clarified.

Alyss considered the new wrinkle. Not just a Galaxy wreck but a fresh one. That meant they clearly were not alone. It might even be possible to salvage, depending on the damage. Regardless, it was a curiosity that was compelling enough and close enough to be worth investigating.

"Cynthia, Nicholas, Taylor, and Natalie, you're on rescue duty. Find Mitchell and bring him back." She discreetly left the one way or another out but the implication was clear to everyone. No report and no emergency signal didn't bode well for the man. "The rest of you, are with me. We're going to check out that wreck."

Something in the dark corner of her mind reserved for instinct clawed for attention. Something was off about this drop. As she hefted her Anchor to a low ready and marched into the swamp towards the biolab, she tried to silence the voice, dismissing it as jitters that ought to accompany a temporary interruption of immortality.

Valeriya

The Rangers reported that they'd found a huge cache of personal weapons almost an hour earlier, but chose to continue combing the plant in the hopes of finding ammunition to refit the Valkyrie. Valeriya didn't have any faith that they'd find something useful. The New Conglomerate did not favor the old fashioned slug throwers or ancient rocket technology in her Valkyrie. The aircraft didn't even exist when Hossin fell. Even if they found something heavy enough to use on *Freya*, without the support of a crack engineering team it wasn't like they'd be able to strap it to the ship anyhow.

The odds of finding something to refit her ship were not what concerned Valeriya at the moment though - it was the dozen signatures she had picked up for a few seconds on her sensors. There wasn't time to properly identify them before they disappeared, but given their appearance high in the atmosphere and near vertical drop she knew exactly what they were: drop pods.

She didn't think it would be more reinforcements for the cultists in the swamp and if the ex-ranger's story could be trusted they probably weren't VS at all. The NC wouldn't have any reason to show up that she knew of - they had ignored their old stronghold for a decade, so why would they return now? She didn't dare hope they were Terran, either. Terrans never made a drop without blasting IFF on the way down; they also could not possibly have launched a counterattack on such short notice unless they were literally on standby when the London went down.

Still, something had dropped.

Valeriya lifted *Freya* above the canopy, turning on her scout radar in the same motion and drifted into a wide slow circle. Nothing was big enough to trigger the sensor, and nothing squawked loud enough to pick up over background EM. Even at this distance, a major military operation would have commanders and their minions chattering back and forth often enough that she'd be able to pick up something.

She was about to abandon the small mystery for the moment when she remembered the VS codes she'd been given. She punched them in and set the scout radar to a slow and narrow sweep in the direction she'd seen the original reading. After a few moments a small blip appeared with a tag - C. Matthews, B. The reading was moving.

One of the soldiers from the biolab was still alive.

It didn't explain the mysterious sensor blips, but it seemed like the sort of thing worth breaking radio silence for.

Mitchell

The drop pod door was open and the interior dark. Mitchell considered the pod for a moment and decided it must be a dream - the load bearing frame was twisted and warped like a strand of taffy left in the sun. He tried to move only to come to a pair of discoveries nearly simultaneously. First, he was still tightly strapped in place. Second was a shooting pain in his right thigh. That second realization meant that it probably wasn't a dream.

Slowly, he remembered the drop. His pod was travelling at nearly terminal velocity when he turned the autopilot back on and the rocket motor simply didn't have the kind of thrust needed to slow to a safe landing speed. He was surprised he was still alive and made a mental note to find out who had designed the pod and recommend them for a bonus.

Mitchell reached for the harness release, pressed it, and fell heavily onto his face. The pain in his thigh, once merely distracting, shoved its way forward. He suppressed the urge to scream and instead just laid on the twisted remains of the pod for a moment until it subsided. He risked turning over on his back and discovered something felt off in his right forearm. It didn't hurt, but then he wasn't sure he'd notice over the pain in his leg.

Mitchell pushed himself upright using and gently probed the injury. There was a strange rigid lump in the middle of his thigh and his pant leg was damp and sticky and clung to his leg.

He sighed knowing that he probably wouldn't be able to set the fracture which meant a medkit wouldn't do anything but stop the bleeding and take the edge off the pain. Still, killing the pain was more than enough to be worth the trouble. As he applied the kit, he felt a rush as the stims raised his heartrate and provided focus; the pain in his leg retreated. It was still there, even though the drug haze, it just felt distant and alien - almost like it was someone else's pain.

He reached over and flicked the emergency transponder switch. Unless he wanted to crawl to the rest of Sigma, he'd need to wait until one of them came along to help set his leg. He would have been content to simply wait in the pod when he heard something - a sound suspiciously like the rumbling engine of a Sunderer. As far as he knew, the NC hadn't left any of the heavy vehicles behind when they abandoned Hossin. They certainly hadn't left any forge large enough to construct one. That meant whoever was driving the Sunderer was almost certainly not going to be happy to find him in their swamp.

In horror, he realized that by turning on the emergency transponder, he'd just told them exactly where he was. Cursing to himself, he pulled his Tempest from its rack and crawled out of the twisted opening in his pod. He'd need to try and find cover and hope he could either hide or hold long enough for the rest of Sigma to come to the rescue.

The Last Sane Man

Rico

The evening sun had already sunk below the canopy and the long shadows merged into an ever present gloom that clung to the floor of the swamp. Rico heaved the crate of ammunition into the Valkyrie before climbing into the cramped space. He was about to sit down when he realized they'd never actually cleaned the interior after Valeriya had pulled them out. The blood had mostly dried leaving a few sticky patches behind.

Surprisingly little blood, all things considered.

"Where are the rest?" Valerya asked.

Rico shrugged tiredly. "Trying to track down some paint, I think. Hemming mentioned that our 'friends' didn't really wear anything to distinguish themselves from the rest of the VS here and the Lieutenant agreed they should try and correct it."

"I thought you said the people you were fighting were wearing some kind of camouflage." Said Valeriya, more as a question than a statement.

"They were. Some kinda nasty green." Said Rico.

"And the Lieutenant doesn't think she can tell the difference between green and grey?" Asked Valeriya.

He knew the reason why the Lieutenant was trying to find paint, though. On any other day, they would happily shoot one another. The excuse that it was for target recognition was just that - an excuse. Keyed into the same network as they were, the AR overlay did a fine job of identifying friend

from foe. She just wanted to cement the fact that they were working together in something more concrete than words. It was a symbolic act.

Rico smiled to himself. "I think they just wanted to get out of hauling all this ammo."

He glanced over at the crate he had just loaded. It was the fourth one he had carried and was surprised at how heavy it was considering how tiny the actual rounds were. Most of the mass in a magazine was dedicated to the battery that powered the coil systems.

Everything about NC equipment seemed off, though. His SABR was mostly constructed out of polymer and ceramic. Unloaded it only weighed two kilograms. Rather than the elegant plastic curves of his SABR, the Gauss Rifle he had pilfered was a boxy construct clearly designed to look as though it was stamped out of steel. Not that it was, of course - it was made out of polymer and ceramic. The added bulk was dedicated to housing the large electromagnet coils and capacitor banks. In spite of the added bulk, though, it was no heavier than his SABR. It felt like he was holding a toy.

"So, what about that signal you picked up?" Rico asked, hoping to fill the silence.

"The VS guy?" Asked Valeria, turning in her seat.

"No, the drop pods." Rico clarified.

"I don't know what to think. The VS don't think it's their people and I'm entirely certain it isn't any of ours. I can't think of any reason the NC would choose now to show up and you'd think the VS in this dump would just waltz up to the front door and knock." She said.

Rico laughed at the logic. "So, you're saying that either you're crazy or your ship is broken? That's the only thing you aren't ruling out."

Valeriya didn't laugh. The two sat in silence until the Lieutenant appeared in the distant doorway.

"Do you think maybe they're right?" Asked Valeriya.

"About?" Asked Rico, confused by the question.

"The VS here. The ones who want to launch the weapon." She clarified.

Rico had considered it. The campaign he had left on Indar was his fourth in that region in the last year. Weeks of blood and violence would move the front a few kilometers in one direction or the other until, inevitably, the supplies ran out or some new crisis would call for the offensive to fall. Then the line would grow quiet for a time until what had been gained was slowly lost. The Republic simply couldn't ever muster the power necessary to decisively break the stalemate anywhere.

Neither could the others.

He had access to the casualty records for his company, of course. He had to keep an eye on soldiers during periods of rapid rebirth for an affliction known only as Rebirth Hysteria. It expressed itself in many ways - hallucinations being the most common - but was debilitating on the battlefield. There was no prescribed treatment beyond simply rotating that soldier to lighter duty. The constant cycle of life and death could easily break someone if not tended to. It was a hard lesson for the Republic. Most of the veterans who had survived the pre-rebirth campaigns deserted. Some went into hiding. Some decided that the NC's ideas for the world were better than what the Republic had pitched. Others were lured by the promise of salvation offered by the Cult of Vanu. Many, though, had taken Brandt's path of oblivion.

Hysteria was not common in the ranks of the Rangers, though. Their casualty levels were generally light compared to a line company. The Indar campaign lasted almost a standard month and required

a total of just over six-thousand rebirths - two per soldier per day on average. He had once heard that in the average month the Republic Army required more than twenty million rebirths to sustain the various field operations.

Casualty levels on Auraxis would have been unsustainable by any society in history. Even the Republic of Old with a population of tens of billions would have been ground away to nothing given a few years.

The Republic on Auraxis had managed the feat for a decade. Rebirth and nano-forging made it possible to carry on the fight but it also made it impossible to win, and yet the war carried on year after year, spending more lives in a day than had existed on Auraxis in two hundred years of human occupation. He had wondered more than once how long it would take before the machine that fueled this war fell apart. Decades at least, he assumed. And what would happen when they started vat growing replacements for those lost to the Hysteria?

He honestly didn't think it would be possible to win the war. Eventually the hysteria got to everyone. It took fewer and fewer rebirth cycles to express symptoms and longer rest periods for them to subside. Victory would seemingly go to whichever side managed to rotate the troops better or to the side with more minds to absorb whatever damage constant rebirth caused - to the last side with a sane man to put behind a gun.

The war was already reaching the point where it was a part of life on Auraxis. Given a few more years, the soldiers being conscripted would have never known of life before the war. The youngest already only had dimly held memories.

If he was honest, the Goo didn't seem any worse than letting the war continue and carry on to its bitter and inevitable end. He rejected the thought though. The risk was too great. What if it did consume all of Auraxis? And even if it didn't, there was always some hope that there would be a moment of sanity among whatever madmen ordered the divisions to new fronts where they could live

and die and live again would see the insanity of it all and broker some kind of real peace while there were at least a few sane people left to appreciate the end. He rejected it because one avenue offered the distant hope that the war would end with enough humanity left in the survivors to recognize them as human. Ultimately, he rejected the idea because handing control of humanity over to anyone dumb enough to use a weapon like goo seemed like the height of insanity.

“I think that trying to find a way to end the war before we all go crazy is a fine idea. That’s why we’ve got to stop them. They’re already insane.”

“Who’s insane?” Asked Hemming

“Anyone fool enough to be in this shithole.” Said Rico.

Reese laughed at the joke. Rico noted that they had failed to find paint and instead had simply placed strips of caution tape on her arms and chest as a marker.

“I like the tape job.” Said Rico with a smile.

Reese looked at her arm and noticed a strip was already trying to peel away in the humidity. She smoothed it down with a gloved hand. “I guess since we’re all on the same side it makes sense. Plus, there was less purple to cover than the red you guys were wearing.” She said.

“That and we couldn’t find any purple paint.” Brandt said in a deadpan tone.

Valeriya laughed from the cockpit. “Just as well. If one of you tries to paint my ship, I swear to god I’ll dump you mid flight.”

“So, where are we going?” Rico asked the Lieutenant.

Camilla glanced at Brandt before answering. "To see if we can find our missing man of course."

Leverage

Alyss

The main square in the Biolab was a scene of carnage with bodies strewn haphazardly across the space. The bodies all wore Sovereignty armor. Some had been shot with small arms, while others had been the victims of the plasma flash heating. All of them had seemingly been killed with Sovereignty weapons.

“Did you see this Max over here?” asked Mike. “Someone put two slugs through its head at point blank range.”

Alyss had only noticed the warping of the outer armor on the Max and assumed the user had been killed by the intense heat. She shuddered to think of the idea of being broiled alive trapped inside that kind of suit. She’d rather get hit directly - it was quicker. Still, that meant someone had been carrying a slugthrower. Sovereignty soldiers almost never carried such a thing, preferring the clinical precision of their plasma weapons.

“Davis, what’s the story on that Galaxy.” Asked Alyss over the squad channel.

“Some damage to both primary thrust engines and a hell of a mess in the cockpit.” Said Davis. After a short delay he added. “The damage to the engines is minor. We could probably piece enough of the controls back together to get it into the air, assuming we can scrape what’s left of the pilot out of here.”

Alyss tried to piece together what had happened. The bodies on the floor had presumably arrived on the Galaxy. Then they had cut the door and walked into a shitstorm. She looked around the courtyard again. Other than a small bloodstain on the stairs leading to the PPA there was no sign of the ambushers. It had clearly been a firefight - there were enough pock marks etched in the walls

and improvised barricades to tell her that. Something at her feet caught her eye. She reached down and picked up a shell casing and looked at it closely. NS .357 AP was stamped on the rim.

Everything about the scene pointed to a VS ambush. So why would the VS ambush themselves? Even the most undisciplined partisan mob would realize their error long before they had managed this kind of damage.

Strottman poked his head out from a nearby door. "Boss, you should come see this." He said.

Alyss followed him into a small room filled with partly disassembled electronics. The remains of the dome's communication room she guessed.

Strottman pointed to one of the machines and said "Someone used the old hardline to make a call to all receiving stations." He said.

"When?" Alyss asked.

"About eight hours ago." He answered.

"Encrypted?" She asked.

"Heavily." Said Strottman. "But, after that, they received a call - from a VS held station on Amerish."

"Can you give me a short version?" Asked Alyss.

"The outbound was high end VS military crypto. These old facilities are all linked by a hardline network, right? This comms room just blasts messages out to all the linked facilities because of the early interference problems. Someone here sent out a call and a VS held lab called them back. But since this side doesn't have VS cryptosystems on it, they had to use something these old systems

could handle. I can't break the code for what they sent out but I can probably recover at least parts of the response they got."

Alyss nodded. "Keep at it. And see if we can get anything from the old sensor net. I want to know what the hell is going on here."

As she walked back into the courtyard, she had a sinking feeling that the Board had known more than they let on. By her reckoning, her meeting had only been six or seven standard hours prior. Nothing about this drop was adding up to her liking.

Matthews

The Sunderer stopped nearly 100m north of the crashed pod. The pod itself bore no faction marking visible through the caked on mud and grime picked up during its landing. Matthews stared at the pod trying to decide if the occupant had survived the drop. The frame had buckled in several points. It was a hard landing but between the crash foam and inertial negators maybe whoever was in it had survived.

If anybody had dropped with the pod at all.

He continued to when a half dozen figures appeared over the hill beyond the crash site and halted. They wore the same tacky green armor of the traitors. Matthews was nearly ready to shuffle back down the hill assuming that anyone in the pod wouldn't have survived when the traitors, apparently bolder and more curious than he, pushed into the depression. He decided it would be worth waiting at least a few more moments.

One of the soldiers, a short male wearing a light exosuit, moved away from the rest of the group, seemingly interested in the brush around one of the small trees. The man moved within a few meters before he pulled up his carbine in alarm. Almost before Matthews could process what that

meant, a sequence of sharp high pitched cracks echoed across the draw. The man fell where he stood. The rest of the traitors swung their weapons towards the tree and opened fire.

Matthews was nearly certain the sound he had heard was a light coil gun but refused to accept that fact. The only people who used coilgun tech were the oligarchs. He couldn't believe that the NC would have had a reason to be in the swamp.

Unless they had intercepted the distress call.

Another short burst echoed through the draw and another traitor fell where they stood. The rest scrambled to find cover while the Sunderer groaned to life and started rolling closer to the draw.

The NC wouldn't just send one soldier no matter the cause for their incursion. Whoever was down in the draw had friends. In an instant, Matthews realized he needed to know what had brought the Conglomerate trooper to this place. That meant he'd need them to survive long enough to be questioned.

He carefully pulled the plasma cannon from his back, flicked it on, and waited. The traitors in the draw fired sporadic shots towards the brush that hid their adversary and were met with a long screaming reply of fire that drove them back to their bellies.

The Sunderer seemed to halt out of view and Matthews cursed the move. He had hoped the driver would pull into the valley. The heavy plasma shot fired by the canon was enormously powerful but quickly lost its edge over distance. It was used to defend against heavily armored targets at point blank range. Few things carried thicker plating than the hardy Sunderer.

Matthews jumped to his feet and sprinted around the edge of the draw carrying the Orion in one hand and the S1 in the other. Twice he peaked above the edge of the short ridge he followed and still couldn't see anything other than the distant forms of men trading fire with scenery.

At last, he came to the narrowest end of the draw where it joined with the top of the short ridge line and saw his quarry. He set the Orion on the rocky ground, shouldered the heavy launcher, and paused for a moment to confirm that the massive vehicle was in his sights. He squeezed the trigger and was rocked back by the recoil.

The plasma cannon, unlike most of the plasma weapons used by the Sovereignty, did not rely on pure kinetic energy to deliver damage - the volatile sphere of high energy plasma did its own work. Still, it used 200 grams of matter in a single shot - more than his Orion had in a full battery - and propelled it fast enough to cover the one hundred meters in a fraction of a second. The shot streamed toward the Sunderer and impacted with a display of sparks and vaporizing metal.

Matthews lowered the weapon to observe the effect and realized he had failed to breach the thick skin when one of the turrets swung towards him and the first 20mm slug snapped past his head.

He ducked back under cover and pulled the hot battery from the launcher only to quickly replace it. Moments later, he grabbed his Orion and shifted several yards, dropped the Orion, and fired again. The second shot landed just like the first had, and, just like the first, failed to pierce the Sunderer's armor.

He moved and fired again; on the third try could easily see that the round did some damage when flames erupted from the dark impact hole. The rear hatch swung open and a figure tumbled out. Matthews, Orion already in hand, fired a short burst into the man as he tried to stand. He waited for several moments until he was convinced that no one else was going to stumble out of the vehicle before sprinting into the draw.

As he ran, Matthews saw something move out of the corner of his eye. He dropped mid step, falling into a slide as a burst of fire screamed through the space he had just vacated. He came to a halt and quickly sprang to his feet, moving a few more meters into the draw before once again turning towards

where he guessed the fire had originated. Peeking over the crest, he saw a young woman frantically waving a carbine in the wrong direction. Her eyes opened wide in surprise when she noticed Matthews leveling his Orion in her direction. He pulled the trigger, the force of the impacting rounds sending the woman tumbling down the hill.

The coil gun sounded again from the base of the draw. Matthews paused briefly to swap the battery in his Orion before moving back up the top of ridge. Three soldiers wearing the green armor he'd come to despise were huddled closely together behind a large rock a short distance away. They were alternatively rising to fire at the tree he guessed the Conglomerate soldier was hidden. He continued scanning as he drew a grenade and realized that the three were not actually providing covering fire for some flanking effort. They had let themselves get pinned down by a single soldier and didn't have the wherewithal to split one of their number off to get a better shot.

Mistakes like that were the sort of thing beaten out of a new soldier in their first few weeks in the field. Rebirth insulated someone from the consequences of such an error but more often than not the process was extraordinarily painful. The implants and wonder drugs would take the edge off, but what remained was more than enough to quickly burn lessons into a soldier. That they would make this sort of mistake confirmed what he'd seen at the Biolab. He didn't know where they'd managed to find these troops but so far none of them had been particularly competent. The only reason any of them had made it out of the PMC compound alive was because someone decided to start shooting early. In the Biolab, had they tried doing anything beyond simply rushing directly into a killzone they'd never have been able to hold. Even their roadblock was sloppy.

As he pulled the pin from the grenade and prepared to throw it, he wondered if the three soldiers would learn anything from this. He lobbed it in a high arc and it landed quietly behind a man who turned and saw the grenade lying on the ground. Rather than trying to toss it away or shouting a warning, the man simply stared dumbly at it until it burst. He was killed outright in the blast while the other two were simply knocked to the ground. He finished off both of them with short bursts.

The silence that seemed so persistent on Hossin returned. Matthews simply waited for a few moments to confirm that the fight was over. He still had not seen the NC soldier. The three bodies splayed out between the rock and the tree at the base of the draw were a strong argument that someone was down there.

“I’m pretty sure you’re clear.” He shouted to the mystery gunman.

Predictably, there was no response. Whoever was at the bottom of the hill was well armed and clearly skilled. That ruled out simply trying to rush him. He might have some of the finest personal armor made by man, but Matthews had pushed his luck often enough to know that he was far from bulletproof. He was confident he could kill whomever was down there, of course. He still had several shots for the plasma cannon in reserve - more than enough to roast anyone using that space for shelter.

That’s when he realized the bomb he carried provided leverage. Odds were good that whoever was down there was disconnected from the rebirth network. The plasma cannon and his Orion were potent enough to ensure victory given the circumstances but there was enough room for doubt that someone might try and push their luck. The bomb he carried offered no such illusions.

“I know that you aren’t inclined to talk.” He shouted. “The people shooting at you are dead and their IFV is gone. I’d wager their friends are probably going to follow up on this little firefight and next time I know they’re going to send enough firepower to flatten this entire ridge line. That means neither of us can stay here.”

There was no reply.

“I’m going to come down the draw. I know you’ve got a coil gun and some skill but it would be in your best interest if you didn’t shoot. I’ve still got some shots left for my S1 here so it probably wouldn’t go well. Of course, you might get lucky and so you should know I also have a twenty kiloton bomb

strapped to my back on a deadman switch.” Matthews shouted towards the tree. He considered holding his breath.

“Why the fuck are you carrying that around?” A male voice shouted from the bottom of the draw.

“Long story. Do we have an understanding?” Matthews shouted back.

Alyss

“I thought Briggs was dead.” Said Mike.

“He is dead. Or at least was. Shot himself something like 200 years ago - just after humans got to Auraxis.” Said James.

“I thought he came back. That’s what the Vanu preachers always said, at any rate.” Jace offered.

“How? He died before rebirth.” Said Mike.

Jace shrugged. “I don’t know what to tell you, man. Just that a guy who looks an awful lot like Briggs sent an encrypted message to this Biolab a few hours ago.”

“He isn’t dead.” Said Harris. “I met him, once. He was preaching about the ‘enlightenment’ he had found in the ‘Wisdom of Vanu’. Someone reported it, of course, and he was hauled off. He was one of the people we sprang from Kane. Supposedly, he ended up here on Hossin for awhile.”

Alyss realized that no one in the small group had bothered to mention the far more startling revelation - that some contingent of the VS had built a self-replicating nanomachine. Or that some other faction in the VS had taken issue with the plan to deploy the weapon and filled the courtyard outside with bodies in protest. Or that Jace had found Republic sensors at the base of the tower.

“So no one’s going to talk about what Briggs said?” She asked.

The rest of Sigma was silent.

Alyss looked at her battle computer. “We’ve got about twenty-two hours until the VS reinforcements show up and sixteen hours until the crossing. Somewhere in this swamp is a research operation big enough to warrant at least two squads of troops and my gut says it’s probably a hell of a lot more than that. There’s also a Terran spec ops team poking around somewhere out there and whatever is left of the VS who were talking to Briggs. Am I missing anything?”

“Briggs sent them to Nason’s Defiance.” Said James.

“Right - and everyone seems to be rushing to the exact place the Board is sending us.” Said Alyss in frustrated agreement.

She couldn’t shake the feeling that the transmission was the real reason Sigma had been sent to Hossin. Too many of the details lined up to assume it was simple coincidence. She had spoken to the Board an hour after Briggs made the call. Sigma had been founded, according to the board, specifically for this drop. If all the Board needed was for someone to flip a switch and truly did not expect resistance, they wouldn’t have told her to find the best - no reason to risk that kind of asset on a potentially lethal milk run when there were plenty of interchangeable grunts out there. Then there was the matter of the fort. There was an old saying that Alyss dimly recalled. Any one of these details could be dismissed as happenstance. Any two of them a coincidence. A bizarre one, but a coincidence nonetheless. Three times, though, was almost assuredly enemy action.

Alyss sighed heavily and activated the squad channel. “Banker - ETA on getting that gal airworthy?”

“Two hours. Maybe less if someone lent a hand.” Came the breathless reply.

“Clark - help him out. I want that thing ready to move in an hour.” She said.

Vivian nodded, grabbed her rifle, and jogged from the room.

Alyss looked at James and said, “Pull everything you can about the facilities around Nason’s. We need to know where their power comes from, where their rebirth tubes might be and where their heavy guns are. We built these places and chances are they’re just squatting.” James nodded in acknowledgement.

“Harrison - take Rainer and King, do a thorough sweep of the area, and give me a perimeter. If you see anything, call it in.” She said.

As the three infiltrators quietly filed out of the small room Alyss ran back through the details that they knew. “Tell me something, Strottman.” She started.

James turned from the console he was working with expectantly. “If they did manage to upload a control signal that could force replication, would resetting the local warpgate network do anything?”

James considered the question for a moment. “I don’t know, to be honest. I’d think it would because it is a firmware level reset. Should revert to default behavior. I mean, that’s why they said they wanted us to do the reset in the first place - to clear the exploit code.” He said at last.

“Exploit? What do you mean?” Asked Alyss.

“Rebirth tubes basically have three parts. The first part is the tube itself - it’s just a nanoforge more or less like any other. The second is the rebirth matrix which we reverse engineered from some of the Vanu artifacts. Those are responsible for capturing the consciousness of anyone who dies after they’re imprinted. The third part is the warpgates themselves. They’re almost entirely old Vanu tech -

the aliens, not the cultists. They are basically what lets matrices talk to one another. The interfaces we built had a security flaw, though, and when the VS took down the network, all they really did was make all connections self-referencing.”

Alyss groaned at the explanation. “Can you explain that like I’m five?” She asked.

“Short version is that the tubes here don’t talk to anything except their local matrix. That’s why rebirth doesn’t really work. We aren’t imprinted on any matrix in range. It makes a dead zone in the network.” He said.

“Wait, that means that if we’d dropped our own matrix and just stayed close, rebirth would work?”
Asked Alyss incredulously.

“Sure, but it isn’t like those matrices are just lying around” Said James with a shrug. “First, they’re massive. Second, in spite of all our tinkering, the core is still a Vanu made matrix. As far as I know, there are only a few dozen of those and most of them are buried inside the warpgates themselves.”

“More than ten years of using Rebirth and we still can’t build one from scratch?” It was a rhetorical question. “You’d think we’d have figured it out by now.”

Making Friends and Influencing People

Mitchell

The pain in his leg subsided. In its place was the warmth and subtle itch that accompanied nano scale rebuilding of damaged tissue. Mitchell did his best to ignore the feeling while the medkit did its work.

“So your plan is to walk into the fort and, what, blow yourself up?” Mitchell asked.

“It’s the only thing that makes sense. My team is dead and no one else can get here in time.” Matthews responded.

Mitchell had to admit that the man had a point. No matter how skilled or how well equipped there was only so much a single soldier could do in the face of many. It was daring enough that it might work, too. Of course, that was assuming that the blast would do enough damage to actually disable anything. Mitchell had enough experience tinkering with similar systems that he knew they tended to be massively shielded.

“You do realize that the control bunker is buried at least 40 meters underground, right?” Mitchell asked.

“Then I just need to get inside the bunker first.” Matthews said with a hard edge to his voice.

The itching feeling faded and Mitchell carefully stood and tested the leg. Thankfully, there was no pain.

“That’s a shitty plan.” He said.

Matthews looked offended for a moment but then quickly deflated. "It's the best one I've got. If nothing else, they won't see it coming." He said.

The element of surprise was powerful. Probably not enough to get the man into the bunker but at least enough to get him through the front door. Probably not much further than that, though. Even though the bomb he carried was substantial, it likely wasn't going to be enough to threaten the bunker itself - at best, it would wipe out the local defenders. Even if it trapped the operators inside the bunker they'd still be able to launch.

Mitchell realized he was giving the VS officer far too much credit for honesty. The NC had made that mistake before and it cost them Hossin and the best hope of ending the war.

Still, he had to admit, if it was a ruse it was massively elaborate. The man had just helped him set his broken leg just after shooting his supposed comrades. His armor did show signs of plasma weapon damage. He wasn't sure that was enough evidence to support the outlandish claim that the VS had managed to build self-replicators.

It was an old problem in nanotech - the tiny machines were so small that simply building them was an endeavor centuries in the making. They were so small, in fact, that giving them on board programming was effectively impossible. Self-replication was all but impossible by design. The machines themselves were built by specialized nanomachines several orders of magnitude larger than the general use bots. The smallest machines that could accept independent programming were nearly the size of a human skin cell.

There had, of course, been attempts to weaponize nanotech. Engineered viruses, harmful gene mods, weaponized deconstructors - all had been tried and tested and all had proven useless in the face of either physical limits or defensive nanotech. An engineered virus was no harder to isolate and counter with nanomachines than a natural one. Bots designed to attack directly were either too slow to be truly effective or produced too much heat to survive long enough to do much damage. Control

signals themselves were limited to very short ranges. The best Nanite Systems had ever managed was a few meters. Self-replicators were possible, sure, but because of limited control range all you really did was go a very long way to achieve what a relatively small bomb could manage.

But, then, no one had tried piggybacking the signal from warpgates themselves. He didn't think that it was possible; admittedly, that's because it was something no one was terribly inclined to try. Fission bombs and their more potent Fusion cousins, lethal chemicals and engineered diseases were once powerful enough that the ancients worried they would wipe out human life but in time each of them was countered. The nuclear exchange at the start of the war proved just how useless nukes were these days. So long as you expected to be hit, you could just build the massive shields that protected the cities and major installations. Humans had not tried to build a tool capable of causing their own extinction in centuries.

This war was just maddening enough that Mitchell was able to believe someone would try and build one.

"Its not gonna work. If it was that easy to take out a rebirth network with a bomb, don't you think someone would have pulled it off by now?" Mitchell said, carefully. "You aren't going to make it to the bunker and a surface detonation isn't going to do a damn thing except kill a few people who are just going to rebirth."

He reached down to grab his Tempest but Matthews took a hasty step backwards and raised his Orion. "What do you think you're doing?" Matthews asked.

Mitchell stopped moving for a moment and stood back up. "You aren't going to make it inside without help." He paused for a moment considering if he should tell the man about the rest of Sigma. "I dropped as part of a team that breaks into places like Nason's Defiance for a living. If I can link back up with them, you can tell the Deputy what you know. I bet they'd be willing to help."

Mitchell's heart raced in the silence that followed. He had hedged his bets by only telling a partial truth - Sigma probably could break into the Fort. That is, after all, what they had come here to do.

Matthews slowly lowered his weapon and remained silent. "I can't take the risk that they'd say no." He said at last. As he turned to walk away, Matthews looked over his shoulder and said "You tell your Director. Maybe he will make the right call."

As Matthews trudged to the east, Mitchell's heart finally started to beat at a normal pace. He reached down and grabbed the Tempest and looked at it for a moment. "She." He said. "The Director is a woman." Mitchell wasn't sure why the distinction would matter. Matthews kept walking for a few moments before stopping in his tracks. He scanned the horizon to the south, and then shouted "Terran gunship!"

Mitchell glanced to the south but didn't see anything. When he looked back, the VS officer was sprinting towards a distant treeline at inhuman speed. The man had saved his life once already. Mitchell ran after him.

Prisoner's Dilemma

Reese

"I think we spooked him." Valeriya said from the cockpit. "He's running for the trees."

Lieutenant Camilla looked back at Reese and said "Call him."

Reese wasn't sure how the Centurion would take the news that they had been reinforced by the Terrans. Out of all the veterans she had met during her brief time in the Sovereignty army, few of them maintained the sort of idealism Matthews displayed. Most veterans fought for little reason other than a dogged refusal to let anyone else win but Matthews still believed in the cause. Just over a day before she had admired him for that but now she wasn't sure how that belief was really any different.

"Centurion Matthews, this is Novus Reese." She said.

The squad channel remained silent but the marker showing Matthews's position stopped moving. Reese looked at Brandt.

"Centurion Matthews, this is Brandt. Please respond."

"You would not believe how good it is to hear your voice." Said Matthews, laughing. "I thought you couldn't fly."

"I can't, but I found someone who could." Said Brandt.

"See if you can get him to the LZ I just passed to you. Its nice and open." Said Valeriya.

"I'm going to send you the coordinates to a place we can land and pick you up. There are some people you need to meet." Said Brandt.

Matthews gave a quiet acknowledgement and his marker started moving again.

“Lieutenant, can you park this thing at the far end of the clearing and drop us off?” Asked Brandt. “I don’t know how he’s going to react to your presence. Might be good to have some distance. Just in case.” She explained.

“Just tell your boy to mind his manners.” Said Valeriya. “*Freya* is pretty good when it comes to enforcing polite behavior.”

Minutes later Reese and Brandt were walking towards the tree line. The fading evening light was all but incapable of penetrating the thick canopy and the treeline was little more than a wall of shadow. Reese triggered the light amplification portion of her vision implant and saw the Centurion kneeling behind the root of one of the smaller trees. They covered the rest of the distance in silence, stopping a few yards short of the Centurion. Matthews rose to his feet and the trio looked at one another without speaking for a moment.

Reese, not knowing what else to do, gave the traditional salute of the Sovereignty - a simple gesture of raising the arm with the palm facing outward as though you were going to wave. It was a symbol of fealty drawn from ancient cultures. She had never really thought about what the gesture meant, though. Was it loyalty to the officer that lead her or the cause he championed? Loyalty to the very empire that spawned the madness she found herself in? Matthews quietly returned the gesture, unaware of her internal struggle.

“I thought you were dead.” He said.

“I nearly was.” Reese replied.

Saying it brought the memory of the previous night to the front of her mind. Images of Waits's body with a thick trail of blood where she had dragged him down the stairs and the vacant look in his half closed eyes pushed their way forward. She half remembered the pain when their Harasser had cornered sharply and she had nearly been thrown from the vehicle. She shook her head to clear the unwanted thoughts but they persisted only to be horrified that she had outwardly displayed the struggle. Sovereignty soldiers were supposed to be above such things. She was thankful that Matthews had not noticed. Or perhaps he had and was choosing to ignore it for the moment. He was far better at keeping his emotions in check than she was.

Reese hated him for that.

"Where is Alvarez?" Asked Brandt.

"There was a road block a few kilometers from the lab." Said Matthews with an audible quake in his voice. "Alvarez." He started before his voice cracked again. "He didn't make it."

Reese barely noticed the break in his voice. She was stunned by the news. She and Alvarez had gone to infantry basic together. They had been assigned to the same advanced training company. They had both excelled in training and were selected for immediate assignment to the same line company.

That's how she'd met Matthews. That's how they ended up on Hossin.

Alvarez didn't deserve to die in this place. *It should have been me.* She thought. If Waits had been there, he would have been able to save Alvarez. Sheffield could have been on that ATV. He wore the heavy armor and the nanomesh reinforcement. He would have survived. But they were both dead because she couldn't do her job. Top marks in training and she couldn't watch a door.

Brandt stepped close to the Centurion and reached up to put a hand on his shoulder. "I'm sorry." She said.

"How did you make it out of the lab?" He asked.

"We took the Harasser. Well, for a few hundred meters at least. They had set up a blocking position on the south end, too. Tried to evade which didn't go well. I dragged Reese out of the wreck and then ran into a Terran Ranger scout party." Said Brandt.

"Rangers?" Asked Matthews incredulously. "What the hell were the Terrans doing here?" He asked.

"They intercepted the distress call we sent. They were apparently poking around the edge of the lab when the Galaxy landed. Ended up in a nasty firefight of their own and were on the verge of being overrun. They had a gunship flying support, though, which was enough to get us out of there." Said Brandt.

"That Valkyrie over there is being flown by a Terran?" Asked Matthews.

Brandt nodded.

"Of all the people on this rock, why in the name of Vanu would you bring them along?" He asked, emphasizing the word 'them'.

Brandt opened her mouth to explain but Matthews cut her off. "They are literally the last people on this planet I'd trust with something like this. What if they get their hands on the goo? You of all people should know better!" He bellowed.

Reese wondered what Matthews believed qualified someone for the quest. The Terrans probably didn't want the world to end either. And they, too, were isolated and teetering on the razor's edge of mortality.

"Because they live here too." Said Reese.

"What?" Asked Matthews, turning to face the young woman.

"They have as much of a stake in this as we do. They're also cut off from rebirth but they agreed to help us anyhow." Reese said.

Matthews was silent for a long moment and stared at Reese. "You know that if we manage to stop the launch and there is even the slightest chance they know anything about the goo we can't let them go, right?" He asked at last across the subvocal channel.

Reese had not considered that. She didn't like the idea of having to permanently kill anyone, especially once she found that only one of them had volunteered to serve. If she was honest with herself, she wasn't sure she'd be able to pull the trigger. She certainly didn't want to. To kill someone because they might harm you seemed so backwards. So primitive. So petty. She nodded in agreement anyhow. She didn't see what good arguing the point might do.

"The NC are here, too." Said Matthews. "I ran into an engineer a few kilometers west of here. Says he's part of some spec-ops outfit. He seemed to think his team would be willing to help."

"What are the NC doing here?" Asked Brandt.

Matthews shrugged. "He wouldn't say. The timing is too convenient for me to think it was just coincidence, though."

Reese scanned the gloomy swamp. "Is he still around?" She asked.

Matthews turned around and shouted into the swamp. "Engineer! You still out there?"

Reese strained to listen and flicked through vision modes; nothing was moving, and nothing made a sound. She had just turned back to the Centurion when she heard a voice to her side. "It's rude to talk about someone in the third person when they're standing right here."

Abject terror seized her heart and Reese pivoted on her heel and swung the unfamiliar carbine to bear on the sound. She pointed it at a man wearing the unmistakable angular armor of the New Conglomerate. The man's armor was painted a flat black with the barest trim of gold. He wore a small splash of blue on his pauldron with a vaguely familiar symbol emblazoned in gold on it. She squinted through the sights of her carbine and recognized the figure. It was an ancient greek symbol - Sigma. The man stood relaxed with his weapon pointed low to the ground.

She wondered how many times the man had to die before someone pointing a gun at him didn't even cause him to flinch. Reese took her finger off the trigger but continued pointing her carbine at the man.

"You know, your safety is on." Said the NC soldier.

Reese rotated glanced down and realized he was right. The simple rotating switch on the carbine was still set to a bullet with a line through it. Reese had told her about it when she suggested the weapon, an AF-19, but Reese had clearly forgotten. Her familiar Solstice simply relied on the presence of the operator's hand and pressure on the trigger. She had never had to deal with a mechanical safety.

"Lower your weapon, Novus." Matthews said.

Reese complied though she opted to continue facing the man with her thumb resting on top of the dial.

“The name’s Mitchell. Mitchell Webb.” He said, extending a hand toward Reese.

Unsure what to do with the gesture, Reese stood her ground and glanced toward Brandt who stepped forward cautiously. Though her rifle was slung low, she kept a hand close to the grip of her revolver while extending the other. “You sound like an Amerish boy.” She said.

“Born and raised.” He said, taking Brandt’s hand in his own and shaking it warmly. “You from there?” He asked.

Brandt shook her head. “No.” She said. “I grew up on Cyssor. Served with more than a few from Amerish, though.”

The idea that people once grew up in a particular place was almost alien. Reese could only dimly recall a time when she had a fixed place to call home. She didn’t even remember the name of the tiny community on the coast of Indar. For nearly as long as she could remember, she had followed her parents and the Sovereignty army as they traveled from dig to dig. Reese realized that there wasn’t any place in the world she’d rather be at that moment than huddled in blankets in her old bed that was crammed into a tiny portable shelter. To see her mom again. To eat a meal that wasn’t just re-arranged protein. To have the war return to that taboo topic people would avoid discussing at dinner. To sleep without worrying that the world would end while you were dreaming.

“What your ‘Centurion’ says is right, though. I did drop with a team and I think we can help.” Mitchell paused for a moment before continuing. “Though, since time is of the essence, do you think I could use their radio to give them a call?” He said, gesturing to the Valkyrie across the field.

Matthews looked to Brandt. “What do you think?” He said.

“Their Lieutenant is a true believer in the Terran cause.” She said. Then she looked at Mitchell directly. “I’d be on your best behavior if I were you. I dragged her sorry ass onto that ship and she still wanted to shoot me.”

Valeriya

One by one the trio of VS soldiers crept from the dark treeline. It was easy to recognize the new addition in thermal - the Centurion would have been a fairly imposing figure even without tens of kilograms of power armor strapped on; he stood more than a head taller than Reese. The infiltrator was tiny in comparison and her habit of walking in a shallow crouch made her seem even smaller.

Then a fourth figure appeared. Valeriya squinted at the feed for her G30. The figure was strolling behind the three Vanu soldiers, seemingly unconcerned with their presence, and walked into the large clearing as though he owned the place. She zoomed the gun camera in for a better look. The mystery soldier was clearly armed and wore only light armor. She quickly switched the feed to simple light amplification and then, recognizing the armor, settled her finger on the gatling gun’s trigger.

“Lieutenant - those VS soldiers have picked up a stray NC soldier.” She said.

Camilla, who had been leaning up against the side of *Freya*, grabbed her new carbine, a GD-23, and motioned to Hemming who was still lounging inside the Valkyrie. Hemming grabbed his scout rifle and quickly jumped from the aircraft and sprinted several meters as he activated his cloak.

“Did the infiltrator tell you about this?” Camilla asked as she glanced over to Rico.

“Nope.” He said simply.

“Stay in the bird, Rico.” She said. “Hemming - put a bead on the new arrival - condition red. If I give the word, take his head off.”

“Want me to prep for dustoff?” Asked Valeriya.

“Yeah. Stay on the deck, though, in case we need to get out of here in a hurry.”

Valeriya reached over and flicked the engines from standby to live and *Freya* hummed to life. She kept her finger on the trigger as she settled into her seat and watched the scene through the gun camera. At this moderate range, the G30's grouping was substantially larger than a human. Pulling the trigger would send at least a few dozen large caliber high density rounds through the VS soldiers long before they reached the man behind them.

The group approached to fifty meters. “Halt!” Yelled Camilla through the proximity speakers on her helmet.

The three VS soldiers dutifully stopped in their tracks. The NC soldier behind them choose to take several more steps until he was standing next to the Centurion. Valeriya smiled at the petty rebellion.

“You didn't say anything about bringing home any stray terrorists.” Said Camilla.

The Centurion turned toward Brandt and gestured to his helmet. “I didn't intend to pick the man up. He fell from the sky while I was making my way to the fort.” He said. “He says he dropped as part of a team just a few hours ago. It was a blind drop, though, so they ended up scattered across the east side of the continent.”

“Then put a bullet in him and let's get out of here before he has a chance to call them in.” Said the Lieutenant.

The Centurion took a step forward, placing himself in the between Hemming and the NC soldier. “I don’t know who you think you are, Terran.” He said, with vitriolic emphasis on that last word. “In case you haven’t noticed, we’re shorthanded as it is. We need every gun we can get our hands on if we want the world to survive the next day. I’m not about to shoot a man willing to help.”

“Keep cloaked and stay low. Make sure you’ve got a shot.” Camilla said on on subvocal. “Fine. You’d better watch yourself cultist.” She said across her proximity speaker.

The small group started advancing again and halted a few meters from the Valkyrie. Valeriya noted that it was conveniently outside the arc of her G30. *Clever*. She thought as she loosened her harness and rested her hand on her repeater.

The NC soldier stepped forward with his compact weapon pointed downward. Though he kept one hand on the weapon, he offered his free hand to the Lieutenant. “Warden Mitchell Webb, Esamir Munitions, currently on loan to Sigma squad.” He said.

“Sigma?” Camilla asked warily.

“Special operations squad that reports directly to the Board.” He said.

Camilla, keeping one hand on her carbine, reached out and hesitantly shook the man’s hand. “Well, Warden Webb of Sigma, I think you owe me an explanation.” She said.

“It’s like the Centurion said - I think we can help.” He said.

“Why should we trust you?” Camilla said.

“Frankly, I wouldn’t if I were in your shoes.” He admitted. “But your big friend back there was nice enough to bail me out of a tight spot. That and he says he’s carrying enough firepower to put a quarter kilometer crater in the swamp.”

Camilla visibly clenched her carbine at the revelation. “What?” She said.

“I thought I was on my own out here.” Said the Centurion. “I didn’t have a lot of options and so I figured my best shot was to try and deliver this bomb to the control room at the fort.” He said.

“Fine.” Said Camilla through clenched teeth. “How is it you figure you can help us?” She asked.

“Easy - we dropped on Hossin specifically to break into Nason’s.” He said. “And Sigma is very good at getting into places that people think are secure.” He paused for a moment before adding “But, to do that, I’m going to need to link back up with them.”

“Then get walking.” Said Camilla.

“Last reading I got said I was forty klicks from the actual drop zone.” He said. “My comms can’t reach that far through this swamp.” He explained. “That’s why I followed your friends here - I need to borrow your radio. Or, at the very least, hitch a ride above the treeline. With a better sight line I might just be able to use my own gear.”

Camilla activated her subvocal and asked “What do you think, Rico?”

“I don’t know, Ma’am. We could use some extra hands but I wouldn’t trust the NC as far as I could throw them.” He said.

“And you would work with these Sovereignty soldiers to achieve that end?” She asked the Conglomerate soldier. “They are the ones who kicked you out of here in the first place.”

“Any other day, I’d shoot as many of you as I could before you took me down.” Said Mitchell with a shrug. “But I believe what the Centurion says well enough to put the decision to the Boss.”

“Then you’ll need to ask my pilot for a ride.” Said Camilla. “It’s her bird.”

Valeriya smiled. The Lieutenant was finally learning.

Breaking Point

Alyss

Alyss stepped inside the Galaxy and wrinkled her nose. The smell of vaporized plastic had mixed with the distinct odor of charred flesh and seemed to cling to the interior of the aircraft. Still, she had to admit that Davis and Clark had seemingly done a fine job restoring the aircraft to life. They had managed to patch the gaping holes burned into the main thrusters by anti-vehicle grenades and, at least to her untrained eye, the cockpit seemed as pristine as any other Galaxy that saw combat service. The smell was the only obvious sign of the damage.

She walked into the tiny cockpit and found Davis wedged underneath the controls where he fiddled with a mass of wiring. Clark was seated in the the pilot's seat eyeing the control panel.

"Still nothing?" Asked Davis.

"Nope. Engine status still shows both of them are offline." Clark replied.

"Boss, can you hand those to me?" Said Davis, pointing to a small set of wire snips.

Alyss handed the man the tool and watched as he clipped several charred lengths of wiring before carefully stripping a length of insulation from each of them and then twisting the exposed ends together, jamming them into a small socket. Davis pulled himself from the small space, sat upright, and looked at the instrument panel.

"Still shows offline." Said Taylor.

"True." Davis replied as he reached over and flicked a pair of switches. A quiet hum filled the Galaxy as the engines powered on. "But that's because I'm bypassing the monitoring and control system."

“Don’t you need that?” Asked Alyss.

“To fly safely, yeah. That system monitors and maintains the engines. Without it, they could catch fire and the only way you’d know is if you looked out the window. Fortunately, throttle and thrust vector have a backup mechanical linkage.” Said Davis as he patted the console. “It’s what I love about these old birds. As long as they’re mostly in one piece, you can always put enough back together to get them into the air.”

“It’s ready to fly, then?” Asked Alyss.

“As ready as it’s going to get without access to a proper forge.” Said Davis.

“What about those guns?” Asked Alyss, pointing toward a gunnery station.

“They passed diags.” Said Clark. “Whoever prepped this bird didn’t bother giving them a full load, though. There were only about 400 rounds split between the tailgun and the top gun so I evened out the load between them. The bulldogs on the wings are in even worse shape. There were only about 50 rounds in their magazines.”

Alyss had heard worse news in her career but finding out that the Galaxy’s heavy guns had less than a quarter of their capable combat load was still a blow. If her suspicions about the Fort were correct and it was heavily defended, Sigma would need all the firepower they could get their hands on.

She was about to activate her squad channel to recall the infiltrators watching the perimeter when her radio sputtered to life. “Sigma, this is Mitchell. Anyone there?”

“Told you he was still alive.” Said Davis. “You owe me your next bonus.”

“Webb, you son of a bitch! When you didn’t pop the transponder we figured you were dead. I sent out a burial party and everything.” Said Alyss.

“Just got banged up a bit.” Said Mitchell.

“Well, we’ve managed to commandeer a ride. Send me your coordinates and we can pick you up.” Said Alyss.

“Can we go secure?” Mitchell asked suddenly.

Puzzled by the request, Alyss opened a direct encrypted channel to Mitchell. “Okay, we’re secure.” She said.

“Listen, boss, I don’t think this drop is what it we think it is.” He said.

“We were already thinking that. Turns out, a VS distress call went out just before I got the mission from the Board. Briggs himself responded to it. Seems that someone built nasty replicator and it just so happens Briggs thinks that someone could stop it from being deployed if they managed to get inside Nason’s Defiance.” She said.

“Huh.” Said Mitchell in a surprised tone. “Then I don’t think you’re going to like what I have to say. I ran into a VS officer who bailed me out of a gunfight with the locals. He said the same thing.”

“A VS officer? Might be the one that sent the distress call in the first place.” Said Alyss. “How’d you find that out?” She asked.

“He told me.” Mitchell said simply.

“He told you?” Asked Alyss. “Just like that?” She’d never known the Sovereignty to be the sort that would let secrets slip.

“That isn’t even the weirdest part.” Said Mitchell. “There’s a handful of Terrans here, too. They claim to be working together.

Alyss was nearly certain that if this war continued for a century, she wouldn’t ever hear anything less believable. She would be more willing to believe that the TR would offer an unconditional surrender than that the TR were working with the Sovereignty. Their long running war with the NC was a matter of basic human ideology. The VS, on the other hand, were at war with the fundamental idea of the human condition.

“And you believed that?” Alyss asked.

“Given that I’m sitting on a Terran gunship surrounded by Terrans and cultists, yeah.”

Alyss’s heart sunk at the revelation that Mitchell had been captured. Then she realized that one normally didn’t let prisoners of war call their allies. It might be that they were working together. Or, maybe, it was an elaborate trap. Alyss was more inclined to believe the latter. But, then, if it was a con, it was certainly one of the more elaborate ones she’d heard of. And to what end, she wondered. To ambush a single squad of the NC? Sigma was good but their loss would hardly be crippling to the NC. None of them were the sort that would let themselves be taken alive for bargaining, either.

But, If the Terrans and the VS truly believed the threat then, maybe, they would work together. Still, in her experience it wasn’t often that a Terran was swayed by logic or reason.

“Put them on.” She said.

“Who?” Asked Mitchell.

“Whoever the hell is in charge of that little circus you’ve fallen in with.” She said.

Alyss waited for a few moments when a new voice entered the conversation. “This is Centurion Brendon Matthews.” He said.

“I’m Lieutenant Katerina Camilla, Terran Rangers.” Said a female voice.

“I’m going to be blunt.” Alyss began. “What the fuck is going on?”

“A VS research station went rogue.” Said Matthews. “They built a weapon that our science council thinks is capable of wiping out most life on the planet. I intend to stop them.”

“So how in the hell did you pick up a Ranger?” She asked.

“We picked up a distress call from one of the Biolabs. Command wanted us to check it out. Now, we’re stuck here.” Said Camilla.

That wasn’t a particularly compelling answer but, for the moment, Alyss decided to let it stand. “I want my man back.” She said simply.

A long silence followed. Alyss glanced over at Davis who was standing nearby with a confused look in his eyes.

“Your soldier thinks you can help get us into Nason’s Defiance and shut down the weapon.” Matthews said at last.

“Maybe.” Alyss said. “But first, I want my man back. Give me your coordinates.”

“This place is no good.” Said Camilla. “I’m sending coordinates for a safe place to meet up.”

The line went silent but a few moments later her sub vocal line chirped with a message. She pulled up the coordinates on her battle computer. It was an old terraforming facility to the south.

“Get this thing ready to fly.” Alyss said as she turned toward Davis.

“What’s going on, Boss?” Asked Clark.

“Mitchell is in the care of a group of VS and Terrans. We’re going to go and get him back.” She said. She activated the squad channel and said “Pack up, Sigma. We’re moving out. I’ll brief you on the way.”

“We heading to those coordinates?” Asked Davis as he settled into the pilot’s seat.

“Yeah. But first, I want to pick up our rescue party.”

“You think it’s a trap?” Asked Clark.

“I don’t know. If it is, god help the bastards.” Said Alyss as she walked down the loading ramp and headed back into the dome.

Reese

The Ranger Lieutenant had told their pilot to keep the Valkyrie’s engine running. “Just in case there’s trouble.” She had said. Brandt and the Terran scout had peeled off from the small group as they made their way to the rendezvous - another precaution. The Centurion still carried his bomb.

She had heard of the phrase 'gunboat diplomacy' before but never realized just how absurd the method was as a negotiation tactic when everyone was similarly armed. Matthews and Camilla were certain that their orders were reasonable and prudent. You keep the gunship handy for an airstrike. You keep snipers in the trees in case you need covering fire. You carry a bomb big enough to kill everyone to keep the peace. What good was an airstrike when you were standing ten meters away from the intended target? What good were snipers in the tree line when any firefight would happen at point blank range and the only cover available were the thin sheets of armor and shields each of them carried? What use was a weapon that you couldn't actually use? If the meeting went poorly, all the contingency planning in the world wasn't going to save any of them. The traitors would activate the goo and everyone would die.

Everyone was playing their hand like the stakes were personal. There was a sort of stark insanity to that logic that Reese now realized was present in all the veterans she had met. Matthews told her he'd keep fighting even though he knew more than most that neither killing nor dying would bring victory. Brandt said she kept fighting long after she realized how fruitless it was because she didn't see any other choice. They all fought because they believed they had to. They endured an existence defined by suffering and death and endless toil in pursuit of one kind of peace or another. None of them seemed to realize the irony that the war would continue for as long as they would collectively allow it. Without people like them, what could the politicians supposedly responsible for the carnage do but make peace?

The most galling part, though, was how clearly meaningless the contingencies were. The traitors would have no difficulty brushing off whatever attack the survivors could muster if they started trading wounds. Opening fire would be the doom of all of them. The tragic stupidity of planning a mutual apocalypse, seemingly predicated on the idea that if everyone was going to lose it would be somehow better if one side lost slightly quicker, was plainly obvious. The fact that Matthews and the Lieutenant were blind to this was absurd enough that it would almost be funny in a different context.

As Reese walked with the small group towards the designated meeting point, she realized she was holding back tears. They were not tears of sadness or fear or self-pity, but of rage at the blatant absurdity of the entire war on display in microcosm.

At last they arrived at the designated spot and found the NC waiting for them. They had assembled on and around a small structure built directly into the base of the massive atmospheric processor. She had seen other terraforming centers before. Small towns had eventually grown up around many of them. Most of them had been destroyed during the war. She wondered, for a moment, if this one on Hossin was still working after all this time. The place had been spared the worst of the conflict thus far.

The two groups stared silently at one another. The way Matthews pulled his Orion closer to his shoulder even as he tried to appear relaxed mirrored the way the oligarchs stood. Everyone was tensed and waiting for someone to do something stupid.

A woman dressed in a heavy exosuit motioned to Mitchell, gesturing for him to approach. Mitchell made the mistake of not asking the Lieutenant's permission and took a step forward. Then, the Lieutenant decided to be the one to do something stupid. In the space of a heartbeat, Camilla snapped her carbine to her eye and leveled it at the back of the Mitchell's head. In a fraction of a second the entire party of oligarchs had brought their weapons to bear as well. Both Matthews and the NC in the heavy exosuit were wrapped in the subtle glow of nanomesh shielding.

Reese realized that everyone was pointing guns at everyone else while she still had hers pointed toward the ground while a voice in the back of her mind screamed that she should raise her weapon. *Maybe he's slower than you are* it reasoned. She refused. She would not submit to the insanity of it all. The Conglomerate soldiers stood behind their weapons with the same conviction she'd seen from Waits and Sheffield, their eyes showing no fear of pain or death.

They were fools. Reese was terrified by the prospect of either. With everyone tensed with fingers on triggers, she didn't know what she could do to avert the inevitable.

In the quiet moment between heart beats, Reese felt something inside her snap. She tried to suppress the urge but failed and broke into a giggle which quickly grew into a full body laugh. Suddenly stifled by her helmet she pulled it off and tossed it to the side. She looked down at her carbine and tossed it to the ground as well. Then, she turned toward the swamp and started walking.

She heard Matthews shout her name. The Ranger lieutenant might have sworn at her but Reese couldn't really tell over her own laughter. Then the Centurion asked something. It might have been what she was doing. Reese stopped walking and tried to suppress the laughter as tears streamed down her face.

"What am I doing? I'm leaving." She said.

Matthews appeared to be stunned by the news. That seemed odd to Reese. She had just thrown away her carbine and started walking into the swamp after all.

"But the weapon." He sputtered.

"The one we're not going to stop because you idiots are about to shoot each other?" Reese said with a giggle.

Matthews remained silent but kept his Orion leveled on the woman in the heavy exosuit.

"Or did you fail to consider that? I think it says something terrible about humanity that even now when we're all standing on the brink of annihilation you still want to make sure they die first." Reese said as she slowly paced back towards the group while popping the fastenings of her chest plate.

“I mean, did you even deactivate that bomb, Matthews? What happens when someone takes your head off? Kaboom, right? We’re all just dust. And to send Brandt out there alone with a sniper rifle in case things went wrong. That’s just a special kind of insanity” She said as she shook her head and dropped the chest plate to the ground.

“And what about you, Terran?” She yelled to the Lieutenant as she pulled off her gloves “A sovereignty soldier dragged you out of a gun fight and saved all of your lives and the first thing you think of doing is shooting her. Then you walk out here with a man you know is carrying a bomb powerful enough to kill all of us and line up an airstrike ‘just in case there’s trouble’. And then you pull a gun when you’re outnumbered two to one. You’ve either got a deathwish or you’re the stupidest woman on the planet.” Reese poured every ounce of sarcasm she had ever learned into her tirade.

She turned to the group of Conglomerate soldiers and as she removed her thigh pads she realized that she didn’t actually know anything about them. “And you!” She said, pointing at the woman staring at her from behind an LMG. “I don’t know anything about any of you.” She admitted.

The last leg guard off, Reese stood and stretched for what felt like the first time in her life. With nothing but the torn wicking liner of her suit and her boots she looked into darkness clinging to the canopy above. “If you’re going to start shooting, try and get me first.” She said. “That way I’ll die without knowing for certain that you idiots doomed us all.”

An eternity stretched seemed to stretch by and no one had taken her up on her offer. Reese looked back towards the Conglomerate troops where were shifting uncomfortably in place and trading glances with one another, still holding their weapons on their respective targets.

“She’s right, you know.” Said Rico as he slowly lowered his rifle.

“What are you doing, Sergeant?” The Lieutenant screeched.

“The only sane thing, ma’am.” Said Rico. “Even if I shoot that guy over there, that woman standing next to him is going to get me.” He said as he nodded at the two people standing across from him. “And even if I live through that, it isn’t like whoever’s left will be able to stop the weapon, is it?”

Reese watched as Rico set his rifle carefully on the ground and stepped away from it. Matthews sighed heavily but lowered his Orion anyway. The glare he shot at Reese was enough for her to realize that the man was incredibly angry. She wasn’t sure she cared.

The Lieutenant realized that she was the only one still pointing a weapon. For a moment, Reese worried that the woman was going to pull the trigger anyway. Or call in the Valkyrie. Or tell Hemming to start shooting. In the end, though, she didn’t do any of those things. She simply lowered her carbine and swore something Reese couldn’t understand as it was muffled by the Lieutenant’s helmet. “Hemming - stand down.” She said over the squad channel.

Hemming materialized in the distance. He had been crouched in a line of brush. Reese thought it was an odd place to choose to wait for the apocalypse. Brandt appeared a short time later though Reese did not see where the woman had been hiding.

The New Conglomerate soldiers, meanwhile, were clearly confused though they still held their weapons pointed at Reese and the rest of her party. Slowly the woman in the heavy exosuit lowered her machine gun. “Do you have any proof?” She asked.

Matthews started at the woman for a moment and then nodded. “We’ve got part of the research data. You’ll have to take my word about the friends who died to protect it.” He said.

Matthews called Brandt in over the squad channel but Reese had stopped listening. She didn’t even notice that Rico had walked over until he put a hand on her shoulder. “How many times have you rebirthed?” He asked gently.

Reese tried to tell him but couldn't find the the words. She slowly sank to the ground, grabbed her knees, and sobbed quietly instead. She didn't notice the rain at first, or that Rico had sat in the mud next to her. When a large drop fell through the trees to splash on her shoulder she realized she was grateful for the medic's presence no matter what colors he wore.

The two of them sat in the mud together. Reese quietly cried though she wasn't sure why. Rico simply sat silently and pulled something off his belt. Matthews was saying something in a raised voice tinged with poorly concealed anger but Reese didn't care. She was tired and scared and cold.

She just wanted to go home.

A Fragile Alliance

Rico

Rico quietly stepped away from the sleeping woman. She didn't need his help, she simply needed time to rest. Time was something none of them had to spare.

He looked around the small structure where everyone had gone to take shelter from the rain. The NC had collected in a corner, where they quietly talked. The engineer they had picked up looked at him and nodded in acknowledgement, the rest simply ignored him. He didn't see the Lieutenant.

Probably still yelling. He thought.

On the other side of the room, Hemming was resting against a rusting machine whose purpose Rico could not identify. Their pilot stood in the corner. Brandt was leaning on a wall nearby and looked up as Rico approached. "How's Reese?" She asked.

"Should be fine. With only two rebirths, it's probably not hysteria. Far as I could tell it's just side effects of all the stims she took and some basic exhaustion." He said.

Rico shook his head at the thought. The stimulant load in a single medkit would be enough to give the average person a few hours of exuberant high. They were wildly illegal for civilian consumption in TR controlled areas. Reese had taken at least twelve in a day. It was a credit to her implants that she avoided overdosing. Even people with substantial tolerance, junkies or the old veterans who fought before rebirth mainly, would be on death's doorstep after half that.

"We know anything yet?" Asked Rico, gesturing to the room that their commanders had retreated into.

Brandt shook her head. "Not since they went in there more than an hour ago." She said.

Rico wasn't particularly hopeful that anything good would come from the meeting. The three had stopped pointing guns at each other after Reese's breakdown but quickly descended into bitter argument. That they had thus far managed to avoid violence was remarkable.

Still, he was worried. Either you believed the story or you didn't. He glanced at his battle computer and realized it was past midnight. With a redeploy you ended up with a fresh body, but that did little to convince the mind that all was well. He'd been on night watch and was just getting off duty when the Lieutenant called that formation on Indar and hadn't had real sleep in a day and a half. He wanted to find a quiet corner so he could get some sleep though he knew this wouldn't be possible. In the sprawling facility, finding a spot away from the crowd would be the easy part. The hard part would be convincing his body that it was okay to rest.

"Let me ask you something." He said suddenly. "You served before rebirth, right?" He asked.

"Yes." Brandt responded carefully.

"Is feeling constantly on edge during an operation normal?" He asked. He wasn't sure. While he was old enough to remember life before rebirth, the technology had been pushed to the masses when he was in his teens. Mortality had never been one of his concerns.

She considered the question for a moment before nodding slightly. "Yeah." She said.

Given how brief her response was, Rico dropped the subject.

Needing something to do to pass the time, he resorted to what always kept him busy on patrol. He went to each member of the team for a quick health check. It was simple stuff that soldiers would often ignore. He'd check to make sure that they were hydrated, that they weren't in pain, that their feet were still in good shape, and that they'd be fit to fight. It was a dull routine but one that kept him busy.

He tried to ply his trade with the NC soldiers but most of them responded with little more than cold silence. He persisted in spite of this and asked each of them in turn. When he at last came to Mitchell, the man broke the apparent code of silence.

“Actually, my arm still feels a bit off. I thought I might have broken it during the drop but I had full range of motion. A pair of medkits didn’t really solve the problem” Mitchell said.

Rico reached for his medical applicator only to notice a subtle shift in the posture of a man dressed in an infiltrator suit nearby. Assuming it was because his side arm was situated just below and behind the medical applicator he reached for it slower hoping it would satisfy the man’s paranoia. A quick scan revealed the probable cause - minor damage to his ulnar nerve. It was the kind of injury that was tough to heal using a medkit. Before the ubiquitous spread of high end nanomedicine, surgeons often plied their trade with traditional surgical instruments and specialized single purpose medical nanites. While such steps were unnecessary with a medical applicator, his pack included a variety of old tools regardless

“Nothing bad. Just some bruising to a nerve in your arm.” He said. “Want me to fix it for you?” He asked.

Mitchell looked around his small group and then shrugged his shoulders. “Why not.”

Rico had the man roll up his sleeve and then went to work. The process took less than a minute. Mitchell’s friends had given him a respectful space in which to work, but stepped in closer once Rico slid the Medical applicator back into its carrier.

Mitchell rolled his hand around, clenching and unclenching his fingers. “How’s it feel?” Asked the infiltrator who had given Rico the stinkeye just minutes before.

“Uh. Feels good, I guess. Normal at least.” Said Mitchell.

“Never seen a medic that would treat a funny feelin’ arm.” Drawled a young woman cradling a shotgun.

“Where’d you learn to do that?” Asked the infiltrator. “Most medics I meet just patch up holes well enough to get you on your feet.” He clarified.

“Medical school. I was going to be a surgeon but this thing put me out of work” He said gently patting the medical applicator.

“So, what, you decided to try and earn your job back by putting people into hospitals?” Asked Mitchell with grin. Several members of his team laughed at the joke.

“Almost. A Commissar came around the day the school shut down and started grabbing students.” Said Rico. “I was drafted.”

The laughter, already soft, stopped instantly. “Oh.” Said Mitchell with an awkward glance. “Sorry.” He said more as a question than a statement.

“Don’t be. I mean, were it not for good old uncle Mattherson, I wouldn’t get to visit exotic hellholes like this place” Said Rico with a grand gesture at nothing in particular.

That earned a small chuckle from the woman with a shotgun. It was a notable improvement from their first meeting, at least.

The door their commanders had disappeared into earlier swung open. Everyone waiting around the room turned towards it expectantly. The woman leading the NC team stormed through the door and looked around for a moment. “Strottman, Webb, get in here.” She said. The woman then pointed

toward Brandt. "You too." She said.

Alyss

Alyss was surprised how quickly the two engineers understood what she wanted. The Centurion kept claiming his evidence was locked in an optical neural network that the infiltrator carried. She knew her armor housed a simple one and that you could tweak it to slightly modify nanomesh behavior, but really didn't have any experience beyond that. Apparently, the ones the Sovereignty used were much more complex. The short infiltrator, she was told, carried two of them inside her. One was always there and the other they'd gotten from their now dead leader. This facility simply didn't have anything that could interface with such a device. She had asked her engineers for a solution and, after a few brief questions, pitched using the interface in the woman's cybernetic rig. After some hesitation, both the woman and the Centurion and the engineers quickly went to work assembling something that would do the job.

"I'm gonna need to get to that access port, miss..." Said Webb.

"Brandt." Said the woman as she popped a seam in her armor that Alyss didn't even realize existed.

"Katelyn Brandt." She said to clarify.

Webb attempted to attached a narrow bundle of cables to a small socket in the woman's chest and then dropped them to the ground in frustration. "Hey James, do you have one of those 22-18 connectors in your kit?" He asked.

Strottman rummaged through his pack and pulled out a small shiny object which he handed to Webb. Webb produced a small tool and began digging at something in Brandt's side. The woman, to her credit, simply stood there as Webb did his work.

“You should get your cybernetics looked at, ma’am.” Said Webb. “What the hell did you do to this thing?” He asked. “The housing is cracked in a few places and you crushed your socket.” He said as he tried pulling out the offending part.

“I think that’s when I got backhanded by a Max.” She said.

Alyss hadn’t expected that answer. The woman was a head shorter than she was and might weigh fifty kilos without gear. She’d seen Maxes crush the armor of a Harasser with their hands. Even a heavy exosuit like hers only had a fraction of that protection. They could pull someone apart like they were made of putty. Normally, if a Max got close enough to man handle you, that was it. “How did you manage to walk away from that?” She asked.

“Luck.” Brandt said simply. “Reese shot it in the back, which drew it off long enough for me to get back on my feet. Then I kept it busy until she got to the PPA we had set up.”

Alyss glanced down and noticed the grip of a large revolver sticking up from a holster on the woman’s back. She was probably the one who double tapped that Max in the courtyard. She’d seen Maxes tear through entire platoons in close quarters before. That two of them had managed to bring one down was impressive, even if they used a PPA to do most of the work.

Webb yanked the old part free and tossed it aside. In moments, he had the bundle of cables fitted neatly in place.

“Should be good.” He said. “Ready whenever you are.” He said to the infiltrator.

The woman closed her eyes and the screen flashed to life. “How does it work?” Asked Alyss.

“It’s a direct neural interface.” Said Brandt. “Seems like it works if I ask direct questions.”

Alyss thought about it for a moment and simply asked “So, what is the weapon, exactly?”

She watched as a series of charts and graphs slowly appeared on the screen accompanied by brief text explanations. After several minutes she leaned over to Strottmann. “Did you get any of that?” She asked.

“It’s what Briggs said. It isn’t a native self-replicator - it’s just a long distance control signal that uses the warpgates.” He replied.

“And the launch window?” She asked.

The screen simply displayed a line with regular marks that she recognized as coinciding with the Auraxian month. The closest mark was only fourteen hours away. That, too, lined up with what Briggs had said.

“Do we know what kind of damage the weapon would do?” She asked.

A map of Auraxis appeared on the screen with small markers she recognized as warpgate locations. Concentric circles appeared around each one. She looked closely and realized they marked probable effective range of the control signal. Even the estimated range for certain functionality was enough to cover all of Esamir, Indar, Amerish and most of Cyssor. Even the edges of Hossin were inside the partial effective range. The irony of being one of the handful not currently threatened by the weapon while being one of the few who might stop it was not lost on her.

That really only left the one question. “Can it be stopped?” She asked.

The screen simply flashed an unhelpful message: INSUFFICIENT DATA.

Alyss looked at Matthews and sighed. The evidence was compelling enough. They still had no idea how to stop it. Maybe the reboot would solve the problem and maybe it wouldn't. If it didn't, they always had the option of just leveling the base.

"Webb - go grab everyone and bring them in here." Said Alyss.

"Even the Terrans?" He asked.

She clenched her teeth reflexively at the concept. "Yes. Even the Terrans."

Mitchell

They had spent the better part of an hour simply trying to get a decent picture of the situation. The Sovereignty team had personally seen garrisons at the labs, amp station, and water purification plant. Mitchell's own encounter south of Mossridge meant that there would likely be a detachment there as well. The Terrans had said that their now destroyed listening post estimated there were more than a hundred combat troops on the continent. Everyone had agreed that there were probably small garrisons at a handful of sites to the east and that the enemy was backed by an operational rebirthing tube. the Terran pilot believed there were at least three operational Scythes on hand and both the Terrans and the Sovereignty soldiers had encountered Magriders. Mitchell knew first hand they had access to Sunderers.

The story painted on their shared tactical overlay was a grim one. They'd be outnumbered five to one at best and would face heavy armor with very little in the way of anti-vehicle weaponry. They could easily penetrate the outer layer of defenses but it was certain that once they did, the larger garrisons in the interior facilities would rush to reinforce the breach. A frontal assault was all but guaranteed to fail as they'd simply be worn down by sheer weight in numbers.

“Why don’t we just drop directly on Nason’s?” Asked Davis. “Just go in low and fast - no way they can scramble the Scythes in time to stop us.” He said.

“It might work.” Admitted Camilla. “But we don’t know how many people are going to be defending it. If they pulled most of their security forces to that facility, it would just be a bloodbath.”

“So we draw them out.” Said Nicholas.

“How are we supposed to do that?” Asked Vivian. “They’ve got the advantage and can wait around till doomsday. It isn’t like any of them are actually going to die or anything.”

“We take their immortality, then.” Said Alyss. “Here.” She said, pointing to the map. “We took all the rebirthing tubes when we left Hossin except the prototype in Nason’s Defiance. We built others pretty quickly, so that original tube isn’t even a hardened structure. Should be able to take it down with an airstrike, I’d think.”

“My Valkyrie only has a few rockets left.” Said Valeriya. “The cannon might do the job but it’s hard to say. I can put a lot of holes in it but that doesn’t mean I’d actually destroy it.”

“Couple of direct hits from a bulldog would, though - assuming you’re right about it being a soft structure, of course.” Said Davis.

Alyss nodded. “We take out their rebirth, that means people will start to care about dying.”

“Then you could hit the labs.” Said Brandt. “Those fools want to build a brave new world which means they’re going to want to keep their research team safe.” She paused for a moment before adding “Plus, if we can breach the labs we can wipe the research data to make sure no one else tries the same thing in a week.”

Quiet murmurs filled the room before the Terran infiltrator spoke up. “That wouldn’t buy much time, though. Unless someone slows them down, their round trip response time is still going to be pretty short.” He said.

“That and I doubt you’ll get into those labs if they have power.” Said James. “Not unless we can hack the shields at any rate.” He clarified.

“Do we know where the power is coming from?” Asked Alyss.

“They might still have a small format fusion generator, but I’d bet they’re probably just siphoning power from the Amp Station.” Said James.

“That still leaves the problem that without anything to stop them, they can just turn right around and crush us at Nason’s.” Said Hemming.

The group argued the details of the plan for another hour before they finally came up with something that seemed like it was anything other than suicidal. They would deposit a team to act as a fixing force along the road between the labs and Nason’s Defiance. Once they were in place, the Terran Valkyrie would drop a small team just outside the walls of the amp station before trying to destroy the Scythes sitting on the landing pad. In the chaos that was sure to follow, the amp station team would, it was hoped, destroy or disable the massive fusion generators at the facility's heart. A second infiltration team would attempt to gain access to the labs and raise hell to draw them out of the central facilities. The rest would drop on Nason’s to initiate the reboot while the infiltration teams pulled out and linked up with the blocking force.

To Mitchell, calling it ambitious was being generous. “I still don’t like it.” Said Mitchell. “Without heavy weapons we won’t hold that road for long if they’re even remotely competent.”

Alyss looked around the room for a moment and then nodded in agreement. "I think you're right. Did that armory at the tech plant have anything heavy enough to crack a Magrider?"

"I know I came across a few crates of AP rockets." Said Camilla. "I didn't look for launchers, though."

Alyss looked at her battle computer and sighed. "Banker when we wrap up here, take Webb and Clark to that armory. See what you can find. I'll need you back by 0500." She said.

"Any other complaints?" Asked Matthews as he looked around the room.

No one said anything.

"Alright - link up with your group leaders." Said Alyss. "We need to be ready to roll out by 0700."

Matthews

A brief conversation with the two infiltrators was enough to convince Matthews they knew what they were doing. Mike had spent years honing his craft as a close combat specialist. That he eschewed the heavy armor plating of an exosuit was an odd choice but not entirely unexpected. Had had met several soldiers that preferred to match compact short ranged weapons with a cloaking device. They often claimed remaining unseen was a better survival tactic than simply hoping a stout shield backed by thick armor would keep you safe.

To Matthews, it was an odd choice. He had spent his entire career in a Sovereignty line unit and had never requested transfer for advanced training nor been assigned to any of the dozens of specialist units. His war had been an endless stream of set piece battles. When an assault forced faced the prospect of running into the churning maw of hundreds of guns, being invisible was less important than wearing enough armor to survive a few hits when your luck ran out. Mike's career was one of

breaking and entering. He had a history of fighting small desperate battles in tight spaces. If the man found a reinforced infiltration suit was the best way to do that, who was Matthews to argue?

He'd released both of them to do whatever it is they felt they ought to be doing. They were professional and they knew the stakes well enough. There wasn't time to try and build the sort of relationship necessary to actually trust one another completely; no need to make them spend these last few hours with a stranger. Mike wandered off immediately but his female counterpart, a woman named Natalie, surprised him by staying behind.

Mathews sat on the floor of the large open room they had moved to following the planning session and rested tiredly against the wall as he eyed the woman suspiciously. She too wore an infiltration suit but unlike Mike had opted against the light reinforcing plates of composite armor. Apparently, the stuff was relatively uncomfortable and only offered a scant improvement in protection. He'd never given the New Conglomerate's armor much thought. It was heavy and thick compared to what he wore on his Exosuit but offered comparable protection. Wearer comfort had evidently not been much of a concern for the NC. He looked closer at the woman's weapon. It was the same as the one carried by Mitchell and Mike and he'd originally assumed it was the common AF-4 but now realized there were slight differences. Her weapon had a wider shroud protecting the coils and long wide magazines rather than the short and narrow ones he was used to seeing.

"What is that?" He asked, gesturing at the weapon.

She looked down at the weapon and gave it a friendly pat. "It's a modified AF-4. It has some accuracy and velocity improvements over the original." She said.

The woman walked over to him and held the weapon out as though she were offering it to Matthews. The gesture caused him to flinch slightly. He wasn't used to an NC soldier handing him anything with peaceful intent. He took the weapon and turned it over in his hands, examining it closely. He had to

admit it was a well constructed example of the weapon. Either it had been freshly forged or it was exceedingly well taken care of. He handed it back to the Natalie.

“I’ve never seen one like it.” He admitted.

“It’s new.” She said. “Since none of us knew what exactly we’d be up against there was a push to get everyone up to speed on the most flexible weapons in our arsenal. The AF-4 is pretty mean up close but Mike and I thought it lost its steam too quick. Took a few months to get everything sorted out and in the end I guess the boys over at Auraxis Firearms changed enough that they considered it a new model.” She explained.

“I’d think the extended range model would be popular with your line units.” Said Matthews.

“Might be. Hasn’t really had much field testing yet. If it goes well they might actually roll the Tempest out to the rest. Kicks pretty hard, though, so I don’t know if people will want to trade their Cyclone in for a Tempest across the board.” She said.

Matthews chuckled at the name they’d assigned the weapon. It reminded him of an experimental version of the VS54 he’d heard about. No one really called the VS54 by its official designation, though. Everyone called it an “Orion” after a legendary hunter from Earth. The rumored variant used an experimental power source and mass collection system that, in the right conditions, could allegedly fire without ever needing to reload. He had heard the weapon called a “Betelgeuse” after a star of the same name in the constellation of Orion. It was clever name, even if Briggs was one of the few in the Sovereignty who had ever personally seen it.

Rico

The Lieutenant had tried to convince him to get some rest but Rico waved her off. He knew he needed to sleep but couldn’t. He hummed with nervous energy for which he had no useful purpose.

The obvious part of the problem was the mission. The two feints demanded infiltration skills he didn't have. The assault on Nason's Defiance would not, if things went as planned, meet much resistance. With no skills to help either Valeriya in her Valkyrie or Davis in the Galaxy, that meant the only place he could really help was the blocking effort. The brutal simplicity of the calculus of command was not lost on him. The blocking force, if all went according to plan, would be the hardest hit of the four ground teams. The people most likely to bleed were the ones who most needed a medic.

He'd tried to blunt the creeping fear of what the battle would bring by talking to the two NC snipers who would be joining him in the field. Neither Nicholas nor Cynthia seemed particularly inclined to talk. Every sniper he'd ever met had been similarly laconic; he was never sure if that was a natural trait of the sort of person capable of being a sniper or if it was an intentionally cultivated result of careful training. Nicholas had quickly made an excuse to leave. Rico had seen him wander outside with another sniper, though Rico didn't recall the second man's name. Cynthia on the other hand remained behind, though she opted to spend the short hours before the mission dozing in a corner.

Reese was supposed to be on the blocking team with him, but given her emotional state he wasn't sure what good she would be able to do. The woman had been through hell. In a fair world she would get time she needed to recover. Physically she was in good enough shape to fight. He didn't know how it worked in the Sovereignty, but in the TR a soldier didn't get a pass because of battlefield stress. If you were healthy enough to carry a gun and sane enough to point at the enemies of the Republic, you were expected to fight. Fair or not, if she was capable of fighting, she would have to.

He had fiddled with his equipment and packed and unpacked his bag a half dozen times. Without checking, he knew exactly where he kept his synthetic adrenaline but felt compelled all the same to check again to make sure it was there. He knew that he still carried 3200 grams of biomass for the medical applicator and that the applicator itself was sitting at a 93% charge. He had confirmed that he carried ten magazines for his Gauss Rifle and that each of the magazines was facing the same way in their respective pouches.

Rather than count his magazines or check his supplies again, he opted to make his rounds. No one had done anything since the last time he came by and so, predictably, there were no injuries to treat. He offered to help the Centurion but just like the last several times the man waved him away indicating the graze on his arm was nothing. He had then told the Centurion that he looked like hell and should get some rest. At first he was afraid the man would take it as an insult but was surprised when Matthews instead laughed and said he'd think about it. Rico left him a light tranquilizer and finished his rounds.

With nothing left to do but go through his bag again, he wandered off to find Reese, hoping to check on the progress the detox implant had made. Of course it was just a flimsy pretext - he knew how long the small implant took to do its work. He really just wanted to get a feel for her mental state. He told himself he needed to talk to her because he wanted to figure out if she was stable enough to fight or if she would just end up a liability. In a moment of surprising honesty, he realized that, too, was a lie. With what she had already managed, he was certain she would stand her ground till the end. But more than that, in spite of her affiliation with a transhumanist cult, Rico realized that he genuinely liked the young woman.

Alyss

The Centurion had been loathe to give up his bomb. Matthews wanted to accompany the assault team so that he could carry the weapon and, for a time, refused to believe Alyss capable of detonating if the situation demanded it. For her part, Alyss didn't trust the man to do anything other than stroll into the control room and blow it up. Walking around with something that potent on a dead man's switch was one thing but showing up to what was supposed to be a peaceful encounter so armed was something else entirely.

She eventually convinced him that Sigma could handle the control room but charging into the labs was something the team just wasn't built for. They needed to ensure they could get in and have time

to do the job properly. She would use the bomb if she had to, but, where it seemed to be the Centurion's only choice, it was firmly Alyss's last resort.

"You almost never see an auraxium charge that big." Said James.

Alyss looked up and realized the man had probably been watching her as she fiddled with the bomb. A bit self conscious, she set the bomb aside.

"How much time do you think you'll need?" She asked.

James shrugged. "I don't know. Only people who've ever tried something like this was the VS team who installed the hack in the first place. I guess it depends on how long it takes to gain access to the system." He said.

"You know that isn't a useful answer." Alyss replied.

"It's the best I can give you. Assuming things are exactly as we left it, there are three security doors we have to get through, if nothing else. Standard bypass for one of those takes about five minutes to run, so that's at least fifteen minutes right there. Assuming they don't have anything nasty protecting the interface to throw it off, a brute force access attempt on a rebirth node takes about ten minutes, though that varies considerably. I've seen someone crack it in four minutes and I've seen it take half an hour. Once you're through all that, there is the reboot itself and I have no idea how long that would take." He explained.

"Can the process be interrupted?" Asked Alyss.

"Any of the crack attempts can. The reboot, probably not." He said.

They had collectively shot down the idea of simply crashing directly into Nason's Defiance and hitting the facility head on because no one believed they'd be able to hold out long enough to get the job done. A conservative estimate guessed it would take half an hour just to attempt the reboot. Even with the diversions in place, the blocking team was going to get hit hard long before they could finish the job.

Alyss glanced at her battle computer again. She still hadn't heard from Banker or Webb. Without heavy weapons, the attempt to stall the cultists wouldn't last more than a few minutes. The Board had wanted a team that was ready for anything. Alyss was starting to wonder why they had limited the team to twelve and had specified the use of infiltrators and engineers. If she could have even a single platoon from one of the heavy PMCs, she knew they'd be able to hold. She pulled up the assignments that the Rangers, VS, and Sigma had agreed on. Right now, if all went perfectly, they'd had ten men and women on the ground and two aircraft short on ammo above trying to hold back ten times their number. Most of them had never had to work together before.

Even if everything went as planned, Alyss knew most of them were going to die. It had been a long time since death meant much to anyone. This one was for keeps. If anyone went down before they could get the warpgates back online, they were properly dead. She realized in that moment that she had no idea how she'd tell Nicholas's siblings that she sent him to die. She didn't even know how one would go about informing the Terrans or the rest of the Vanu what happened to the people they had sent.

Of course, that's assuming I make it out of this alive. she thought.

Mitchell

The armory was impressive. Tens of thousands of weapons filled the long rows. Mitchell did not even want to guess how much ammunition had been stockpiled. It seemed odd that it would have been left behind when they evacuated the continent when the NC had stripped the place of

everything else that was of any real value. The smaller weapons were not what interested him, of course. He was looking for a weapon powerful enough to stop something protected by almost 40 centimeters of armor.

He stopped in front of a sealed case that looked promising. Mitchell quickly unfastened the clasps holding it closed and pulled it aside. Inside was an NCM2 nestled alongside the heavy tripod that used to accompany the weapon. When the weapon was initially conceived, it was simply a recoilless rifle built for industrial purposes. They had been used for everything from mining to avalanche control. When tensions on Auraxis eventually escalated to open warfare, more than one insurgent group realized that the NCM2 was seemingly purpose built for combat. The shells it fired were able to carry potent explosive payloads. With a little tinkering, the high explosive warheads could be turned into potent armor piercing weapons.

The weapon was bulky, yes, and certainly heavy. With the tripod it weighed almost 200 kilos. A person in a military grade heavy exosuit could drag one around but the process was never pleasant. It was never really adopted by the PMCs, though, who preferred the compact MANA turret produced by Nanite Systems. While the missiles that weapon launched were far smaller and thus less potent, they maintained that reliable accuracy and ease of transport were the more important factors.

Of course, that was before some enterprising tinkerer got the bright idea to take a massive industrial exosuit frame and then bolt on heavy slabs of armor. Unconcerned with form or wearer comfort and with no need to fit into the tight confines of military vehicles, industrial exosuits were massively more powerful than their military counterparts. It wasn't long after that that someone modified an NCM2 so that it could be carried and fired as though it were a personal weapon.

The NCM2 in the crate wouldn't do them much good, though. It was potent, but it was also functionally immobile.

“Jackpot!” Shouted Davis across the squad channel. “I just found a whole pallet of gen 1 MANA turrets”

Mitchell groaned. The first generation of the weapon was almost sixty years old. The guidance system was notoriously short ranged and unreliable. He cued the squad channel and said “You know there’s a reason they left that garbage behind, right?”

“Better than nothing by quite a bit.” Said Davis. “Besides, it’s better than anything you’ve found.”

Mitchell had to give the man that much. Even if they were unreliable, they could crack heavy armor with ease. He continued his sweep of the armory and was increasingly convinced Davis’s find would have to do. He came at last to the end of his row and was about to simply turn around when something caught his eye.

He turned to look at the object clearly. It was a machine shaped roughly like a man, though it would dwarf one easily. It stood more than two meters tall and was painted a flat dull black except for the shining chrome tubes that of the heavy hydraulics that acted as the machine’s muscles. It was industrial exosuit.

He excitedly ran around the hulking machine, looking for some sign of wear or damage that would justify it having been left behind. Long chains descended from the high ceiling and looped at last through large steel hooks welded to the back, serving to hold the machine upright. With no obvious indication of defect or damage, Mitchell clambered onto the machine and reached inside to power it on. With little more than a hum the reactor came online; dials and gages flickered to life.

Given that the machine had simply hung in the corner of an abandoned armory for a decade, Mitchell didn’t dare hope that it would actually be serviceable. One by one, small green lights flashed on the master warning indicator on the machine’s arm. Hydraulics were good. Reactor output was normal.

A small amber indicator flashed indicating a problem with some of the servomotors in the suit's legs but that was something they'd probably be able to fix.

"Davis." he said. "Get the tools. I found something better."

The Last Dance

Brandt

As she idly wandered through the compound, Brandt realized that she had not properly slept in years. While it was hard to remember specific things since she had gotten the sentinel package and joined the Sovereignty, a simple examination of her service record would show little room had been left for sleep.

People often mistakenly called sentinels robots, but that was only a partial truth. The cybernetic augmentation and gene alterations were extensive, and virtually every part of her body was modified in the process. Her bones were reinforced with a lacing of carbon nanotubes. Artificial muscle fibers were implanted in major muscle groups and linked to her nervous system so that they operated in time with the ones she naturally possessed. The eye implant and arm replacement the TR had given her were replaced with Vanu made equivalents and where the Republic's models for both had been unmistakably machine the ones she bore now could pass for human at a glance. They went so far as to replace or augment glands all in service of producing something that was better than human. She was faster, stronger, and able to shrug off an injury that would instantly kill a normal person. Not that normal person meant much. Everyone fielded similar upgrades and, while none were as complete as what the Sovereignty used, the result was the same. The war on Auraxis was one fought by men and women who rightfully deserved the title of demigod. But in spite of all of that, there was nothing about the upgrades that negated the need for sleep. The last time she could remember having both a need for rest and the chance to do so was when she had been captured. She had never really noticed that fact before.

She noticed this time because her triage unit sent regular notifications that, based on a half dozen factors, she needed rest. When she was injured it impassively notified her of the damage. When a wound was fatal, it would helpfully display the probable cause of death and would offer a projected life expectancy. When the filter worked, she never really questioned that system. Pain and fatigue were vague indicators of a problem better addressed with explicit information.

In the last day she had been shot and it didn't hurt. She had ribs crushed in spite of the bone lacing and had hit her head hard enough when the Galaxy rolled that her helmet had left a wide gash on her scalp. None of that had hurt, either. She had just gotten little notes telling her of the damage as microscopic systems tried to compensate. It wasn't that she missed the pain of a broken rib or a concussion so much as their absence felt conspicuous in a way she hadn't questioned before. She couldn't quite put her finger on the problem but eventually decided it was like she was simply driving a body. It might have looked like the one she remembered having, complete with all the scars she'd earned in a lifetime of hard lessons learned when it was still possible to acquire scars, but it didn't feel like it belonged to her.

The irony that she found it odd was not lost on her. She agreed to betray the Republic to forget those hard earned lessons. Until the brain implant failed, the Sovereignty had upheld its end of the bargain. She hadn't thought of Jessica in three years or lingered on the memory of Marcus dying in her arms on Amerish. When night fell, They had kept the demons and ghosts that haunted her at bay. That is why she refused to sleep now even though she knew she should. With the implant disabled, the memories were there waiting to bubble to the surface. That is why she simply wandered around the terraforming facility in the middle of the night. Not that she would tell anyone, of course. If they asked, she decided that she would say she was keeping watch. It was the sort of half lie people were always comfortable telling one another.

She walked past a pair of young men seated close together against a short wall in the dark. The day's heat had faded into a simple muggy warmth once the sun had set. The heat may have explained why the two were dozing with their infiltration suits partially peeled back though she suspected that probably wasn't the case. Assuming it was anything like the suit she now wore, they were likely to be more comfortable with it completely sealed.

As she continued her patrol, she came across the rest of the ragged crew. Matthews snored softly in a corner by himself. The NC had mostly collected in small groups, chatting and laughing quietly. A

few seemed to prefer solitude. The woman the NC team kept calling boss sat in the corner of a large room. She motioned Brandt over.

“I was talking to that Ranger Lieutenant.” She said. “You seem to have made a hell of an impression on her.”

That didn’t really square with Brandt’s own experience with the abrasive woman. She snorted and said “She did only threaten to have me shot twice. If she keeps it up, she’ll be a Commissar in no time.”

Alyss smiled and shook her head. “I think that’s just because she’s too young to know how to lead.” She said. “When we were trying to figure out assignments, I asked about you. She says you helped save her team, even took a bullet for one of them.”

“Old instincts.” Said Brandt. It was the sort of explanation that would only make sense to another veteran. Alyss nodded as though she understood.

“You know, Jace was on Indar.” She said. “So was I.”

That was another shorthand reference. There had been dozens of Indar campaigns but when someone mentioned the place without qualifying which it always meant the first. It was the battle that changed the war.

Brandt settled to the floor next to the woman. Admitting you were on Indar was as clear an indicator as any that you wanted to have a serious discussion. The two went through the normal phases of any conversation between veterans. Brandt found that both of them were in the war before rebirth. Both of them had lost their families in the slow escalation of violence that led almost inexorably to the massacre at Searhus. They had served in the same theaters at the same time. Alyss joked that she had probably traded fire with Brandt on Esamir when she found they were both on the same section

of a glacier one day. Brandt had had this conversation many times when she was a Ranger. This was the first time she had it with a hated foe. It seemed absurd that the two of them spent their adult lives shooting at each other when they were so alike. With a single twist of fate, they could have ended up fighting alongside one another instead. Finally, the conversation wound down to the uncomfortable silence that naturally followed such discussions. They tended to dredge up old memories. Both of them knew when to stop pressing an issue. For that reason alone, Brandt liked Alyss more than the Ranger.

Brandt stood back up and started to make an excuse but Alyss just waved it off. “Go.” Said Alyss. “And good luck out there.”

“You too.”

“If we’re still alive tomorrow, I’ll buy you a drink.”

Brandt smiled and agreed to the offer but never intended to follow through with it. The plan was as good as could be managed in the circumstances, but she, Jace, and Hemming were being thrown to the wolves as bait. It was another one of those small lies you told that everyone knew was a lie but pretended to accept. Alyss didn’t want to admit she was sending Brandt on a suicide mission and so Brandt played along.

After excusing herself, she went back out on her idle patrol. She hadn’t seen Reese or Rico in hours. The last time she had seen the medic, he was in the process of unpacking his kit for the third time in an hour. As far as nervous habits went it was a useful one at least. Both of them had been assigned to the blocking force. Their odds weren’t much better than hers. A brief search confirmed neither of them was in the main structure where most of the team waited, nor were they the small room where Rico had left Reese after her outburst. Reasoning that neither of them would be inclined to wander very far she set out to look for them.

A few minutes later, her logic proved correct when she spotted the two of them together in a dark corner of the courtyard. When she first saw them, she was confused why Reese seemed to be sitting on Rico's lap but when she noticed the young woman was making small circular motions with her hips the implications were clear. She smiled at the sight and turned away back to continue her solitary vigil. They were coping as well as could be expected. If Reese survived the coming battle she would need a happy memory to cling to in the days ahead.

As she walked, Brandt began composing a message. It was a tradition as old as war to try and write down whatever might bring closure to those left behind when you were facing nearly certain death. She hadn't ever written one before, though - there was no one left at home to care. After deleting her fourth attempt in a fit of frustration, she opted for a radical new strategy. She would simply write down the truth of it all as best as she could tell it.

She'd never found any peace in lies anyhow.

Mitchell

Mitchell lifted his helmet and wiped sweat from his brow as he stepped back to examine his work. He had spent an hour pulling tri-plate armor from a collection of abandoned exosuits and attaching them to the exosuit's frame. On top of those, he placed heavy composite plates. Unlike a modern Max, this suit wasn't sealed; it wouldn't protect against gas, vacuum, or water. It was ugly and whoever wore it would have to cope with the fact that the reactor that sat between their shoulders had nowhere to dump the heat. What it did have was almost eight centimeters of armor at all the critical points - more than enough to stop any weapon an unaugmented man could carry. It might even be able to stop a round from the high tech plasma cannons the Vanu favored when dealing with heavy armor in close quarters.

Davis walked over to and looked the machine up and down. "Looks like shit." He said.

Mitchell ran his hand across a plate of armor on the thigh, grabbed it, and shook it violently. Neither the plate nor the machine budged under the assault. "Yeah, but what do you expect?" He said as he turned around. "If all you've got is a few hours and bits from power armor someone left behind, aesthetics are the last thing to consider."

"You ever operate one?" Asked Davis.

Mitchell shook his head. "The industrial loader, sure. Never one modified for combat, though." He looked around and spotted the Falcon they had dragged from the crate. Davis had been working to modify it so that the improvised Max could carry and fire it. "Is it done?" He asked, nodding toward the weapon.

"As ready as can be given the time." Davis said looking at the computer on his wrist.

The two men walked over to the weapon. Davis pointed to the heavy pair of grips he had installed on the recoilless rifle. "I didn't have time to modify it so that it linked directly to the gauntlet." He explained. "Firing switch is here." He said, pointing to a heavy steel lever. Davis leaned down and picked up a boxy magazine. "Good news is that you don't have to hand load every shot. I put together a few of these. Each one will hold five rounds." He placed the magazine back on the ground and pointed to the length of steel protruding from the side of the weapon. "Pull that back and then drive it back forward. It should pick up the next round in the mag." He explained.

"Where's the magazine catch?" Asked Mitchell.

"It's right there." Said Davis, pointing to a small lever on the cocking handle. "You'll have to pull the handle to the rear first."

"I hate to be the bearer of bad news, boys, but we need to get this stuff on the bird." Vivian shouted from the distance.

Mitchell looked at his own battle computer. She was right.

“You want to drive or...?” Asked Mitchell, pointing to the suit.

“Nah. Wouldn’t fit in the cockpit anyhow. Besides, you know what they say - ‘you build, it you test it’.” Said Davis as he cited a line from ‘The Engineer’s Code’ - a parody manual someone had written to guide new engineers.

Mitchell looked at the imposing machine before turning back to Davis. The man was right. If he’d measured wrong one of the armor plates could pinch or crush the person inside. Still, he trusted his work. It wasn’t the first time he’d built something like this. He was a tinkerer by trade. It’s what earned him his spot on Sigma.

He reached over and pulled several release catches. He took a deep breath and braced himself to lift the chest plate out of the way. He had to reinforce the original narrow frame to support the huge mass of armor he had attached to it. The original designers had never intended for it to carry a payload at all and the small servos that normally lifted the frame burned out when he tested them. He quickly realized his error. There was no way he would be able to climb in the suit while simultaneously holding it open.

“Can you give me a hand with this?” He asked, straining.

Davis hurried over and grabbed the bottom edge. “I’ve got it.” He said.

Mitchell climbed inside the tight confines, struggling to force his legs inside the narrow padded space left for them. It took him several moments to find the small clasps designed to hold his foot in place. Combat Maxes used a direct neural interface but the industrial exosuit simply used sensors to detect

movement in the wearer's limbs, moving the suit accordingly. Before he had time to consider it, he shoved his arms inside, straining to grab the handles that controlled the Max's wrists and hands.

"Okay, I'm in. You can seal it." He said.

Davis didn't need to be told twice. He slowly lowered the chest plate and then released it, letting it swing closed under its own weight. He gave it a few tugs before he was satisfied that it had sealed.

Mitchell felt around inside the glove, groping for the startup switch he had installed. As soon as he pressed it, the suit hummed with energy. He felt the foot plates shift slightly under his weight and the sensor pads close in around his legs and arms. The machine shifted him subtly inside the suit until it was satisfied his joints lined up with those of the suit. A small green light appeared in the corner of his eye. The Max was ready. Mitchell tried lifting his arms and shifting his legs. The suit quickly responded to his desires. After a few moments of careful movement, he tried an exaggerated flail and the suit complied without even asking for a limb in exchange. Satisfied, he trudged toward the Falcon and leaned over to pick up the massive weapon.

Something groaned and snapped near his hips, the chest plate of the Max swung partly open and upset his center of balance. Mitchell flailed the suit's arms wildly and took a step back, barely managing to keep the machine upright as Davis laughed behind him

The pilot walked around the Max and leaned over to examine the catch. "See - that's why they have the rule." He pointed to the clasps that once held the chest cage shut. "This thing's fucked, man. Hate to say it but I think we're gonna need to weld it shut."

Mitchell groaned inwardly. This shithole was hot enough without a nuclear reactor strapped to your back. He leaned over again, this time more carefully and lifted the Falcon from the tripod. He was momentarily surprised at how effortless it was to carry the massive weapon. Even in a military exosuit your body still had to do some of the work.

Reese

Reese stirred awake to a small chirping sound. She opened her eyes tiredly, trying to focus on the AR overlay that flashed for attention. She dismissed several medical warnings and a note that she should inform her platoon commander of her tryst before submitting for rebirth. She was usually thankful for the various implants that monitored her condition and labored to keep her alive but now resented that they were spying and seemingly judging her. With the overlay cleared of junk, the cause for the chirping in her mind was obvious. It was time to get up.

She looked over and saw the medic was still dozing next to her. She reached over and touched the man on the arm, giving it a gentle shake. Rico grumbled quietly as he rose upright, looking around blearily before turning to face her.

“Good morning.” He said with a smile.

“I suppose it is.” Reese agreed.

Rico stretched while yawning and then rubbed the dark stubble on his face. “Shouldn’t you get dressed?” He asked.

Reese looked down. She had fallen asleep without her armor on. She looked around in the darkness and found the top half to her wicking liner and quickly pulled it over her head. It wouldn’t have made much difference had she left it on, as ragged as it was thanks to the exertions of the last several days.

As she began clipping her armor into place, she looked over at Rico, struggling to pull his armor over his head. Reese scrambled to her to help the man and Rico, seemingly confused by the turn of events, looked at her with surprise. The two of them sat there in what would pass for an embrace

were it not for the partial suits of armor they wore. Rico slowly leaned toward her; Reese closed her eyes, expecting the man to kiss her.

A small cough startled Rees and she quickly backed away from the man. She turned around to see Brandt leaning against the building.

"I didn't even hear..." Reese started. "It wasn't what it looked liked." She said.

Brandt smiled at the young woman. "Yes it was." She said. "It's fine. It's healthy. I just came to let you know that there's been a delay. We're waiting on that team they sent to grab anti-vehicle weapons. Matthews wants us to form up at 0630. Same for you and your Lieutenant, Rico."

Brandt turned and and began walking away silently. As she walked, she turned to look over her shoulder. "I'll keep tabs on Matthews and and the Lieutenant. I'll let you know if they're heading this way." She said with a wink.

Reese looked back at Rico, who was seemingly just as surprised by the turn of events. "I guess that's why she's an infiltrator." She said.

Rico watched Brandt walk away. Once she had turned the corner, he looked at Reese. "Well, we do have some time. And, unless they've found something to eat, there's not much to do but take a nap."

Reese gave the man a wry smile and answered in in a way that transcended language when she leaned over and unclasped the leg plate she had just put on.

Later, Reese sat in the afterglow, watched a small insect flit about above her head, enjoying the feeling of the warm air on bare skin. Occasionally one of the insects would burst in a flash of bioluminescent light. As she watched them buzz around in whatever passed for the life of a bug in a

swamp she wondered why they bothered to shine at all. Was it to attract a mate? Some elaborate defense against predators? Or did they simply shine in defiance of their miserable existence?

She supposed the reason didn't matter any more than her reasons for enlisting did. She had made the choice and, step by step, they led her here to a swamp where she had nearly died, where she was still certain she would die. Where everyone else seemed to believe they would make it through the day, she didn't see any more reason for hope in their explanations than she did in the insects shining above her head.

"Do you think we'll win?" She asked suddenly.

Rico turned to look at her and thought for a moment. "I think we're playing our hand as well as we can." He said at last.

"That's not a answer."

"I suppose it isn't." He agreed before falling into silence again. "I guess it doesn't really matter what I think. Either we win or everybody dies. Works out about the same either way." He said, finally.

That the man seemingly had just as little faith as she did wounded Reese. He was a Ranger and their history was seemingly an endless stream of impossible deads. If he didn't believe, maybe they were all doomed.

"But, what if we do succeed?" She asked.

"You mean, what happens if the Republic is still standing and I'm still alive?" Rico asked rhetorically. "To be honest, I've not really thought about it. I mean, the Lieutenant is right. If command finds out what happened here, I'll be sent to reeducation."

“Reeducation?”

“For those whose loyalty has been found wanting.” said Rico. “I don’t know what it used to entail, but these days the rumors are they just torture you to death until they think you’ve learned your lesson.”

Reese propped herself up on her elbows and stared at the man in disbelief. “Surely they’d know you did what had to be done for your Republic!” She exclaimed.

Rico gave her a thin smile. “You forget how long this war has gone on or the long history of violence on this planet. The Republic is uncompromising on the subject.” He said. “They have to be because the only thing that keeps the machine running is the iron loyalty of her citizens.”

“You can’t possibly believe that.” Said Reese, confused by the absurdity of what Rico had said.

“I do believe it.” Said Rico firmly. “The truth of something does not rely on my approval.”

The two of them fell back into an uneasy silence. “But what if you didn’t go back?” Reese blurted out.

Rico snorted. “And then, what, hide in this swamp until the war magically comes to an end?”

“You could come with me.” Said Reese defensively. “The Sovereignty would understand.”

“I can’t.” Said Rico. “I have to believe the Republic can be saved.”

Rico looked toward the horizon and Reese followed his gaze. The first warning glow of the approaching dawn had appeared in the canopy as rose colored pinpoints of light. “It’s almost time.” He said sadly. “What about you? What would you do if both you and the Sovereignty survive the day?”

Reese didn't have an answer. She did not believe either eventuality would be the case. "I don't know." She admitted as she edged closer to the man.

The two of them sat in silence and watched as the small dots of light gradually grew and merged together into dawn. Both obstinately refused to bring up the prospect of their uncertain future. Reese, for her part, hoped that Rico would survive and that he would see the truth.

The Republic had died centuries ago. All he was doing was propping up a corpse that stood as a grotesque parody of the utopia of old.

Matthews

Matthews watched as the Galaxy settled slowly into the swamp. Alyss had told him that the team she sent to find heavy weapons needed more time but had not explained why. As soon as the Galaxy's loading ramp lowered, the cause of the delay was obvious. A man-shaped, two meter tall machine stomped its way down the ramp and splashed messily in the mud. It was unmistakably a Max though he'd never seen the configuration before. It looked like it had been built out of spare parts.

Brandt gave an appreciative whistle as the machine strolled forward and stopped in front of Alyss. She looked up and down at the creation. "Impressive work." She said at last. "But tell me this isn't all you managed to do."

The Max gave an exaggerated gesture toward the Galaxy. "Nope. We brought Four Mark I MANA turrets and a few crates of AV grenades." It said. Matthews recognized the voice. It was Mitchell.

Alyss turned to the rest of Sigma and said "Then let's get them unloaded so we can give them a function test."

Matthews gestured to Reese and walked in the direction of the Galaxy. "How are you holding up?" He asked.

Reese gave him a sideways glance. "Fine, I guess."

"Are you going to be okay out there?" He asked.

"Well, I'm pretty sure we're all going to die out there. But since we don't really have a choice in the matter, I figure it's better to die with this in my hands." She said, touching the grip of the carbine she had slung across her shoulder.

Matthews opened his mouth to rebuke the young woman but thought better of it. Her point was valid and the conviction with which she had spoken was enough to convince him she would do her duty. Thinking quickly he asked "Have you ever used a MANA turret?"

Reese nodded. "Well, a newer one at least." She clarified.

"The old ones are basically the same. All that really changed is some of the electronics. Well, that and the fact that the gen 4's are shipped to line units in deconstructed format. 'Easier to ship' was the logic though I'm not sure I buy that explanation." He said.

The two of them reached the Galaxy and Matthews pointed Reese to one of the crates of ammunition while he grabbed the turret. The two of them carried the equipment to the swamp. Matthews had Reese assemble the launcher and then he walked her through loading and firing it. Having confirmed both that she knew what she was doing and that the weapon worked, Matthews repackaged the weapon in silence and together they returned to the staging area to wait for the others to finish their own tests.

Matthews looked around and saw Brandt leaning against a wall, talking to the Terran infiltrator. The woman looked over and saw the two of them were waiting. She excused herself and walked over to them.

The three of them stood in silence for a moment until Matthews asked, "Are you ready?"

"Always." Said Brandt.

Reese simply nodded in mute reply. It would have to do. Matthews looked at the two women and simply shook his head. "I'm sorry it worked out this way." He said.

"It is what it is." Said Reese. "I know you wouldn't ask us to do this if there was any other way of getting the job done."

Brandt simply stared at the ground for a few moments before clearing her throat. "You know, there are a lot of ways to die on Auraxis. I...ah...I should know." She looked up at Reese before continuing. "But at least this time it will be for something I can believe in." She said.

Matthews watched as Brandt handed Reese a small object. "Hold on to that for me. Its got a time based encryption on it. It unlocks at midnight." She said.

Reese looked at the small object Reese had handed her. It was a data chit. She looked up at Brandt with a confused look. "What..." She started.

Brandt raised her hand, cutting off the Novus's question. "If you're still around when it unlocks, it will make sense."

The NC soldiers were shouting something behind them. Matthews turned to look. They were huddled closely together as their leader was speaking. She apparently said something stirring

because the group cheered again. He turned back to what remained of his team. He had set out from Indar two days ago with seven people and now he only had two. He had nothing to cheer about.

Matthews clenched his jaw and quickly pushed the thoughts of the dead from his mind. He needed to focus on the people who were still alive. The people who he might be able to save. He glanced at Reese and Brandt and realized that they were beyond his help. The team was split between three objectives. There was nothing he could say to these women that would help.

“For the Sovereignty.” He said at last.

Reese shook her head. “No.” She said with a hard edge to her voice. “For the future.”

Once More Unto The Breach

Brandt

Brandt squinted out the door of the Valkyrie as it skimmed the treetops at more than two hundred kilometers an hour. Valeriya was clearly an expert; the wispy branches of the massive trees below seemed to pass mere centimeters below the belly of the Valkyrie. She leaned her head into the whistling jet stream surrounding the aircraft and saw a massive gap in the otherwise unbroken treeline.

“Thirty seconds.” Said Valeriya.

Brandt leaned back inside the aircraft as it rolled into a turn. Just as Brandt became accustomed to the sudden reminder momentum, the pilot pitched the nose upward sharply and fired the thrusters. Brandt strained against the sturdy handle as the Valkyrie shed speed. In moments, Valeriya dipped the aircraft through a gap in the trees. An odd sense of vertigo accompanied the sudden transition to near vertical drop. At the last moment, Valeriya fired the vertical thrusters again and the Valkyrie slowed to a hover a half meter above the ground.

None of them needed a signal. Brandt, Hemming and Jace lept from the aircraft. Brandt landed softly and ran forward several meters before dropping to a knee and scanning the swap.

“Good luck.” Said Valeriya as she lifted the aircraft back through the trees.

“Remember, we go on your signal.” Said Matthews. “And Brandt - that generator has to go down. No matter what.”

“I know, sir.” She replied softly as she watched the Valkyrie darted away.

“You’ve been here.” Said Jace. “Is the plan a good one?”

“No.” Said Brandt. “But I think it’s as good we can manage without reinforcements.”

The amp station was still out of sight. Brandt stood and jogged toward the waypoint that burned brightly on AR.

Alyss

Alyss walked through the cramped interior of the Galaxy and looked at the pair of Terrans and the cultist. That they would be responsible for the lives of her soldiers grated on her. She shouldn’t have to trust her team’s lives to the enemy. She paused at the front of the aircraft and poked her head through the cockpit door.

“Status?” She asked.

Davis didn’t even look up to respond. “Valeriya deposited the amp station team about ten minutes ago.”

The plan called for six soldiers to act as bait to draw the separatists out of Nason’s Defiance. If they survived, their reward was joining the blocking team to help play the part of Horatius. Five people had been selected to hold the road. Almost half of Sigma would be on the ground outside the walls. They had agreed to the suicidal tasks without reservation. She trusted them beyond reason. It was the others that worried her.

“How long ‘till it reaches the second drop zone?” She asked.

“About five minutes.”

Alyss turned back and looked down the length of the Galaxy. Her penchant for overly dramatic speeches was a running joke in some circles. Now, though, she wasn't sure what to say.

"Sigma." She said at last across the coalition channel. "I know this isn't how we pictured this drop going. We came here to take back our home. Now, I guess, we're here to save it." Alyss stopped, hoping some kind of inspiration would strike her. "I don't know some of you. On any other day we would just shoot at each other. Four hundred years ago our ancestors were locked in a war that killed billions. Then, one day, we were given proof that we were not alone in the universe when a wormhole opened and Pluto was destroyed. We took that as a warning and in the face of the new threat, old differences were set aside and the world banded together in a great Republic. That Republic took us to the edge of our home system and beyond. Four hundred years is a long time, though, and all of us are a long way from the homeworld we've never known. Somewhere along the way I guess we've forgotten the lessons of the ancients."

Alyss looked around the small space. Everyone was watching - even the Terrans and the cultist. "In the two centuries we've been on Auraxis, we've all grown apart. Now we're all locked in this war to determine once and for which path humanity ought to take. Today, though, we don't fight for empire. This isn't about freedom, order or progress. This is about survival. We are all children of Auraxis and today, you people have chosen to fight for the only home any of us have ever known. For that, you have my thanks."

Alyss glanced down at her battle computer. The Valkyrie was nearly at the second drop zone. "Once we drop, I don't want anyone looking at the colors the person next to them wears. I know it takes a lot of faith to believe, but we all got on these transports together and we're all on the same side today. Watch each other's backs. You owe each other and all the people back home that much."

"The Valkyrie is a the drop zone." Said Davis.

Brandt

Brandt listened to the quiet that seemed to blanket the amp station. Hearing nothing, she mentally increased the gain in her aural implants. The sound of her heart beating a steady rhythm meshed neatly with the subtle clicking of the gas exchange system buried in her chest. Quieter still was the hum of the amp station's fusion generator. There were no voices, no footsteps, no human sounds at all.

The three infiltrators blanketed the complex in sensors but she didn't believe the readings. The barracks showed some signs of movement and there were a handful of markers inside the station itself but that was it. The sprawling facility was a ghost town.

Brandt mentally flicked off the gain and set the aural implant to standard adaptive as she scanned the open courtyard.

"Bad news." Jace said on the subvocal line. "Access to the interior is restricted. Looks like we have to blow that outer gen after all."

Brandt sighed and shifted the rifle in her hands. Blowing the auxiliary generator would attract a hell of a lot of attention earlier than was wise. "Fine." She said. "Hemming, set the charge on that generator and then come to me. We're going to breach the station together. Jace - I want you on the northeast tower. When we blow the gen, whoever is in that barracks is going to come running and they'll have to cross that courtyard."

Brandt switched to the Coalition channel and informed Alyss of the development, then opened a direct line to Valeriya who was lurking below the treeline a few kilometers away. "We're going to have to go loud quicker than we hoped. I count three Scythes on the landing pads. AA is offline." She said.

"That can't be right." Came the confused reply from the pilot. "They have to know we're coming."

"Maybe they just didn't expect to be hit here." Said Brandt. "Either way, we're blowing an auxiliary gen and that's going to draw some attention. You'll need to set up for your run. I'm passing you markers for the Scythes."

"Got it." Said Valeriya before closing the channel.

Minutes later, Hemming quietly jogged to Brandt's side. Brandt glanced at the man and he flashed her a thumbs up. Brandt stood and drew the Vandal close to her shoulder. "Jace - are you in position?"

"Yep." Came the reply.

Brandt looked at Hemming. The man pulled out a small black detonator, flicked off the safety, and nodded.

"Do it." She said.

Hemming pressed the small red button. Though the explosion was on the other side of the massive amp station, it roared in the still morning air louder than a single kilogram of high explosives ought to. Before the explosion faded, Brandt was already sprinting across the courtyard. She stopped in front of the access door she had been watching and tried to key it open.

The door, for its part, did nothing.

"Run a bypass." She said as she raised the muzzle of her rifle, leveling it at the courtyard.

A high pitched crack sounded from the tower. The report from the first shot was still echoing when two more shots rang out in rapid succession.

“They know we’re here.” Said Jace.

Brandt opened the channel to Valeriya again. “Auxiliary generator is down. You’re up.”

Valeriya

Valeriya dipped the nose of her Valkyrie and pressed the throttle all the way forward. The Amp station was mostly vacant but, then, it only took three people to crew three fighters. She had been lucky with the Scythe yesterday; the pilot had gotten greedy. If it had played his part more conservatively, he would have eventually run her down. Valeriya had read hundreds of after action reports that told her exactly how that would have worked out.

She carved graceful paths between the massive trees as she flew below the canopy at almost two hundred kilometers an hour. In less than a minute, she saw the massive perimeter wall of the amp station through a gap in the trees. As she burst into the narrow band of cleared space between the jungle and the wall, Valeriya pitched the Valkyrie’s nose upward until it was nearly vertical, then fired the thrusters beneath her feet. An elephant sat on her chest and Freya groaned in protest at the rough treatment.

She cleared the wall in a fraction of a second and hurtled above the towering amp station before leveling off. In nearly the same motion she flicked on the G30 and a false-color overlay filled her visor. The Scythes stood out as a bright white. Someone had left them running.

It didn’t matter. At less than 80 meters the G30’s grouping was tight enough that she could cut a man in half. The considerably larger Scythes didn’t stand a chance. Valeriya squeezed the trigger and a sound like a thousand angry insects filled Freya’s cockpit. The G30 was designed to carve a path through the heavy armor of a main battle tank; the lightweight shell on a Scythe offered no more protection than a sheet of paper. One by one she directed streams of heavy metal into the Scythes

until they crashed into the landing pads. With the last Scythe destroyed, Valeriya flicked the Valkyrie onto its side and slid over the courtyard. More than a dozen small figures were scurrying around in the space.

“Scythes are down.” She announced on the coalition channel. “Want me to clear those guys out for you?”

“No. Save the rockets.” said Brandt, punctuating her order with a gunshot.

Brandt

Brandt huddled closer to the wall. The bodies of three of the traitors dotted the courtyard. She had no idea how many Jace had stopped around the corner. Several more sharp cracks emanated from the tower.

“Guys, they’re piling up on that corner there. I don’t have an angle on them.” said Jace.

“Hemming...” Said Brandt in a questioning tone.

“I know!” He shouted. “I’ve almost got it.”

A bright green helmet peeked around the distant corner for a fraction of a second. Brandt snapped off a shot that sparked off a shield. The helmet wisely retreated before she had a chance to fire a second time.

“Got it!” Shouted Hemming.

Brandt turned and saw the door sliding open. Without looking, she keyed the mag ejection switch on the Vandal. The rifle slid open and presented the partially spent magazine. Brandt turned back to

watch the corner as she pulled the magazine free. She glanced inside and saw shining metal and propellant. Rather than discarding the magazine, she swapped it with a full one. Once the magazine was seated, the Vandal whirred appreciatively as it drew the box inside, sealing it tightly in place.

“We’re moving inside the amp station. I want you to try and keep this exit open.” She shouted.

Brandt did not wait for the man to respond. She turned and peeked around the corner with her rifle. The corridor beyond was empty. She motioned to Hemming with one hand while keeping her Vandal aimed with the other. Hemming took an exaggerated breath, pulled his stalker to his shoulder and quickly moved around the corner and into the heart of the amp station. Brandt let him advance halfway down the corridor before moving in after him.

The two infiltrators reached the end of a t-shaped intersection. Hemming had stopped a full pace short. “Which way?” Asked Hemming on the subvocal channel.

Brandt examined the facility map Strottmann had dug out of the biolab records. The primary fusion generator was nestled below the room that once housed the heavy nanoforges. “Right.” She said.

Brandt edged forward until she was parallel to Hemming. Then, as though they had practiced the move a thousand times together, the two stepped into the corridor as one body, each clearing the other’s back.

“Clear.” Said Hemming.

Brandt crept carefully down the long corridor. According to the layout she had, the forges were directly ahead though there were several large rooms that intersected their path.

She had only advanced a few steps when a burst of plasma fire streamed down the corridor from behind. In nearly the same instant, Hemming uttered a curse. Brandt pivoted on her heel and

dropped to a knee as she brought the heavy scout rifle to bear. Hemming was lying on his back. Brandt snapped a series of shots down the corridor before Hemming rose to a sitting position and brought his Stalker to bear and fired a short burst.

“We’ve got to keep moving.” She shouted, not bothering with sub-vocal.

Hemming rose unsteadily to his feet. Brandt took several careful steps backward as she pointed the rifle in the direction of the mystery shooter. Hemming limped backwards several steps before he said “I’ve got it.”

Needing no further prodding, Brandt turned and rushed forward as Hemming intermittently fired bursts to their rear. She reached the first of two large intersecting rooms and glanced back to see Hemming slowly following behind her.

He wasn’t in a position to help clear the room. Brandt closed her eyes to steady herself before smoothly moving inside. She was not prepared for what she saw.

The room housed single clear plasteel tank filled with a translucent blue liquid. Inside was a collection of human organs. She watched as the outline of a vascular system began to form. Seconds later bones began to grow. It was an early model rebirth tube.

“They have rebirth capability at the amp station. I say again, they can rebirth at the amp station.” She shouted into the squad channel.

Without a better plan, she pulled a demolitions charge from her pack and quickly placed it on the tube. She paused to arm it before hurrying from the room. Brandt grabbed Hemming roughly by the collar and dragged him as quickly as she could toward the generator. She stopped just short of the second room they had seen and peeked around the corner. Another rebirth tube.

“Jace. They have multiple rebirth tubes here. We’ve got to try and hack the node and clear their spawn records.” She said over the squad channel.

There was a moment of silence before he responded. “Understood. Moving inside.” He said at last.

Brandt stepped into the room with the second tube and motioned for Hemming to follow. “Where are you hit?” She asked.

“Just above my right knee.” Said Hemming, his voice bright with pain.

Brandt glanced into the corridor and didn’t see anything though the tactical overlay showed several signatures collecting at the other end of the corridor. She turned back to Hemming and looked down at his leg. A small hole had appeared in the man’s thigh. She reached over and gently felt behind his leg. The plasma shot had made it all the way through. Hemming drew in a sharp breath as she probed inside the hole with a finger. It had missed the bone.

“Sit. And, cover the corridor.” She said.

Hemming nodded, shuffled to the door, and gently lowered himself to the ground.

“This is going to hurt.” Said Brandt.

Hemming nodded in understanding.

Brandt gently coaxed the man’s knee off the ground. Then she pulled out a small canister of liquid bandage, sprayed it onto her hand, and slapped it to the back of the man’s leg before it could set, squeezing tightly. Hemming groaned in protest but kept his rifle leveled on the corridor. She flicked the safety off a medkit, jammed it directly into his wound, and pressed the applicator button. Brandt had learned long ago that applying a medkit inside a wound would get the biomass and nanite load

directly to where they were needed. While it made for a more effective patch, the stimulants and painkillers were almost rendered inert. Though pain would linger for days, it would help with the limp more than doping the man with drugs would.

Brandt tossed the spent medkit aside she pulled her hand off the back of Hemming's leg. Most of the bandage had stuck to the wound, sealing the back of the wound. She sprayed the rest of the canister over the wound and rose to her feet.

Brandt pulled out the second demolition charge and placed it on the rebirthing tube before turning and extending a hand to Hemming. The man gratefully accepted the gesture and Brandt pulled him to his feet.

Brandt pushed past him and glanced carefully around the corner into the corridor. It was still empty. "Put your claymore behind us. Proximity sensor." Said Brandt

Hemming pulled the claymore from a pouch and fiddled with it for a moment before placing it in the corridor facing the way they had come.

Brandt let Hemming lead the way until they reached the forge chamber. The rebirth node, along with the generator, was inside. She inched past Hemming to glance inside the massive room. There was a single forge with a partially constructed Sunderer sitting on it. The tactical overlay showed the room was clear otherwise clear. Unless someone was running a high end sensor shield, it was empty.

"Come on." She said, stepping into the room. Brandt pointed to the generator interface. "Plant the charge." She said. "I'll get started on the node."

Hemming nodded and quickly shuffled away.

Brand hurried into the second level of the room. As she had expected, the simple interface of a rebirth network communication node greeted her. She rushed over to the machine and entered several keystrokes on the interface before closing her eyes and building a connection.

She had done this more times than she could even begin to recall. Time stretched into an eternity as her electronics warfare implant negotiated with the node. She snapped her eyes back open at the sound of a sharp explosion beneath her feet. Something had tripped the claymore. Brandt quickly confirmed that she had placed the virus and left a small counter with the estimated time to node wipe on her AR.

“Hemming?” She shouted.

“Charge is set!” He shouted back.

Brandt pulled the detonator from her belt. There were probably more than the two spawn tubes but at least this would slow them down. “Blow it.” She said as she pressed the detonator.

The explosion rocked the facility beneath her feet. Seconds later, it was followed by an even louder explosion. The lights in the facility cut off abruptly only to be replaced with red emergency lighting after a brief delay.

“Generators are down.” She said on the coalition channel. “Be advised, we are holding our position at Ixtab to try and take down the spawn node. If you lose contact with us, assume the enemy has rebirth.” She said.

Security on the rebirth node was sturdy. Her ONN estimated it would take twenty minutes to complete the wipe. She looked down and saw Jace sprint into the room. “Dig in, people. We’re going to be here for awhile.” She said as she shared the counter with Jace and Hemming.

Matthews

Matthews ducked further behind the wall as a wave of vicious green darts streamed by. A few impacted the edge of the building and gouged chunks out of the concrete. Most flew harmlessly by and simply served as a reminder that just around the corner was a man with a plasma rifle. The small clouds of pulverized concrete and lingering scent of ozone, meanwhile, served as fair argument to remain in cover between bursts.

The drop had gone smoothly and Matthews's team had made it to the perimeter wall of the labs without tripping an alarm. Predictably, Matthews had been the one to draw attention to their movements. Where the infiltrators had optical camouflage and sensor shielding to keep them hidden, Matthews was a large man wrapped in grey and purple armor. He had tried to keep out of sight and only moved when Mike indicated it was safe to do so. He wasn't sure if the dead woman beside him had spotted him or if he'd simply tripped a sensor. In the end, it didn't matter.

Brandt's team had taken out the power at the amp station, but the NC engineer's worry that the labs had on site power were confirmed when the sensors showed the security field blocking access to the labs was still online. The infiltrators had split off, hoping to track down the power source, and left Matthews to simply wait and hope. He had crouched behind a weathered collection of crates when the separatist woman appeared over the railing and fired a wildly aimed burst his way. Matthews's return fire was far more accurate.

Another burst streamed by his wall as Matthews glanced at the tactical overlay. So far it looked like the only other defender was the man around the corner. Matthews was betting that would change soon. The elevator leading to the underground lab had started to move.

Based on the sound, he guessed the man was firing a Solstice. He slowly peaked around the corner only to snap his head back behind cover as a shot snapped by his head. The shooter was positioned well behind cover and had barely exposed himself to shoot. Matthews glanced again at the tactical

map hoping to find a way to a better angle when he heard a sharp short burst from a coilgun followed by a short pained shout of surprise.

Matthews peaked his head around the corner again and saw the man squirming on the ground, trying to shift himself into cover better suited to the new threat. Matthews fired a short burst into the man's back that cut the effort short.

"Looks like we're going to have more company in a second." Said Mike.

"Find the generator?" Asked Matthews.

"Yeah. Natalie is prepping a charge on it now." Said Mike.

"We need to get to that elevator and hit them before they can fan out. Brandt said there were at least a dozen troops here last time." Said Matthews.

The two men sprinted to the largest of the above ground buildings and hurried inside. The elevator, to Matthews's relief, had still not arrived. Like most elevators, it was simply a gravity lift. Unlike the ones that were common in the military installations of Auraxis, this one was an industrial model. It could easily handle payloads weighing several tons. The tradeoff, though, was that such lifts were notoriously slow.

The two men exchanged a glance before both reached for a grenade. Matthews was glad he had chosen to forge fragmentation grenades rather than the anti-vehicle grenades he normally carried. Mike, for his part, produced a small black cylinder - that Matthews instantly recognized as a concussion grenade.

The elevator door made a small ding sound. Before the heavy doors started sliding open, Mike had already tossed the grenade. His timing was impeccable and the placement nearly perfect. The doors

had nearly fully opened with the grenade burst with light and a sound so loud one would hesitate to call it a sound at all. Even though he was almost twenty meters away from the burst and prepared for the result, the blast blurred his vision. He quickly pulled the pin from his grenade and tossed it inside the elevator among the disoriented guards.

The second blast was far less impressive than the first but the result was gruesome. In the confined space, even a heavy exosuit backed by a nanomesh screen was no match for the high energy fragments which tore through armor and flesh with equal ease. Not waiting for the smoke to clear, Matthews sprinted forward, pointed his Orion through the door, and raked the bodies inside with fire.

Confident that the guards were no longer a threat, he turned away from the carnage and pulled the battery out of his Orion.

“That was cold, man.” Said Mike. “Surprised you could do that to your own people.

Matthews glanced back into the elevator. “They stopped being my people when they sided with a madman trying to destroy the planet.” He said bitterly.

The Best Laid Plans

Valeriya

Valeriya hovered just above the trees, trying to split her attention between the chatter from Brandt's team along with their tactical feed and her own sensor suite. At the moment, it was the latter that consumed most of her attention. Brandt's team had opened fire almost a half hour ago. Davis had just informed her that Matthews's team had similarly encountered resistance. The cultists had to know they were under attack by now.

And, yet, there was still no apparent response. Nothing big enough to trip her sensors was moving inside Nason's Defiance. She was starting to worry that they had all guessed wrong. The cultists managed to field at least a platoon to try and silence the VS team at Zotz. Yesterday, they put almost a squadron of Scythes into the air. Brandt even verified that they had functioning rebirth tubes, and yet between both teams on the ground they only had evidence of perhaps two dozen soldiers.

So where the hell was everyone?

She switched back to Brandt's tactical feed. Small red markers had ominously arranged themselves at the various entrances to the forge room. It wouldn't be long before they tried to rush in. By now, even imbeciles would realize they were only a handful inside. She considered asking again if Brandt wanted her to intervene, but she knew the woman would refuse just as she had the other two times. 'Save the ammo.' She'd said.

It wasn't the first time a tactical commander had refused her offer of help, of course. They often had a better grasp of what would help their situation than she did. Normally, though, the price for making the wrong call was a small one - a rebirth and maybe the loss of a few square kilometers of real estate.

Valeriya nervously chewed at her lip as she stared at the screen. Several red markers shifted suddenly prompting an explosion of gunfire and shouts on the squad channel. The markers stopped and disappeared; calm returned to the channel.

She's done this before. Valeriya reminded herself. Brandt served before rebirth. She knew better than most what happened when someone made the wrong call.

Her sensors chirped for attention; an estimated dozen heavy vehicles had started to move. During planning it was hoped that they would take the road that lead to the dam to the amp station before swinging north to the labs. It would ensure not only the longest possible route but also that the blocking team would only need to worry about stopping traffic along a single path. It also gave the amp station and lab teams the best possible chance of being able to link up with and reinforce the team holding the road.

Valeriya directed her sensors towards the cluster, setting it to focused mode. The vague blob resolved into discrete vehicle marker arranged in a standard convoy formation. Two Magriders were at the front while one guarded the rear. A fourth tank sat in the middle of the formation, splitting the column of ten Sunderers in half. She held her breath and watched as the formation edged out of the base perimeter into the shallow swamp.

They were going directly to the amp station. They had taken the bait. Valeria breathed out in a sigh of relief and keyed her radio.

Matthews

Natalie shifted uncomfortably as the elevator slowly descended. "Couldn't you have waited until they were off the elevator?" She asked.

Matthews had pointedly tried to ignore that he was standing in a pool of blood and ragged bits of flesh. “No.” He said. “Too many to handle it any other way.”

The three sat in uncomfortable silence. Matthews, for his part, tried to not breathe through his nose. He wasn't sure what it said about him as a soldier, but he'd never grown used to the stench of death. The sticky iron smell of blood, the strong whiff of bowel, and the acrid stink of bile all mixed in an revolting miasma. Eight people had died gruesomely in the small space. Matthews regretted choosing a lightweight helmet rather than one that offered an integrated rebreather. At the time it seemed reasonable as Hossin was legendary for its heat and humidity.

The elevator was nearing the base of the facility. According to Brandt, the lower portion of the facility had nearly twenty thousand square meters of lab space spread across four major labs and nearly a dozen smaller rooms. One of the Sigma engineers had an old layout of the facility, but it was nearly twenty years old and Brandt wasn't sure it was accurate.

“Concussion before we breach?” Asked Natalie.

Matthews nodded and tried to edge his way to the corner of the lift so that he was out of the line of fire when the doors opened. If there were more guards inside, they would be expecting trouble. The logical place to try and stop them would be at the door. It was, after all, how he and Mike had managed to kill the first set of guards.

Matthews's pulse quickened as the platform slowed to a halt and the elevator rang pleasantly, signaling anyone in the lab of its arrival. Both the infiltrators released the safety levers on their grenades at the same moment just as the doors shifted and began to slide open and threw them outside.

Matthews turned his head away and squeezed his eyes closed. The two concussion grenades detonated as one. Activating his nanomesh, Matthews turned and rushed into the room with his

Orion at his shoulder, settling his sights on a man without a helmet. As he pulled the trigger, Matthews realized he recognized him. It was Archon Phillips - the man who had greeted his team when they arrived. The burst staggered the man backward a step before he stumbled and fell against the wall.

Matthews flinched slightly at the sound of twin coilgun bursts as the infiltrators cut down the two guards on either side of the door.

“Clear!” Shouted Mike.

“Clear!” Came Natalie’s reply.

Matthews watched as the Praetor slowly slid into a sitting position as he fumbled for his side arm.

“Clear.” He agreed as he stepped forward toward the dying man.

Matthews placed his boot on the Praetor’s hand and forced it to the ground. Something in the man’s hand cracked. The Praetor started laughing between ragged breaths. “So you didn’t die at Zotz after all.” Said Phillips.

Matthews clenched his jaw and struggled to contain the rage he had barely kept in check since his first night on Hossin. The Praetor gave a crooked blood soaked smile. “No matter. We got Daniels and your two young associates.”

Matthews pressed his full weight onto the Praetor’s hand and was rewarded with several more sharp pops. The Praetor winced but held his grin. “And the man you left to die by the side of the road? Such a shame.” He said.

Matthews reached down, grabbed the dying man by the armor, and hauled him to his feet, then shoved his Orion up under the Praetor’s chin.

“You can’t stop us.” Said the Praetor. “And once we’ve cleansed this planet of the rest of the filth, I’ll enjoy hunting you down. Maybe I’ll catch that young Novus first. The young are so easily swayed to a new path.”

Matthews pressed the man flat against the wall, turned his head away, and pulled the trigger.

Matthews dropped the Praetor’s corpse, bitter that the man would likely get a chance to rebirth.

They cleared the lab room by room. There were two dozen men and women wearing civilian clothing rather than armor. Almost half of them had produced small weapons and foolishly tried to fend off the advance. Matthews cut them down without regret. Matthews did not even realize that one of the was the Primarch until he saw the man’s badge on one of the dead scientist’s lab coat.

They corralled the surviving staff in a small lab and sealed the door. He sent the two infiltrators to wipe the research data while he remained behind to make sure none of them escaped. The lab door was three inch plasteel and the room itself was little more than a containment vessel. There wasn’t much of a chance that they’d get out but, then again, it was supposed to be impossible to make goo.

Several of the people pounded on the heavy window of the room and shouted, saying that Matthews was thwarting the will of Vanu and that he was a traitor to the cause. He ignored them. Vanu wouldn’t want them to destroy the planet. The Sovereignty was in part founded because the use of weapons of mass destruction threatened Auraxis as a whole. It was why the Sovereignty disabled the orbital weapon platforms and seized Hossin in the first place.

“They’ve taken the bait.” Said Alyss across the radio. “More than a dozen heavy vehicles are en route to your position. Valeryia thinks you’ve got about 20 minutes before they’re knocking on your door. We’re moving in.” She said.

“Acknowledged. Let me know when the tubes are down.” Said Matthews.

Natalie rushed into the room. “You’ve got to come take a look at this.” She said.

Matthews stood tiredly. “Look at what?” He asked without turning around.

“Mike thinks there is a secondary fire control for the weapon here.” She said.

Matthews shook his head. “Watch them.” He said, pointing to the lab.

As he walked through the facility he wondered just how long they had been setting this up. They had two rebirth sites when the Council only knew about the one in Nason’s Defiance. They had managed to find more than a hundred people to join their cause including two dozen scientists. And now there was a second fire control option? He wondered how many other tubes they had stashed away and how many other places they had to trigger the weapon. He quickly dismissed the line of thought.

One problem at a time. He thought as he walked into the data room.

“Show me.” Said Matthews.

Mike pointed to a device in the corner. “It’s the heart of a communication node for the rebirth net.” He said. “This one’s linked directly to Nason’s Defiance.” He said.

“So?” Asked Matthews.

“So, most communication nodes don’t have a giant stack of ONN’s plugged into them running a program with high end crypto.” He said.

“Can you disable it?” Asked Matthews.

“No offense, man, but I’m not a scientist or a hacker. All I’ve got is this this thing.” He said pointing to a device on his wrist. “And it says it will take a few months to break through.”

“Then we burn the lab.” Said Matthews.

“What?” Said Mike incredulously

“We burn the lab. This place was used for nanotech research. That means this place has plasma charges planted everywhere - enough that it will raise the temperature of this place high enough to break the bots down.” He said.

Mike looked at the node in the corner for a long moment before nodding. “Fine. That’d take care of the files, right?” He asked.

“Probably. ONNs aren’t rated for more than a few hundred kelvin.” Said Matthews.

Reese

Novus Cayla Reese shifted uncomfortably in her Galaxy drop seat and was rewarded with her exosuit biting into a new piece of tender flesh. The aircraft hummed and vibrated noisily to itself and groaned in protest whenever it turned or banked. The air stank of burned flesh and electronics and managed to be at once both too hot and too cold. Reese realized that it was fitting that the interior was so repulsive since this time she would not be exiting from the loading ramp but rather by dropping through the chute beneath her feet and hoping that the nanites bound to her would slow her fall. This was a Galaxy being flown in the usual way and the pilot hugged the ground to deny anti-aircraft guns a tempting target. While such aircraft were normally flown by immortal demigods, the man who flew this one, was, for the moment, just a man. Davis was clearly a gambling man and thus his flight was neither safe nor predictable.

“One minute to drop.” Said Davis from the cockpit.

Reese had graduated from training three months ago and the scuffed and worn service tag on her arm showed she had participated in the recent campaign on Indar. Her armor was standard issue and, like most junior soldiers, had been reinforced with composite plating. It had been customized to accommodate the odd square magazines for her stolen compact coilgun. The wide fields of purple and grey had taken on a brown and black hue from the Hossin mud and filth. Her armor bore the scars of fragments and plasma weapon fire including one great hole on her abdomen where the color had turned a deep and muddied red.

Her record showed that she accounted well for herself. In a week of combat among the coral and dunes of Indar and another two days on Hossin, she had only been killed three times. That the third one didn't stick was a rare feat all things considered. In any other conflict she would be a hardened veteran but as the world slipped closer to armageddon she would barely qualify as having been trained. But the Novus knew something most people on her Galaxy did not. She knew what it was like to fear death. She knew what it was like to face it. She knew what it took to accept it.

Down from her sat Deputy Director Alyss Rodriguez of the New Conglomerate's Sigma squad. Reese had only known her for a few hours. She didn't know what the woman's war record was but supposed it must have been impressive considering her rank and the reverence her team showed her. Her armor showed no record of rank or service. It was a simple flat black trimmed with gold. She didn't bother asking the woman why. When the woman spoke, there was a hardness to her voice that could lend courage to any cause. It carried a sense of determination. Reese wanted to hate the woman for her seemingly unconquerable will in the face of it all.

Across from the Deputy Director was Lieutenant Katerina Camilla of the Terran Republic Rangers. She had lead the man next to her, Tech Sergeant Kier Rico, as a platoon leader for almost a year. The two sat together in worried silence. The Lieutenant had been tasked with building a battle line

and holding it at any cost. It was hoped that they could delay the Separatists long enough for the Deputy Director to take a team into the heart of Nason's Defiance and shut down the weapon. It was a suicide mission that Reese was to join her on.

"30 seconds!" Shouted Davis from the cockpit.

To aid them in the cause, Alyss had assigned a pair of specialists. The man and woman sat across from her with their helmets firmly in place. Reese did not bother asking them any questions. She simply leaned back against her seat and then tried to not think about all the possible ways the mission could go wrong.

She failed.

"Fifteen seconds." Said Davis from the cockpit.

Reese reached down and unclipped her carbine from beneath her seat in a smooth motion. Pulling out and up at the same time was the trick. She glanced down at the weapon for a moment and confirmed the magazine was seated like Brandt had showed her as Davis gave a droning count from the cockpit.

At three she stood and centered herself over the drop square. At two she pulled her arms in tight just as she had been shown during training. At one she took a deep breath of stale acrid air.

"Drop!" Said Davis.

The small square fell away from her feet and Reese plunged through the gap. She noticed a slight tingle on her skin as the nanites attached during her rapid passing but the feeling was quickly overpowered by the sense of weightlessness. She looked up at the Galaxy as it banked away towards Nason's Defiance.

“Godspeed.” Said Alyss over the radio.

Reese looked down as she fell towards the ground. Her brain was confused by the sight - full of fear at the sudden drop, confusion that physics wasn't working the way it should and the screaming voice of the jump master who told her to tuck her chin, keep her arms close to her body and keep her knees slightly bent.

She obeyed the voice as the ground rushed forward in a way that was at once too fast to be safe and too slow to make sense. She landed exactly as she was taught, hitting with the balls of her feet before offering slight guidance so that she collapsed first on her calf, and then her thigh, and then her buttocks before finally stopping on her back.

Brandt

An alarm chirped inside Brandt's head; her ONN had broken through security. A glanced at her tactical overlay showed the garrison was still holding just outside the forge room. Inside, the bodies of almost thirty men and women provided the reason why they hesitated. The last group to try their luck hadn't even been wearing armor when they charged in.

She ducked behind the ruined console that she was using for cover, closed her eyes, and brought up her AR overlay. Quickly sorting through information she saw that the communications node was linked to three other sites in the immediate area. She issued a status query and after several seconds a report returned. The nodes were online but none of the sites had rebirth tubes attached. Satisfied, she severed the connection to the other sites and issued a final command to delete the local spawn record. Without a connection to a primary spawn record or a local instance, the rebirth tubes at the amp station would be reduced to little more than elaborate art installations.

Of course, the link could be reestablished. She needed a more permanent solution. Brandt hopped to her feet, moved to the communications node and pried off the access panel. Most of the time, the node itself was buried deep beneath a facility specifically to prevent what she hoped to do. She glanced inside the space and saw, to her disappointment, this node was also buried.

Still, if she severed the physical connection between the console and node, it would slow them down considerably and without a knowledgeable engineer on hand they might not figure it out at all. She reached down and pulled the mag cutter she had found in the tech plant armory to replace her own knife, which she had left lodged in a man's back at the biolab. Brandt firmly grabbed the bundle of cables and hacked at them. The blade's electromagnetic vibration allowed it to pass through them as easily as if they were strands of thread.. As a last petty act, she reached deep inside the console and hacked the bundle a second time, pulling a half meter of cable free from the space.

Brandt replaced the knife as she tossed the bundle of cables in a dark corner. "Node is done. We need to move." She said.

"You got a plan for how we're going to get out of this room? They're blocking all the doors." Said Jace.

"Not all of them. There's the service lift to the landing pads." She said.

"We cut the power, which means the lift is out. And all that would accomplish is putting us a few dozen meters off the ground." Said Jace.

"The shaft has a ladder. And climbing down the side of this building gives us a better chance at making it out alive than trying to shoot our way through one of the ground level doors." Replied Brandt.

Jace begrudgingly acknowledge her point. The three of them quickly scaled the ladder before activating their respective cloaking devices at the top. Brandt eased herself to the side of the building and glanced down at the half dozen soldiers guarding the door below.

They slowly worked their way down the steep sloped roof of the building, stopping at the narrow ledge at the base. Brandt carefully looked over the edge and saw that there was a much wider ledge a few meters below the one she paused on. She turned around and grabbed the narrow lip of the building before stepping over the edge and lowering herself until her arms were at full extension. She let go and dropped the last two meters, landing lightly on her feet in a crouch. Hemming and Jace quickly followed her example.

Brandt examined her options to continue. The drop from their current height could easily prove fatal if attempted by an unaugmented man. Even with bone lacing and reinforced muscles, the odds of landing without an injury were slim. They would have to try and climb lower using the massive struts that supported the lopsided structure of the amp station. Unfortunately, the strut was not level with the ledge but was instead recessed just behind it. She had heard soldiers claim they had accomplished the feat before. Though she had never attempted it herself, she reasoned that even if she fell, it would be from a lower height. The worst case was still better than simply jumping.

Or rushing the door, for that matter.

Brandt carefully lowered herself over the second ledge. She dropped to the full extension of her arms, slowly released one hand, and stretched out to grab a seam that was only a few centimeters deep. Before she could reconsider, Brandt released her grip on the ledge hoping she would be able to stop her fall. The fingers she had wedged onto the narrow seam strained as she fell and slammed heavily into the strut. A small damage alert flashed in the corner of her vision but she dismissed it as she frantically clawed at the seam with her free hand for support.

For an instant she feared that she wouldn't find it. That she felt fear stunned Brandt, and, in the quiet moment of surprise, she managed to find the seam and steadied herself. Slowly, she made her way to the bottom of the strut until she was only a few meters off the ground. Confident the fall was easily managed, she dropped to her feet, unslung her rifle, and sent a subvocal message to the others to take their turns.

Brandt shifted to the corner of a nearby building and watched as Jace made the descent with relative ease. The man hopped down the rest of the way and ran to join Brandt at the corner.

Hemming was much slower to start. He made it to the second ledge and kept reaching and falling short of the seam. A sudden explosion of plasma fire caused Brandt to check the tactical map again. They separatists had just breached the forge room. It wouldn't take them long to realize where the team had gone, either.

"Hemming, you've got to hurry." Said Brandt.

Hemming grunted in acknowledgement and reached for the seam again and, at last, managed to grab hold. He released his grip on the ledge just as Brandt and Jace had before him only to have his grip on the seam fail. Hemming clawed for purchase along the face of the seam to no avail. Brandt watched in horror as the man dropped nearly twenty meters to the ground, rotating as he fell. Hemming landed on his neck with a dull thud and did not move.

"Son of a bitch!" Exclaimed Jace.

Brandt leapt from her position and ran to the fallen man. He wasn't breathing. She knelt by the body and pulled off the light mask he wore and carefully probed at his neck checking for a pulse to no avail. Hemming was beyond her ability to help. Rico might have been able to save the man but she doubted even a medical applicator would help. She reached down and pulled a small identity tag from the man's armor and placed it in a pouch before snatching the man's rifle and slinging it across

her back. She took what remained of his ammunition and shoved them into her ammo pouches, touched the dead man gently on the chest in quiet thanks, then stood and started running.

The separatists were already starting to stream out of the amp station behind them by the time she and Jace made it back across the wall.

Mitchell

“Amp station team is reporting a KIA. Ranger Sergeant Hemming.” Said Valeriya over the radio.

Mitchell was surprised they’d managed to hold out as long as they had without taking a serious casualty. Assaults on amp stations were dangerous affairs rife with nasty close quarters fighting. The people trying to dig them out of the forge room had access to rebirth, too. Trying to hold out against that was almost certainly futile. Eventually, your ammo or your luck would run out.

“Tube should be coming up on the left side.” Said Davis from the cockpit

Vivian shoved her way past Mitchell and said “Can you move that junkpile somewhere else?”

Moving in the Galaxy inside the makeshift Max was tricky. Official models had taken the aircraft’s dimensions into account when they were designed. Mitchell had been more concerned with making it work than making it fit comfortably inside a Galaxy. He shifted out of the woman’s way as well as he could so that she could get to the controls for the light mortar mounted on the left side of the aircraft.

Davis lifted the nose of the Galaxy slightly and started a wide banking turn. Mitchell looked at the video feed simulating a view outside the aircraft. They were directly over Nason’s Defiance.

“We’re at a good range. Boss?” Asked Vivian as she turned to look at the Deputy Director.

Alyss nodded. Vivian turned back to the controls and squeezed the trigger. The Galaxy shuddered slightly as she carefully paced out shots from the mortar. Great holes seemed to appear out of clouds of dust and flame as each shot landed on the crumbling old building. After a dozen shots produced a dozen matching holes, the flimsy structure shuddered and collapsed into a heap.

Some of the tubes might still be working but anyone who rebirthed in one would find themselves buried inside several tons of rubble.

“Think we got it, boss.” Said Vivian.

“Good shooting.” Said Alyss. “Banker - put us over Nason’s...” Alyss was interrupted mid sentence when the Galaxy lurched in response to what sounded like a group of giants hurling boulders.

“Skyguard!” Yelled Davis from the cockpit. “It’s at 022.”

“Get this thing over the drop!” Shouted Alyss over the noise. “Sigma! Grab your shit - it’s gonna be a hot one!”

The Galaxy shuddered and and shook as the heavy flak shells burst against it’s thick skin. Davis struggled to pull the lumbering aircraft through a turn tighter than its designers had ever envisioned anyone ever attempting. Something along the aircraft’s spine groaned in protest at the treatment - a remarkable feat considering the noise it competed with.

Davis completed the turn and pointed the Galaxy toward Nason’s in a race to see if the Galaxy’s armor would last the trip. A crash that almost instantly filled the compartment with smoke answered the question as shell fragments and splinters of armor ricochet around the tight space, sparking in response to contact with a shield.

“Boss, this bird isn’t gonna make it before it comes apart.” Shouted Davis over the radio. “You’re gonna have to drop now!”

Alyss did not argue with the pilot. She gave the rest of Sigma the signal to drop before slapping the release and disappearing through the floor.

Mitchell stomped to the back of the aircraft, stumbling several times when it bucked against a particularly heavy impact. He punched the door release and engaged the nanite field in the same motion.

“That means you, too Vivian.” Davis said from the cockpit

“I’m not leaving. We can make it.” She said defiantly as she struggled to return the Skyguard’s fire.

“Mitchell - make her leave.” Said Davis quietly on a private channel.

Mitchell turned from the opening door and stumbled back to the front of the aircraft. He grabbed Vivian in one hand and the Falcon in the other. Vivian screamed and snarled as she struggled to free herself from his armored grasp. Mitchell ignored the woman. He knew she’d stay on the Galaxy as long as Davis would and Davis wouldn’t bail until he was sure the Galaxy would clear the dropzone.

Mitchell jumped through the nanite field out the back and waited until he had cleared the clouds of flak and debris before releasing Vivian and pushing her gently away. He looked up at the Galaxy as Davis tried to level the mortally stricken aircraft enough that he could make his drop.

A fireball tore through the aircraft first. Mitchell watched to see if Davis would jump but there was no sign of the man. The big aircraft entered into a lazy turn and pitched toward the ground as smaller explosions, the magazines no doubt, ripped the Galaxy apart.

Horatius

Rico

“They’re coming.” Said Lieutenant Camilla. The Ranger was crouched on the wide limb of a tree several dozen meters off the ground. “Look like we’ve got Maggies escorting a pair of Sunderers.”

Valeriya had detected several of the heavy vehicles heading toward the Amp station while a small group continued on to the labs. The bulk of them were sitting at a crossroads a few kilometers away. It wasn’t clear if they had stalled because of confusion or if they were simply choosing to hold onto a reserve until they knew where they would be best put to use. It seemed a conservative move and Rico wondered if that meant they had succeeded in disabling all of their rebirth tubes. Fear of mortality would make them a lot less eager to charge into the waiting ambush. If that was the case, this was just a probing attack.

“Lock and load, people.” Said the Lieutenant before she hopped out of the tree and floated gracefully to the ground.

Rico lifted the transit case lid with his foot and leaned down to pull out a heavy cylinder, ammunition for the first generation mana turret, and slid it into the launcher. The tube contained both the rocket and the long thin wire that carried the control signal from the launcher to missile itself. The technology was as simple as it was ancient. It was also notoriously unreliable.

Lieutenant Camilla had placed her turret thirty meters away. Across the road, Reese had set up a third launching station while one of the snipers, Harris, manned the fourth. The plan was simple - they’d wait until the convoy entered the narrow pass and then they would open fire on the leading and trailing vehicles, disabling them. It would trap the Sunderers in the killzone and the snipers would pick off infantry as they tried to exit their vehicles. With nowhere to go but up the steep rocky hill, the infantry would be easy prey for the snipers.

Rico crouched behind his launcher and watched as the convoy slowly came around the bend in the road. They were travelling quickly. That was a good sign - they weren't expecting to hit any resistance yet. The first Magrider entered into the pass.

"Wait until that lead vehicle is just about to clear the pass." Said Camilla over the subvocal channel.

Rico's heart raced in anticipation as he watched the convoy bunch up in the space. It was a classic error of convoy operations and Rico was grateful that they had made it.

The lead Magrider had nearly cleared the pass when the Lieutenant jumped up behind her launcher, swinging it towards the tank. "Now!" She shouted as she fired.

At point blank range, the missile had little difficulty breaching the thin rear armor of the hovertank. Rico pointed his launcher at the same vehicle and fired. Two more missiles streaked into the pass from the other side of the road as Rico grabbed a second missile and shoved it into the tube.

He had just placed his sights over the second Magrider when the troop door on one of the Sunderers flew open. It was almost immediately met by the heavy crack of a sniper rifle. Another volley of missiles rushed into the narrow pass.

All three of the vehicles were on fire and immobile and a thick smoke was building inside the pass. Panicked, the Sunderer gunners sprayed their 20mm cannons wildly at the ridge line as infantry poured out hoping to fight their way out of the ambush.

Neither Rico nor the snipers intended to give them a chance. The crack of their rifles echoed across the road even as Rico fired a third shot. This probing attack was doomed. The cultists were sealed in the pass; now there was nothing they could do but die. They might not know it yet but Rico was certain they would figure it out quickly.

Matthews

“You guys are gonna have company soon. Magrider is sniffing around out front.” Said Valeriya over the squad channel.

“Mike?” Shouted Matthews. “What’s the story on that burn?”

“It’s ready to go when we are.” Replied Mike. “What are we doing with the prisoners?”

Matthews looked toward the sealed lab. Those inside had tried to build a terrible weapon and every single one of them should have known better. They were supposed to be the enlightened vanguards of mankind’s future and instead they had sought to bury it. In a better world they would be captured and interrogated and perhaps a few of them would eventually see the error of their ways. The only options he had was executing them or freeing them. To free them was to gamble that they could be rounded up and dealt with. To kill them was to betray almost every ideal Matthews had ever held. “Leave them. They’ve served their purpose.” He said.

Three days ago, the brutality of his answer would have shocked him. Had he been given that order, he would have refused it without hesitation. He had always believed that murder was the worst of all possible options. Now, though, it was the only reasonable course.

Mike and Natalie exchanged a worried look. “I understand that we can’t let them go but you really want to burn ‘em?” Asked Mike.

“It’s a plasma burn. They won’t even notice it’s getting hot before they’re dust.” Replied Matthews. “And that’s better than they deserve after what they’ve done.”

Mike looked back at the lab and shook his head. He turned and locked eyes with Matthews. “You sure? Rebirth’s down.”

Matthews met the man's gaze. "Yes."

Mike turned back to the console and tapped several keys. An alarm sounded in the lab and announced the containment breach failsafe had been initiated. The people he had sealed in the lab quickly grew panicked and several began pounding on the door and shouting. Matthews tried to ignore their screams as he lifted his Orion and walked back to the elevator.

The three rode the carnage filled lift in silence. No one said a word as they smashed their way into a garage or when Natalie hotwired one of the Galaxys inside. As Matthews climbed into the bed of the vehicle, the small counter he had started when Mike activated the failsafe hit zero. There was no grand explosion - just a subtle vibration under his feet as the plasma charges did their work.

"Valeriya - can you give me the status of that service road to Nason's?" He asked.

"Can't say. Looks clear from here but I've lost contact with a few of the Sunderers." She replied.

He slapped the roof of the vehicle. "We're going to stick with the plan and take the service road to link up with the blocking team." He said over the squad channel.

Mike pulled the Galaxy out of the garage and started down the service road. The amp station quickly faded into the distance. As they travelled, Matthews listened to the reports from the assault and blocking teams. The blocking team was being pressed by several Sunderers while the Magriders shelled their position blindly. They'd almost certainly have to fall back soon. The assault team was making rapid progress, though. The diversion worked better than he'd dared to hope.

The service road came to an abrupt end in a shallow marsh. As they made the turn south to link up with the road leading to Gourney Dam and the line, a burst of fire hissed through the air. Matthews

ducked further inside the truck bed and looked wildly around for a source. A second burst ripped through the swap, impacting the side of the Galaxy with loud thuds.

“Harasser, 10 o’clock.” Shouted Mike.

Matthews turned and peeked above the top of the vehicle. Seeing the other Galaxy, he pulled the plasma cannon from his back and attempted to take aim only to lose his sight picture as Mike swerved away around a rock.

“Keep it steady!” He shouted.

The maneuver had broken the other Galaxy’s line of sight for the moment. Matthews shifted in the truck bed slightly and braced against the side with an outstretched leg. Just before they cleared the rocks again, Matthews activated his nanomesh.

The instant they were in view, the Galaxy raked Matthews’s vehicle with fire. At almost 200 meters, it was a long shot for the unguided plasma cannon. Matthews held his breath and started to squeeze the trigger even as several large caliber slugs deflected off his heavy shield. He fully squeezed the trigger and an emerald spear darted from the launcher as he felt something hot stab at his neck.

Warnings flashed across his AR overlay and he saw his blood squirt up into his hand as he grabbed for his neck. His shot splashed against the Galaxy’s window and, as his vision blurred, he watched as it slowed to a halt.

“You okay back there?” Yelled Mike from the driver’s seat.

“Shit - he’s hit bad.” Said Natalie as though from a great distance.

Reese

Reese yanked the retaining pin free from the launcher and lifted it from its tripod before shoving both parts of the weapon inside the transport case. She'd heard someone say that Matthews had been wounded but didn't have time to listen to the details. After their initial ambush, the traitors had gotten smart and simply lobbed heavy unfocused plasma shots into the hills while Sunderers randomly fired their 20mm machine guns. If they didn't move, they'd risk being surrounded.

Reese looked up and realized that the machine gun fire had stopped. She unslung her carbine and flicked off the safety as several bursts from a coil gun echoed across the road. She brought the carbine to her eye just as a man came sprinting into view. Without pausing to think, she squeezed the trigger. The first two rounds glanced off his shield but, surprised by the heavy recoil, the remainder of her burst simply sailed past the man's head. She adjusted her aim and fired a second time, halting the man's run mid step.

Seeing movement out of the corner of her eye, she quickly swung the carbine toward it and fired again. Several more traitors appeared, their arrival announced by plasma shots that zipped haphazardly past her head. Reese dropped flat on her stomach and, guessing where the fire was coming from, and fired the remainder of her magazine. As she rolled to her side to reload, a booming shot cracked over her head.

"Grab the launcher. I'll cover." Said Harris.

Reese kept low and scrambled forward toward the case and slammed it closed.

"Go." He said.

Reese grabbed the carry handle and struggled to her feet before turning and running along the ridge line. After she had run a short distance, she stopped near a rock and took a knee so that she could throw the strap for the case across her shoulder. "Move!" She shouted as she fired several bursts.

Several more rounds from a sniper rifle, this time from Cynthia across the road, echoed through the trees.

“Keep moving to the second position.” Said Lieutenant Camilla over the radio.

Trusting that the two snipers could take care of themselves, Reese turned and started running. The second fall back position was almost a kilometer away. She arrived ahead of the rest and began unpacking the launcher. As she worked, the Lieutenant shouted that she’d been injured.

Reese looked pulled up the tactical map and left it on the edge of her vision as she worked. Rico was shouting at the woman, trying to get her to move closer. Cynthia yelled something about movement on a flank. Camilla tried to tell Rico to leave her while the medic pleaded with her to crawl over to him. The argument continued for almost a minute, punctuated by regular gunfire in the distance; It only ended when the Lieutenant flatlined. Rico shouted something incoherent across the radio.

As Reese loaded a missile into the Mana turret she noted with relief that Rico had, at last, started moving to the second position.

Alyss

Breaching the perimeter at Nason’s had been surprisingly easy. The skyguard had attempted to run them down but Mitchell dispatched it easily enough. They’d only run into a handful of guards inside the facility and beyond the two men Nicholas had picked off, no one had tried to stop them as James bypassed the first two security doors. They’d scanned the base a dozen times once they reached the first door. There were only a few signatures inside. By all appearances, the cultists had committed almost everything they had to the convoy.

In spite of the success, they were paying a heavy toll outside the walls. Banker had almost certainly died when the Galaxy went down. Two of the Rangers were dead and the Centurion might not be far behind.

“I’ve got it.” Said James, looking up from the door controls. He said.

Alyss looked over her shoulder. “Ready?”

The rest of the team indicated that they were.

Alyss nodded to James. “Do it.”

James pressed a key and the reinforced doors began to slide open. Almost immediately, plasma fire streaked through the narrow gap. *This is more like it.* She thought as she stepped close to the door frame, pulled a concussion grenade from her belt, and tossed it inside. The explosion cut the volume of fire tremendously. Alyss activated her nanomesh, stepped around the corner, and started firing into the room. Within seconds, the combined fire of the assault team left six of the cultists lying on the ground.

Alyss gestured inside the room and Mitchell stomped his way inside. She darted behind the makeshift Max and followed him inside before peeling off to duck behind a bank of computers. The rest of the team filed inside, taking several minutes to clear the cavernous space.

“Strottmann - get to work on the reboot. Clark, give him a hand. Webb and Young, fan out and watch those doors” She said gesturing toward the two entrances they had found.

“Mike - what’s your ETA?” She asked.

“Not long. A few minutes.” He replied.

“And the Centurion?”

“Not good.”

Valeriya

Valeriya lifted the nose of her Valkyrie toward a break in the trees and pressed the throttle as tracers filled the air. Several warnings flashed across her instruments as testament to the fact the gunners were getting better. The damage wasn't what worried her, though. Freya had taken worse. The worry came from the Ammo counters. The Brimstone pods still had the twelve rockets she'd had since the Biolab but now the G30's indicator was flashing. She had just under 200 rounds left.

Normally, this is when she would retire to the nearest refit zone for reload and repair. With the London destroyed, the next closest site was on the west coast of Indar nearly two thousand kilometers away.

Still, she had spent the rounds well and had picked off one of the Magriders and another two Sunderers. That still left them with at least eight pieces of heavy armor, though, and god only knew how many infantry.

She reached over and turned the stealth suite back offline and powered up her sensors. With just enough ammo to take out one more vehicle, she hoped that one of the vehicles would move outside the defensive ring of heavy machine guns.

Rico

“Looks like they're pulling back again.” Said Harris, gritting his teeth. The sniper had been shot in the hip. Rico worked to close the wound.

Rico looked up from his work and saw that the man was right. The remaining Sunderer was slowly backing around a bend in the road. Two others burned slowly in the road. They'd had to leave two of the Mana launchers behind. Most of the passengers of the wrecked vehicles had managed to escape. A few of them stopped to snap off shots as they retreated but the combined fire from Reese and Cynthia ensured they were not well aimed.

Rico turned his attention back to the man's leg. Having already repaired the damage to the bone, he worked to close the ragged wound in the man's flesh. Skin and muscle was far easier to work with and Rico finished quickly. "You're good." He said as he stood and looked around.

There were nearly a dozen bodies splayed out along the road or at the foot of their short hill. Reese was busy reloading her carbine. "Sorry about the Lieutenant." She said without looking up.

Rico walked over to the woman and sat down beside her, leaning against the tree. "There wasn't anything I could do. It was like when Iona got hit. I couldn't get to him." He said as he fidgeted with the medical applicator. He shoved the device back into its pouch. "Why didn't they send Havoc?" He asked bitterly. "Why'd they have to send us?"

Reese sat the carbine in her lap and looked down the hill. "You know, I asked Brandt that. She didn't really have an answer." She said. "I mean, the Council thought this mission might go poorly. That's why they sent the Praetor with an armed escort. They could have sent Hephaestus Company or Janus. Even Darkstar would have been a better choice. Instead they sent us. I guess it doesn't matter why. We're all that's here. Just us." She turned to look at Rico. "Besides, if the Terrans did send someone else, who's to say they'd have made the choice to try and stop all this? Someone else might have gotten it wrong." She said squeezing the man's knee.

"Harasser's comin' in. Looks like the Lab team." Said Cynthia from her perch.

Rico scrambled to his feet and ran to meet the speeding vehicle as Reese followed close behind. When he reached the Galaxy, a woman was pressing something against the side of Matthews's neck. Both the Centurion and the woman were soaked in blood.

"How long?" Asked Rico.

"About twenty minutes. I've given him three medkits already." She said.

Rico jumped into the increasingly crowded bed of the Galaxy and pulled his medical applicator free. Deep in the throes of shock due to massive blood loss, the man's vital signs were virtually non-existent. A quick scan gave grim news. His interior carotid artery and his anterior jugular vein had been breached. Rico pushed the woman's hands out of the way and rebuilt the damaged segments, stopping further blood loss.

Reese leaned over the bed of the truck and looked inside. "Is he going to make it?" She asked softly.

Rico knew that he didn't have the biomass left to build enough replacement blood to save the man's life. Even if he did, the man was brain dead and had been for long enough that he didn't know if he'd be able to restart its function in any case. He wanted to lie to her and tell her that he would be able to save the Centurion but the truth was the man was already dead. The only reason he was still breathing was because his implants wouldn't let his heart or lungs quit. He looked up as he rummaged through a pocket for a neural stimulator and shook his head.

Reese reached into the bed of the truck and grabbed the dying man's limp hand, squeezing it tightly. Rico carefully stuck the stimulator against the back of the Centurion's neck and pressed the small button. If he could get some sign of brain activity, even the smallest spark, it might be possible to stabilize him long enough that he could rebirth after the system rebooted.

He carefully watched the readout from his medical applicator as the stimulator sent pulses directly into the man's brain stem. Each flash was accompanied by a brief flurry of activity only to quickly fade to nothing. Field protocol was to leave the stimulator attached for five minutes. Hospitals in the days before rebirth gave the machines ten minutes to do their work before doctors would declare a patient dead.

Rico waited eleven minutes before pulling the stimulator off the man's neck. "I'm sorry." He said to Reese without looking at her.

Rico slowly climbed out of the truck and began to walk away. He looked back towards the smoking wreckage on the road. The cultists would be back soon. They were running out of missiles as quickly as they were running out of people to man the guns. He slid the applicator back into its pouch. "We've got a KIA. Centurion Brendan Matthews." He announced on the coalition channel.

"Harris - take charge of the team." Said Alyss. "Be prepared to fall back to Nason's. Taylor's trading fire with a few cultists in the swamp. Looks like a few of them were smart enough to go around."

Brandt

Brandt and Jace stopped in a narrow draw. They had been running flat out for more than an hour. Even with all her cybernetics, her triage unit was warning about the dangerous buildup of lactic acid. Jace was not nearly so completely augmented. That he had managed to keep up was a testament to the man's training and an iron will.

"What do you think?" He asked between gasping breaths.

Brandt examined the tactical map. They were only a few kilometers from the first defensive position. They could cut across the hills to the second line easily enough but given the chatter on the coalition channel, the blocking team wouldn't be able to hold on to that second defensive line for long.

“I say we swing north toward Nason’s Defiance.” She said as she marked a proposed path and shared it with the man. “That will drop us about half a kilometer north of the third line. Should put us in a good spot to watch their flank.”

Jace reached down, pulled out a small applicator, and stabbed it into his thigh. Brandt hadn’t seen a restoration kit since she was in the Rangers. Several of the smaller implants in the standard Vanu Sovereignty combat augmentation package took on the task of combatting the side effects of fatigue and strenuous physical activity. Beyond that, the air exchanger that replaced one of her lungs was substantially more efficient than the organic original, which helped delay the onset of symptoms. But the two of them had just run almost thirty kilometers in just over an hour. Even with her implants her triage unit suggested that she take a break for a few minutes and warned that failing to do so could result in complete muscle failure.

“We’ll wait a few minutes to give that time to work.”

“Thanks.” He said. “Shouldn’t wait long though. It’d be shame if the world came to an end while we were taking a breather.”

Brandt chuckled at the joke. “If it does, we weren’t going to make much of a difference.”

Brandt looked at the tactical feed from the blocking team. They had arranged themselves in a semi-circle at the top of a steep hill looking down a long straight section of road. Several heavy vehicles had been spotted and marked while a collection of red dots edged their way up the hill.

“Alyss said you were on Indar.” She said suddenly. “Where you at Mao?”

Jace nodded silently.

“Sorry. That was a real shithole.”

“Yeah. You know, we thought we’d won the war that day.” Said Jace. “The TR had fallen back to a defensive line just outside the warpgate. No way they could have stopped us. We’d have captured the warpgate and would have had a direct link to Cyssor. If Cyssor fell, that would just leave Connery and Waterson.”

Brandt knew what happened as well as anyone. The NC launched tactical nukes at that defensive position in violation with their agreement with the Sovereignty. In response, the VS had launched operation Vidar and cut the NC off from rebirth. The last stand of the Republic turned into a counterattack that forced the NC to flee across Indar.

“Sometimes, I think it would have been better if you had.” She said.

“Yeah, well, I’d still have a few more friends around if it had.”

Brandt glanced at the feed from her triage module. The warnings had cleared. “You ready?” She asked.

Jace nodded and stood back up. The two of them turned to the north and took off running through the hills.

Balancing the Books

Reese

Reese dropped the transport case and paused to catch her breath. Just like the first ambush location they had stopped the initial probing attack only to have the traitors simply blanket the hill in plasma and 20mm fire. This time they weren't as lucky. Cynthia was standing behind a small tree that simply ceased to exist when a plasma cannon shot landed directly at its base. Rico reported the woman dead without even trying to resuscitate her; she was simply gone.

Natalie jogged over and dropped the last crate of missiles at Reese's feet. Reese cracked it open and glanced inside. There were only 3 missiles left. Even with perfect accuracy and the best possible angle, she had fewer shots than the traitors had vehicles.

Harris walked over and looked inside the crate and then turned to Natalie. "That all that's left?" He asked.

The woman nodded.

"Boss, we're running real short on ammo out here. We got any idea how much longer that hack is gonna take?" Said Harris across the radio.

"Strottmann says the longest he's ever heard of it taking to run a bypass like this is forty minutes. He's been at it at least that long. I've got Young and Webb out on the wall trying to get at least a few of the perimeter guns online, though." Came the response.

Reese finished assembling the Mana turret and stood back up. "Those guns aren't going to do us any good out here." She said as she reached down and pulled a missile out of its case. "They've got no line of sight." Reese said as she slid the missile into place.

Harris glanced toward Nason's Defiance and then nodded in agreement. "So we try and stop the first push. At this point they have to be worried about the rate at which they're spending their armor advantage. If we can do that, we'll fall back inside Nason's and try and hold them at the wall."

Reese sat down tiredly and stared down the road. They were getting smarter about their assaults. With three missiles, she didn't even think they'd be able to stop the first push.

Valeriya

"You have anything left?" Asked Alyss across the radio.

"Just enough for one pass." Replied Valeriya.

"They're almost out of ammo out there. We're trying to get the perimeter guns back online but I don't think we'll get them running before the next wave. Can you lend a hand?"

"Always."

"Tie in to their net, then. I can't speak for anyone else, but if one of mine call for an airstrike, do what they ask. They know the ranges well enough."

Valeria acknowledged the woman and switched over to the blocking position's network. She had done her best to thin out the convoy but the odds were still grim. Of the eleven people who were supposed to man the line, only five of them remained.

She had voiced her concern with simply dropping the amp station and lab teams and leaving them to find their own way to the defensive line during planning. The hope had been that they'd be able to grab a vehicle to make the trip. The Lab team had managed, but Hemming and his team had been cut off and forced to make a run for it on foot. If they'd had a real extraction plan, Hemming wouldn't

have fallen and Matthews might still be alive. Not that any of that really mattered at this point. Without AV weaponry it didn't matter how many people they had down there; they'd simply be swept aside.

Valeriya banked *Freya* into a slow turn, starting a wide orbit of Nason's Defiance. The cultists, it seemed, would not make her wait long and her radio erupted with shouts and gunfire. She carefully watched the readout from her sensors, dismissing a warning from her damage control system. There wasn't anything she could do about the dropping pressure in the hydraulic lines.

In the space of a few minutes, the blocking team reported destroying one Sunderer and disabling a second. No one cheered. At least two dozen infantry pressed up the hill against the line under the cover of a blanket of 20mm machine gun fire. The blocking team slowly retreated back up the hill, trading meters at a time for every casualty they managed to inflict. They didn't call for an airstrike. At last they team had fallen back to the peak of the hill. With a sharp cliff at their backs and more than a 200 meter dash through the swamp devoid of cover, they had nowhere else to go. Someone reported that one of the oligarchs had been hit and yet they still didn't call.

Valeriya exited the slow turn aligned *Freya* with the road. The remaining Magrider burned white hot against the road and, just beyond, the Sunderers. "This is Valeriya. I'm set up on the run and I've got a clear shot at their back."

"Not yet!" Yelled Harris

She watched plasma fire streaked up the hill even as the volume of blue tracers racing down in response dwindled to a trickle. *What the hell are the waiting for?* She thought. The cultists were nearly on top of them.

"Now!" Shouted Harris over an explosion of gunfire.

Valeriya pushed the throttle all the way forward and *Freya* lept through the air. She dropped the cumbersome aircraft until it skimmed the road and raced toward the Magrider. At 100 meters, she squeezed the trigger, sending a line of red streaks toward the hover tank. At point blank range, the thin armor protecting the tank's engines was no match for the stream of high density slugs. Purple flames erupted from the tank even as Valeriya jerked backward on the control stick, barely managing to clear the crippled tank as it crashed to the ground.

Valeriya didn't back off the throttle; she dipped the nose of the aircraft and applied full thrust from the engines mounted on the bottom of the Valkyrie and raced forward faster than the gunship was ever designed to fly. She placed the crosshairs on one of the remaining Sunderers and squeezed the trigger, not even bothering with the thermal sight. The last one hundred rounds coughed out of the vulcan in less than a second, impacting in a spray of sparks and pulverized armor. Valeriya lifted the nose of her ship, quickly gaining altitude. As she leveled off, she flicked over to the brimstone pods.

The cultists were bunched together at the top of the hill; less than 20 meters separated them from the blocking team. Valeriya realized if she fired now, the flechette spread would be too wide and would engulf their position and so she waited. Below her, several 20mm guns turned to face the new threat. Valeriya kept closing the distance.

The first volley of 20mm shells tore into the Valkyrie and warning lights screamed for attention. Valeriya ignored them and kept closing. "I hope you're in cover." She shouted across the radio.

At less than 200 meters, Valeria fired and a dozen rockets leapt from the Valkyrie even as the heavy machine gun fire tore great gaping holes in the aircraft.

She tried to roll the Valkyrie into a tight turn, hoping to break for the cover of the treeline. *Freya* responded sluggishly and limped just above the tree line. She had only travelled a few hundred meters when the flashing yellow warning lights turned red one by one. As if on cue, the main engines sputtered and died. She desperately pulled against the collective, hoping to offset the

sudden loss of thrust but her efforts merely slowed the fall. Valeriya flailed helplessly at the controls trying to keep the machine aloft even as it sunk below the treeline and smashed into the shallow water of the swamp.

There wasn't any pain. She looked down through the smoke that filled the cockpit, absentmindedly slapped her hand down on the fire suppression system. There was a bone protruding through the leg of her flight suit surrounded by a dark stain. Valeriya fumbled for the release catch for her harness when she realized there were voices shouting in the distance. With the harness released, she tried to push herself out of the seat only to have her effort rewarded by a stabbing pain in her back.

That's when Valeria realized she couldn't move her feet. The crash had broken her spine.

Reese

"Rico, man, we've got to move now. We aren't gonna get another chance." Said Harris.

"I'm going after her." Said Rico, loading his rifle.

"Rico." Said Reese gently. "That swamp between us and Valeriya is crawling with the traitors. They'll get there before you can."

"I'm still going."

"So you're just going to throw your life away?"

"She's not dead. Look at her biometrics - she's not dead."

"You can't help her." Reese pleaded

“I have to try. Rangers don’t leave people behind.” He said as he turned to walk down the hill. “If it was Brandt or Matthews, you’d want me to go.”

Reese didn’t have a response for that. He was right. She turned to Harris and said “I’m going with him.”

Harris sighed heavily. “Then you’re on your own.”

“I know.” Said Reese. “Good luck.”

Reese jogged down the hill after Rico leaving the sniper behind. The two of them ran through the swamp toward the crash site. Three times they ran into a cultist and each time they barely slowed to gun the soldier down. As they approached the Valkyrie, they heard sound of a small caliber gunpowder weapon firing short rapid bursts.

“That’s a repeater.” Said Rico, breaking into a dead sprint.

Reese rushed behind the man as the two closed on the stricken aircraft. The sound of plasma fire at first joined with the sound of the side arm before drowning it out entirely. The two of them crested the hill in nearly the same instant. One of the traitors was standing just in front of the crushed nose of the Valkyrie with a gun leveled at the open cockpit.

Rico gave an anguished shout and raised his rifle as the traitor fired into the cockpit. The man’s fire was cut short by the first burst from Rico’s rifle. The man took a step backward and almost seemed confused. A second burst dropped the man to his back.

Rico rushed forward scrambled onto the nose of the Valkyrie, reached inside, and started trying to drag Valeriya out. Reese squeezed in beside the medic and helped pull the woman from the Valkyrie.

The set the woman on the ground; there were several small holes burned through her light chestplate.

Rico frantically tore off a glove and pressed his fingers to the woman's neck, feeling for a pulse. He pulled out a small knife and sliced through the straps hold the armor in place and lifted it out of the way. He produced two medkits and jammed one in Valeriya's leg, the other into her chest.

Reese took a knee, covering the medic while he worked. He felt for a pulse again, shouted in anger, and began chest compressions. He would shove hard on her chest several times, stop, and breathe into her mouth before starting the compressions again. Valeriya was spitting up blood; after giving the woman a breath, Rico turned to spit the sticky fluid onto the ground. Valeriya's shirt was sticky with a mix of blood and sweat. With each compression, blood welled up through one of the holes in her shirt. Seeing this, Rico pulled out a canister of bandage and sprayed it over the oozing wounds and started CPR again as he desperately tried to keep her heart beating.

Reese couldn't stand to watch the woman die. She turned her attention to the swamp. The sudden movement of a man wearing bile colored armor caught her attention.

"Rico..." She said as she raised the carbine to her shoulder. "They're coming."

Reese squeezed the trigger and the burst caught the running man in the head as plasma fire zipped past in response. Reese ducked instinctively and rotated to face the new threat. Unable to see where it had come from, she fired a long burst in the direction she guessed the shots might have come from.

She jumped to her feet and grabbed Rico by the collar and yanked him away from his task, dragging him behind the Valkyrie. Scarcely had they made it behind the aircraft when plasma fire streaked in and splashed against the wreck. Reese peeked around the corner only to pull her head back into cover when a shot hissed past it.

Reese pulled up the tactical map, hoping to find an escape that provided at least a modicum of cover. The ghostly red dots told her that the Valkyrie's sensors were still working. The dots were all around them; they were surrounded.

Brandt

"You can't be serious." Said Jace.

Brandt pulled the bandolier with the remainder of the ammunition for her vandal off and tossed it to the ground before laying the rifle on top of it. "I am." She said, as she pulled the magazine out of the stalker. Convinced it was loaded she turned to Jace. "I'm going down there to try and get them out. Now, are you going to cover me or not?"

Jace stared down the hill. Reese and Rico were surrounded. There was no way to extract them without drawing attention. "Fine. But if you go down, I'm not coming after you." He said at last.

Brandt nodded. The man didn't owe her any allegiance. She was grateful that the man would provide covering fire.

Brandt looked at the tactical map one last time. The Valkyrie had come to rest on the edge of a wide marsh. Several of the traitors had taken shelter behind the rotting tree trunks or large rocks that dotted the terrain. Pushing south from the wreck toward the final defensive line would be impossible. Skirting the edge of the marsh to the north east was the only viable route away from the Valkyrie and even that assumed she would be able to reach it.

Brandt activated her cloak, rose to her feet, and sprinted down the hill. Long years of experience meant that even at a dead sprint, her step was nearly silent. She came across a soldier, uncloaked, and sprayed a burst at the back of his head without breaking stride. A second soldier, a woman,

turned at the sound of gunfire behind her. Her eyes opened wide at the sight of the infiltrator barreling down on her and blindly sprayed her carbine from the hip even as Brandt's own rounds tore through her chest.

A medical warning flashed across her vision as Brandt paused behind a tree to reload. She dismissed the warning without reading it as a burst of plasma impacted the edge of her cover, spraying splinters of wood into the air. Brandt crouched down and leaned around the edge of the tree and snapped off a short burst at a man well out of cover. The shots merely glanced off his shield and he hurried back behind the tree. A shot rang out from the top of the hill; the soldier behind the tree flopped to the ground and lay twitching.

Brandt hopped back to her feet and continued on toward the bottom of the hill under the cover of cloak. Several more shots sounded from behind her as Jace fired at a target she couldn't see.

She was only 30 meters from the Valkyrie when the cloak ran out of power. Something slammed into her from behind. Suddenly off balance, Brandt tripped and fell, tumbling down the hill.

"Brandt!" Reese screamed. The young woman rose from the ruined passenger compartment of the Valkyrie firing.

Brandt came to a halt on her face with a new medical warning flashing in AR. She rolled onto her back and sat up slightly. The warning, no longer content with a visual indicator, blared inside her head. Brandt ignored it as she leveled the stalker at a man running down the hill and squeezed the trigger. Like Brandt, his momentum carried his body roughly down the hill before he came to rest a meter away.

Seeing nothing else, Brandt tried to fully sit up but could not. She rolled over, pushed herself upright with her free hand, and stumbled toward the Valkyrie. "We need to move. Now." She said

Reese looked at her with wide eyes. "You've been shot." She said.

Brandt looked down and realized there was a ragged three centimeter wound in her chest. The medical warning she ignored told her that the lung had collapsed and that she was bleeding internally. It estimated the wound would be fatal if left untreated.

Rico looked closely at her and shook his head in disbelief. "You shouldn't even be standing." He said.

Brandt leaned heavily against the wreck and fished for a medkit, jamming it just above the wound. "Doesn't matter." She said. "Jace, we're moving."

Brandt tossed the spent medkit aside and pointed along the edge of the marsh. "We're going to follow the treeline until we hit the wall. Now move."

The three of them moved through the trees at the pace of Brandt's unsteady jog. Twice they had to stop and shoot at men in green armor that chased behind them. The third time they stopped, only a few hundred meters from the gatehouse, was because Rico had spotted two dozen traitors creeping through the trees ahead of them.

Brandt looked around and realized that their pursuers would catch up with them soon. The only other route was to cut across the open swamp. The only piece of cover along that path was a rocky tree covered hill that jutted out of the water. Reaching it would require fifty meter run in the open; all it would accomplish is trapping them somewhere slightly more defensible.

The sound of approaching footsteps caught Brandt's attention and she turned with her rifle at the ready. It was Jace. "Thought you weren't going to follow." She said, lowering the weapon.

"Didn't have a choice. They were crawling up the hill from behind. You got a plan?"

Brandt pointed a shaky hand toward the hill. "There." She said.

Rico and Reese exchanged a worried glance. "The hill?" Reese asked.

Brandt nodded. "Nowhere else to go. If we can make it there..."

Jace glanced toward the sky. "Little early for a last stand don't ya think?"

"At least we'd have the high ground." Brandt said. "Jace - you and I go first. Cloak won't buy us much time so move fast. These two will need covering fire."

Jace nodded and activated his cloak. Brandt rose slowly from her crouch, turned hers on, and started running. Her once nimble stride was clumsy and erratic as an otherworldly fatigue sapped at her limbs. Jace reached the hill well ahead of her and ducked behind one of the jutting rocks. Seconds later, Brandt made it to the small hill and slowly climbed until she had reached the husk of a long dead tree.

She took as deep a breath as was possible with only a single artificial lung, hoping it would steady her hands. "Go." She said.

The two took off running at a dead sprint, splashing murky water with every step. The sign was not lost on the traitors; they had scarcely made it across half the distance when the first emerald darts streaked from the trees towards them. Jace methodically cracked shots into the trees where he saw movement.

Brandt leveled the stalker at chest height and squeezed the trigger, emptying her magazine. Faster than should have been possible, she swapped it for a fresh one. They were still ten meters out when fire erupted from a different edge of the treeline. Brandt turned her weapon to the new source of fire

and placed her crosshairs over the head of a man brazenly standing in the open as he fired wild bursts. The short steam of high velocity rounds battered through his shield and exploded against armor and flesh. He had not even fallen before Brandt was firing another burst, then a third and then a fourth.

Rico and Reese reached the hill and began a desperate scramble for cover as plasma fire thudded into the rocks around them. Reese lost her footing just short of where Brandt crouched and started to slide back down the rocks. Brandt stood and took a step forward out of cover to grab the woman. She had just placed her right hand on Reese's shoulder when a round sparked through her shield and tore into her artificial wrist. She leaned over, placed her other hand on the woman's belt, and strained to pull the woman to her feet and shoved her behind a nearby rock. A second shot ripped through her shoulder and, already unsteady, she began to stumble. Two more shots hit her low, passing through her abdomen, knocking her to the ground.

"Brandt!" Screamed Reese.

Brandt felt a hand pull at her as Reese tried to drag her into cover.

The Last Door

Alyss

"I've got it!" Shouted James from across the room. "Starting system purge and reboot now."

"Does that mean we've stopped the goo?" Alyss asked, still leveling her Anchor toward the gatehouse.

James squinted at the readout. "Purge completed - the only data I'm seeing is the usual relay stuff. Once I kick off the reboot they won't have any way to re-upload until it finishes and, by then, the vulnerability will be closed." He said at last.

Alyss rolled her eyes only to realize no one was around to notice the gesture. Ask the man for the time and he'd tell you how to build a clock. "Layman's terms, please."

"Yes. We've stopped the weapon. Rebirth is offline until the reboot finishes and the warpgates link with the rest of the system, though."

Alyss sighed in relief as stress she was not consciously aware of drained from her shoulders. "Any guess on how long that'll take?"

"The only people who've rebooted the system were the VS and they did it ten years ago. I have no idea."

Alyss switched to the coalition channel and announced the good news. Now the operation was simple; they just had to stay alive. "Anyone still outside the walls, collapse back inside Nason's Defiance." She said.

“Afraid we can’t do it, ma’am.” Said Jace. “We’re cut off about 200 meters from the east gatehouse. No way we’d make the crossing.”

Alyss’s heart sank. The smart move would be to pull out of the facility entirely, leaving the Centurion’s bomb behind as a parting gift and detonating it when they had cleared the blast radius. She had already lost three people; she wasn’t about to leave a fourth to die just outside her walls while there was still a chance he could be saved. She opened a private channel to Vivian. “Clark, get over here.”

The young woman ran to her side. Alyss pulled the small heavy sphere from her pouch and handed it to the woman. “You’re going to stay here with Strottmann. If we get overrun, I want you to detonate.”

Vivian looked down at bomb and nodded.

Alyss held out the detonator. “Are you sure you can do that?” She asked.

“Push a button? Yeah, I think I can handle it.”

“This isn’t just any button. It’s a 20 kiloton weapon of mass destruction. If you push it, everyone dies. I want you to be sure - if it becomes necessary, can you make that call?”

Vivian was silent for a moment and then nodded. Alyss handed her the detonator.

Alyss switched back to the coalition channel. “Strottmann - you’re here with Clark. Everyone else - get to the east wall. We’ve got some friends out there that need a hand.”

Alyss ran through the facility and bounded up the stairs to the top of the wall. Mitchell and Taylor were still trying to route power to one of the heavy gatling guns that covered the approach to the gatehouse. “No luck?” She asked.

“Not yet. This place has a small generator but no one bothered to service the lines.” Said Taylor without looking up.

Alyss shuffled to the edge of the wall and peeked around the parapet. She could see muzzle flashes in the distant treeline and streams of plasma raked the small outcrop. The team stranded there only managed to put up sporadic outgoing fire.

Mitchell stomped over to join her as a pair of Sunderers slowly rolled into view around a bend in the road. “You know, that hill they’re on covers the approach to the gate perfectly.” He said.

“Too bad they don’t have any AV out there.” She agreed.

Mitchell leaned over and grabbed the modified Falcon. “I’m going.” He said. “If we can hold those Sunderers, the Xiphos should be able to keep their infantry from advancing any closer.”

Alyss opened her mouth to stop the man but quickly thought better of it. Even if Taylor got the gun up and running, the Sunderers had already passed through the better part of the kill zone and the light caliber round was of questionable worth against the vehicle’s thick skin. Alyss simply nodded her head. “Sigma!” She shouted. “Mitchell has volunteered for a rescue mission. Let’s give him some cover!”

When Mitchell stormed through the gate, the response was almost immediate. Plasma fire streaked across the open stretch. Alyss gritted her teeth as she swung her anchor from muzzle flash to muzzle flash, firing a half dozen rounds at each. An explosion of smaller rounds drifted toward the muzzle flashes as the squad stretched the effective range of their Tempests to the limit. For a brief moment, their combined fire overwhelmed that of the cultists. Mitchell pushed the makeshift Max to its limit, taking great bounding strides across the shallow water.

He reached the outcrop and quickly climbed partway to the top before turning toward the road. Mitchell fired shot after shot towards the two Sunderers even as they swung their heavy machine guns towards him and desperately tried to return fire.

A Galaxy raced into view from behind the smoking wreckage of the vehicles caught in the blocking team's final ambush and swerved hard into the swamp. Alyss shifted her fire toward the careening truck, emptying her magazine into the vehicle to no apparent effect. She pressed the magazine release as she reached for a replacement in her bandoleer.

Before she completed the reload, Mitchell had already turned the Falcon toward the Galaxy. His first shot hit the vehicle on the nose, tearing a great hole in the armored hood. The second shot landed squarely on the windscreen though the sturdy plasteel merely splintered and cracked under the assault. The last shot caught the Galaxy just above the wheel, shredding the tire in an instant. Mitchell scrambled to reload the falcon as the driver lost control, skidding into a turn before losing stability entirely and rolling through the shallow water toward the outcrop. The smoking vehicle slid to a halt on its roof, coming to rest at the base of the hill.

Reese

Reese crouched low behind a rock as small green darts slammed into the opposite side. She looked up at Rico as he crouched beside Brandt and tried to slow her bleeding.

Suddenly, the sound of plasma fire ceased. Reese cautiously raised her head over the rock and scanned the tree line. The traitors were massing just across the short stretch of water. Taking a chance, Reese hopped to her feet and scrambled up the hill.

Jace was peering through the scope of his scout rifle. "Looks like they're gonna try for a rush." He said. The scout turned and looked toward the smoldering Sunderers near the gatehouse. "We're not going to have a better chance to fall back than this."

Reese looked toward the gatehouse. Several of the traitors scurried among the bushes. "There's more of them over there. I don't think we'd make it."

"Well, the falcon is out of ammo." Said Mitchell, stomping over to the remains of the Galaxy with an obvious limp. Either the charge or one of the 20mm rounds had caused a complete failure of the servomotors in the machine's hip. He punched into the side of the vehicle near the door with a mechanical fist, causing the frame of the Galaxy to buckle and then reached into the newly created gap and started to pull. Metal screamed in protest before finally giving way with a snap, sending Mitchell stumbling backwards, door in hand. "But if you stay close behind me, I can still provide a bit of mobile cover."

"Worth a shot." Said Jace. "Not like we can do any more good from up here."

Rico, finished bandaging Brandt's wounds as well as he was able, motioned to Reese. "Come on. Help me carry her."

"No." Said Brandt as she struggled into a sitting position. "Leave me here."

"But..." Reese started to protest before Brandt cut her off.

"That's an order" Brandt said between gasping breaths. "I'll slow them down. Buy you some time...before you're followed."

Rico glanced between the two women before standing up. "Just...prop me up at the top of the hill." Said Brandt. Rico turned to look at Reese before gently grabbing Brandt under her good arm and dragging her to the top of the hill.

Reese watched as Brandt ejected the magazine from the stalker only to fumble trying to pull a replacement from her pouch with her mangled cybernetic arm. Reese numbly trudged to the top of the hill and knelt by the woman's side, reached across her, pulled out the magazine, and helped her guide it into the weapon.

"Brandt, I..." Reese started to say before Brandt cut her off with a head shake.

"Stop wasting...time."

Jace ejected the magazine from his scout rifle into his hand, looked inside, and tossed it aside. He pulled out a fresh magazine from his pouch, slid it into the rifle, crouched next to Brandt, and gently laid the rifle across her legs. "Fully loaded - thirteen rounds. Make 'em count."

"I thought you said no one should die alone." Reese said quietly.

Brandt turned to look at the young woman. "I won't." She said. "Now, go."

Rico started down the hill and grabbed Reese by the hand. Together they reached the bottom. Jace had pulled the Vandal from his back and was checking to make sure it was loaded. "Ready?" He asked.

Reese looked back to the top of the hill. "Ready." She said at last.

Alyss

"We're gonna make a run for the gate, boss." Jace said across the radio. "We'd appreciate some cover if you can manage it."

Alyss leaned over the edge of the parapet. They had collected just behind the wreck of the Galaxy. She had already sent Nicholas and Harris to the north corner, hoping that they'd have a better angle. Unfortunately, the men had reported that unless the cultists near the gatehouse decided to actually leave the ditch, there wasn't anything they'd be able to do. "Harris - do you have line of sight to that group on the east end of the swamp?" She asked.

"Yup."

"Jace - we can only cover the east approach from here. There's a pack of them holed up just on the other side of the gatehouse we can't cover. Best I can do is lay smoke." Said Alyss.

"Understood."

Alyss gestured to Mike as she pulled several green canisters from her pocket. "Go down to the gatehouse. Once they start moving, toss these." She said.

Before the infiltrator made it into position, the relative quiet of the swamp was pierced by a pair of thundering shots. Less than a second later it was followed by another pair. Mitchell took it as a sign and started trudging forward. Streams of plasma erupted from near the gatehouse and splashed against his makeshift shield.

The wall at Nason's Defiance exploded in gunfire in response as the rest of Sigma poured fire toward any target they could see. Mike, well aware of the urgency, simply jumped from the parapet onto the gatehouse itself and quickly tossed the smoke grenades into the road one after the other before shouldering his Tempest and spraying it into the ditch. He ducked after expending the magazine just as return fire cut through the air just above his head. Alyss frantically swung her Anchor from target to target, spraying a careful burst at anything that looked like a living human. Unable to stand without being instantly killed, Mike opted to throw the remainder of his grenades into the trench. Their

detonation instantly cut the rate of fire to a fraction of what it was just as the stranded team made it to the gatehouse.

With the targets of opportunity lost to them, the cultists ceased firing. Alyss hopped off the wall and jogged to greet the survivors as they streamed into the fortress.

Mitchell dropped the remains of the Galaxy's door at Alyss's feet. In several dozen places, streams of plasma had burned all the way through the composite plating, leaving gouges in the improvised Max behind it.

"Mitchell you son of a bitch. I can't believe you're still standing!" She said, laughing.

"What can I say, I build things to last." He said.

Alyss glanced at the assembled group and realized there were only four of them. "Where's the infiltrator?" She asked Reese.

A series of rapid bursts from a coil gun echoed from across the wall. Moments later, several plasma weapons answered. "She was hurt and thought she'd slow us down. She's still out there."

Alyss looked at her feet, unsure of what to say. "I'm sorry." She said at last.

The light coil gun fire ceased abruptly only to be replaced by the methodical report of some large caliber gun. Alyss heard six shots before calm returned to the swamp again.

"We need to get back up on the wall." Alyss said. "Give the reboot some time to finish."

A single plasma shot echoed across the swamp. Alyss glanced at the battle computer on her wrist. Brandt's name appeared in grey.

For half an hour, Alyss and the rest watched as the cultists pushed closer to the gatehouse. They had even managed to get one of the Sunderers moving again. Mitchell, out of the badly damaged Max, worked with Taylor to attach the exosuit's power supply to the turret.

It was only a matter of time before they rushed for the gate.

Alyss walked over to Reese and Rico and sat down beside them. "You know, when I got on the dropship, I never thought I'd find myself dying side by side with Terrans and Vanu."

"If it makes you feel any better, when I volunteered for this mission, I didn't think I was going to die at all." Said Rico.

"When the Centurion grabbed me for this mission, I thought it was an honor. I got to escort a Praetor" Reese trailed off for a moment. "I guess that's like a general in the Terran army. Some guards we turned out be. He was the first one to die." Reese sighed heavily. "Now it's just me."

"For what it's worth, thank you both. We wouldn't have made it this far without your team's sacrifice." Alyss said. "It might not be enough to make us friends, but you have earned my respect."

"Well, we did save the world, at least." Said Reese.

"For what?" Asked Rico bitterly. "Tomorrow the war will go on just like it always has."

Alyss was surprised at the young man's cynicism. It was the sort of thing you heard from a crusty old veteran, usually before they disappeared into an asylum. "True." She said at last. "But it's a war to determine the future of mankind. You can't expect that kind of thing to be easy."

“When this war started there were just over a million people on Auraxis. Thanks to rebirth, almost eight hundred million people have died. That’s just official counts - god only knows what the real number is. Saying it won’t be easy is the understatement for all time.” Said Rico.

Alyss didn’t have an answer for the man. She’d come to Hossin hoping to take the first step in finally ending the war. All they’d managed to do so far was ensure it could continue another day. “You ever know why those maniacs went and did this?” Alyss asked.

Reese shook her head. “Maybe they lost their faith and didn’t see a way out of the war.” She said. “Or, maybe they were a test.”

“Test?” Asked Alyss.

“Of us, of mankind.”

“Test us for what?” Asked Rico.

“To see if we’re worth saving, if humanity is ready to inherit the stars.” Said Reese.

Alyss’s battle computer flashed for attention. She glanced down at it and simply stared at what she saw, refusing to believe her eyes. Rebirth was online. The reboot had finished.

The entente had done it.

Wild cheers erupted from the rest of Sigma; James and Vivian sprinted out of the bunker and into the courtyard. In the exuberant mood, Alyss struggled to get them to quiet down.

“I know you’re excited to be immortal again, but we need proof that the system is up. Anyone want to volunteer for a redeploy?” She asked.

Harris's hand shot up in the air. "Anything to get out of this shithole, ma'am."

Alyss nodded and the group took a collective step backward. Harris keyed a sequence on his battle computer before collapsing to the ground, dead. No one dared speak while they waited. A full minute that seemed to stretch on for an eternity ticked by before a small message appeared on Alyss's battle computer. Harris was alive.

They were all immortal again.

A new cheer broke out and for once Alyss joined in the revelry. Then she noticed that neither Reese nor Rico had joined in the celebration. She walked over to them. "What's the matter? We did it!" She said.

Rico looked up at her. "We're still disconnected from the network."

The sounds celebration stopped nearly as suddenly as they had begun. "All the warp gates are keyed for the NC." Said James, realizing the problem. "You still don't have a link."

The members of sigma exchanged long glances with one another, seemingly coming to the same silent agreement. "What's the closest warp gate to here that doesn't involve trying to shoot our way through those bastards out front?"

"The west gate." Said James.

"Well, I think the west gate is a bit buggy, don't you, Strottmann?"

"I do, ma'am. Damn shame, too. I'll have to get a team to look at that in, say, eight hours?"

Alyss walked over to Reese and Rico, removed her helmet and leaned in close. “There are a few Harassers in the garage on the other side of the facility. The western warpgate is going to be set to one way neutral. Should be able to get you two home.”

Reese climbed to her feet and shuffled awkwardly before raising her hand in a gesture Alyss had seen the VS give one another. “For what it’s worth, you earned my respect, too.”

Rico gave a haphazard salute, grabbed his rifle, and the two took off at a jog for the other end of the compound.

Reese

The curved spires of the warpgate towered above the trees in the distance. Reese slowed the Harasser to a crawl as she tried to maneuver it around the nearly ubiquitous brambles that seemed to choke the roads as they approached the ancient vanu device. Rico hadn’t said a word since they turned onto the coastal road three hours ago; he simply stared out the window of the Galaxy and watched as the swamp raced by.

“How are you doing?” She asked, wanting to fill the increasingly uncomfortable silence with something.

At first, Rico didn’t answer and simply stared out the window. “I couldn’t save them.” He said at last. “What does that say about me? I was their medic and I’m still here but they’re all dead.”

“Hemming and Camilla would probably have died yesterday were it not for you.” Said Reese. “I know I would have.” She added quietly.

“Somehow, I don’t think the Commissar is going to look at the fact I saved you as a point in my favor.”

The two rode together in silence until, at last, she slowed the Harasser to a halt in front of the warpgate. They climbed out of the vehicle and simply looked at the ancient relic of the Vanu. "Have you given any thought to what I said, about coming with me?" She asked.

Rico looked down at his feet. "Yes." He said. "I can't. Someone has to tell their story."

Reese didn't say anything at first. She looked up above the warpgate towards the sun that hung low over the tree line. It was the answer she had come to expect from the man. "Thank you." She said at last as she walked around the Galaxy towards him. She stopped a few paces away, unsure of what to say. Still not able to find the words, she closed the remaining distance and embraced the medic in a bear hug. She tried to hold back the tears and failed.

Everyone else was dead; Reese was happy she was still alive. That thought made her cry all the harder even as Rico pulled away and turned toward the teleporter. He keyed in a destination, paused on the threshold, turned, and looked toward Reese.

"I'm glad I met you." He said. Rico stepped into the field and flashed from existence.

Epilogue

Reese

Not knowing where to go, Reese redeployed to the Indar warpgate she and the rest of the team had departed two days prior. When she arrived on the teleport pad, she was greeted by the sight of several hundred Sovereignty soldiers. One of them realized who she was and started a cheer that quickly spread through the assembly.

Reese stumbled out of the tube and looked around in wonder. "What is all this?" She asked.

"Your reinforcements." Said a Centurion. "We're going to Hossin, to finish the job."

A man wearing ornate armor that marked him as a guard to the Technocracy itself pushed his way through the crowd. "Novus Reese?" He asked. "I've been instructed to take you before the Technocracy if you arrived here." The man looked around. "Where are the others?"

"Dead."

The guard relayed her response. "I'm sorry." he said sheepishly. "The Council insisted that I find out."

She let the man lead her back through the crowd to a waiting Valkyrie and climbed on board. Reese spent the flight staring out the open door as the dunes raced by below. She was taken to a small redeploy station - the first in a long chain. At the final jump, she was ushered to a small dormitory. Reese looked inside the space in confusion and turned back to the woman who had guided her.

“The Technocracy wanted to allow you to rest before they spoke with you.” She explained.

The woman helped Reese out of her armor and placed it carefully on a cart before pointing toward the small shower in the corner of the room. Reese stripped off her wicking liner and stepped inside. She turned the heat in the shower on as high as she could stand it and simply stood inside as the collected filth of of Hossin washed away down the drain.

When she was done, she stepped out and saw that the woman had taken the cart with her armor and left a dress uniform in its place. She walked over to the small bed and collapsed onto it, dropping almost instantly into a dreamless sleep.

She slept for eighteen hours.

She awoke to a polite tapping on the door. Reese climbed out of the bed and walked to the door while rubbing her eyes. She pulled the door open and saw a different attendant. “If you are ready, the Technocracy would like to speak with you now.” Said the man.

Reese nodded and took a step as though she intended to go right then but the man held up a hand. “Decorum dictates that you wear your uniform for the occasion, miss.”

Reese looked down and realized she was still nude. She apologized profusely and quickly dressed herself in the uniform that had been left the night before. When she was finished, she followed the man out of the small dorm and through a maze of corridors until she arrived at last at great wooden

doors featuring intricate carvings of the ancient Vanu language. While the language did not directly translate, she knew what it said: 'We Are Tomorrow.'

The heavy doors were pulled open as she advanced inside where she was directed to a chair seated behind a small table placed in front of the three chairs of the Technocracy - Astor, Briggs and Scott. As Reese sat, she realized her throat was completely dry. When the attendant said she was to meet with the Technocracy she assumed it would be with one of their aides. Few were ever granted the privilege of meeting even a single chairman. To meet all three in the flesh was unheard of.

"Novus Reese, thank you for coming." Said Paragon Astor. "We have retrieved a partial record of events from your armor's ONN but there are several matters that we are unclear on."

The Paragon asked many questions for which Reese had no answer. She couldn't tell him what happened to the Praetor or to the research data at the labs. She didn't fully understand what had been done to wipe the control signal from the Hossin rebirth network. The military chairman quickly grew frustrated.

The Technocracy sat in silence. For a several moments until Briggs simply said. "I think the best way to handle this is for you to simply tell us what happened."

Reese told them the tale as best she could. That they had arrived on Hossin and been split from the Praetor upon arrival. How they received word that they'd been betrayed at nearly the same instant that the team was attacked. How Waits and Sheffield died and how she was wounded. That they had fled to the Biolab only to be attacked. She had just started to explain they had fallen in with the Terran Rangers when Astor raised a hand.

“Rangers?” He asked.

“They said they picked up the distress call we sent from the biolab. Since Hossin was supposed to be empty, their commanders sent them to investigate.” Said Reese. She wasn’t sure it was the truth but it was the only version of the story she’d been told.

“And you trusted them?” Asked Astor.

“They had lost a man in the battle and were stranded themselves.” She explained. “Disciple Brandt is actually the one who talked to them, though. She even convinced them that we needed to work together.”

Astor looked at a console in front of him. “Disciple Katelyn Brandt? She’s a sentinel. They aren’t known for their diplomatic prowess.”

Reese shook her head. “Something happened to her when she plugged in the ONN the Praetor gave us. She told me that it broke the emotional blocker.”

Astor looked at Briggs who simply nodded. Astor gestured for Reese to continue.

Reese told them how they had found weapons at the old Tech plant and had just launched into an explanation of how the New Conglomerate had become involved.

Astor held up a hand again. “The oligarchs, too?” He said with a sneer.

“Yes.” Said Reese.

“In our darkest hour you turned to our two greatest enemies for aid?” He said in an incredulous tone.

“Yes. We all saw the threat was greater than our differences.” She said. “What would you have us do instead, refuse the help of the only people in a position to offer it?” She paused. “A lot of them died to stop the weapon, you know.” She said quietly.

Briggs leaned forward and simply said “We understand, child. Please, continue.”

Reese told them about the diversionary attack and how the small coalition managed to hold the traitors outside of Nason’s while Sigma rebooted the network. She told them how the Centurion died in spite of Rico’s efforts to save the man’s life. How the Valkyrie pilot saved her with an airstrike only to be shot down. How the woman had been executed. How Rico had tried and failed to save her too. How they had been surrounded at the crash site and assumed they were doomed until Brandt arrived with one of the Sigma scouts. How Brandt had been wounded in the effort. How their little band tried to run to the perimeter at Nason’s only to be cut off and then rescued by a Sigma engineer who built a Max out of spare parts.

She tried to tell them how Brandt stayed behind because she was too badly wounded to follow. She kept stopping to try and hold back the tears that threatened to burst at any moment. Finally she said “Brandt stayed behind and held them off so I...So we could get inside Nason’s.” With that, the dam broke.

She had been too tired to cry before, but now, telling how she had been saved by a woman who was little more than a stranger broke her resistance. So many people had died - truly died - so that she might live. She didn't believe she deserved it.

The Technocracy sat in awkward silence for several minutes. Briggs cleared his throat and said "I believe we should take a short recess." The three Councilors stood and walked out of the room, leaving Reese to her grief.

The attendant came through the door a short time later bearing a small tray of food and offered Reese a tissue before departing. She thanked the man as she wiped the tears from eyes on the back of her sleeve. She picked at the meal with a utensil but could not bring herself to eat it. The last time she had eaten anything had been on Hossin. Food just didn't seem to matter anymore. When the Technocracy returned, most of the meal was still on the plate which the attendant dutifully removed.

Briggs asked her to finish the story. Reese told them how she'd managed to get inside of Nason's. How they all prepared to make their last stand only to have the reboot complete and bring the warpgates back online. How she and Rico had been given a Harasser and driven all the way to the western warpgate.

Astor and Briggs exchanged glances. "Young lady, you have done a remarkable service for the Sovereignty and for mankind. That you were able to build a coalition of bitter enemies and entreat them to fight as one is a feat beyond compare in this war." Said Briggs.

"You are dismissed, Novus." Said Paragon Astor.

Reese stood from the small chair, turned, and walked out of the room. The attendant was waiting outside. "Novus, there was a small memory chip in one of the pockets of your armor. It had a time based encryption. We took the liberty of checking what was on the chip." The man produced a small plain box and handed it to Reese. "Once we saw what was on it, the Technocracy had us track this down so that we could give it to you."

The man led Reese back to her room. Reese sat on the edge of the small bed and turned the box around in her hands. It bore a small label that said simply 'Master Sergeant Katelyn Brandt - Sentinel Program'. She placed the box on the bed and carefully pulled off the lid. There were only a few items inside. The memory chip Brandt had given her, a set of Terran army identity tags, a pistol with the symbol of the Terran Rangers stamped on the hilt and their motto engraved along the barrel.

She pulled out the tag and read their inscription. It had Brandt's name and rank and a long chain of numbers. She picked up the pistol and realized it was heavier than it looked. Turning it over in her hands, she saw that there was a number engraved on the hilt. It was the same as the number on the identity tag. Reese felt tears welling in her eyes when she realized this was Brandt's side arm - probably the one she carried when she had been captured.

She was about to replace the pistol when she saw a small scrap of paper in the bottom of the box. She pulled it out and turned it over in her hands. It was a photo in the ancient style. On it was a blond woman smiling with both arms wrapped around an even younger woman. Reese stared at the picture for a moment before she realized the older of the two women was Brandt. She turned the picture over in her hand. 'Me and Jessica - October 13th, 2844' was written in careful script.

Reese grabbed the memory card Brandt had given her and carried it to the small terminal in the corner. She slid it into a small slot on the machine. The card was mostly empty and only hosted a single text file. She opened it and began reading.

If you're reading then then you survived and the world didn't end. If you're reading this, then I died on Hossin.

If you're reading this, I kept my promise.

I don't know what you might have thought of me, but I guess it doesn't really matter. Whatever you do, don't feel sad for me. I died a long time ago - I just kept surviving.

I died the first time on October 15, 2844, when a small bomb went off in a cafe on Cyssor. That kind of thing was common back then, before rebirth. Terrorism doesn't work when you're immortal. The bomb only killed two people - it didn't even make the news. My mom owned the cafe and I had worked there for years. I hated the place. That's why I joined the National Guard - to get away.

It was a slow night and I left early to go to a party. Hours later, my Guard unit was ordered to assemble for cleanup duty. I didn't think anything of it at the time - like I said, the bombings were incredibly common. We all loaded onto trucks, but this time I recognized where we were going when, turn by turn, the truck drove past my childhood: the school I attended, the house mom bought when dad died, the small park where I used to play. It stopped, at last, in front of my mom's cafe.

The bomb had been a small one. Jessica, my sister, had been standing next to it when it went off. She died instantly. I didn't even recognize her at first. The shoes gave it away. I'd given them to her

the day before on her birthday. My mom was a bit further back and was still alive when we got there. I watched her die on the floor.

I should have been there that night. But I wasn't, so I survived.

I applied for transfer to the Republic Army. Six months later, I killed my first man on Amerish. Six months after that, the War really started.

My training cohort had 150 people in it. By the end of that first year, there were only 60 of us left. By the time rebirth rolled around, there were only 12. I kept surviving.

I blamed myself for not being there when the bomb went off. If I'd been there, maybe I'd have noticed the bomb. Maybe Jessica and mom would still be alive. I blamed myself for a lot of the people in my cohort, too.

I fought, I guess, for revenge. Then rebirth happened and people stopped dying. I was wounded three times before rebirth and even though I nearly died once, it didn't stick. Then rebirth rolled around and all of us started dying. I died more times than I can remember.

It stopped mattering. Revenge doesn't mean much when all you're doing is inconveniencing an immortal. I died a second time the day I came to that realization.

Eventually, I defected to the Sovereignty because they said they could make me forget. That's the third time I really died.

I guess this time was the one that stuck.

When I saw you in that biolab, you begged me to tell your mother what happened and I told you I'd do everything I could to get you out alive. I didn't really know why until now. All I've ever done is kill people but that never brought me any peace. I thought that if I saved you, it might make up for at least some of the mistakes I've made.

I guess I'm still trying to save you now.

What happened to Waits and Sheffield wasn't your fault. None of what happened on Hossin was. You can't control who gets shot or who doesn't - it's war. All you can do is watch out for the guy next to you and hope neither of you get hit.

None of us really knew what we were walking into anyway.

It's going to hurt and that probably won't ever go away. Don't try and bury it like I did - it'll just end up burying you. Find a soldier who has the red marker on the right sleeve. You might not have noticed them before but it's a badge earned if you fought without the protection of rebirth. There aren't many of them, but find them and talk to them.

They're the only ones who will understand.

Alyss

Alyss walked into the small bar near the Sigma barracks with her shoulders slumped. The rest of the team was already inside. She waved to them, went to the bar, and ordered two bottles of the finest

old style whiskey in the house. “Well, it’s official.” She said as she walked over to the group. “The TR seized the east warpgate a few hours ago. That means both of them are on Hossin.” She said.

The room was quiet for a moment. “Ungoddamn believable.” Muttered Mike. “You think it’s because we let those two get away?”

Alyss shook her head. “The VS dropped almost a thousand people on the west gate from low orbit. It’s like that Centurion said - they were expecting reinforcements, they just weren’t going to show up in time.”

“So...What did you tell the Board?” Asked Mitchell.

Alyss had dreaded the meeting with the Board since rebirth came back online. Their questions had told her everything she needed to know. They knew about the weapon. That they wouldn’t even bother to tell her before the drop was galling enough that she’d stuck to the plan Sigma had agreed on - no one could know about the weapon. If they knew it could work, someone might be dumb enough to try again.

“That we had a bad drop and a few unfortunate accidents along the way.” Said Alyss as she poured herself a drink.

“A bad drop? I think it was a little more than that.” Said Vivian, clearly drunk.

“We managed better than the VS did.” Said Jace. “Or the TR for that matter. Almost a total wipe.”

The group fell into an uncomfortable silence. Sigma had lost three of its own but Alyss was certain the toll would have been far heavier were it not for the others. She raised her glass to the assembled group. "To absent friends." Said Alyss before downing the drink in a single gulp.

Mitchell looked into his nearly empty glass, grabbed it, and raised it into the air. "And to those poor bastards who helped out, even if they wore the wrong colors."

Reese

Justicar Cayla Reese stood on the north wall of Gourney Dam and looked out across the swamp towards Nason's Defiance as a thousand warriors of the Sovereignty pressed across the swamp below toward the great fortress. Emerald streaks crossed paths with bright red tracers as the Sovereignty and the TR traded blows. Three days into the fourth campaign for Hossin, Reese could already tell the effort would be in vain. The Terrans had paid a heavy toll for the center and dedicated tens of thousands to hold it.

A year ago, she had tried to hold the band of packed earth that served as a road to the north with a coalition of the New Conglomerate, Terran Republic and the Vanu Sovereignty. Two dozen of them had dropped on Hossin for their own reasons only to find the world hanging in the balance. Nineteen of them survived the realization and, in desperation, banded together to face oblivion as one. Only eleven of them walked out of the swamp alive.

Reese had long since submitted a custom request for her armor. The names of those who died on the expedition were engraved across her chest. It was the only monument any of them would ever get. A few hundred members of the Sovereignty's elite knew the truth of what had happened and

what the price had been to save the world. Neither the Terrans nor the NC even acknowledged the event at all, seemingly content to carry on the war as they always had.

Reese still wore her heavy exosuit reinforced reinforced with composite plating - something she had learned the value of that first night on Hossin. Her right arm bore a thin streak of blood red paint. Along the edge it simply said Hossin - 2859. She had earned her blood stripe. Only a few hundred members of the nearly two hundred thousand strong VS army could claim the privilege. Brandt had told her to meet with them and, for a few months, she had until she realized that none of them could do anything for one another. All of them were broken in one way or another; they all bore wounds that would never properly heal.

As the only survivor of the expedition, the Technocracy had granted her a boon. For nearly a month, Reese had struggled with what to ask. The one thing she wanted they could not grant - the dead would stay dead.

Eventually, Reese realized what she should ask. She couldn't save the dead or fix the broken but she could help hold together whatever was left. She was transferred to advanced combat medical training in August of 2859 where she excelled just as she had during infantry school. For a time, she served with the 3rd Light of Vanu regiment out of Indar. She fought four different campaigns with them and earned enough distinction that eventually she piqued the interest of Darkstar.

Darkstar was a legend in the VS. Each member was a veteran medic and an expert marksman. Most of them had seen friends die. She accepted the invitation and passed the grueling two month long selection process to be accepted into the elite group. Her right shoulder bore their black star surrounded by a field of bright purple.

Darkstar rarely worked as a single unit and instead deployed their members to crisis spots where they could do the most good. Reese had never seen them collect their full might in a single place but still wore the star with pride.

“Justicar?” Said a voice from behind her.

Reese turned to look at a young man wearing the same sort of stock grey and purple exosuit she had when she deployed to Hossin. “Command wants to see you. They have a Terran prisoner. He asked for you by name” Said the young Novus.

Appendix

Exosuit

While modern Combat Exosuit can trace its roots to Humanity's earliest forays into space, they are most easily linked to the Hard Suits developed during Humanity's second great foray into space in the 26th century. While these hard suits had substantial disadvantages in terms of mobility and freedom of movement, they afforded a level of protection that simply could not be matched by traditional soft suits. They quickly became the suit of choice for crews working outside the domes of Venus or laboring to dig the habitats in places like Ceres.

This expansion heralded a new age of crime both organized and petty and while outright war was seemingly a thing of the past security forces on the frontier were often forced to apply law and order outside of the habitats. Many security firms began tinkering with the hard suit design and by applying heavy slabs of armor in vital areas and the first combat hard suit was born.

The wormhole mission was Humanity's next great step into the vast unknown of space and planners argued the merits of bringing armed personnel. Eventually, it was agreed that the exploration fleet would need to be prepared for as many conceivable contingencies as possible. As a result, most ships had a small cadre of Republic Marines and at least a handful of combat hard suits. The Combat Hard Suits often proved necessary during the early months of the disastrous mission. As tensions rose among the stranded fleet and violence became frighteningly routine, seeing Republic Marines clad in the heavy suits stalking the corridors became common.

Upon arriving on Auraxis, the various Hard Suit designs initially saw regular use in the fledgling colony but many outposts quickly mothballed their supply. The design was simply far too cumbersome for use on a planetary body with an actual gravity well like Auraxis.

In the two hundred years that followed, the hard suits were given new life by constant development. Breakthroughs like the efficient artificial musculature allowed the suit to be comfortably worn in the Auraxian gravity well. Improved protective materials allowed for the heavy shell to gradually shrink until it eventually arrived at the mix of soft and rigid materials seen in the modern Exosuit.

Development of fusion technology eventually yielded compact reactors that could be embedded

inside the suit for power but research teams were never able to squeeze enough power out of the units to do more than power the artificial musculature. It wasn't until scientists began to understand some of the stranger properties of the seemingly unique Auraxium crystal that the power problem was truly solved. Exosuits could be fitted with shields derived from the bulky micrometeorite shields found on several of the Expedition's spacecraft. While initially these shielding systems were staggeringly expensive to produce, Nanite Systems creation of a general purpose nano-forging techniques brought personal shielding to the masses of regular Republic soldiers.

With this breakthrough, much of the composite armor was removed and the result was a suit light enough that when combined with artificial musculature would allow users to perform superhuman feats. An infantry soldier wearing a standard Heavy Assault Exosuit can lift more more than 100 kilos with a single hand and can nearly effortlessly maintain a run of up to 20 kilometers per hour.

Unfortunately, fine motor control when wearing the such a suit was difficult to manage and the attempt to solve this problem eventually yielded the light exosuit. By discarding everything beyond the armor and the shielding the suit was made light enough to wear without requiring any sort of artificial movement assistance. While less protective in general and certainly no longer capable of operating in a vacuum, the light exosuit eventually became the most common personal armor worn by the military forces of the various Empires.

A separate development project started when utility hardsuits developed for construction, mining and other civilian tasks were repurposed by the New Conglomerate into combat suits in their own right. These utility suits had far more robust motive systems than the compact artificial muscles used in military exosuits and the result was that it could carry a staggering payload of heavy armor plating and weaponry. While it was originally a New Conglomerate invention, the power of these units was quickly recognized by both the Terran Republic and the Vanu Sovereignty who rushed their own variants into the field. Due to power requirements of keeping the result moving, personal shielding has yet to reach practical implementation on what eventually became know as the Mechanized Assault-Exosuit, commonly referred to as a MAX.

Medical Applicator

Medical care was one of the earliest applications of practical nanotechnology on Auraxis. For more than a century, facilities able to afford the extravagant cost of the diagnostic and signaling machinery and the specialized nanomachine forges could provide the rich and powerful of Auraxis medical care that would be considered miraculous in any other era. Most common diseases were fully eradicated from the population within a handful of years. Even cancer, once assumed to be the killer that would follow humans until the end of time, was wiped out.

The march to global war presented new challenges that the medical community had not faced in centuries. Victims of gunshot wounds, stabbings, explosions and other forms of combat trauma started as a trickle but quickly turned into a flood and countless people died from injuries that could be readily treated with nanomedical techniques if they could reach one of the handful of facilities capable of providing that service in time.

Nanite Systems eventually provided a solution with the MA-1 Medical Applicator. While this first generation device was large enough that the term “man-portable” was only technically true it did grant combat aid stations access to the same nanomedical care available at a state of the art facility. A soldier wounded on any front line was potentially only hours from nanomedical care rather than days. A soldier's odds of surviving a wound on the battlefield skyrocketed.

The invention of practical rebirthing technology and the massive increase in daily casualty totals quickly stressed even this system beyond the breaking point. Entire offensives would grind to a halt when rebirthing tubes were unable to match the rate of combat deaths with rebirths. Nanite Systems produced a truly man portable MA-2 within months of the introduction of rebirth to Auraxian War but its reliance on massive doses of general purpose medical nanites and reaction mass was wildly inefficient and a medic could quickly exhaust their supply of both on a busy front. Worse still, wounds could take hours to fully heal. MA-3 and MA-4 were released within months of one another when it was discovered that the newly added imaging unit would often misdiagnose internal bleeding due to

blunt trauma resulting in the formation of massive and quickly fatal tumors. The MA-5 was the first iteration that included a smart diagnostics suite but still relied on general purpose nanomachines and thus unfortunate medics still labored carrying massive tanks of reaction mass and nanomachines.

The invention of the MA-6 was a revolution in combat medicine. For the first time, a medic had access to a proper imaging unit in the form of a continuous-wave terahertz imager, a sixth generation ONN driven diagnostics suite and the newly invented MNF-9C nanoforge. Small enough to fit in a hand sized applicator, the MA-6 is able to treat wounds with a fraction of the reaction mass. Recovery time from a relatively minor wound could take little more than a few seconds and even relatively severe injuries could be effectively treated in minutes. If a soldier is still alive when a medic equipped with an MA-6 reaches them, their odds of survival are virtually guaranteed.

While the healing abilities of the MA-6 are almost miraculous, the system does have substantial limitations. It cannot reverse brain death and any soldier who reaches this state is forced to rebirth. Additionally, the ability to fully heal massive trauma is limited by reaction mass. If someone loses an entire leg, for example, it is unlikely that a medic equipped with the MA-6 will be able to regrow it simply due to lack of necessary organic mass to build it with.

Medical Kit

Life on an Auraxis battlefield is short and violent. Thanks to effective immortality, battles tend to be fought at very close range. Traditionally this sort of combat was avoided because of their tendency to result in staggering casualties. The average firefight on Auraxis thus generates casualty numbers equivalent to much larger scale battles of antiquity. Even a match between the equivalent of 21st century infantry divisions can result in hundreds of thousands of deaths in the span of a few weeks and that sort of concentrated carnage resulting entirely from small arms and relatively small yield explosives was only seen in one 20th century war.

Even with advanced armor and personal shielding systems, soldiers are wounded with frightening regularity and the wounds are often tremendous. While all factions have developed various systems for keeping soldiers fighting until the bitter end none have been more important than the simply named medical kit.

This device consists of a relatively small quantity of base organic reaction mass, a payload of medical nanites, and a cocktail of drugs including coagulants and narcotic stimulants. This is loaded into an injector delivered subcutaneously and while the device itself is needle free it is injected through a one of a selection of ports on a user's armor that give direct access to major blood vessels. Standard procedure is to inject at the closest site upstream from the injury.

Wounds from high energy projectiles can cause damage to a surprising amount of organic matter in the body. Most combat wounds result in effective mass loss. Round that fully penetrates a soldier often carries substantial quantities of tissue out with it; if nothing else any serious wound is often accompanied by blood loss.. The goal the medical kit is to stabilize the wound. The medical nanites repair what they can using their available reaction mass and whatever damaged tissue is present while the drug cocktail helps stem heavy bleeding and ensures the wounded soldier feels no pain.

They are not a replacement for real medical care though. They serve to stabilize and return a soldier to fighting form but they are a quick patch job and nothing more. Without medical care a fatal wound will still probably prove fatal. Medical Kits buy a soldier time. Many who fight on Auraxis view them as

miracle cure-all and for most soldiers they might as well be. It is rare that any wounded soldier survives long enough without being treated by a medic or simply dying and having a fresh body printed that they see the limitations. Medkits are the equivalent of strapping a broken part on a vehicle back on with duct tape.

Optical Neural Network

The Optical Neural Net is a learning computer that simulates the function of an organic brain. They operate using light rather than electricity and use microscopic crystalline structures to form logic circuits. New connections in the structure can be made over time which in effect allows it to learn new tasks.

Originally developed by a Nanite Systems research lab in 2825, the technology was seen as little more than a curiosity. Few saw any advantage in a computer that could only be programmed through repeated training of basic tasks and beyond basic proof of concept trials the ONN was left to languish. There was little promise of return on investment considering how difficult the devices were to build and each required extensive attention from a trained technician before it could perform even the most basic task.

Studies into rebirth breathed new life into the project. Several years before the first successful human trial, an NS team managed to successfully replicate an ONN complete with all training intact. With this discovery in hand, commercial application became practical.

Nanite Systems began issuing trained ONNs as the computational core of their robust line of combat vehicles. Though many in the Republic military scoffed at the idea that such a machine would be of much use, the fact that the Lightning light tank could be reduced to a single crew member was an attractive prospect. As the cold war between the Republic and the New Conglomerate rushed inexorably toward open combat, they began seeing a new benefit. The ONN would slowly learn how their operators used the vehicle and were often capable of making subtle adjustments to the vehicle's performance. A Harasser crew might find that their ONN would slightly adjust engine performance to favor top speed and acceleration while a galaxy crew might find their ONN carefully metering thrust to allow for a more stable platform.

Miniaturized versions of the technology were loaded into heavy exosuits to better regulate power output to the trademark nanomesh shielding and soon it found its way into other personal armor as

well. With the move to open warfare, both the Republic and New Conglomerate were quick to retrofit their existing vehicles and armor with the technology and Nanite Systems, eager to maintain independence, provided both sides with the technology. Unfortunately for NS, the entire research team responsible for the breakthrough left the company and joined the fledgling Vanu Sovereignty.

While the other empires see the benefit of the learning computers, they are largely content with the technology as it currently stands and neither the Terrans nor the NC have started new research. After successful trials in the Scythe and Magrider, vehicles with even tougher operating requirements than the relatively simple NS machines, research went in a new direction. ONNs were developed for a variety of specialized tasks including electronic intrusion, surveillance and battlefield intelligence.

The latest advance in the technology is the attempt to integrate the ONN into human physiology. The first trials implanting an ONN directly in a human brain came from the Sentinel program where an ONN implanted in the brain controls emotions and memory of traumatic events. While the program was initially created in an attempt to produce an utterly fearless battlefield fighter, many came to see it as a way to escape from the horrors of endless war.

The History of Auraxis

History is the autobiography of a madman

- Alexander Herzen

In 2426, the great nations of Earth launched into the most devastating war humanity had ever fought. It was waged with every conceivable weapon, fought in every corner of the globe, and, for the first time in human history, the full might of the species turned, as one, upon itself. The war lasted a generation and resulted in the death of billions. Those unlucky enough to find themselves at that crossroads of history assumed that Armageddon was upon them.

Then, history dealt a wildcard. On March 16, 2444, what remained of the world's scientific institutions detected an anomaly at the edge of the solar system near Pluto. It was a fracture in space, a wormhole, and something on the other side scanned the Earth. The wormhole vanished a few weeks later, but, as it closed, Pluto was annihilated. Humans had been given their first hard evidence that they were not alone in the universe and, for the first time in history, found themselves outgunned. The implications of that shot across the bow were clear, and the leaders of what remained of the world met in the first serious peace talks since the war started.

On May 13, 2445, an armistice brought a sudden end to the war, and what was left of humanity struggled to pick up the pieces. But the war that nearly killed the world bought an unexpected boon, and managed what countless centuries of diplomacy never could when the survivors banded together under the banner of a single government: the Terran Republic. As one, they rebuilt the world, and as one, they prepared to meet the new threat.

That threat would never appear. In 2542, the wormhole opened again, but this time there were no signals from the other side. After several weeks, it disappeared again. This time, there was no cataclysm. For nearly a century, Humanity had prepared to face a terrible foe only to be greeted by dust and echoes on the appointed day of battle. Some questioned if the original reports were accurate, but most chose to celebrate the apparent stay of execution.

For the first time in more than a century, mankind was free of the fear of imminent annihilation and a new golden age dawned as Humanity spread across the entire solar system, colonizing and terraforming their celestial neighbors. In that great age of expansion and exploration, an adventurer named Tom Connery made a startling discovery: an unnatural signal originating from the strand of ruined dwarf planets in the Kuiper Belt. Without the means to investigate further, Connery returned to Earth where he eventually became president of the Terran Republic.

Connery lead the Republic during the very height of its power, and his attempts to break apart the last vestiges of the world with policies designed to limit the power of the mega-corporations drew the attention of a powerful consortium of bankers and industrialists that called themselves Business Forward. Business Forward earned a new moniker, the New Conglomerate, when they moved to unite major banks, corporations, labor units and private military firms under a single banner in response.

After twelve years as President, Tom Connery left public office and assembled a new expedition to the edge of the Sol system, hoping to, at last, find the source of the mysterious signal he detected nearly two decades prior. The second trip proved far more fruitful. Together with an exobiologist named Henry Briggs, Connery found the source of the signal buried in the ruined remains of a dwarf planet. It was a small artifact built by alien hands, and when Briggs touched it he received a vision that changed his life forever, though he only retained a single memory of the event - the word "Vanu".

Spurred by this discovery, Tom Connery petitioned the new government of the Terran Republic to commission the most ambitious exploratory mission humans had ever attempted. He wanted to go through the wormhole. Hundreds of thousands volunteered, and the Terran Republic set aside hundreds of ships for the attempt. Refitting the ships and assembling the crews for the monumental undertaking was an endeavor years in the making. Slowly, Connery assembled a fleet ready for every eventuality. He had more than a dozen warships, dozens of colony ships packed with the best and brightest humanity had to offer, and self-contained agricultural ships to sustain them on a journey

that would certainly last generations and tens of thousands of people hoping to start a new life along with those gambling on striking it rich in a new land rush.

The fleet assembled at the edge of the Solar system in 2640 and, as predicted, the wormhole reappeared. In that moment of triumph, history dealt a second wildcard. As the fleet moved through the wormhole, it collapsed. Only half the ships made it through intact and they found themselves stranded in an alien star system far from home. At first, the survivors celebrated their unlikely survival, but once the mood had a chance to settle realized that their situation was precarious. Only one of the grow ships made it through the wormhole intact. The expedition's planners believed the fleet required at least three if it were to survive. Worse still, only three of the original dozen warships made it through. The 1,500 Republic Marines quickly found themselves overwhelmed when a wave of panic ripped through the fleet as hunger set in among the survivors. Connery, along with his advisory staff, charted an ambitious course and aimed the fleet towards an alien star, hoping to find a planet capable of providing shelter in the moment of crisis.

Six months into the long journey, the survivors grew desperate. Crime was rampant as the colonists did unspeakable things to ensure another day's food or air ration. In response, Connery was forced to do the only thing he could: he assigned his meagre force of Marines to the colony ships in a desperate bid to keep the peace. The Marines found themselves beset on all sides by the desperate survivors. Theft, prostitution, and murder quickly gave way to a violent insurgency that the Marines were powerless to contain.

On January 2, 2642, a ragged and desperate band stormed the armory on one of the surviving warships, the Explorer-5, and used their stolen weapons to take the bridge. Their demands were simple. They did not hope for loot or power, only increased rations. Former President Tom Connery, once the most powerful man in history, found himself in the uncomfortable position of being a slave to the situation. Shifting rations would mean starvation for hundreds. He ordered the Marines to storm Explorer-5's bridge. The assault cost the lives of all 53 insurgents and nearly 20 Marines. Hoping to avoid a similar tragedy, Connery declared martial law.

On January 6, 2642, hoping to avoid further bloodshed, Connery brought together an assembly of the insurgency leaders. The meeting on the colony ship Discovery-7 was an ill fated one. Scant hours into the proceedings, a nuclear blast tore through the ship and all 592 lives on board, including Tom Connery, were lost.

In the wake of the disaster, what remained of the fleet's leadership elected Deputy Mission Commander Brent Waterson to lead them. Waterson's first order of business was to institute a new wave of curfews and bans designed to keep an uneasy peace.

At last, in April of 2642, the fleet detected a world potentially capable of being terraformed. After half a year of hard burn toward the distant world, the fleet arrived on a moon orbiting a gas giant and dubbed the place New Earth. In spite of inexplicable local gravity fluctuations that caused the loss of several installations, most of the colony ships dropped from orbit and unfolded themselves into the first human settlements in 2643. The tensions built during their years in space did not dissipate, though. Life on New Earth was just as tenuous as it had been in the void of space. Waterson did not lift the restrictions placed during martial law and slowly the emergency measures became a fact of life. To many, it seemed that the Terran Republic had died during the long journey to their new home.

Eventually, the survivors discovered that they were not the first sapient inhabitants of their new world. Ancient alien ruins dotted the surface. Henry Briggs, the xenobiologist who discovered the first alien artifact, found others that were identical to the one he had found in the Kuiper belt. The second discovery was accompanied by a new vision and Briggs became the first person in history to speak to an alien consciousness. A few years later, the man committed suicide.

Humanity's new home was host to another surprise that was nearly as startling as proof of alien life - a material that defied all known physical conventions dubbed Auraxium. The new world was rechristened after the element and became known as Auraxis. Auraxium should have heralded the dawn of a second great age of discovery but instead simply fueled a new war machine. For two

hundred years, the remnants of the Terran Republic and the Insurgency were locked in a desperate cold war as each sought to unlock the mysteries of Auraxis and Auraxium for themselves. Nanotechnology, once little more than a technical curiosity, quickly became the basis of industry and medicine.

After two centuries, the insurgency, having assimilated into a single faction that assumed the now ancient moniker New Conglomerate, and the Terran Republic, found themselves at a crossroads. After a raid by the Terran Republic's secret police resulted in the capture of several charismatic leaders of the New Conglomerate, the two sides entered into last minute negotiations even as their respective armies assembled on a volcanic island named Searhus. The new world hung in a precarious balance.

No one knows who fired the first shot in the Kaorr desert, but, ultimately, the identity of the shooter was irrelevant. With that shot, the dam that held back two centuries of hatred burst. The two armies tore through one another at point blank range. Five thousand men and women died in the battle before the small NC army breached the walls of the sprawling prison. In desperation, the beleaguered Terrans played the last card they had left and launched a full nuclear strike against the camps and cities known to support the rebellion. The Conglomerate was not without potent weapons of their own and they retaliated in kind. The first battle of Searhus spent twenty thousand lives in the space of an hour. The first day of the war on Auraxis left three hundred thousand dead.

Hardened by that first day, the Terrans launched a campaign designed to crush the rebellion but where they expected the NC to kneel as they always had they found something different. Disciplined mercenaries from the various mega-corporations stood shoulder to shoulder with the street fighters and made every attempt to gain access to the underground cities result in a blood bath. As the Terrans settled into a long siege, they paid little attention to the small group of researchers, scientists, and civilians converted to the cult of Vanu or their declaration of sovereignty.

Indeed, neither faction concerned the Republic because they were on the cusp of the greatest advance in human history. Reverse engineered from Vanu artifacts, Terran scientists discovered a way to preserve human consciousness after death and implant it in a new body. Combined with staggering advances in nanotechnology which made it possible to construct a human body from scratch, the Terrans had found a way to cheat death. They called the discovery rebirth.

Less than a year into the war, the Terrans prepared to field their first legion of immortal soldiers. But a few among the research staff had reservations. Together with a small assault force picked from the few members of the Vanu Sovereignty with combat experience, the scientists leaked the remarkable discovery to the New Conglomerate. The move cost the Sovereignty dearly, and they found themselves hunted across Auraxis. The Sovereignty had hoped that universal immortality would defuse the growing crisis but found that it instead ratcheted up the violence. In desperation, they turned to the New Conglomerate for protection.

The two separatist empires retreated to Hossin, leaving a few thousand elite soldiers to carry on the fight backed by rebirthing technology. For nearly a year, they built an army comprised of the desperate, the hopeless, and the idealists of Auraxis. In 2847, they launched a massive invasion across the deserts of Indar. The Terrans, having spent nearly two years engaged in bitter guerrilla warfare, was utterly unprepared for the scale of the attack and meter by meter they were driven back across the desert. As the Terrans prepared to make a desperate stand, the NC, worried that further delays would allow the TR to regroup, launched a nuclear strike against their lines and, in the process, destroyed several key Vanu archeological sites.

The attack was a direct violation of the agreement between the the New Conglomerate and the Vanu Sovereignty. The Sovereignty had spent their time in the jungles of Hossin honing their small army to a fine edge and had long planned for what some saw as an inevitable conflict. An alliance of convenience would not last the rigors of war. In early October, 2847, the Sovereignty deployed strike teams to sites across the planet. In the space of a few hours, they destroyed or disabled most of the remaining stockpiles of nuclear and chemical weapons. As a last act of revenge, Sovereignty

commandos disabled the warpgate network on Hossin and in so doing cut off rebirthing on the continent.

The NC, stunned by the betrayal, was forced from the field in disarray. Most of the NC army lost access to rebirth entirely in the aftermath and hundreds of them died permanently as a result. The Sovereignty hoped that their timing would allow them to destroy both the Republic and the NC in a stroke but found, to their dismay, the armies simply melted from the field as their empires worked to ensure their remaining rebirth systems were fully hardened against similar attacks.

And so began the long war. Each day, a few hundred thousand warriors fight and die only to rise and do it again. It's been nearly twelve years since the last person died on Auraxis.