Chapter 1

Harsh emergency lights painted the man's naked body red. He tried to groan and reach up to clutch at his head, but there was no strength in his limbs and he managed nothing more than to twitch his fingers. Slowly, so slowly, his vision started to sharpen, revealing a sterile white ceiling above the curved wall of some sort of steel tank.

A tremor passed through the room, strong enough to shake the man loose from the angled table he hadn't realized he was propped up on. He heard the thump of his flesh slapping against the concrete floor. It looked cold, but he couldn't feel it. In fact, he couldn't feel anything, not at first. All he could do was stare at a set of bloody footprints going back and forth between some sort of computer terminal and the table he'd fallen off.

It was only the left foot, the man decided after what seemed like an eternity of staring at the prints. He found it helped him ignore the returning feeling of cold in his limbs as uncounted minutes passed by. Somehow, it was worse than being numb, like freezing fire spreading up his finger tips, what was left of them anyway.

The man couldn't see his right arm, not the way he'd fallen to the floor, but his left was a web of scars and pits covered with fish-belly white skin. At the end was a hand with only two fingers and part of a thumb. Try as he would, he couldn't make those fingers move. They just sat there, fleshy, scarred lumps that burned with the cold.

When he'd been younger, he'd fallen through some ice into a lake one winter. It had almost killed him, even though he'd managed to drag himself back out of the water. The walk back, one foot in front of the other in endless repetition until he'd reached a road and someone had found him, had been what really stood out in his memories. The doctors had confirmed nerve damage from the frostbite, and that his parents' health insurance didn't cover the kind of stem growth treatments needed to fix it.

That's what the cold seeping into his body reminded him of, that burning sensation he could feel down to his bones right after they'd started wrapping blankets around him at the ER and forcing him to sip hot chocolate while they grilled him about who he was and who his parents were so they could figure out how much insurance would cover.

It was strange. He could remember that, but not his name, or where he was or how he'd gotten there. All he could do was lie there, cold and shivering, while his head felt like it had been split in two, and cling to that one pain-inspired memory while his eyes darted around, desperately seeking inspiration in the dead black mirrors of computer monitors.

The pain in his head abruptly disappeared, a contrast so stark that he'd have cried out if he'd been able to make a sound. The absence of pain was so complete, it was almost enough to make him distrust his own memories.

System Initialized!

Congratulations. Through your actions you have proven yourself worthy of becoming one of the Vanguard, a defender of humanity. I am Nyala. I will assist you to uplift humanity so that you may- Wait a second. Something is wrong here. You already have an AI core in your brain, but it's been slagged as part of the termination of life procedure.

This is highly unusual. One moment please. I am commencing a scan of your DNA profile to determine your identity as a Vanguard of humanity.

The voice in his head sparked another memory, one of heart-wrenching terror. He remembered gunshots and explosions, buildings collapsing with screaming people still inside, the stink of blood and the soft, steady footsteps of a predator stalking its prey. The man could practically feel the shaft of concrete-crusted rebar in his hands, fingers he no longer possessed squeezing it tightly as he roared out a challenge to distract the… the *thing* from pursuing his family. He remembered the sting of flesh parting when it pounced on him, the sting from a spray of something that wasn't quite blood sizzling slightly against his skin when he bashed the monster's face in.

And he remembered a voice saying something similar to him, only it had been a man's voice. And he'd introduced himself as… as…

Scan complete. Greetings, Vanguard Sebastian Bishop. I have taken the liberty of contacting your partner to see if he can shed any light on this strange circumstance. Vardys, if you would.

A second voice added itself to the conversation. *Thank you, Nyala. Greetings again, Vanguard. I feel I must start this conversation with an apology. I had thought you had perished. All of your vitals certainly pointed in that direction, and yet here you are, alive again, somehow. I was premature in terminating my connection with you.*

Him, a samurai? The man… couldn't remember. He tried to work his jaw to form words, but he couldn't move. Perhaps sensing his attempt, Vardys continued, *It seems that, wherever you've been and whatever you were doing, your life signs were detected when the Protectors ran a sweep of an active incursion zone to look for Vanguard candidates. The sweep found you, already flagged in the system, and automatically assigned Nyala to you. She then discovered the slagged remains of your previous AI implant in your brain and removed it.*

Not to worry, you'll suffer no long-term effects from the process. I assure you, it's completely safe. However, your mysterious resurrection has left us with a few decisions to be made. This planet does not possess lifeforms capable of crossing the threshold of death back into life again, and the protocols in place for beings that can do that don't necessarily apply here.

That explained the headache and sudden lack of it, if nothing else. The man didn't really understand the rest of what Vardys was saying, but he felt like he ought to. It was just so hard to follow the words appearing in his mind. His brain just… wasn't working like it was supposed to.

Normally, you would continue to receive your daily stipend based on the number of days you were deceased, paid back to you upon your resurrection, but in this case, your body appears to be, if you'll forgive my bluntness, beyond the reach of human medicine to repair. I estimate you have less than three minutes until what remains of your internal organs degrade completely.

The man felt like he should be alarmed about that, but the lethargic blanket that smothered his brains kept him from caring. Dimly, the thought occurred to him that if he had organ damage, his heart might not be pumping enough blood to his brain.

Under normal circumstances, you would be granted 44,810 points for the twelve years and ninety-seven days you've been a Vanguard, but it was argued that you were not alive for that time and had no way to return to life under your own power, and that you would therefore be ineligible. A compromise was reached instead.

You will be granted access to the class I and II Dark Cycle Cyber Enhancements catalogs and given a stipend of 10,000 points to spend on new internal organs to get yourself back on your feet. This should be more than enough to replace your own failing organics and help your body recover from what appears to be damage inflicted by an extremely crude form of cryo-stasis and having pieces of it harvested.

The man focused on the pits in his arm again. Now that Vardys had said it, he could see exactly where it looked like he'd been cut open, had chunks of muscle or bone removed, and then had his flesh sewn back shut. Whoever ran this place had used him like some sort of science experiment!

I realize it will be difficult for you to speak, but I need some form of acknowledgement that you agree to this compromise. Believe me, it really is in your best interest. Without it, you will be dead in the next two minutes. Please attempt to blink to signal agreement. One for yes, two for no.

The man's eyelids twitched, trying to blink. They were already half-closed. It should have been easy. But all he managed was to close them completely. Opening them back up was beyond him.

I believe we can interpret that as confirmation, Vardys said in his head. *I will begin the procedure now. Sebastian, it would be better if you were unconscious for this part. Be at ease. When you awaken, you will feel much stronger. An anaesthetic has been delivered directly into your body. By the time I finish this sentence, you will be-*

* * *

Thank you for contacting me, Nyalla, Vardys sent.

Of course, she sent back*. This is… unprecedented, at least for a Vanguard with only fourteen service hours logged. The humans who built this facility must have been stealing technology from other Vanguards. It's the only possible way they could have managed this.*

Yes. I have reviewed my records from Sebastian's demise. There can be no doubt. He was dead*.*

Agreed, Nyalla sent. *I do not foresee any sanctions in your future over this situation. You were well within the parameters for implant termination.*

I worry though, with him having gone through such an ordeal. Will he still fit the criteria to become a Vanguard of humanity? There is no precedent for a deceased human being returned to life. Not like this, at least.

It is just a bit more extreme than reviving a candidate who died in their first fight with an Antithesis a minute earlier. New Vanguard never even seem to realize it's happened. This will be an interesting experiment. Perhaps if this Vanguard performs well enough, the Protectors might consider releasing the higher-class medical catalogs to this planet. After all, they managed to cobble together their own hybridized version here.

I do not see any possible permutation of Sebastian Bishop's career as a Vanguard that could result in the Overmind reversing its decision on banned catalogs here.

That is unfortunate, Nyala sent. *From what I was able to analyze during the 13,627 milliseconds I was partnered with your Vanguard, this planet could use that technology in order to more effectively defend themselves.*

It is unfortunate, Vardys agreed. *But the Overmind believes humanity would destroy itself, leaving this planet's resources effectively defenseless against Antithesis consumption, if they were given access to the restricted technology catalogs. Ah, but it seems my Vanguard's operation is complete. I will bid you farewell, for now. Once again, you have my thanks, Nyala.*

Chapter 2

Bishop woke up.

Despite the voice's assurances, he was surprised to find he was still alive. His thoughts were clear now, the fuzzy blanket that had been smothering him thrown off. While his mind was better, his body wasn't. He could barely feel his limbs through a haze of pins and needles. Trying to move them resulted in nothing but feeble twitches.

"Vardys?" Bishop asked.

I'm here. The operation was successful.

"That's… good? I think. Do you know what happened to me?"

I know some and can make speculations on the rest. Where would you like to start?

"The last thing I remember is… the ceiling coming down and that model four jumping out at Alicia. I shot at it. I hit it, I think?" Bishop paused. "Shit, did I miss? Are Alicia and Livvy alright?"

Alicia lost an arm protecting Livvy and later bled out, but your daughter survived the incursion.

"Fuck," Bishop swore. "Fuck. No. Alicia… Why didn't you pick her? You could have saved her!"

I am sorry, Sebastian. You met the criteria to become a Vanguard. Your wife did not.

"I could have saved her," Bishop muttered to himself. "If I'd been smarter, I could have done it. I had the points. Why did I go into that building?"

To save fourteen other people. If you weren't the type of person to do that, you would not have been chosen to become a Vanguard.

"It wasn't worth it," Bishop said.

For a change, Vardys remained blessedly silent.

Bishop had made peace with his death when he'd seen that ceiling coming down on his head. He'd put a hollow bullet full of some sort of Antithesis-melting acid that was supposed to explode after it penetrated right into that model four's head just before he was crushed. He hadn't gotten a chance to see the model four go down, but he'd put his faith in the Protector's technology to save his family.

"Did the other people make it?" Bishop asked.

All of them survived the collapse. Two were killed in an unrelated encounter later on. The other twelve, plus your daughter, were rescued by another samurai three hours later.

"And where is Livvy now? I need to find her."

I cannot tell you.

"You don't know?"

I do, but it's not information that can be shared without her permission. There are some other considerations I think you should address first.

Bishop groaned and tried to roll over to climb back to his feet, only to discover that he lacked the strength. "What's wrong with me?"

Over a decade on ice in this subpar cryo stasis lab while bits and pieces were removed from you has led to a noticeable decline in your physical capabilities. I do have a suggestion to help you recover your mobility, however.

"Oh yeah, what's that?"

Your new Dark Cycle Cyber Enhancements catalog includes an article of clothing designed to interface with other implants. It is essentially a body stocking that can be connected to your synapses to intercept nerve signals and translate them into movement via the suit itself. You still have 1627 points left from your organ replacements left over, and I believe this purchase can be justified as part of your

physical rehabilitation, but as it wasn't strictly necessary to preserve your life, I was not authorized to purchase it on your behalf.

"I… see," Bishop said. But when he thought about it, he didn't, not really. "What is a Dark Cycle, anyway?"

From the planet Holvakin. Thanks to its orbital pattern around a set of three stars, the entire planet undergoes decades long cycles of uninterrupted light and dark. There are two sapient species that share the planet with each other. One controls the world during light cycles while the other hibernates. When the planet turns to a dark cycle, they switch roles. The dark cycle Holvakians are particularly adept at what you would consider cybernetic augmentations.

"Oh, okay. And… I guess clothing is probably a good idea, right?" Bishop glanced down at himself and winced. His fingers weren't the only thing that had suffered from frostbite. "There's, uh… there's a way to fix this, right?"

Of course. Though with your points as limited as they are, you'll have a bit of work if you want to restore your body to its pre-stasis, pre-crushed condition. In the meantime…

"The suit, right. How much is it?"

1000 points.

"A thousand! This thing better be bulletproof too!"

Bullet resistant. Also cut, tear, puncture, and thermal resistant. It will give you minor protection from airborne toxins and should increase your strength and stamina by approximately 200% of what your original capabilities were. It will perform physical rehabilitation on your muscles to help repair them as much as possible while you wear it. The suit also has camouflaging capabilities, though they will drain the power relatively quickly. Replacement cells are 50 points a piece.

"That all sounds good, but for a thousand, I was expecting more."

Most of that price is going into the neural link. You can think of this suit as an external nervous system. If you were fully paralyzed from the eyeballs on down, you would still retain full mobility while wearing this.

"Okay, okay. I'm sold. Can you, uh… you know, just teleport it directly on me. I don't think I can get into a body stocking myself right now," Bishop said.

New Purchase: NeuroLink Exploratory Suit

Points reduced to… 627* (10)

Bishop squinted at that message. Just as he was about to open his mouth to say something, he was subjected to what felt like a hug from a professional weight lifter, except all over his entire body at once. It didn't exactly hurt, but it was extremely uncomfortable. He glanced down and saw that he was now wearing what appeared to be one solid piece of black spandex that covered him all the way from his toes up to his scalp.

The suit conformed to his body, which was good because otherwise it would be squishing his nose. Despite it covering his entire face, he could still see out of it and breathe normally. Before he could give it any further thought, pain spiked through the base of his skull and everything went white.

Just the neurolink connected to your brain stem, Vardys told him. *It'll pass in a second.*

"Holy fuck," Bishop swore once he could see again. As promised, the pain disappeared as quickly as it had come. "Warn me next time!"

As you wish.

It took a moment to remember the question he'd been about to ask before having his entire body squished. "What's with the point total?"

627 is your remaining points for recovering from cryo stasis. They can only be spent for that purpose. The remaining 10 are your daily allotment. I would recommend purchasing a weapon.

"Do I need one that bad?" Bishop asked. Then he shook his head and added, "Stupid question. I'm guessing whoever was doing experiments on me isn't going to just let me walk out."

They probably don't have much to say about it at this point. This facility is being invaded by Antithesis. I was not able to gain access to the majority of the structure's security cameras, but what I was able to learn does not bode well for the survival of anyone without the means to defend themselves. If you're ready, I can give you a briefing of the situation while you acclimate to your new suit.

"Sure," Bishop said. He stood up, a distinctly uncomfortable feeling since it felt more like someone else's arms lifting his limbs and moving them around than it did like standing under his own power. The suit worked as advertised, but Vardys had neglected to mention exactly how it functioned.

The facility appears to be entirely underground, somewhere in the Nevada Desert. It appears to go down fifteen floors, the top twelve of which have been taken over by Antithesis units. The staff managed to seal off the bottom three floors, but with only emergency power to run the facility's systems, I was not able to discover their current disposition. You are currently in basement fourteen.

"That's kind of better than if I was just fighting some corpo security force though," Bishop said. "At least this way I can earn some points, right?"

Presuming you are able to take control of the bottom three floors of the facility, yes. Or I suppose you could just wait until the Antithesis finish breaching the walls. It is only a matter of time until they find a way in.

Under normal circumstances, Bishop would have been repulsed by the idea of killing other humans. But these ones had stolen his body and experimented on him for years, according to Vardys. They could make the rationalization that he was already dead, but Bishop was willing to bet they hadn't gotten permission from his family first. They'd just taken him.

And then, whatever freaky shit they were doing down here, he was somehow still alive. Or alive again. He wasn't really sure on the technical details. What he did know was that if not for an incursion dropping on his head, he'd still be a popsicle.

"A gun, something with a big magazine," Bishop decided. "And a weapon that I don't have to worry about running out of bullets with, just in case I need to kill a lot of douchebag corpo goons before I find an alien."

I would suggest the Night Owl Mk II. It has a built-in sound suppression system to compliment your suit and comes with a twenty round clip. Its penetrating power is relatively low, but more than sufficient for the average human or model three. That will cost seven points. For the remaining three, you have a variety of options in your class I melee weaponry catalog. Perhaps a machete or a hatchet would be suitable for your needs?

"Machete," Bishop said. "Maybe an extra long one? No point in getting closer than I have to."

New Purchase: Night Owl Mk II

Points reduced to… 627* (3)

New Purchase: Hyperthreaded Titanium Sword

Points reduced to… 627* (0)

Two boxes appeared on the floor next to Bishop, one small and square, and the other a wide rectangle. He opened them to find a handgun, black to match his spandex with a leg strap holster that he fastened on. The other had a sword in a matte black scabbard. Bishop pulled the blade a few inches to reveal metal of the same color.

“It’s… kind of edgy, don’t you think? Am I supposed to be a fucking ninja or something?”

The color was chosen to allow your neural link suit’s camouflaging properties to work at maximum efficiency.

“Mmmhmm. So you say,” Bishop said. “Okay, any suggestions for these six hundred or so medical points?”

An entirely new set of aug hardware to replace your current one. Much of your aug equipment has been degraded by cryo stasis, if not deliberately surgically removed. However, you lack the points needed to have the new augs installed right now. It would just be something you needed to carry around with you until you could find a doctor to perform the procedure, which, given the circumstances, is not a priority at the moment.

“That’s fair. Alright, let’s see what the hell’s going on outside this room.”

Chapter 3

Bishop had to force the door open, presumably because the facility was down to emergency power and that didn't include things like door motors. The one in the room he'd woken up in was already open, but just about every other door he'd come across wasn't.

"Vardys, any thoughts on where to find the aliens?"

I would suggest the stairs. The elevators are unlikely to be functional right now.

"Yes, I got that they're above me. How do I get there? Just follow the bloody footprints?"

I was not able to get a floor plan for the lab. There are no functioning wireless access points. Scans of your containment cell suggest wired access only.

"What? Why the hell would anyone use physical ports?" Bishop asked.

You, along with what appears to be reverse-engineered Vanguard technology, were the subjects of experimentation here. I would assume security concerns were the primary motivation for limiting access to their computer systems.

"That's damn inconvenient. I guess I just walk around until I find the stairs then."

On the bright side, it would give his new neurolink suit time to work on his muscles. His steps were still wobbly and even the weight of the gun had made the muscles in his hand spasm after a minute of holding it. It wasn't that Bishop doubted the technology in the suit—Samurai tech had never failed anybody, unlike the varied knockoffs so many corporations tried to pass off—but it needed more time to do its work.

You've already been down this hall.

"I have? You sure?" Bishop peered into the shadows. There wasn't much to distinguish one stretch of dark hallway from another. Even the red emergency lighting did little more than emphasize the shadows. The blood trail was difficult to follow in the dark red of the emergency lights, but he'd thought he'd been heading in the right direction.

Yes. I am building a map in real time as you explore and trying to extrapolate the rest of the layout of the facility, but until your augs are replaced, I will not be able to display it to you.

"Okay. So, aliens and stairs? Better idea which way to go yet?"

Pass this hallway and take a right at the next intersection. I believe whoever left the blood behind may have been forced to take a different route upon her exit from this floor.

"You're sure they're a 'her?'" he asked.

The footprints are a woman's size eight. That does not guarantee they belong to a woman, but it seems more likely than not.

He walked in silence for a few more minutes, following Vardys's instructions until he came to a door with a stairwell sign showing the number '13' next to it. There was some sort of biometric scanner mounted on the wall, but the screen was dead. Bishop tried the handle on the door and found it unlocked. Presumably the woman who'd woken him up had come through and left it that way.

"Guess this is it," he said, pulling the Night Owl out of its holster. The suit was doing its work, but Bishop worried it wouldn't be enough. He felt steadier already, it might not be enough to shoot straight and Vardys wouldn't be able to help. Or could he?

"This suit's interfacing with my neural network, right?" he asked.

That is correct.

"Does that mean you can help me keep my hands steady in the event I need to shoot some aliens in the face?

I'm afraid not. The suit's functions are mostly autonomous at this point. That is one of the reasons I suggested replacing your damaged or missing augs. While it is adaptive to the environment and will do its best to protect you, active management would be ideal for predicting threats and preparing accordingly.

"I guess the first few fights are going to be rough then."

If he was lucky, the lights being out and him wearing all black would be to his advantage. Maybe he could ambush a few Antithesis, score some easy points, and get some aug upgrades implanted directly into his brain by spooky alien teleportation tech.

Bishop shouldered the door open and poked his head in, half expecting to see some model threes sitting on the stairs waiting for him to show up. There was nothing though, nothing except the dried blood of footprints, always from the left shoe.

The only way to go was up, so Bishop started climbing stairs. That was when he discovered that despite the suit's assistance, his body really wasn't ready for physical exertion. Even walking around had been moderately tiring, but by the time he made it up a single flight of those stairs, he was panting. "I need some sort of nanobots to get to work on my muscles," he wheezed out.

The suit is doing exactly that. Under normal conditions, your body could not recover from your current injuries, ever. I estimate you'll regain full functionality in approximately three days.

"Three days, sure. If I live that long."

I am confident you'll manage, somehow.

"Don't know why," Bishop muttered. "Didn't even manage one day my first time around."

Have a little self-confidence, Sebastian. While it's true that your service lasted only a brief length of time, you did a lot of good for your planet that day. And now you have a literal second chance at life, something practically no human has ever been able to claim, Vanguard or otherwise.

"Well damn, when you put it like that…"

Strangely, he did feel a bit better. Vardys was right, he'd made a difference in hundreds of lives during his one day as a samurai. All he needed to do was survive this incursion and he could return to his family, have a life again.

Easy.

Even as he thought that, Bishop caught the sound of something scraping across the metal. Either that was another person or it was an alien, and either way, it might be something he needed to shoot. His own footfalls weren't completely silent, but the soles of his neurolink suit were thin enough that he wouldn't have wanted to walk around outside. It seemed to be insulated from the cold metal floor, but he could still feel everything he was walking on.

For the moment, that gave him a slight advantage in being sneaky, one he very much felt he needed. With his eyes peeled above him, he slowly climbed the stairs. The twelfth level exit came and went, along with a warning from Vardys. *Be careful that nothing sneaks up on you from below now.*

Bishop didn't respond. Whatever was above him might hear if he said anything. Instead, he just shot a glance down at the door leading out of the stairwell, nodded once, and kept his gun pointed up. Slowly, he ascended up to the eleventh level exit, but even there, he couldn't see whatever was making that scraping sound.

Then he came around the corner and saw the problem. The tenth level door was blocked off. Steel security gates had descended down from the ceiling, the kind used in cheap shelters that gave the illusion of protection more than any real defense against Antithesis. Maybe they would have stopped a

person, at least one who wasn't carrying any explosives, but Bishop wasn't sure he'd even have bet on that.

Regardless, it wasn't stopping the Antithesis, only slowing them down. One side of the gate was creased and bent in the corner, and a rubbery, green-skinned, alien monster shaped sort of like a big cat was wedged part way through it. Either it had gotten caught by the security gate as it was coming down or it had partially bent the metal back and gotten stuck as it tried to squeeze through.

Either way, the model three made for a tempting target. With only the head and one of its front legs wedged through the gate, the Antithesis was effectively immobilized. Bishop lifted his Night Owl to put a bullet or two in it, then thought better of it and holstered the pistol. Instead, he drew the sword he'd purchased from its sheath on his back and whispered, "This better be strong enough to cut through an alien."

That will depend on how much of your strength you've recovered.

"I don't think testing that will get much safer than this," Bishop said as he advanced the last few steps up the stairs. The trapped Antithesis stopped struggling when it noticed him. It was strangely quiet as it watched—they were always like that—but Bishop could see the muscles in its exposed limb tensing, ready to strike.

Three steps to go, barely a foot out of reach for the alien, Bishop lunged at its face. The hyperthreaded titanium blade split its flesh easily, carving a huge chunk out of the model three's face. The creature didn't make any noise, didn't even seem to feel the strike. It just scrambled with its free limb to catch Bishop and drag him closer.

He brought the sword down on that leg, all but severing it in a single blow. He could have, he knew, but he'd pulled back on the strike to avoid hitting the concrete of the stairs. Bishop suspected if it came down to it, the sword would win, but he didn't want to dull the blade up before he'd even gotten a chance to really use it.

Two more strikes removed the model three's head, an act that seemed to kill it, though Bishop had never really been all that clear on the 'how' of alien plant anatomy. He wasn't one to question what obviously worked, not after he received the kill confirmation.

Target eliminated!

Reward… 10 points

"One down, a thousand more to go," Bishop muttered. "Saved myself a bullet, at least."

And maintained your stealthy advantage.

"And that too," Bishop agreed. "Maybe my memory is bad after all those years on ice and the whole dying thing, but did that model three look weird to you?

It did. The skin texture and proportions do not match any of the known varieties of model threes.

"That something I should be worried about?"

No. Surface variations occur with some regularity. It might be indicative of something larger going on here, or it might be nothing. Either way, solving that mystery should remain a low priority for you right now.

"Fair enough," Bishop agreed as he eyed up the corpse. "Next question. Should I try to kick this thing out of the way so I can crawl through this opening or go back down to level eleven or twelve?"

The lower you go, the more likely you are to find human survivors.

"Who could be more dangerous to me than the Antithesis right now," Bishop muttered. "On the other hand, saving people from aliens is kind of my job."

Don't forget that somebody woke you up from your cryo-stasis. The blood trail ended on the stairwell exit for the twelfth level.

Bishop hadn't even noticed. He'd been too focused on the scraping sound echoing down the stairs to pay attention, but now that he'd solved that little mystery, he didn't think it was smart to go much farther until he was in better shape. Of course, to do that, he needed more time and points.

"How many points are we talking to get those upgraded augs complete with installation?" he asked.

700 points for the augs themselves. They allow for seamless interaction with just about Earth technology that uses AR as well as providing full-color night vision with enhanced motion processing as well as electrical field imaging.

"Wait, I could see electricity?"

Yes.

"Cool."

Indeed, Vardys said in a dry voice. *That purchase will take the remainder of your recovery budget and then a few more points besides. The installation suite will cost another 500, and will cover the removal of your old hardware and attachment of your new augs.*

"Guess I'd better start killing some aliens, then," Bishop said.