

# PROGENY

Deep space travel has a way of tugging at your soul; of naggingly drawing on those frayed, ragged edges left behind by life's many descents into Hell. What you bring onto the ship—and, more pointedly, into the cryopod—is a liability; the demons you harbor just might undo you.

Talbot James, Chief Biologic Officer, former professor of biology at New Thessalonica University, and survivor of the Calliope Prime incident, was slowly piecing back together his sense of self. Hunched over the restroom sink, he towed cryobath from his face, softly reciting like a mantra the string of details about his rank and past. The few weeks of sleep—imposed for the sake of stretching their strictly rationed supplies as far as humanly possible—felt like a millenium. He set the towel aside, passed his hands through the lukewarm water spilling from the tap. A few runs of his fingertips through his hair slicked it back. He couldn't remember if the gray speckling his temples had been there before he'd gone under, nor the streaks of it coming into his beard.

A light knock on the door. "Doin' alright, Jim?"

"Yeah," he answered. "Be out in a minute."

"I'm gonna go get the brief pulled up."

"Good idea." Jim paused. "And hey, Red?"

"Yeah?"

"Can you grab me a carb pouch? I'm starving."

"All that sugar's gonna kill you, buddy."

At his bunk, Jim dragged-on his standard issue thermals one leg at a time. In the process of pulling on his matching shirt, the photo pasted on the wall above his bed caught his eye. It was of a woman and a young girl, standing in front of a stone water fountain surrounded by blooming pink and purple peonies. Scrawled in sloppy freehand at the bottom of the photograph, in the white border, were the words *Ariah + Lara*.

Fragments of memory stitched themselves together. Uncomfortable ones. Gazing into the photograph, Jim tugged his shirt the rest of the way down.

Red's husky voice cut through the reverie. "You good?"

"Huh? Yeah." Jim looked at Red; at the square jaw, the hooded eyes, the broad forehead and thick nose that comprised his rugged face. He hadn't recognized him when they first woke up, but now he felt familiar. "Just be a second."

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Red left him, and Jim returned his attention to the photograph. The sting of tears fighting to get out came into his eyes. Squeezing it away, he kissed his first two fingers and pressed them to the picture.

At the comms stations, Jim stood to the side and drank on his breakfast. Red was in the seat, going over a holo-projected schematic of 258-C's surface.

"How's it looking?" Jim asked.

"Probe's still live." Red swiped the air, scrolling the floating three-dimensional display until it showed several gauge readouts. "O2 levels are golden. Temps are singin'. Barometrics look great. Might be a storm brewing a few clicks south of the landing site, but otherwise it looks like the fuckin' Garden of Eden."

Jim swallowed, breaking into a smile. "The birthplace of man the key to wiping out those An'kunari cocksuckers?" He crushed the emptied carb pouch in his fist. "I like the sound of that."

Red grinned. "You and me both, brother."

Jim tossed his pouch in the bin, and Red fired up the brief.

"Stealth mission two nine four dash tee," said the feminine voice of the ship's Multi-Operational Large Language Interface. M.O.L.L.I. read aloud the text crawling up the holo display. "Mission members, Redding Washington, Talbot James. Date of initiation—"

"We know our damn names," Red grunted, and tapped the forward arrow button to go to the next section.

"Mission objectives," said M.O.L.L.I. "Survey appropriate sites for establishment of Verillium mining operations, warehousing, lodging, and transport logistics. Assess water availability and viability, and document local plant and animal species, fungi, microorganisms, and ecological factors that pose risk. Second phase objectives include—"

Red paused the presentation. "That enough to jog your memory?"

"Yeah," Jim said. He slapped the back of Red's seat. "Let's suit up and get going."



The curve of 258-C's upper atmosphere shined with a reddish light in the windshield of the SS Charon. The local sun, Helios 258, had entered its red giant phase some five hundred thousand solars ago, according to the report Jim had been skimming. That gave this system another couple million years before the star would go Kronus and devour its children: more than enough time to eradicate the filth that banded together like trash adrift at sea and called itself the An'Kunari Blood Pact.

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Red came onto the bridge, boots clapping hollow on the metal grate flooring. Like Jim, he'd geared up, having put on not only his boots but also his vest, his comms headset rig, and his personal prox scanner. "Entry's in two." He sat down in the pilot's seat and began to fiddle with the menagerie of buckles that would stop him from being splattered across the inside of the windshield. "Let's strap in."

In the passenger seat, Jim slipped into the padded X-shaped harness and clicked it together with the pelvic strap that came up like a V between his legs. The head restraint, a bit and bridle combo designed as a bulwark against whiplash and cracked teeth, was the more uncomfortable part. He placed the spongy bar in his mouth and bit down, then drew the straps at the sides of his skull taut.

Jim hated the retention system, but, in spite of its awkwardness, he had to admit it was a sensible design. Entry was the riskiest part of space travel, after all. Well, besides cryo. There were stories of people who simply never woke up from the sleep. Repeatedly freezing and thawing a hunk of meat was bound to do some damage; but, unlike punching through an atmosphere, you weren't risking a broken neck in the pod.

The rattle of first contact with air resistance entered every nook and cranny of the Charon. Like swarming insects, everything began to buzz. Jim dug his fingers into the armrests and chomped down on the bit as hard as he could. There were so many things forgotten under deep freeze he'd have liked to hold onto, yet his dread of this process was one his petulant brain couldn't be bothered to relinquish. The entire affair reminded him of those Old Earth movies that showed electric chair executions, where the guy was belted down and shaking like seizure tremors. Every time he went through it, Jim felt like he was going to die, so he figured the association fit.

Conversely to the ride, the view was spectacular. The planet filled the entire windscreen now, gray and white clouds churning in gargantuan spirals, lightning flashing in enormous blue and purple arcs. The ship's pointed nose began to burn; furnace heat licked up the glass and ran over the edges like liquid. The land and oceans were rising up to meet the visitors.

An alarm blared.

Jim tensed, snapping his eyes to the control panel. Red howled with fury, his words garbled and half-formed as they spilled past his own face restraint. The panel spat up a projected model of the Charon, the recreated right wing flashing red. M.O.L.L.I. announced, "Starboard stabilizer thrusters, ninety-five percent failure. Take emergency action." The view of 258-C's surface through the windscreen tipped, then started to spin like water going down a drain. Red gurgled more curses as he pulled and twisted the steering wheel.

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Jim clamped his eyes shut, chanting, “Fuck space, fuck planets, fuck ships,” to himself. Red’s crazed hollering smeared with the beeping and whining of the alarms.

The squealing, hurtling descent continued for several seconds; then the impact with solid ground battered Jim’s eardrums. A sickening swirl took his entire awareness, spinning him like a gyro. The carb pouch he’d sucked down burned its way back up his throat and into his mouth. Like a drunken tussle, gravity ripped him this way and that, but wouldn’t commit to any one direction. On it went, one gut-sloshing round after another, until a violent and final shuddering of the ship brought the wild career to a halt.

Jim panted for breath, puke dribbling past the bit wedged between his teeth.

Red tore off his head restraint and roared, “Mother fucker!” pounding his fists on the dashboard. “I’m gonna fuckin’ *kill* Ramirez,” he spat. “Son of a bitch *swore* to me that goddamn engine array was solid.” He twisted around to look at Jim, his scowl changing to a look of pity. “Jesus, Talbot. You good?”

Jim only whimpered in reply.



Minutes later, after stock of the immediate concerns had been taken—chiefly, the bodily integrity of the two-man crew—Red sat at the comms station, flipping through diagnostics readouts. “Thank God these little S-32s are built like tanks,” he grumbled. “We woulda been vaporized if it was a Pelican we came in on.”

Jim plucked a bottle from the med cabinet. “How’s the damage?”

“Well we ain’t going anywhere for a minute. The power core is fine, but the wiring for those stabilizers is fried.”

Jim popped a couple alk tablets, hoping to neutralize the acid in his throat and settle his stomach. “Great,” he said sarcastically, then chewed the pills into bitter chalk and swallowed.

“Yep. Our little lottery landing’s what we’re stuck with for the moment.”

“How far from the original site are we?” He put the bottle back and slid the door closed.

“About four-and-a-half Ks. Not terrible, but not great either. There’s more, though. Comms are up, not that we can radio anyone from out here, but the water unit’s toast. We’ve got zero H2O in the pipes and the tank is fusewelded shut.”

“So we’re going to dehydrate to death.”

“If we don’t do somethin’, yeah. Luckily...” Red swiped a screen away and pulled up a three dimensional representation of the surrounding geographical area. “Topo scan

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shows a stream or something a couple kilometers southeast.” He spread his finger and thumb to zoom in, “Here,” and pointed to the base of a sharp and jagged mountain.

“Glad we didn’t hit *that*,” Jim said, inclining his head towards the spire.

“Yep. We’d have been shish kabobs.”

“So what are we thinking? Thirty there, thirty back? Then get going on repairs?”

Red turned in his chair. “We have no idea what could be crawling around this forest. I’m starting repairs *now*.”

“Dude, seriously? You’re sending me out there to play waterboy all by my lonesome?”

“Sorry, bud. Wish it wasn’t your bag.” Red paused, then grinned. “Just kidding, no I don’t. Enjoy the trek!” Laughing, he spun back to the reports.

Jim smiled. “Thanks, asshole. At least tell me the hover caddy survived the landing?”

“Let me see.” Red tapped a couple places on the holo display. “Looks like it’s fine. The decanters look good, too.”

“That’s something at least.” Jim started towards the entry bay.

“Aren’t you forgettin’ something?” Red had turned to eye him again.

“What?”

Red tilted his head towards the armory rack. Six fully kitted Weiguang Sonic Rifles, decked to the gills with straps, mag carriers, assisted aim, and three different modes of optics, rested in the slots.

“Come on, you know I hate those things.”

“Ain’t you supposed to be smart or some shit?” Red stabbed his finger at him, “Shove your conservationism up your ass,” then pointed to the weapons, “and grab a fuckin’ gun, *professor*. I ain’t sendin’ you out there unarmed.”

After a moment, Jim hung his head and sighed. “Alright, fine.” He plodded to the rack and took up a rifle.

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Outside, the hover caddy’s repulsor engine whirred to life. “Christ, it’s fucking hot.” Jim mopped sweat from his brow. “Temps singing, my ass. It’s like a broiler out here.”

Red’s voice crackled over the radio. “Lovely weather today, isn’t it?”

“You’re a real prick, you know that?” Jim grinned.

A snicker was Red’s response.

Jim waved his hand at the caddy, then tapped his thigh like he was summoning a dog. “Come on, stupid.”

“I know you ain’t talkin’ to *me* with that lip,” Red said.

“I would never.”

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“Well, this bird ain’t gonna fix itself. Have fun out there. Signing off.”

“See ya in a bit,” Jim returned.

A couple of chirps and the caddy started down the storage bay ramp.

As Jim loaded the decanters into the wagon compartment on top of the caddy, he looked over the Charon. It was dinged and dented and filthy with dirt and the smeared green remains of obliterated vegetation, but had come through the chaos of the crash remarkably well. He estimated that with the way Red worked, and on account of the guy’s extensive experience as a mechanical engineer, the ship would be airborne again by next morning. Red was many things, chief among them a wunderkin when it came to anything mechanical.

“Well, let’s go,” Jim sighed to the caddy. It warbled a digital jingle in response. Together, they headed off through the woods.

The air hung thick with sticky, hot damp. It had only been maybe ten minutes and already the shirt beneath Jim’s vest was glued to his back with sweat. The ground was suffused with moisture, too, sticking to his boots in muddy clumps. The suffocating humidity was perfect for plants, evidenced by the thick clusters of leaves, hefty stalks, drooping boughs full of fruits, and tangles of mossy vines he was faced with in every direction, in this labyrinth of green. It was beautiful and lush, yes, but the undergrowth was so thick it cut off any possibility of a breeze: a fact Jim silently cursed as he traveled.

Time wore on slowly and, for much of it, his steps and the constant electric hum of the caddy were the only things to be heard. The forest appeared completely devoid of animal life. Even the insects had apparently fled the Charon’s disastrous descent. After a while, though, as the terrain began to climb, something new tickled his ear: the sound of rushing water.

Eager to reach his destination, he increased his pace. In a few minutes more, the trees and undergrowth were starting to thin. Sunlight warmed the growing spaces between the huddled trunks and leaves. Jim pushed on, so sticky and sweaty that he felt like he’d just crawled out of cryo again. The caddy scuttled closed behind. The closer the treeline got, the more tolerable the temperature became. There even arose the sweet relief of moving air.

By the time he broke free of the woods and came out under the open sky, the noise of water had swallowed all else. And it wasn’t just a stream he found. He’d reached the foot of the jagged, needle-like mountain, and a titanic waterfall tens of meters wide spilled down from its rugged, copper-tinted heights.

Craning his head, Jim attempted to spy the source of the water. The sheer verticality of the spire reminded him of Olympus Tower back home in New Thess. The upper extents

of the fall were clouded in thick mists, making it impossible to see where along the face of the mountain it issued from.

He redirected his focus. Dutifully, the caddy hovered in place a couple of steps behind him, luggage still in tow. He signalled it to follow him, and started down the grassy slope.

This area, like the forest, was deserted of any obvious forms of animal life. Spraymist billowed down here, as well, curling like fog around the pool that the waterfall slapped into. Where the water crashed, it all churned white. The current surged from there into a stream that fled along its course down a narrow fold that disappeared into the trees to the west.

Jim knelt at the edge of the pool, unslung the rifle from his shoulder and laid it beside him in the grass. He pulled the portable water analyzer out of his vest pocket. With a small tug, he extended the probe. Bracing himself on the soggy mud ringing the pool, he reached down and inserted the wand into the frothing water. The device beeped a few seconds later.

“Wow,” he mouthed, his voice drowned out in the crush of the fall. He sat back on his heels to more closely examine the results: imperceptible turbidity, superb mineral content, and the PH was perfect.

He shook the probe free of water and closed it before returning the analyzer to his pocket. The Garden of Eden might not be an exaggeration after all, he thought.

He climbed back to his feet, pressed a couple buttons on the hover caddy’s control panel. He didn’t need the battery dying on him out here, so he put it to sleep. The hover drive wound down, slowly lowering the steel frame to the ground. A twist on the top of the first decanter released its intake hose. While drawing out the rubber tube, something shifted in his periphery.

Daring not to move, he looked from the corner of his eye. Whatever it was, inexplicably, it hadn’t triggered his prox scanner. What he saw he couldn’t have expected. Bare feet. Calves. Knees. Thighs. The hem of a simple white skirt.

His heart stuttered in his chest; the tube fell from his shaking hands. It was *her* waist. *Her* chest. *Her* neck, chin, and lips. Those dark, dangling curls and those olive green eyes he’d fallen in love with on sight. She had on that ridiculous toga she wore the night he first met her, at that Halloween party at the university.

She stood slightly behind the waterfall, smiling enticingly.

Jim staggered forward. “Uh...” he silently mumbled, his mouth trembling. “Ariah?”

Wearing that playful grin, she turned and ran behind the column of tumbling water.

Jim broke into a sprint after her.

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An outcropping sheltered the area directly behind the fall, keeping it relatively dry. There was no sign of Ariaah, but a few steps ahead was a door-like opening in the side of the mountain.

He hurried forward and plunged inside.

A narrow path. Rock damp and slimy with moss. He squeezed past a stalagmite. A bend to the left and into total darkness. Forging his way through, he found another curve. Beyond it, some small hint of light greeted his eyes. The light grew as he pushed on. In a few seconds he could see again. The tunnel turned once more and brought him into a room.

He froze. Ariaah, propped up on her elbows, lay on a stone slab, still smiling. A column of golden light streamed through a hole in the cave's roof, bathing the tanned curves of her naked body.

Desire burned in his loins and all the nerves in his solar plexus seized up. His hands ached to touch her, to reacquaint themselves with her soft and shapely contours. To hold her again, the way he did the very morning of that accursed day...

Like a flower unfurling its petals, she slowly opened her legs.

With the speed and force of water through a broken dam, he rushed forward, ripping equipment from his body, kicking off his boots, tearing off his clothes. He fell upon her. Smothered her with kisses. Filled his hands with every bit of her he could grab. He entered her, and in only a handful of seconds exploded like a supernova. Panting, sweating, and swimming in ecstasy, he collapsed on her. But something felt strange. She was growing cold. She *shivered*.

Jim opened his eyes. A grayish-blue mass of sloppy, wet gelatin spread beneath him.

His recoil was automatic. Scrabbling, he shoved himself off the rock and fell on his ass on the uneven stone floor. Like a melted saltwater marshmallow, the thing slicked over the edge and oozed to the ground. As the entity slopped to the floor, it vibrated; and a fuzzy, stinging sensation sliced into the depths of Jim's skull.

He squeezed his eyes shut. When he opened them again, he was faced not with a quivering blob, but with orange, with white, with black stripes and gleaming ivory fangs the size of icicles. Dark eyes leered. Whiskers flared. The snarl reverberated through his bones.

He turned, crawled, dragged himself to his feet, and bolted.



Like his urgent submission to lust, Jim's flight from the cave was instinct in motion. By the time he reached the Charon and was smashing his palm against the biolock that



sealed the door, he couldn't remember the journey back. All he knew was that if he had been followed, he would have been caught.

He pounded on the steel with his fist, screaming no words in particular; more a loud, desperate moaning than anything intelligible. He couldn't stand his thoughts, but they kept coming. The memories had returned to him while looking at the photo above his bunk. And now he wanted to forget again. He *had* to forget. The shame was too much to bear. Not only the shame of his absolute failures as both a husband and a father, but his shame over what he'd just done with that...*thing*. Oh God, it all had to stop; at least for a little while.

The door whooshed open. An oil-stained Red, arc visor tilted up, gave him a once over with bewildered eyes. "What in the fuck happened to you? Where are your clothes?"

Jim shoved past him, ran for the med cabinet.

"Talbot, what the hell?"

Ignoring Red's demands, Jim found the bottle he was looking for. He stripped off the top and inhaled a deep, strong breath of the sweet-smelling fumes that poured out.

Red snatched the bottle away. "Are you nuts?"

Jim shoved by and headed for his bunk.

"Damnit," Red barked. "Talk to me."

Jim's vision turned to jelly. Ah, sweet relief. He collapsed face first onto the bed...

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Thunder rocked the Charon—and shook Jim awake.

Groaning, he sat up, hand clutched over his eyes. His head split with pain: the consequence of the trichloromethane. He had shorts on. Red must have clothed him while he was out, the poor bastard. The lodge bay was dark, save for the blinking lights on the nearby control panel.

He dragged his fingers over the glimmers. Fluorescents fired alive. His hand landed on something cool and firm. A tablet, left next to him on the bed.

He picked it up. The screen turned on by itself. It showed the results of a bioscan Red must have run on him. All clear. No parasites. No pathogens. Omnivax holding strong.

"Might as well start calling him my guardian angel," Jim murmured. Another page was open in the background.

Jim whisked away the scan and pulled this second item forward. It was a photo of a cave. A shaft of light cut through the gloom at a nearly horizontal angle. And some large, rounded shape like a swollen sac splayed in front of a stone slab, center of frame. Its outer

layer was a semi-transparent membrane stretched thin over what looked like a clutch of pale seeds.

The memory of what happened came storming back.

Taken by a surge of nausea, Jim threw the tablet to the floor. The cave image had come from his headset vid uplink. The feed had been streaming the entire time. If Red hadn't been working in the belly of the ship, he would have seen everything Jim did in that cave...

But the creature...It changed...?

Jim's eyes went wide with the shock of realization. "Oh, God, no." He got up and ran to the comms station, smashed the power button to fire up the screens. The last holo display on the right showed his camera's live uplink, but the picture was black.

He hit the button to switch the lens to infrared. The image seared red, orange, yellow, green, and blue. It took a moment to decipher, but the pedestal was splattered with something giving off a residual heat sig.

He leaned in closer. "Son of a bitch." The stuff was smeared across the otherwise cold walls and floor, as well. Another boom of thunder rattled the ship, lighting up the several windows with purple flare. And in a smooth but quick crescendo, the tinny sound of rain pelting the Charon arose.

Jim crept to the portside window. He could have sworn he'd seen something in the flash. Nose pressed to the cold glass, he stared into the dark. Beneath the noise of what had swiftly become a torrent, he could hear something else.

A fresh burst of lightning revealed in a singular, flickering instant a round, deathly face, lips pressed to the glass, teeth tapping and tongue probing.

Letting loose a yelp, Jim jumped back.

"Jim?" Red's voice resounded through the bowels of the ship.

"Red!" he returned desperately.

The lagging thunder boomed, as a headset lamp emerged from an opening in the floor. "You alright?"

"We have to get out of here."

Red climbed up out of the gap in the grates. "I've got at least another couple hours of work before this can move an inch."

"We need to go *now*."

"What the hell's gotten into you? If this about that *thing* you encountered—"

"You don't understand, okay? They're here."

Red's brows arched, his eyes darted around. "There's more blobs?"

"Not exactly. Just—"

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Lightning again, and every window, even the windshield, was swarming and squirming with the small white bodies of naked albino children.

“What the fuck?” Red gasped. “They look human.”

“They...are.”

“Talbot.” Red grabbed Jim’s shoulder and turned him around. “What happened out there?”

A strained whine from the entry bay cut off the query.

“They’re trying to get in.” Jim pushed by him and towards the comms station. His hands floated uncertainly above the keys. “What’s the camera for entry?”

Red reached by to tap a button. The security feed switched to show an infrared image of a scarlet and vermillion mass of bodies pressing against the outer door.

“Fuck,” Jim muttered. “The biolock’s still offline, right?”

“I got that system back up half an hour ago.”

“Christ help us.” Jim bolted for the weapons rack.

Red followed. “What aren’t you telling me?”

“If I’m right, they’ll be able to get in.”

“How the hell’s that poss—” Red stopped mid sentence, and Jim cleared the breach of a sonic rifle and chambered a round. Slowly, Red lifted his eyes back to Jim. “Lord have mercy, man, what did you do?”

“Access granted,” said M.O.L.L.I.

“Here they come!” Jim shoved Red aside and, with a crazed growl, opened fire. Concussive bursts of air tore through the pack, shredding sickly flesh, spraying blue-gray blood across the stainless chrome walls. Their shrieks pierced his ears. One leapt like a monkey from the back of another to land on Red. With small, cruel fingers, it clawed at his face, tried to dig into his eyes and nostrils.

Wet warmth slapped into Jim’s bare foot and shin.

He pointed the gun down at a pair of coal-black eyes that gazed up at him.

“Daddy?” it croaked.

Red’s boot smashed into its skull, sending it sailing. In the time before it hit the wall, its face changed—*aged*—from that of a baby to something more resembling a toddler.

Red stepped behind him and Jim dumped more sonic rounds into the horde, punching ragged, bloody holes in them, scattering viscera and bone. In some seconds he’d mowed down the spawn, halting the pale tide.

“God in Heaven,” Red breathed. “Is that all of them?”

“Who knows.” Jim kept the rifle focused on the open door. “There could be hundreds.”

“Alright, fuck it.” Red turned and started towards the cockpit.

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“What are you doing?”

“I’m launching us. I’d rather die trying to get away than spend one more second on this rock.”

“Daddy?” A much softer voice this time. Sweet and delicate.

Jim whipped around, rifle ready.

She had on the lily white dress he’d buried her in.

“Oh my God,” he whispered. “Lara?”

“Jim?” Red paused. “Jim, what are you doing?” he shouted. “Shoot it!”

Jim inched forward. His voice quavered. “Baby?”

“Daddy,” the girl said again, sounding exactly the same as he remembered. “I missed you.”

“Lara—”

Red grabbed him. “What the fuck, man?”

Jim couldn't look away from his daughter. “It’s Lara.”

“The hell it is. What kinda spell are you under?”

Jim shrugged off Red’s hand, and took another step forward.

“For fuck sake.” Red’s clanging footfalls retreated then returned. There was the clicking and clacking of a rifle’s action being cocked.

BANG!

Before Red had even aimed his gun, Jim had fired. A bloody pit carved through her chest, the girl slumped to the floor in a lifeless heap.

Jim collapsed to his knees, his rifle falling from his hands and clattering on the grates.

“Jim.” Red knelt beside him, and placed a gentle hand on his back.

To his eyes, the corpse Jim had thought was Lara looked like just another of his grotesque offspring. The image had only been an illusion, same as Ariaah. Some kind of hallucinogenic psychic projection, he figured. He’d been drawn in by it the first time; *deceived* into having his genetic material harvested. He so eagerly swallowed that lie. And look at the horrors his delusions had wrought. Not just now, but a year ago, too...

“My little girl is dead,” he said flatly.

“Yeah,” Red whispered, rubbing Jim’s back.

“The An’Kunari killed her on Calliope Prime. They killed Ariaah, too.” His voice cracked with the effort of forcing out the truth he’d been running from for so long. “They killed our entire world.” He broke into a sob on the last word, and bowed so low his forehead touched the cold metal floor. “Oh God,” he choked out. “And I was so desperate to have them back, to *believe* maybe it didn't actually happen, that I went and did...*this*.” He waved his hand toward the heap of his slaughtered ill begotten progeny.

"I know," Red cooed.

Jim's baritone wavered. "What do I do, Red? How do I go on without them?"

"Well," Red said, continuing to caress Jim, "you can't keep runnin'. You have to stop, look the pain square in the face, and let it swallow you. Either it'll kill you or you'll kill *it*. You have to survive it, Jim. You can't avoid passin' through the fire." Red lagged a moment, then concluded, "You can't outrun judgment."

"And that's what this is, isn't it? Judgment." Defeat crept deeper into Jim's tone. "I'm condemned."

Red said matter of factly, "*Everybody's* condemned, Jim. You ain't special. Don't you go thinkin' you have some monopoly on misery. Look, only one thing matters, and that's acceptin' responsibility. Not tryin' to deny you did it. Not tryin' to escape your comeuppance. By recognizin' your failin's, you live through 'em. By admittin' your guilt, you're absolved. The only way to survive judgment is to accept it, Jim. If you run and keep tryin' to blame other people, or tryin' to blame circumstances, it all just piles up. You either face the day's firin' line and take a handful o' bullets, or you face the years' worth down the road and get shredded to pieces. Dodgin' those guns ain't an option. They'll get you eventually. And yeah, steppin' up and takin' it everyday, *dyin'* that little bit each and every day, is painful. But that's life. There ain't no sweet without bitter, man. There ain't no livin' without dyin'."

"And this," Jim whispered, again indicating the destroyed remnants of his emission. "This was my firing line."

"The guns don't always look like guns."

The two sat in silence for a short time, before Jim broke it. "So what now? What do I do?"

"*Now...*" Red stood.

Jim looked up at him; at the hand he held out in offering.

"Now you get to work. There ain't else to do but take your lashin's and keep on movin' ahead, tryin' to make things right."

"But..."

"We'll clean up here, then deal with the rest of 'em as they come." Red reached down, seized Jim by the arm, and hauled him to his feet. "In the meantime, we've got plenty of shit to make right."

"Thank you," Jim said feebly, unable to look Red in the eye. "For everything."

Red pulled him into a hug, clapped his back, "We're partners, Talbot," then gripped him by the shoulders and held him a few inches away. "We're a team, and ain't nothin' gonna fuck with that."

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Jim smiled weakly. "Alright," he said, finally lifting his gaze to Red's, the dreadful weight of his shame feeling the tiniest bit lighter. "For Aariah and Lara," he said.

"And Yvonne, and Harold, and Becca, God rest their souls," Red added.

"For everyone we lost, and for all the Commonwealth of Humanity," Jim said. "Let's win this war."

**END**