

The pounding headache confirmed Adler was still alive. The high-pitched ringing in his head drowned out the distant pops of machine gun fire, even subduing the screeching blasts of energy rifles. He commanded himself to open his eyes. The ceiling's metal plating came into view, crinkled like paper and ripped apart to expose its innards of frayed cables and rusted pipes. A cone of yellow light covered it like pus on an open wound, then slowly continued clockwise. Adler absently traced the ridges and cracks of his chest plate with an unsteady hand, stopping once he felt a warm shard of shrapnel. Fortified by the dregs of adrenaline, Adler sat up and unstrapped the plate to take several deep breaths, letting it slide off with a loud clank.

“Loretta.”

Adler stumbled to his feet and looked around the now unrecognizable passageway. Staring at the blobs of destruction in the darkness, he waited for the rotating light atop the open hatch to circle back. Adler spotted Loretta's black hair and pale face against the battered copper floor, motionless behind a haze of dust particles irradiated by the murky yellow light. Her lower torso and legs were covered by fallen debris. He rushed over and knelt down to check for a pulse, his hand sliding off her neck after several agonizing seconds. Ignoring the bursts of gunfire and vague shouts that grew louder, Adler removed her plate and began doing chest compressions as he whispered shaky platitudes. Bringing his ear down to her chest, he cursed. The yelling outside the hatch was clearer, though not in a language he understood. He started frantically removing the metal parts and rubbish that covered her so as to carry her.

Removing one large metal plate revealed her severed body, entrails strewn and blood leaking into a pool. Adler realized he was kneeling in. In place of hips, legs, or feet there was only the jagged end of a snapped spine. Adler reeled back and looked away, focusing on the ringing that overpowered all thought. He forced himself to look back at Loretta, closing her eyelids with the gentle sweep of his hand. Once he heard the rushed footsteps approaching, he kissed her forehead.

Adler mechanically stood up and unholstered his pistol, leveling it against the open hatch. The light in the perpendicular corridor was bright enough for Adler to see the three men that barreled past. Their receding shouts were hoarse and frantic, some regressing to prolonged screams that caused Adler's aim to waver. Though it snapped back up once two more men lumbered into the hatch's frame, one supporting the other. The shirtless man in the red bandana hobbled ahead, dragging behind a foot that clung to the ankle by a few muscle fibers. Adler dragged his gun to match their sluggish pace, letting them pass leaving nothing but a trail of blood. The stench of sulfur and smoke became suffocating, forcing Adler backwards towards the exit on the opposite side. He froze when he heard screeching.

“Mamu! Oh mamu, mamu, mamu,” the voice yelled in a frenzy, loud and shrill. A young man came into view and rested against the opening of the hatch. His gaze was stuck to where he'd come from, wailing “mamu” in between bursts of convulsing sobs. Adler applied the gentlest amount of pressure to the trigger.

*Put up your gun.*

The stranger peered into the room. Adler held his breath and waited for the rotating light to dictate his fate, exhaling once the young man with the red bandana snapped his gaze away. With a sobbing warcry

the stranger lifted his pistol and fired two shots at something out of sight, then, realizing that was all the ammo he had left, hurled the handgun at whatever was still approaching. He stumbled back and tried to enter through the hatch, locking eyes with Adler who was awash in yellow light. The stranger let out a pleading cry with an outstretched hand, cut short when a stalky appendage with long black talons gripped his head from above. He had time to widen his eyes before the charred claw crushed his head with a sickening crack. He lurched forward for a moment before collapsing in between the hatch doors, leaving only the sound of gurgling coming from his caved in head.

Adler staggered back as he stared at the body, losing his balance and crashing to the ground. He groped the nearby darkness for his pistol, but it might as well have sunk into the depths of the ocean. The black talons gripped the top of the hatch's entryway, and soon the rest of its large humanoid figure came into view. Despite the direct light it stood under, it still resembled a silhouette. Its taut black leathery skin was wrapped so tightly that Adler could note its prominent ribcage with ease. Its body thrashed as if attacked by relentless fits. At a certain angle during these spasms, Adler could see the concavity of its stomach, so severe that it could only have come from a lifetime of starvation. The creature's head, though out of sight above the hatch's frame, produced rabid wheezes and groans. The noises seemed in response to the creature's violent twitches rather than its own conscious will. Despite this however, it shifted its mass with intent, entering through the hatch.

Crawling backwards, short of breath and a pistol, Adler panicked he'd gone mad. Reassurances that he was lucid only made things worse.

He was jolted out of his feverish trance by a volley of lightning and thunder. The corridor flashed white, flickering with the rapid-fire blasts that punctured the air and whizzed past overhead. Looking behind, Adler could see a burly figure through the muzzle flashes of their light machine gun, even gleaning the grin on their face. The man yelled something at him over the roaring gunfire, though Adler became mesmerized by the stream of shell casings ejecting out of the LMG. Clinking against the copper floor, the sound reminded him of wind chimes caught in a hurricane. The casings piled up near the man's boot, itself splattered red up to the ankle. One blink later and the boots were close enough to smell the iron. Another blink, Adler was standing. The man, sustaining fire with one arm and gripping Adler's shirt with the other, was again yelling, but everything he said morphed into one high-pitched tone that could scarcely be heard over the explosions detonating in Adler's skull. The man let go of Adler with a slight push and furrowed his one brow, looking towards the ceiling as if the answer was etched in the rotting wires.

Adler shook his head. "Hugh?!"

Hugh looked back astonished, then shouted "Hallelujah" over the raging firestorm.

He lowered his weapon with a pulled trigger, and Adler grimaced as he heard the soft thumps of rounds burrowing into the corpse wearing the red bandana. Illuminated orange by the glowing tip of the overheated barrel, Hugh squinted at the hatch seemingly devoid of life. Adler noticed the creased metal where the claw had rested, leaving him with bitter relief that he hadn't imagined the ordeal.

“I thought you cracked there Addy. Well, with all the abominations I guess I shouldn’t blame ya,” – and as if to signal he hadn’t abandoned his post, Hugh blasted a couple of shots downstream – “but seeing as you’re whole, we needa make our way to Ash. She’s in the nav room. *With a plan.*” Leaning in, his breath warm and reeking of liquor, Hugh whispered, “But we need to move. I got about thirty bullets before this turns into a five-thousand-dollar paperweight.” Then he turned and bellowed, “Come on freakbag, I can do this all day!”

As his bravado echoed down the empty passageway, Hugh hustled towards the exit on the opposite side without so much of a glance behind. Adler focused on the stranger with the holes, the stranger without a head, then followed suit. When he reached the exit hatch, Hugh was waving his arms and muttering obscenities towards the top of its frame. There, a camera sat blinking its blue LED light.

“Even pressing a button! No, no, no, her hands are too manicured, too clean. Because –” The hatch opened. Hugh stood for a moment, as if amazed that worked, then blew a kiss towards the camera.

“Every planner needs an executioner,” Hugh chanted in a melodic whisper to himself as he and Adler stepped through the exit. Adler eyed Hugh as the hatch slammed shut behind them, unsure if his savior was invincible or already broken.

They started walking a familiar route. Adler recalled his recent trips carrying reports and coffee and munitions past dozens of others in the cramped corridor – the amicable stops, the accidental bumps, even the awful smell of sweat that overpowered any air freshener. Now, staring at splotches of either soot or blood, he grasped for the memories like an ex-lover on an oversized mattress. The sound of distant gunfire was gone, and when Adler strained to listen he heard only muffled screams that abruptly cut out. Warped howls pierced through the iron walls in their place, stoking similar frenzied cries from above, below, and ahead. The uproar fed on itself, inflamed by every new howl, all morphing together into the anguished bellow of some giant beast in its death throes.

To distract himself, Adler peered into any open room as they walked. Upon seeing his bunkmate impaled on a juted steel rod, rib cage snapped open, organs missing, he resigned himself to the modest view ahead. The dimness of the red emergency lights was a gift.

“Where is your – forget it. That’s on me. I set the bar too high,” Hugh said as he unholstered a silver pistol and shoved it into Adler’s chest. “Let’s hope you’re at least housebroken.”

Adler stopped to examine its dull scratched metal, lingering on the *To Ashes* sloppily etched into the barrel.

“That’s a rental,” Hugh called out.

Quickening his stride to catch up with him, Adler piped up with a quivering voice he didn’t care to settle, “How many of us made it?”

“Me, Ash, and somehow you. Not counting all the scum out to get us.”

Adler fell silent, stopping again to stave off the sudden light-headedness, then trudged forward after seeing Hugh wasn't slowing down.

"Loretta didn't make it," Adler said, his voice laced with aimless accusation. A minute later, after Adler's thoughts drifted to his final coffee date with Loretta this morning, Hugh replied under his breath, "She was a helluva captain."

They wandered the long passageways and waited for the hatches to open upon request, all without coming across anyone or anything. They reached the entrance to the mess hall – two interconnected iron slabs blackened by some gelatinous organic matter. Adler pushed down the thoughts of the meals he'd shared there, instead focusing on their destination just across the chamber. Hugh glanced at the security camera on top of the entryway's frame, lit red.

"I'll need to jury-rig these," Hugh grunted as he crouched with the strapped LMG, pulling out a screwdriver and loosening a plate a shade lighter than the wall.

Adler flinched at the sound of something scraping against metal. It was from the level above them, scampering in different directions. Muffled gunfire erupted. Hand hovering over his holstered pistol, Adler looked to Hugh for guidance, but Hugh dismissed it with a cursory wave and went back to work. Adler heard faint shouts, quick and controlled, until another volley of gunfire rang out. During the sporadic moments of silence, he understood the threat. The initial scampering mutated into a stampede – some amassed swarm approached the group above with such frenzied determination that the rusted pipes above trembled and rained down dust. As the gunshots dwindled and the voices grew panicked, Adler could hear the guttural sounds of the horde. Most resembled the strained grunts of a choking pig, as if each breath had to be violently earned. But others were closer to the screeches of a demented chimp – whether from excitement or agony, Adler couldn't tell. Eventually, like a virus, the unrestrained howls spread and overtook everything.

Meanwhile, Hugh muttered about the shoddy wiring.

"Hugh. Were those our guys?"

"No."

"How, how do you know?"

"Because I do."

"But –"

"Listen kid," Hugh exclaimed as he slammed his screwdriver down. "If you wanna survive – and at this point I can see that's a *pretty big fucking if* – then I need you cool. Calm. I need you to empty out your weepy brain. Like Buddha or Bundy." Hugh turned to face him, searching Adler with an impassive gaze. "Y'know how most people died today? In a panic. Have your wits and you have your chance."

After a beat of silence, Hugh cleared his throat then turned back to the panel, humming as he worked. Adler, as a favor to Hugh, stepped away to inspect a random section of the wall. His thoughts fluttered, settling on the day he had been drafted at thirteen all those years ago.

Was he *really* willing to die for the Coalition of Planetary Peace? He hesitantly reasoned the cause you live for should be good enough to die for.

“So. How many of those subhuman freaks you take out ‘fore I came?”

“I mean, none,” Adler stammered, surprised at the sudden interest. “I’ve never seen or heard *anything* like that before. Thought I went mad until you came.”

“What, you’ve never seen a second-rate raider before? Bunch of red rocket dog dicks walking around in those bandanas.” He laughed at Adler without taking his eyes off the panel. “If you can’t take them out then I really don’t know why Ash bothered with you.”

“Three. I took out three raiders before we got hit.”

“Atta-boy,” Hugh said as he stood up and watched the doors to the mess hall creak and groan open. “I guess even a butterknife could slash someone’s throat.”

Adler’s gruff exhale stopped Hugh mid-stride, the latter throwing him a curious glance.

“Screw the raiders for bringing out those monsters, those aliens, experiments, whatever-the-fuck! I should’ve killed every single one of them for what they did to Loretta,” Adler spat out, leaning against the wall for support. He felt on the verge of unconsciousness. Maybe he already was. He took a deep breath. “At least now the snake’s eating its own tail, right?”

Hugh studied Adler, a commanding officer sizing up his shaken recruit to make sure they were committed to the assault. He strode into the mess hall, telling Adler he’d get his chance to avenge Loretta.