



Solemn Vigil

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The clatter of footfalls against metal filled the corridors of the UES Contact Light. Their din was carried on the wind that swept through the damaged ship as it hurtled towards the alien surface of an unknown planet, the wounded vessel barely managing to stay in low atmosphere. Reinforced windows designed to withstand the vacuum of space shattered and exploded as the metal hull of the ship burst into flames, a ribbon of fire and smoke trailing the doomed ship as it broke apart at the very seams, yet somehow managed to stay airborne.

The survivors were out of time. Eleven of them sprinted through the final bulkhead door as it slid open with agonizing slowness. However, one of them simply walked backwards through the opening, his dual auto pistols blazing as he unleashed salvo after salvo at the mob of creatures rushing down the deteriorating hallways of the ship, eager to rip him and his ragged companions to shreds. Hot lead bit into the flesh of a massive, tan, reptilian humanoid, as the force of every pounding shot sent it reeling back a few steps, while it impotently hissed and roared, flames pouring out of its maw. A final shot connected, the bullet ripping into its skull as it tumbled backwards, but three more of its kind were already rushing past the fallen Elder Lemurian.

"Jason, get in here!" a gruff, gravelly voice yelled from down the corridor, as a streaking purple laser slug raced past the Commando reloading his weapons, the intense heat and light of the round illuminating his weathered orange armor, the plates of carapace shining dully in the sudden light. The shot smashed into another Elder, the powerful slug tearing the reptile's head wide open as it stumbled forwards, blood oozing from its ruined skull cavity.

"I'm coming Lex, just gimme a sec!" the Commando called back at the sharp-eyed Bandit covering him. Another laser slug rippled through the air, slamming into the shoulder of an Elder that was rampaging forward wildly. The Commando turned sharply, letting his smoking pistols take a break as he dashed forward a few feet, before diving into a roll, an orange inferno engulfing where he had just stood moments ago.

"Lex, we got a bit of problem over here!" cried a distorted feminine voice as an explosion rocked the bridge of the ship.

The metal doors between Jason and Lex snapped shut instantly, as the Commando slammed into the door, coming to the end of his prolonged roll. He bolted upright, despite the abrupt impact, and pounded his gauntlet clad fists on the door,

metal screeching against metal, as the roars of the Elders still madly giving chase reminded him of his situation.

He took a deep breath, pivoting around to face the oncoming rampage of gnashing teeth and fiery breath, peering down the wrecked corridor through his bulbous, orange tinted space helmet that was laden with cracks, damaged in multiple spots. His boxy, yet effective and light suit of semi-powered armor had fared no better, the entire thing covered in scorch marks, dents, and puncture holes. Even his form fitting, black space suit beneath the armor was torn and ravaged to pieces, showing bits of mutilated flesh that bled profusely.

"It's all in the training ..." he mumbled to himself quietly as he raised his two auto pistols, spreading his legs to steady himself. A torrent of cascading claws and ravenous maws surged towards him as he pressed down on both triggers.

"Goddamnit! HAN-D, get over here and pry open these gad dang doors!" Lex shouted, readjusting his worn cerulean cowboy hat. He turned from where he had been facing to cover Jason, shifting his long, slender laser rifle in his hands as he did so, and motioning behind him towards the sealed door. What he saw as he turned was simply beyond words. Even through his cyclopean helmet, the burning white light glowing around his visor's central eye, Lex was able to clearly see the scene unfolding before him.

The bridge was a large room, with two rows of control panels on either side. They were big bulky, immovable things with plenty of strange buttons, holo interface panels, and knobs that only the now late crew of the UES Contact Light would know how to use. Situated above these dozens of control stations were two observation platforms that could only be accessed by metal, dropdown service ladders; one platform on each side of the room. Large, panoramic windows wrapped around the sides of the bridge, beside the rows of navigational equipment, culminating in a wide swath of window at the head of the room. The center of the bridge was devoid of any kind of equipment, just a nice, wide-open walk space with the captain's control station at the far end of the room.

But none of this was out of the ordinary, even though much of the equipment was damaged or broken. What was strange was that there were no bodies, no sign of a

struggle, not even any blood ... but, there was something standing beside the captain's station.

A titanic creature, nearly fourteen feet tall stood at the far end of the room. It dwarfed everyone else in the room, and yet it wasn't the same kind of monstrous huge as some of the other creatures Lex and the others had encountered on the planet below. There was an air of nobility about this one, something about the way it carried itself, how it looked down upon the rest of them with an unflinching gaze.

It wore a strangely shaped helmet, a crown of some sort that was like a crest turned sideways, the ends of it extending a good bit past the sides of the creature's head. Embedded within the crown were three rectangular gems, spaced evenly apart, each one radiating with an unearthly cyan glow. That in itself was strange, but just below its helmet was what really startled Lex.

Gazing out at them was a single, flaring orb of white hot energy. It radiated strangely intense light, so much so that the rest of the being's face was simply impossible to see clearly beneath the overbearing glow. The small portions of its face not entirely obscured by the ludicrously bright light emanating from its eye were pitch black, seemingly wholly unaffected by the light source. It was almost as if its flesh was sucking in the light.

Lex took a cautious step backward as he found himself up against the metal door, still unable to rip his gaze from the giant, even as the sound of gunfire rocked the blocked hallway behind him. He glanced over to several of his other companions, they too frozen in a combination of awe, shock, and fear.

The droids HAN-D and CHEF were the closest to the massive being, both of them peering up at it with their robotic eyes. CHEF tilted its metallic head, attempting to get a better look at it, its poofy white chef's hat swaying haphazardly with its motion. The machine shifted its segmented silver arms, sharpened cleavers glistening in the orange light of the bridge, one attached to the end of each of its arms where its hands should have been.

HAN-D, instead of attempting to survey the creature, wheeled backwards slightly, attempting to not garner the gargantuan's attention. His widely spaced, thick armor-plated legs tapered down into a more slender form near the bottom, where his tiny wheels were attached. HAN-D's utilitarian looking torso and arms shifted slightly as he rotated his upper half ever so slowly to look back at the rest of the survivors, his

central eye pulsating with a strangely vivacious orange glow. It was as if it was speaking to them with but a glance, telling them to be ready, as a small compartment on HAN-D's back slid open, and a bulky metal rectangle popped out into his waiting hand. It almost instantly unfolded itself into a massive, double sided mallet with a long haft designed to be held with both hands. The robot turned back to the towering figure, gripping its mallet tightly in one hand as it readjusted the tiny, tan janitorial cap atop its squat head.

Lex tore his gaze away from the now shifting behemoth, and glanced over to his left where four more of his companions were standing beside a service ladder leading up to the platform above. The Sniper, plated in rugged military composite armor was hefting his impressive rail rifle off of his back, the shiny purple plates of his suit gleaming in the orange glow that permeated the bridge. His bulbous space helmet was tinted a light purple, concealing the apathetic face beneath it, as his oddly shaped spotter drone cautiously hovered in the air a few inches from his helmet. A dim red glow emanated from the drone's eye, draping the Sniper's helmet in an ominous shroud of crimson light.

Beside the rogue marksman stood a wall of a man, lugging a riot shield as big as himself around, a tiny slit cut into the top of the interlocking blue plates of the shield, at eye level. Through it, the Enforcer stared down the huge entity at the other end of the room, his wide T-shaped visor reflecting the orange light of the room as the strange, modified police lights attached to his metal shoulder plates began to stir, the flashing blue and red lights spinning around within their thick composite plastic coverings. The flashing lights atop his shoulders illuminated the rest of the huge man's armor, his simple chest plate cascading down into his wide utility belt, before flowing into the thick, heavy leg plates that interlocked with each other. His arms bore similar protection, and beneath all of this, he wore dark blue fatigues, his pants tucked into the steel toed, black combat boots. He made a move forward, towards the giant surveying the room.

From beneath the tattered, yet flowing, maroon robes that concealed the creature's body came a massive arm, the entire length of it plated in strange, alien metal, the plates all interlocking with each other, as if they were one with the creature. Even its hand was encased, the entire thing hidden by a gauntlet. The clanking of metal resounded through the room as it outstretched its arm.

The band of survivors were deathly still as a bright flash of cyan light rocked the bridge, overtaking the orange glow generated by the flames on the hull of the ship. A moment later, the massive being was holding a titanic sword by its side, clutching its long grip tightly in one hand. The huge blade was easily the width of a man, and nearly

twice as long as a man was tall. The metal it was made out of was bizarre, the cerulean sword pulsating with an aura of cyan energy that glowed dimly, cutting through the haze of orange that had overtaken the room. Even its shape was unorthodox; instead of tapering down into a point like most swords, this one instead curved back near the end to form giant hooks, before coming back around to form the blunt head. The result was not dissimilar to sticking an axe head at the end of a sword.

With another sudden motion, the giant's other arm threw its cloak back, allowing it to flutter in the wind behind it like a cape, the shawl still fastened around its upper chest and neck. Its entire body was covered in the same interlocking mesh of dark maroon alien plates, the belt buckle about its waist shaped like a shield. Even its legs were encased in the otherworldly metal, layer upon layer of armor cascading down into its thickset sabatons. It was completely armored from head to toe, barring its exposed face.

Lex could feel his breathing quickening as the colossal being's gaze shifted to him, its white hot eye burning a hole through his mental defenses. He forced himself to break eye contact, wrenching his head to the left where the Sniper and Enforcer were holding firm. He noticed that the Huntress and the Engineer were scaling the ladder behind them, up to the platform above.

The Engineer was bedecked in a suit of titanium alloy, the plates colored a light purple, as the grooves and visible circuitry that ran through the bionic armor pulsed a light bluish green. Antennae that glowed the same blue green light poked out from the bulky, backpack like protrusion that powered his armor, the antennae periodically flashing in a pattern. His massive shoulder pauldrons, housing his grenade launcher systems, somewhat hindered him as he scaled the ladder a bit more slowly than the nimble Huntress ahead of him.

She darted up the metal ladder with incredible speed, the few plates of bright red armor fastened to her chest, arms, and thighs making themselves known as they took on a deeper shade of red thanks to the orange light the bridge was bathed in, the flames on the hull of the ship clearly visible through the sweeping windows on either side of the room. She was at the top of the platform within seconds, leaning down over the edge with an outstretched arm as she offered an open hand to the Engineer.

"C'mon Grahm, lets move," she spoke in an electronically distorted voice, as he took her hand. She glanced over to the mountainous creature at the other end of the bridge, peering through the two vertically aligned, circular visor slots in her red-plated

helmet, the reflective light-blue material of its eye slots concealing her visage. Turning back to the matter at hand, she took his hand with both of hers, struggling to hoist several hundred pounds of man and machine up onto the platform, sighing in relief as he scrambled up over the edge. He nodded respectfully to her through his own bulbous, cyan tinted visor.

Getting to her feet, the Huntress glanced down at Lex, his back pressed against the bulkhead door, his hands fiddling with his rifle. She looked further right, taking note of the other four survivors close to one of the huge windows at the far right of the room, close to the entrance. Two of them were slowly inching towards the observing creature at the other end of the room.

The one in front, the Miner, brandished two short but stout pickaxes, one in each hand, with a third, a two-handed version, slung across his back, fastened by a tan strap. They were all made completely of one piece of bright yellow metal that took on almost fiery glow given the lighting of the bridge. His face was concealed behind a mining helmet with a face guard not unlike a welder's helmet, a long, horizontal vision slot cut into it, covered by the same shiny, reflective material everyone else's visor was made of. He wore black and tan mining fatigues, with tan plates of metal layered on top of his extremities, his broad chest encased in bulky plates of metal that jutted out, making him look more barrel chested than he was. Although the heavy industrial mining suit he wore looked rather cumbersome, it didn't seem to hinder his movement or mobility in the slightest.

A heavy, dull footstep resounded through the room as another survivor inched forward, standing beside the Miner. The sound of whirring hydraulics cut through the din of blasting alarms, as the Loader willed his yellow construction exoskeleton to raise its arms and crack its robotic knuckles, unafraid of the attention he drew to himself from the being at the other end of the room. The Loader stared back at the entity through his protective, light-blue visor that wrapped around the sides of his head, before disappearing into his simple black helmet.

He lowered his exoskeleton's arms, his real arms working the contraption's exposed control sticks as he did so. In the lighting of the bridge, the hydraulic exoskeleton attached to the upper half of his body seemed to give off an aura of dim light. The orange glow of the room washed over his simple black crewman's uniform, the grey pouches fastened to his belt deepening into a vibrant orange every time one of the red alert lights overhead pulsed. His grey boots, plated on the bottom with a black metal, sent another metallic clang resounding through the room as he took another step

forward, the yellow ribcage of his exoskeleton rattling slightly. He was about to take another step forward, when he stopped short, frozen in place by the chilling voice that rang through the air.

"If you have come, looking for salvation," the creature spoke, its voice like the wind itself, ethereal and otherworldly, "then I must inform you, that you will not find it here," it finished calmly, no movement of a mouth, if it even had one, visible beneath the blazing orb of light that passed for an eye. It abruptly turned, without a word, its cloak fluttering majestically as it walked over to one of the control stations at the head of the bridge. No one dared move as a series of holo panels burst into existence around the giant, their dim blue aura shifting and flickering as it used its free hand to manipulate them, dragging them around itself and through the air. It was controlling the ship.

Lex's eyes darted upwards. The Huntress and the Engineer looked down at him, nodding knowingly, as the former materialized a sleek bow made of hardlight out of the palms of her hands, while the latter pulled a small cube from his belt, letting it clatter to the floor as a sentry turret began unfolding itself.

Lex looked down at the base of the ladder leading up to the overhead platform, the Enforcer and Sniper both nodding at him in unison as the latter leveled his rail rifle, setting his sights on the creature. Another shift of view, and another pair of nods from the Loader and the Miner, as the two figures behind them stepped forward to stand beside their companions.

The first of the two stepped forward proudly, his stance firm, his pale yellow space helmet tinted a deep orange. The navy blue and black plates of his armor fit his form well, his lean musculature visible beneath. He reached down, unclipping a small metal cylinder from his belt, grasping it tightly in one hand, as he glanced over to Lex, nodding deeply, so much so that it looked almost like a respectful bow. In that same moment, the Mercenary pressed down on a button embedded into the side of the cylinder, as a column of light exploded into existence, its sudden bluish-white light cutting through the orange haze of the room for a moment, before settling down. He straightened his stance, gripping his laser sword with both hands in anticipation.

HAN-D and CHEF turned in unison back towards Lex, both of them flashing the lights that illuminated their robotic eyes, before swiveling back around, ready for what was to come.

Feeling his confidence returning, surrounded by the people he had gone through hell with, Lex took hold of his laser rifle, crouching down on one knee, and leveling it at the preoccupied colossus at the other end of the bridge, his tan duster settling as the targeting reticule in his helmet's display aligned itself with the trajectory of his rifle's shots.

A guttural snarl went up, far to left of Lex as his finger hovered in front on the trigger of his rifle. He stole a quick glance in that direction, just to reassure himself it was what he thought it was. He smirked slightly at the sight of the fleshy, burgundy colored creature standing beside the Loader. Toxic green slime seemed to ooze and pour from every one of the many ghastly orifices that covered its body; even the flexible spines that ran down its back glistened with the stuff. Its razor sharp claws were coated in the same vile concoction. It looked over at Lex, the bestial hunger that permeated its gaze resonating with something more, a gleaming intelligence far beyond just a beast of instinct glimmering in its four predatory eyes aligned on its head like that of an arachnid.

It snarled once more. Acrid was ready.

Returning his attention to the behemoth down range, Lex smiled grimly as he spoke.

" S'all you Alex. "

There was a brief pause after the echo of Lex's words faded, a red laser dot appearing on the back of the cloaked figure, the line of the laser barely visible, but definitely there. A clicking sound could be heard a split second before the room exploded with the powerful, rippling sound of a rail rifle being fired. The supersonic round tore through the air, finding its mark as it ripped through the colossal being's maroon cloak, smashing itself against the back of his abdominal armor.

It stopped what it was doing instantly. It straightened itself out, retracting its free hand from manipulating the holo panels, and letting its arm rest at its side. Lex could see its grip on the massive sword in its other hand visibly tighten, as a sharp, metallic clank could be heard. Lex's eyes trailed down from the smoldering hole in the being's cloak. There, resting by its feet, was the warped and deformed rail rifle slug.

It hadn't penetrated.

Lex could feel his heartbeat quicken at the very thought.

Without turning to face them, the creature spoke, its voice filling the room with an air of dread. "Ah, a challenge ..."

Its voice trailed off, fading into the constant buzz of alert warnings and sirens blaring in the bridge, as it looked over its shoulder, the blinding light radiating out from its eye intensifying. The three gems in its helmet glowed brighter, as a strange, fluctuating halo of light surrounded its head.

Everything happened in a split second after that, as it disappeared completely, phasing out of existence, only to reappear several feet above the Sniper, its sword held high, poised to smash down into him. The eagle eyed marksman flipped backwards with lightning reflexes, arcing through the air as the huge entity slammed down on top of his spotter drone, the machine sputtering and dying with a hiss. Sparks flew and smoke went up from the bisected drone, as the room exploded into a symphony of bullets, lasers, and explosives.

A barrage of cerulean laser arrows rained down from above, every shot scorching the creature's breastplate, as the rattling gunfire of a sentry turret tore into its armor. A hail of laser slugs flew at it from across the room, tri-nades raining down from above, as meat cleavers soared through the air, cutting apart his cloak, while the Sniper lined up for another shot, cycling his rifle.

The colossus rampaged forwards, sprinting towards the Sniper. It somehow ignored the hail of projectiles smashing into it on all sides, even as an explosion rocked it, setting its cloak alight, but doing nothing to stop its advance. Another rippling shockwave tore through the air as the Sniper loosed a second shot, this one impacting the being directly in the chest. Again, it failed to get through, but managed to leave a sizable dent as the warped round clattered to the floor.

The Sniper took another step back, frantically cycling his rifle, finding himself pressed up against the back wall of the bridge.

The being refused to stop, even as HAN-D threw himself at it, his mallet raised over his head, ready for a devastating strike. Without turning to acknowledge the determined robot, the figure smashed him aside with its free hand, sending the robot crashing into a control panel on the side of the room, his torso armor crumpling like tin foil against the blow.

It took another massive stride forward, gripping its sword in both hands, the withering amounts of punishment directed at him finally seeming to do something as he faltered slightly, allowing the Sniper just enough time for a third shot. The distinct sound of metal giving way could be heard as the round connected, finally managing to pierce its armor in the same spot the last round had dented it.

Not a moment later, the gargantuan sword came down on him, cleaving through the Sniper's midsection as his armor did nothing to stop the impossibly powerful stroke. His severed top half fell to the ground as his legs wobbled uneasily for a moment, before collapsing into a heap, his rail rifle clattering to the floor with the rest of his broken form. His insides spilled out onto the deck, blood pouring from both halves of him, the huge figure not taking even a moment to rest as it teleported again.

It appeared beside the Engineer on the platform above, the constant din of gunfire and explosives ceasing for a moment as everyone readjusted their aim. A sweeping blow cut through the sentry turret, the gun falling to the ground as it sparked and sputtered at the spot where it had been severed. The being was met with a face full of explosives not a second later, as the Engineer retaliated with a constant stream of small, spherical tri-grenades, each one exploding in a flash of blue light. Grenade after grenade poured from the ports in his pauldrons, exploding on contact with the being, as it lunged forwards.

The creature cut into the Engineer's suit with startling ease, the blade sundering his reinforced armor. The massive gash in his suit's breastplate sparked furiously as circuits exploded and ceased to function, but no blood spilt forth from the wound, and indeed, it did nothing to lessen the Engineer's relentless onslaught of tri-nades.

The Huntress loosed another laser arrow at the swiftly encroaching behemoth, the expertly placed shot striking it square in the face, forcing it to recoil back for a brief moment as more explosions rocked it. But it refused to be stopped.

It performed another powerful sword stroke, the diagonally aimed strike cutting through the air, before biting into the Engineer's right shoulder, as the being dragged its blade downwards, forcing it through layer after layer of armor and cybernetics. The resilient Engineer continued to defiantly fire at the creature from his one functional launcher, but that too soon ceased as the blade being dragged through him came to his chest. The electrical crackling and sputtering sound his armor had made when breached was replaced by the unmistakable sound of flesh being torn apart.

The creature ended its stroke upon seeing the satisfactory results of his attack. Blood gushed forth from the Engineer's heart, along with some sort of dark, synthetic liquid, as his other grenade launcher fell silent, smoke drifting off of it. The being wrenched its sword free from him with the terrible screech of broken metal, as his knees buckled. A pained gasp was muffled by his helmet as the creature kicked him aside forcefully, sending him plummeting over the edge of the platform, a ribbon of blood trailing him as he fell. He smashed into the deck below, the great rents in his armor sparking and smoking as one of his arms feebly attempted to push himself off the ground before going limp.

Even as another survivor embraced death, the fighting raged on, the relentless outpouring of projectiles continuing to shake the room from their combined force. The Huntress let another arrow fly, this one striking the creature square in the chest, scorching the spot where it had connected as smoke drifted off of it. She pulled a small metal disc from her belt, pressing down on the circular button in the center as three blades sprung forth from the glaive, before being encased in an aura of cerulean energy. She reared back as the being surged forward, hurling the glaive at it with all of her strength.

It shot past the creature, slicing open the side of its breast plate as it spun, before arcing back around, returning like a boomerang. The giant paid the disc of death no heed as it lunged forward, its blade angled perfectly as its strike came down on the Huntress.

Its blade found nothing but air to bite into as a sudden burst of cerulean light exploded in front of him, the Huntress now standing several paces behind him, another arrow already notched. The glaive made another pass at it, shredding through its cloak and ripping open another hole in the side of its armor before crashing into a wall and imbedding itself as another arrow found its mark, scorching the back of its armor.

Just as the being swiveled around to face her, another arrow slamming into its chest, a massive hydraulic gauntlet appeared on the ledge of the platform, while the Enforcer's head poked over the top of the ladder, carrying his shield on his back.

In a blur of motion, the Loader reeled himself in, the thick metal cable attached to the gauntlet on the ledge pulling him up, and within moments, he was hoisting himself up onto the platform as the Enforcer readied his shotgun, taking the shield from his back and planting it down firmly in front of him.

Without wasting a moment, the Enforcer let loose a salvo of blasts from his shotgun, its fire rate truly relentless as cluster after cluster of pellets smashed into the being's back, each one putting a tiny dent in his carapace. The Loader, meanwhile leapt forward, throwing himself at the creature, hydraulic gauntlets clenched into massive fists as a field of blue energy exploded brilliantly into existence around him, all while the Huntress continued to pepper the creature with arrows.

The Loader came down exactly where the being had been less than a second ago, his exoskeletal fists smashing into the floor, leaving a sizable dent in it. It had teleported again.

It reappeared inches away from CHEF, directly in front of the culinary robot, as the machine reacted instantly, the door to its blast furnace like oven in its chest bursting open, a blast of concentrated flames searing the creature, but doing nothing to stop it from bringing its sword down on CHEF.

Metal screeched and hissed as its sword cleaved through one of CHEF's arms, before slicing clean through its chest, cutting it in half as its robotic eyes flickered for a moment, before going dark.

That's when the cook exploded.

The machine went up in an orange fireball, the force of the explosion tremendous as even the colossal creature was sent reeling backwards from the fiery shockwave. Smoke billowed off of the wreck of CHEF, the other survivors forced to take notice of its demise as they struggled to remain standing in the wake of the explosion that had violently shook the bridge.

The huge being managed to find its footing soon after though, quickly reasserting itself as the thick black smoke surrounding it began to clear, thinning just enough for it to be able to see the vicious mass of burgundy flesh and toxins sailing through the air, claws splayed out.

The behemoth jerked its arm upwards to shield its face as Acrid slammed into it, his ravenous maw clamping down on the being's arm, while his terrible, toxin coated claws attempted to rip into its chest plate, but to no avail.

Similarly, Acrid's poisonous bite did little to puncture the colossus' armor, as it began to shake him off, managing to finally tear him free from its own arm, sending

Acrid skidding away, his claws digging into the metal floor with a terrible screeching sound. He roared at it in frustration, caustic spittle flying from his cavernous maw as he reared back on his hind legs. The spines on Acrid's back flared up, standing at attention as a ball of caustic sludge coalesced inside his mouth.

The massive being surged forwards as Acrid spat the slimy bile at it, the corrosive liquid splattering against its alien carapace, beginning to eat away at the metal as soon as it made contact. Acrid rampaged forward to meet it head on, confident in his chances as his allies continued to pummel the being with ranged fire, the Loader and Miner scrambling to get in range, whilst the Mercenary attempted to get HAN-D back on his wheels.

Acrid leapt at towering creature, attempting to get at its neck, but was stopped short, getting the wind knocked out of him as the being caught him by the neck in mid air with its free hand. Its gauntlet's grip was immovable, even as Acrid slashed and clawed at its hand desperately attempting to free himself.

Its death grip on him tightened, crushing Acrid's windpipe as he gasped and sputtered for air. His ferocious slashing quickly died down to a weak clawing at the being's hand, black spots beginning to form in his vision.

With a sudden movement, the colossal creature swiveled around to face the survivor's shooting it in the back, swinging Acrid through the air as he flailed helplessly, before smashing him into the deck forcefully.

The massive creature took a hold of its sword in both hands, swiftly reversing the direction of the blade, pointing the tip down, as it raised it high, a strange, vibrant orange glow suddenly overtaking the blade entirely.

A hydraulic gauntlet shot forward through the smoke that filled the room followed by its attaching cable, smashing into the being's chest plate.

Its sword came down on Acrid in a single, swift stroke, the cable connecting the Loader's expended fist to his suit being severed as the blade plunged into Acrid mercilessly. The crackling orange aura surrounding the sword seemed to ripple outwards as it slammed into the ground, the forceful, visible shockwave emanating from it throwing every survivor to the ground simultaneously.

Acrid fared the worst. His body was blown apart into meaty chunks of pustulent flesh and shattered bone, deep red blood mixing with corrosive green sludge as his remains were splattered around the room in an unceremoniously disgusting display.

The hail of gunfire and the rain of arrows momentarily ceased as the remaining survivors struggled to their feet in the aftermath of the radial attack, the Mercenary the first one to stand back up. He bolted upright from his position on the floor, the glow of his laser sword creating shadows that danced across his suit of form-fitting armor. Wasting no time, he continued his effort to get HAN-D back up, taking the crushed machine's enfeebled hand, his metal digits twisted and bent awkwardly. The Mercenary managed to get HAN-D to grasp his arm as tight as he could with such mangled phalanges, while he wrapped his fingers around the robot's arm before taking a big step back, attempting to pull the robot out of the mess of shattered metal and broken circuitry. HAN-D had been smashed into a huge control panel meant for multiple crew members to operate, and the beastly piece of equipment refused to let him go of him, HAN-D's twisted and crumpled limbs tangled up in the mess of exposed wires.

The Mercenary grunted in exertion, quickly realizing he was getting nowhere by simply attempting to pull the janitorial robot out through brute force. He released his grip on the machine's arm, readying his laser sword as he did so, taking it in both hands and flipping the energy blade upside down.

As the ever present sound of gunfire and metal being scorched and dented resumed, the Mercenary plunged his sword down into the mess of metal and circuitry, the energy blade easily slicing through without any resistance. He was careful to avoid cutting through HAN-D, the portions of the robot's plating that were colored gray blending into the tangle of twisted metal. Even so, the Mercenary managed to carve him free within a few seconds, each moment spent disentangling the robot further elevating the Mercenary's anxiety, his back turned to the colossal being he knew was looming not far behind.

With a final stroke, the sword wielding survivor pulled his blade from the control panel, tapping the button on the side of its grip as he took HAN-D's arm in both hands, and heaved backwards, the sound of gunfire intensifying behind them. With a terrible screech, the crippled machine was pulled upwards, still clutching his huge mallet in one mangled hand, as metal scraped against metal and wires snapped, the ear grating sounds masking the dull metallic thud that was steadily approaching from behind.

The Mercenary released his grasp as soon as HAN-D was on his wheels again, the length of the energy sword held with both hands now, bursting back to life as he whirred around frantically.

He only caught a glimpse of the massive gauntlet flying right at his face before he was sailing across the room. The Mercenary's helmet had been completely shattered by the blow, the glass-like material that it had been made of now lying in broken shards on the ground as he slammed into one of the panoramic windows on the side of the bridge, his impact visibly cracking it slightly, as his battered form slumped to the ground in a heap.

His form remained motionless, his energy sword skittering away as HAN-D gazed up at the creature towering over him. He hefted his hammer up, taking hold of its haft with both hands, as the being before him surged forward, its massive sword already in motion, the blade angled for a sweeping, horizontal strike.

HAN-D barreled straight ahead, dodging underneath the sword's arc as he forcefully slammed his hammer into the creature's leg. The alien metals composing its armor deformed and crumpled in a bit as it stumbled forward, struck off balance by the attack. HAN-D surged forward, letting another terrible blow from his hammer smash into its legs and rattling the plates. He refused to relent, spurred on by the reassuring sight of the barrage of energy slugs and laser arrows constantly impacting it, the deafening sound of a combat shotgun firing nearly continuously filling the room as wave after wave of flechette smashed into the figure from somewhere behind it, riddling its cloak with smoking holes.

Another rattling blow connected with the alien creature, HAN-D's damaged servos pumping and whirring with every last bit of mechanical strength they had left. The force of the blow was such that for the first time, it seemed as if the colossus felt pain, the shockwave of force slamming into it eliciting an unsteady grunt as its leg gave out momentarily, forcing it down on to one knee. HAN-D began to redouble his efforts upon seeing this, but the momentary victory was cut short as the massive being surged back onto both feet with a deafening cry of rage.

“ENOUGH!”

The shockwave of the gargantuan creature's voice was such that it stumbled the advancing survivors, giving it ample time to rise to its full height, and swivel around to face HAN-D in one purposeful motion, its sword flourishing as it did so.

As it turned swiftly, a brilliant streak of cerulean light cut through the orange haze of the bridge, its sword igniting with energy as it landed a master stroke on HAN-D, metal screeching as his carapace was torn asunder, the gargantuan blade biting downwards, rending through the machine from his head all the way down to his chest. His one glowing eye, vibrant and full of life to the very end, now lay shattered and broken. The reinforced glass lens that once covered HAN-D's optical port fell to the ground in a crystalline pile of shards, soon joined by an outpouring of synthetic fluids, severed wires, and sparking circuitry as the brutally elegant sword was wrenched free from the robot's husk.

HAN-D fell backwards stiffly, his twisted metallic digits still clutching his hammer as he hit the ground with a terrible metallic thud, the tattered remains of his janitorial cap coming to rest beside his ruined head in shreds as black synthetic fluids soaked into the cheap cloth hat.

Even as another wave of flechette and laser projectiles crashed into the huge creature standing before HAN-D's broken form, the alien being shimmered ethereally, before phasing out of existence.

The Miner and the Loader, who had been momentarily halted by the colossus' screech, ground to a halt a few feet from where it had just been, while their ranged companions held their fire, the raucous cacophony of gunfire finally dying down for a moment, the blaring sirens going off in the bridge filling the void of sound immediately. The Loader looked over at the miner uneasily, swearing under his breath as he glanced all around the room, searching for the disappeared giant. The others did the same, recomposing themselves for a moment as they consolidated their positions on the bridge.

But it was not to last.

Out of nowhere, a massive, blackened form burst through the floor beneath the Miner, ripping the titanium deck apart as it surged upwards, engulfing the unaware survivor in its cavernous maw and sending the Loader flying backwards from the force of its abrupt entry.

Even as the Miner was swallowed whole, he swung his pickaxes wildly, raking the creature's throat and plunging his weapons into its huge esophagus as the jagged mess of teeth in its mouth snapped shut, sealing his fate.

“Gilded Wurms, enact my retribution!” an unearthly voice commanded; the voice of the alien creature who had vanished not moments ago.

As if on command, a second, massive worm-like creature exploded into view inside the bridge, rending apart the deck as it surged upward, smashing through the ceiling and then diving back down, its hungry maw open and waiting. Its segmented body was covered in a suit of chitinous carapace that was so black it seemed to eat light itself. Glimmering golden ornaments adorned its body, contrasting sharply with the light-devouring blackness of its shell.

It plunged back down, smashing back through the roof of the bridge, tearing through metal and circuitry, its hungry mouth aimed directly at the Huntress. The worm found nothing but air to snap its jaw shut around as the Huntress blinked away in a flash of cerulean light, breaking into a quick roll as she redirected her momentum, coming to rest on one knee as she readied her hardlight bow. She took aim at the writhing masses of plated flesh snaking their way through the bridge like overgrown vines.

What happened in the split second afterward was nothing short of terrifying, as the other worm exploded into existence a good distance behind her, the worm’s maw open and waiting, but not in any way attempting to devour her. Instead, an intense spark of red light crackled into being inside its massive mouth, gaining energy and intensity quickly as it coalesced into a swirling mass of electric light with frightening haste.

The Huntress had not loosed more than a single laser arrow before a terrible hissing filled the room as a beam of red energy tore through the air, streaking towards her and overwhelming her instantly, wrapping her in a veil of intense heat. There wasn’t even any time to scream, and even if there was, her nerves were instantly incinerated, cutting off all feeling as she was wholesale vaporized, the red beam slicing through the bridge window and spiraling off into the distance.

There was a stunned silence among the remaining survivors as they witnessed the Huntress’ deletion from reality. Shocked terror was quickly replaced by the burning embers of survival, still smoldering deep inside each and every one of them as the need to live another day took over, the fire within them flaring up. The Bandit shouldered his rifle, the Enforcer planted his shield firmly, and the Loader steadied himself, his damaged hydraulic suit moving in unison with him. There was an unspoken bond between these three.

They refused to die here.

The energy beam relented a second later, only to be replaced by the second worm's attack, blue energy crackling like electricity around its head as the much smaller orbs of swirling cyan energy circling it intensified into bright white spheres of plasma, before being dispersed.

Each one melted through the ship like butter, liquefying metal as they surged in all directions. The Bandit dove to his left, just barely avoiding a generated plasma star as the Enforcer opened fire on the worms, his armor-piercing flechette tearing through the black carapace as the sinewy creature screeched with feral rage.

One worm's head streaked down, racing straight towards the Enforcer in response to his assault, prepared to tear him to shreds with the rows of jagged daggers inside the worm's maw.

The Bandit wasn't having any of it, fixating his rifle directly on the worm's eyeless head, and firing a specially charged laser slug cartridge that erupted out of his gun with a crack. The air around the slug ignited as it flew, giving the streaking purple laser trail behind it a fiery glow.

No more than a split second later, the slug connected with the worm, piercing its carapace without any trouble, ripping through its soft insides as it literally ignited the creature from within, before detonating in a pulse of brilliant purple light that seeped through the cracks in the beast's carapace. Though little external damage was apparent, the rampaging creature, filled with unimaginable ferocity not a moment earlier, slammed down into the deck beside the Enforcer who payed it no mind, continuing his salvo of flechette. The worm's pierced head slumped limply back through the hole in the deck of the bridge, the rest of its long, slithering body untangling itself from the various holes it had torn in the bridge as the weight of the majority of its body pulled it downwards, before it finally fell from the ship entirely, plummeting to the ground below.

"Jesus H Christ," the Bandit sighed to himself in exasperated relief as he scrambled to his feet to take aim at the other remaining worm, stopping short as he watched the scene unfolding before him.

An entire section of the worm's segmented carapace was torn open as the Miner pried his way out of its guts, digging his way through walls of flesh and chitin with his pickaxes as he freed himself, tumbling onto the deck without any sort of grace, covered

in corrosive stomach acid. Nonetheless, the Bandit couldn't help but want to tip his hat at the man as he bolted to his feet with unnatural vigor, letting loose a cry of anger mixed with excitement that shook even him, before leaping into the air back at the worm, pickaxes raised high.

That was one crazy bastard.

Shaking himself out of his momentary daze, the Bandit refocused himself, steadying his rifle as the Miner's weapons sunk into the worm's side, the enraged berserker of a man plunging his pickaxes in over and over in an adrenaline fueled frenzy of frothing madness. The Bandit managed to get a hold of himself long enough to squeeze off several shots, the purple trail of the laser slugs slicing through the air as each one found its mark in the side of the worm's head.

It wasn't long before the armored behemoth wilted under the combined assault of all three survivors, the Loader having chosen to instead make a break for the unconscious Mercenary over by one of the Bridge's windows. The creature fell back through the hole from which it had originally burst through, its increasingly sluggish movements not deterring the Miner from hanging onto it by continuing to plunge his weapons into it, tearing its side open one swing at a time. Even as its body began to unravel, freeing itself from the ship, the Miner refused to relent, hearty but muffled laughter resounding from beneath his welding mask.

The Bandit didn't even attempt to reason with him; there was no talking to an animal. All he could do was peer through the gaping hole in the deck of the ship, looking past wrecked circuitry and twisted metal to briefly catch a glimpse of the Miner, still chipping away at the enfeebled worm as they plummeted to the ground below like rocks. He could only shake his head at the scene, thankful for the Miner's sacrifice, but deterred by the loss of another survivor all the same.

He knew he was imagining things, but he could almost hear the thud they made as they smashed into the ground, which made everything that much more surreal. He could hardly have anticipated the kind of downright insanity to come.

There, right before his very eyes, not ten feet away, the giant-like colossus that had sicced the two worms on them phased into existence, with two quadruped golems on either side of him. The golems were made of a mix of vibrant maroon stone and metal, their short but stout legs positioned evenly at each corner of their square torso that widened into a broad chest that had abdominal musculature chiseled into it, like a

Greek breastplate. Where their arms and heads should have been, were instead mounted cannons of some sort, their wide bores elegantly grooved. Some kind of targeting module was fastened to the side of each cannon, the complex technology pulsating with red light.

“You will go no further,” said the colossus standing between his automatons, its commanding voice filling the room and pacifying the remaining survivors for a moment as it spoke.

“I am their salvation,” it said, louder this time and with more intensity as it took a purposeful step forward, now only inches away from the Bandit who began to backpedal hurriedly.

“I am the Bulwark of the Weak,” it spoke authoritatively and loudly yet calmly, bringing its sword to its side with a flourish of the gargantuan blade, its cloak flourishing with its movements, the heavy, punishing thud of its metallic boots the chorus to its voice.

“I AM PROVIDENCE.”

The hulking colossus known as Providence raised its free arm from beneath its cloak, its gauntleted hand glowing with a violet-pink aura of energy that rivaled the sun in its intensity, blinding the survivors and forcing them to shield their eyes, even beneath their helmets. It was clear that Providence was done playing games, as an orb of crackling violet materialized around the Enforcer, encasing him in a bubble of unstable energy that seemed to dance and morph with Providence’s slightest hand movements; the twitch of a single finger forced the sphere into an even more unstable state as it overloaded rapidly, growing in intensity and size as the Enforcer was paralyzed by the incredible amounts of electricity coursing through him.

The orb abruptly imploded, shocking the Enforcer viciously, causing him to spasm uncontrollably, before reforming itself in an instant around him, encapsulating him within the electrical prison once more, as Providence looked on apathetically.

The Enforcer struggled doggedly against the arcane orb, fighting tooth and nail to try and drag himself out of its crippling clutches, but found no reprieve, as the darkness trailing Providence rose up from the floor to seal his fate like an executioner.

Providence’s own shadow wrenched itself free from its place on the floor, tearing itself into three dimensions, and standing beside its owner, mimicking its every

movement. The manifestation of darkness shimmered strangely, as if it were unstable and fleeting, and Providence itself was visibly strained in maintaining the shadow clone.

The orb of violet energy encasing the Enforcer swirled and crackled violently for a moment, the maelstrom of power darkening into a deep, smoky black as its potency was amplified twofold.

Providence clenched his hand into a fist a moment later, and the shadowy doppelganger followed suit, before dissipating into a veil of wispy black smoke that faded quickly. The dark orb of overloading energy responded violently as Providence's shadow dispersed. The swirling maelstrom of coalescing power collapsed in on itself instantaneously, before rippling outwards in a pulse of intense force that knocked the Bandit off his feet.

The Enforcer, though sealed within a suit of some of the heaviest riot plate available, was utterly torn asunder by the arcane explosion centered directly on him. His smoldering, limp form crumpled to the floor in a pile, wispy tendrils of acrid smoke drifting off of him as his heavy shield clattered down on top of him. Metal and ceramic plating had been reduced to molten slag, rivulets of the stuff slowly pouring down the sides of his body, mixing with and boiling the streams of blood that seemed to pour from the several molten rents in the Enforcer's armor. Even his visor had been liquefied, the reinforced glass-like crystal that it was made of now brutally fused with whatever remained of his face, still concealed beneath the slag of his helmet.

Providence retracted its arm, the plated limb disappearing back into the savaged remains of its once majestic cloak. It looked down at the grisly remains of the Enforcer for a moment, its central orb of flaring light studying the corpse intently, watching and listening to the sound that the dead man's blood made as it was boiled by the molten remains of his armor. The colossus looked on in seeming apathy, before turning to face the Bandit with a flourish of its cloak, the two robots flanking it turning in unison, their tops halves swiveling independent of their legs to follow Providence's gaze.

A dark shadow loomed before the dazed Bandit, the hired gun just barely able to steady himself in order to remain standing as the alien figure towering over him came within arms reach. His instinctual response kicked in as the metallic thud of the colossus' boots registered, the old outlaw whirling around to face the giant with his rifle at the ready, his duster flourishing as he did so.

The giant set before him matched the small man's dextrous speed and more, as a huge, carapaced arm shot towards him. The Bandit pressed down on the trigger, a single crackling laser slug spewing forth from the barrel of the gun, smashing into the alien's gauntleted hand as it closed around the end of the weapon tightly. The round scorched the giant's palm, but did little more as the laser rifle was wrenched forcefully from the Bandit's desperate grasp. The Bandit, having attempted to hold on to the gun in vain stumbled forward uneasily, crashing into one of the behemoth's plated legs.

He cursed openly and profusely, spewing forth every cuss word known to man, and some known only to the other races of the galaxy, as he attempted to balance himself out, furious at the thought of having his weapon snatched away like a toy from a misbehaved child. He could only watch in dazed anger as Providence crushed the weapon in his hand, the exquisitely crafted rifle crunching and sparking as it was reduced to scrap metal, its purple energy core flickering and dying with a pathetic whimper.

His stream of profanity wasn't to last though, as Providence let the ruined gun clatter to the floor in a heap of twisted, broken metal, before reaching down and encompassing the Bandit in a steely death grip. Huge metal fingers wrapped around the outlaw who thrashed against his iron prison like an injured animal, even as the life was choked out of him.

Within a few short moments, a blinding light overtook the Bandit's vision as he was brought to 'eye' level with Providence, the alien creature's singular glowing orb of an eye burning with incredible intensity as wisps of ethereal, white hot fire drifted upward like smoke. The Bandit was forced to look away; attempting to gaze into Providence's eye was like staring at the sun.

“By my will, this shall be finished.”

Providence's voice cut through the din of the bridge like it was nothing, his commanding aura wholly overtaking the blaring sirens, whirring alarms, and the whistling of the air as it flooded into the bridge from the numerous holes its Gilded Wurms had left in the hull and deck of the ship.

“T-two w-words, pardner,” the Bandit managed to groan out, just barely audible, but confident he had caught the alien's attention by the way it brought him closer to his luminous eye.

“Lights out.”

All of a sudden, a massive hydraulic gauntlet crashed into Providence’s arm, gripping his thick vambrace with a mechanical tightness as the Loader yanked the giant down with all his exoskeleton’s might, Providence’s grip on the Bandit faltering just long enough to allow the outlaw to wriggle his way free, dropping to the ground unceremoniously and scrambling away to the other side of the room.

Despite the momentary victory, Providence quickly reversed the situation as he retaliated, gripping the metal cable connecting the Loader’s rocket hand to his suit, and pulling forcefully, lifting the man off his feet, and sending him flying across the room towards Providence. The golems flanking Providence angled their guns, training their sights on the Loader even as he sailed across the bridge, before opening fire with a salvo of yellow energy bolts that sliced through the air, each one slamming into the mid-flight Loader without mercy.

The battered, smoking husk of the Loader crashed into the deck beside Providence as the salvo of energy blasts relented for a moment, the heavily wounded survivor skittering across the floor in an uncontrollable tumble, before finally coming to a rest. His hydraulic loading suit had been charred and scorched all over, his resistant fatigues beneath it torn and ripped open in several places, cauterized flesh poking through as the smell of burnt flesh filled the room.

Providence wrenched the Loader’s mechanical gauntlet free from its own arm, taking the hydraulic hand in its own, and reeling the Loader in, the man’s scorched body dragging across the floor with a terrible metallic screech, kicking up sparks as he went. It wasn’t long before the barely alive Loader was resting at the feet of the colossus, who promptly lifted him up by his distended gauntlet’s cable. The Loader dangled precariously before Providence, barely able to see out of his smashed, light blue visor-plate. He hung there for a moment, the radiating and blinding light emanating from the giant’s eye overtaking him, wrapping him in a veil of intense whiteness.

He knew his time drew near.

“Go ... g-go to hell,” was all the battered and beaten man could grind through his broken teeth, bearing through the wracking pain as best he could. Nothing came of it right away, but shortly after, through his muddled, agony ridden senses, the Loader could feel himself floating, sailing through the air as he was cast aside by the giant with incredible force.

He could feel himself smashing through something, the crystalline shards slicing and slashing at his body through his fatigues, raking him terribly as he became dully aware of the free falling sensation asserting itself. His dim, bloodied eyes, shot open for a split second as he realized the flaming husk of the UES Contact Light was quickly drifting away from him. Reacting as best he could, he snapped his one remaining hydraulic gauntlet back into its arm socket, before instantly firing it back at the ship.

A yellow, metal hand latched onto the side of the vessel, near where one of the bridge's window's had been shattered, the mechanical gauntlet sinking its clunky metallic digits into the hull of the ship.

The whiplash effect of hanging onto an object losing altitude, and going very fast, was less than pleasant, and the Loader quickly found himself being yanked along at great velocity, attached only by the metal cable connecting his gauntlet to the rest of his suit.

He steeled himself as best he could, fighting through the incapacitating pain, and beginning to reel himself in, recalling himself to his gauntlet. Inch by inch, he drew closer to the ship, flapping and flailing in the intense winds like a ragdoll, but doggedly hanging on regardless. A glimmer of hope reasserted itself within him as he came closer and closer to reconnecting with his gauntlet.

That's when *it* appeared at the side of the bridge, looking down at him through where the panoramic window had once been, seemingly wholly unaffected by the pressure difference inside and outside the ship. It hardly moved, its single, central eye gazing down at him with contempt. By all rights, it should have been getting ejected out the side of the ship standing so close to a shattered window, especially on a ship that was barely maintaining altitude. But there was no sign of struggle, no sign of desperately trying to anchor oneself down so as not to be thrown out the side of the ship.

Providence calmly glanced over to the Loader's gauntlet, then back at him, then back to the gauntlet, before brandishing its massive, axe-like sword. The Loader could only watch in frustrated horror, desperately attempting to reel himself in faster, as the colossus, who refused to obey the laws of physics, severed the metal cable connecting him to his dug in gauntlet with a simple swordstroke.

Providence watched the stub of cable still attached to the gauntlet embedded in the side of the ship's hull, its cable flailing in the wind, before gazing down at the Loader in full free fall. It only managed to catch a glimpse of the frenzied, defiant man, apathetically observing his final moments as he thrashed and flailed like a stuck pig, before he was dragged out of sight by the speed at which the UES Contact Light was going.

The giant swiveled around, turning away from the void the window had once filled, and gazed down at the Bandit from across the room.

The outlaw was thoroughly outgunned at this point. He didn't even have a weapon at all anymore. He was having a hard time maintaining his footing with all of the holes and hull breaches that dotted the bridge. Even the electromagnets he and the other survivors had had embedded in the heels of their boots were beginning to falter under the incredible pressure pushing into the ship from all of its puncture wounds. He could feel himself sliding ever so slightly as he stared down the behemoth set before him.

He looked at the floor for a moment, hiding his dimming visor beneath the rim of his cyan stetson.

"So this is it pardner, in'it? Reckon its the end of the line, huh?" he said, mustering all of his courage and wit. If his years as a mercenary, gunfighter, and outlaw had taught him anything, it was that if you were going down, you better have some damn fine last words.

He dared not look up from the ground, but he could almost sense the imposing presence of the colossus drawing nearer with every fleeting moment.

"Y'know, there ain't any such thing as winnin' in this game pardner," he said, his voice becoming hoarse as the stomp of metal boots grew louder, a dark shadow falling over him. He let his hand drift to the cylindrical capsules fastened to his ammo belts, slung across his chest beneath his duster in an X shape. He frantically began uncapping each row of metal cylinders with one hand, each one revealing a small red button.

The rumbling footsteps came to a stop as it reached a deafening volume. The Bandit could now see the giant's feet, even though he hadn't looked away from the nice spot of deck he had been staring at the entire time. He continued to ignore the giant, as

he finished uncapping every last explosive charge fastened to his chest, running his fingers along each row of red buttons hastily, pressing down with just enough force to arm them.

“You see friend, where I come from, victory is measured in the number of scars you can get before you croak ... “ the Bandit said, pausing for a moment as a low, intermittent beeping made itself apparent as he finished arming all of the bombs attached to his ammunition belts, before cracking the slightest smile beneath his damaged helmet.

He couldn't help but mind his manners, taking his trusty stetson off mockingly, and placing it against his chest as he finally met Providence's gaze head on as he finished his sentence, the impatient giant already rearing back with its sword for a decisive blow.

“ ... and big fella, I reckon this is gonna leave a *mighty* fine scar.”

As the final word left his lips, the intermittent beeping came to a head, transitioning into a long, whining drone that lasted only a split second before the belt of bombs detonated in a fiery explosion that swept outward with such force that the shockwave was visible, and even Providence was thrown backwards a few uneasy steps, the giant stumbling awkwardly before managing to find its footing.

Both of the automatons flanking Providence had been viciously thrown aside by the blast. One skittered away clunkily, the quadruped gun platform tumbling over itself several times before dropping down into one of the many rents left in the bridge's floor from Providence's late Gilded Wurms, and disappearing out of sight.

The other mechanical construct managed to fare a bit better, having only been launched backwards like a ragdoll to crash into one of the many damaged control seat stations still left on the bridge, one of its legs sailing through the air alongside it, sparking and flaming, completely severed by the explosion. It smashed down into it with the terrible screech of metal on metal, as sparks flew and an electrical fire broke out, the flames roaring with ferocity as the damaged machine attempted to pry itself out of the tangle of twisted metal and circuitry, despite missing one of its frontal legs. The angry blaze quickly grew, engulfing the machine entirely, scorching its maroon armor plating terribly as it continued to struggle, charring and blackening its outsides as its inner circuitry began to feel the affects of the heat.

Providence payed the desperate machine no mind as it regained its composure, eyeing the massive, smoking dent in the floor where the Bandit had sacrificed himself. It took a step forward, closing the distance between itself and the mini crater left in the floor, all the while eyeing the tattered, burning embers of what was left of the Bandit, which is to say, not much.

It stood there, staring down at the dent in the floor, before craning its head back to look at the still struggling mechanical golem, wedged inside the shattered remains of a control station.

“Open ... the bulkhead,” it managed to groan out between ragged breaths.

The machine instantly stopped struggling, as an eerie sense of calm washed over it, the robot freezing in place as a low hum began to emanate from it, before the dim light running through the grooves in its carved stone carapace flickered, and were extinguished entirely.

Providence broke into a labored, brisk pace, heading across the ruined remains of the bridge, straight for the bulkhead door the survivors had entered through not so very long ago. Its gait was marked by a distinct limp, grunts of exertion going up between every laborious, tiresome step. It was clearly struggling to keep on going, after everything it had been through.

Bits of charred, broken metal tore itself free from Providence’s nearly destroyed chestplate, the interlocking plates of bullet hole riddled carapace shredded and blasted to pieces. Bits of searing slag dripped off of its breastplate in thick gobs, rivulets of the intensely hot molten metal scorching and charring what little was left intact of its armor. Its chest was covered by a writhing mass of shifting blackness beneath the tattered remains of its armor, and this layer of darkness oozed a strange, black substance that flowed freely and boiled with a sharp hiss when the dripping trails of it met with the rivulets of slag.

As Providence limped towards the bulkhead, it reached up with its free hand, covering its grievous chest wound with one hand, attempting to stop the flow of the viscous black substance, all to no avail. The thick ooze seeped through Providence’s gauntleted fingers, staining the burgundy metal as the colossus grunted and heaved in pain, attempting to suppress it.

Yet so determined and single-minded in its stride, so intent on ignoring its crippling wounds was Providence, that it failed to notice the dim burst of cyan light on the bridge platform above it. The suffocating haze of red and orange alarm lights, combined with the blaring sirens and automated warnings, mixed in with the increasingly intense whistling and whirring of air forcing itself into the bridge through the many rents in the ship's hull masked the flash of light incredibly well, and Providence continued on doggedly towards the door as the interlocking metal slabs ground against each other, before slowly parting.

As the gap grew wider, it became apparent that something had been propped up against the door; a corpse. The ravaged remains of an Eldur Lemurian, a large, tan, humanoid reptilian beast fell through the doorway, hitting the ground with a sickly thud. Its leathery skin was soaked in blood, numerous perforations visible all across its body, vivid red liquid pouring from every one of them as a pool of the stuff began to form around it.

Providence ground to an unsteady halt upon seeing this, catching itself from giving in to its creeping weakness, just barely managing to remain standing, and gripping its massive sword tightly at the sight. It let its central orb of light gaze into the red tinted darkness of the hallway leading up to the entrance.

It was a bloodbath.

Strewn down the entire hall were *dozens* of corpses, all Elder Lemurians. The ship was tilted at such an angle that it caused all of the escaped blood, pouring from the hundreds of smoking gashes and wounds, to pool into a literal river of blood and flow downward, into the bridge. The stream of liquid life gushed into the bridge, rushing past Providence, the red river breaking around its feet. Providence held firm, gripping its sword tighter, its 'eye' flaring up spectacularly as something shifted at the end of the hallway.

It was the Commando.

He was awash in blood, his wrecked semi-powered armor now more red than orange. The tattered remains of his black jumpsuit were hardly there anymore, leaving only bits of destroyed and bloodied flesh to poke through at the joints and midsection. His bulbous, orange tinted space helmet was cracked and shattered, but was still somehow managing to hold itself together, despite the damage it had sustained. Much

like the helmet, it was amazing that the Commando was holding himself together as well as he was. It was a miracle he was standing at all, from the looks of it.

He stood hunched forward and limp, like he had gone through the fires of hell and come out worse for it. His armor was scorched and torn up, his flesh charred and slashed, deep, claw pattern gashes bleeding profusely, despite his attempts to cover the grizzly wounds with one of his hands; the red liquid simply seeped through his fingers, staining what was left of his black jumpsuit's gloves. He about looked ready to drop to his knees and resign himself to his fate, but he simply stood there, unfazed by the giant staring him down from across the bloodied corridor.

The faux silence between them was palpable; the sirens and warnings were still going off, but there was an eery dampening, almost complete removal of sound between the two, at least in their minds. This moment was too important to be bothered by outside forces, by unimportant disturbances such as the blaring 'CRITICAL ALTITUDE WARNING: 10,000 FEET' resounding through the bridge in the electronic female voice of the ship's damaged, just barely functioning AI.

The Commando didn't need a verbal confirmation as to what went down inside the bridge while he was locked outside; the blood still dripping from Providence's sword was more than enough. The brutalized survivor's gaze fell to the floor as he cleared his throat, managing to find his voice, ragged and hoarse as it was.

"What ... what did you do to them?" he choked out, knowing the truth, but feeling obligated to confirm it regardless. He stood there, staring at the floor for a few moments, before the giant's voice hit him like a wall.

"What had to be done."

The Commando couldn't help but smirk at that remark, morbid as it was to smile at a time like this. He could feel himself shaking his head ever so slightly, chuckling under his breath; it was all too much to really take in and process all at once, that they had come so far, overcome impossible odds time and time again, only to be turned away just as they were about to reach the cusp of salvation. When a burden becomes too much to bear, one can't help but laugh at the absurdity, the implacability of the forces set against them.

“So, that’s it then. It’s just me, isn’t it?” the Commando managed to rasp, wrenching his gaze from the floor, and staring into the creature’s shining eye despite the blinding radiance of it.

The injured colossus standing across the hallway nodded ever so slowly in silent affirmation.

“Last man standing,” the Commando managed to croak out in a beaten, exhausted voice. A mixture of defiant anger and resigned acceptance raged within him, battling for control, neither side able to get the upper hand, leaving him in an oddly calm, almost zen like state.

“You know how this must end.”

Providence’s voice cut through the whirring din of sirens and alarms, floating over to the Commando with an otherworldly presence, a commanding aura about it that startled the grizzled survivor, shaking him out of his concentration for a moment. He looked up, taking in the sight of the giant before him, and sighed deeply.

He had come so far, been through so much, and *this* was how he died? He could hardly believe that after everything, it had been all for naught; he had been *this* close to getting away, to getting off this god forsaken planet.

“Yeah ... “ the Commando said solemnly, managing to shakily raise his right arm, his grip tightening around his pistol as he centered it on a vulnerable looking rent in the colossus’ chest plate. The wound was oozing some sort of viscous, black liquid that the Commando could only assume was the creature’s blood. “ ... yeah I do know.”

The two stood there, staring one another down as another unheeded altitude warning played in the background. The Commando took one last, deep and full breath as Providence’s voice floated down the gore strewn hall like an execution sentence.

“As you wish.”

The subtle sound of a trigger being pulled back momentarily was drowned out by the instantaneous crack of a bullet being released from the Commando’s pistol, the shot ripping through the air with deadly intent, spiraling in on its target with all of this one man’s grit and capacity, all of his pertinacity. This was it, his final, quite literally, shot at surviving, all coalesced into a single, shredding bullet ...

... and it missed.

Providence was suddenly gone, vanishing into thin air for the briefest of moments as the bullet whizzed past where it had been only a second earlier. The Commando didn't even have time for his heart to sink before the colossus phased back into reality, not two inches from his face, towering over him.

He attempted to react, swinging both of his auto pistols up with what little of his strength was left, only to be met with an iron grip around his midsection, crushing him painfully. The sudden jolt of intense pain that shot through the Commando forced him to release his grip on one of his pistols, just barely managing to hold onto the other one through sheer force of will. He gripped the weapon as tightly as he could, swinging it around and training it on the rent in the giant's ruined chest.

"Die! *Die!*" his desperate, rasping voice was overtaken by the flurry of cracks ringing out from his pistol, as he rapidly fired into the giant's chest, each bullet tearing into the wrecked portion of armor, finding its home within the creature's chest. He squeezed down on the trigger of his auto pistol forcefully, resulting in the morbidly satisfying sound of flesh being ripped apart, of bones splintering, and of blood spurting out. The sudden assault was over in a moment, as the pistol's magazine ran dry, and the Commando, still pressing the trigger down in reluctant refusal to accept that it was over, grit his teeth in a combination of pain and disbelief.

"Die! *Why won't you die!?*" his voice was hardly audible, a ragged, sorrowful rasp. "*Why won't you die ...*"

A sharp clank resounded through the hallway as the Commando willfully let go of his handgun, the weapon clattering to the floor loudly. Despite everything, even the fact that the gushing wound in Providence's chest was gruesome, perhaps even fatal given time, it hadn't been enough to bring the goliath down.

Providence pulled the bloodied survivor in close, bringing the broken man closer to its own face, before speaking solemnly.

"Because I am not yet finished with you," it said, its normally powerful and booming voice somewhat weaker, struggling to win out over the blaring noise aboard the damaged vessel. Providence was still standing, but only just it seemed.

The Commando forced himself to stare right into the giant's blinding eye, white hot streaks of energy flaring up around it violently. A million thoughts raced through his head as he stared into the goliath's glowing eye, but one single question pushed itself to the forefront of his train of thought, one that had plagued him ever since this mess had started just a few short days ago.

He could remember exactly how he had felt, the confusion, the panic, the anger seeing this *thing* through one of the security monitors, appearing out of nowhere, and vanishing just as suddenly. Watching it slam its sword into the deck of the cargo bay explosively, witnessing it freeing all of the creature in captivity aboard the ship; those damned overgrown, fire breathing lemurians. It had all happened so fast; one moment he was manning his security post vigilantly, the next he was making for an escape pod like a coward, refusing to confront an entity that had critically damaged an entire ship with a *freaking sword*.

But fate's cold like that, and even though he had ran away from confronting this thing, his bid for survival had brought him right back to it. It was strange, thinking about things in hindsight. He had been doomed from the start.

He didn't know if he'd get an answer to his simple, yet gnawing question but after everything, it was worth a shot. With a groan, the Commando rasped out a single word.

"Why?"

The pathetic sound of the beaten man's voice hung in the air for a long time, Providence going as still as a statue, visibly tensing up. It appeared that this simple question had struck a chord with the giant.

Or perhaps it was something else, the Commando realized, as he managed to crane his head down just far enough to see a column of cerulean energy poking through Providence's chest wound, the beam of light searing the black ooze seeping from the gash with a sickly hiss.

Providence suddenly jerked backwards, whirling around and hurling the Commando down the hall with a mighty toss, sending the battered survivor soaring through the air, only to crash down unceremoniously in the center of the bridge. He tumbled viciously over himself several times, each uncontrollable roll accompanied by the din of his ravaged metal armor scraping and screeching against the floor, before finally coming to a full stop near the head of the bridge.

His chest was still moving up and down, taking in shallow, ragged breaths. The taste of blood filled his mouth and his vision was blurry, but he had managed to survive the shattering throw. He was alive, but only just.

The Commando willed himself to turn himself over, to be able to see what was going on in the carnage laden hallway. With a pained groan, and the crunch of broken bones, the battered survivor managed to roll himself over, his somehow still intact helmet clinking against the floor precariously, as if it might shatter at any moment.

Through his dulled senses, his dazed vision, he was just barely able to make out the blob of the colossus holding something in one hand and rearing back with its other. The dark, blueish blob clutched in the giant's hand appeared to be moving, struggling and squirming violently against Providence's iron grasp, but it appeared to be all for naught as a colossal, sweeping sword stroke from the colossus cleaved through the midsection of the struggling, dark blob.

Its lower half fell to the floor with a sickly squelch, but the colossus refused to release the upper half. Instead, Providence looked directly at the Commando, its flaring orb of an eye clearly visible even through his blurred vision. It began walking towards him calmly, slowly, a noticeable limp in the giant's gait.

Every thudding, metallic step grew louder, cutting through the din of the bridge more and more, even as the Commando was being slowly sucked towards a breach in the ship's hull, a resounding automated warning shouting calmly in the same distorted, electronic voice.

"CRITICAL ALTITUDE WARNING: 5,000 FEET," the AI notified them desperately, but it was for naught as the Commando was unable to even drag himself over to a control station to attempt to stop the ship's shaky descent. All he could do was lay there as Providence came to a stop a few paces away from him, looking down at him apathetically, before tossing the other half of the darkened blob towards him carefully.

It skittered across the floor, sliding to a stop just a few inches in front of the Commando's cracked helmet, the battered man freezing up instantly upon recognizing what the blob was.

It was the Mercenary, or at least, his top half. His innards, no longer encapsulated within his body, spilled forth from the carcass unceremoniously, blood

gushing from the destroyed form's insides, and pooling around the body. Deep red blood was darkened further by the red emergency that flashed intermittently, accompanied by a wailing siren.

The Commando's gaze swept up and down the ruined carcass, taking in every gruesome detail, from the way the Mercenary's bulbous helmet, similar to his own, had been shattered, shards of his visor impaling the late man's face, to the crushed, sparking hilt of his energy sword, still grasped firmly in one hand, now forever held there by rigor mortis. Despite everything though, the Commando couldn't help but silently thank the deceased survivor for intervening, albeit at a terrible cost; he had thought he too had perished with the rest of them, and so seeing him alive, if even for just a moment, gave the Commando the slightest glimmer of hope.

That glimmer was quickly snuffed out though, as a massive metal boot came crashing down on the head of the corpse of the Mercenary. His skull splintered and exploded outwards in an explosion of torn flesh and greymatter, followed by a sickly outpouring of blood, gushing from the disfigured remnants of the Mercenary's head.

The Commando willed himself to look up at the giant before him, wrenching his gaze away from the ghastly, gore caked boot beside his own head.

"It's time," said the colossus somewhat laboriously, its words slamming into the Commando like a sledgehammer. It was clear Providence was struggling to stand, fighting against its grievous injuries. The gash in the giant's chest had been widened by the Mercenary's efforts, and indeed, the wound had been carved up viciously. It was a gruesome sight to behold, what with all of the viscous black ooze gushing out of it. But what really caught the Commando's attention, was the dab of red mixed in with all the black.

At first, he thought it might just be the Mercenary's or even his own blood, but after observing for a moment, witnessing more of the red liquid pouring out of the giant's chest wound, mixing in with the black gunk, he couldn't help but force himself to speak up.

"Y-you're, *human?*" the Commando choked out hastily, attempting to stall his demise.

What happened in the moments that followed could only be described as euphorically satisfying.

Providence, who had been clearly struggling to remain standing in the hallway, *before* the Mercenary's assault, began to feel the full impact of its wounds, succumbing to the gash in its chest as one of its legs gave out, forcing it down onto one knee as it grabbed at its wound desperately, attempting to cover it, perhaps even staunch the bleeding.

From where the Commando was, he could hear the behemoth actually, truly breathing shallow, ragged breaths. He watched as the giant's glowing eye dimmed considerably, its radiant, blinding glow fading away until it wasn't even able to cut through the red haze filling the bridge.

"Y-yeah, i-it is time. We're b-both gonna die here pal," the Commando managed to rasp out mockingly upon witnessing the colossus' moment of weakness. He watched intently as Providence's sword slipped from its grasp, clattering to the floor with a metallic clank, as the giant removed its hand from its still bleeding wound. The colossus tensed up as its other leg gave out, dropping onto both knees, before falling backwards weightily, its armor clattering against the metal floor of the bridge.

As its head slammed into the ground, its crown slipped from its spot, skittering away as the juggernaut's central eye was extinguished completely, flickering out with a whimper. Its crown rolled precariously, circling back towards Providence in a wide arc, before brushing up against its limp arm, and coming to rest there. The Commando could only look on in a mix of awe, shock, and euphoric accomplishment at the motionless giant.

And so the two lay there for a time, several moments passing in faux silence between them, before a ragged, rasping voice floated up from the giant's form.

"I suppose it is time, after all."

"You never ... answered my question," the Commando immediately followed up, pausing in between words to catch his breath, his breathing labored and unsteady.

"I am not as alien as you think. I ... I am no more inhuman than what you've let yourself become," Providence spoke coldly, gasping for breath, wheezing hoarsely. The Commando thought about it for a second, and indeed it, or perhaps *he* was right about him. On the planet below, after he had abandoned ship, he had been forced to make ... sacrifices, to ensure his survival.

The UES Contact Light, the ship he was hired to protect as part of the security team was a cargo ship, a space train of sorts. It carried mundanities, like advanced medical equipment, robotic assistants, and sealed shipments of weapons, sure, but it harbored much more *exotic* cargo as well. Some of it, in fact much of it, was illegal, considered unethical or otherwise inhumane. Everything from parasitic symbiotes that increased cellular mitosis, to mysterious vials of green gunk that increased one's regenerative capabilities. When the ship had been damaged, the cargo bay was the first thing to go, and so much of its load had rained down onto the planet below. The Commando, along with the other survivors had been forced to make difficult decisions; how far would they go, how much of their humanity would they give up in favor of living to see another dawn?

"What you did, what *all* of you did, it was selfish. You traded away everything that made you human, and for what? To go on living, as a deformed, mutated husk? You're lying there, still breathing, but all I see when I look at you, is a hollow shell. You died a very long time ago, Jason," Providence said, its normally booming, audacious voice having been reduced to a hoarse groan. Its words still carried weight however.

"What choice did we have ... and how did you know my name?" the Commando groaned out, forcing himself to sit up, pushing himself off the ground with concerted effort. It hurt to breathe, let alone move, but he wanted a better look at the downed giant in front of him.

He glanced over his shoulder, to the head of the bridge, to the captain's terminal; the sharp, crushing pain coursing through his body made it seem so very far away. He sighed in exasperation, knowing it was too late to stop the ship from crashing now, even if he did manage to drag himself over to it. He was going down with the ship, there were no two ways about it; he might as well attempt to squeeze some answers out of the wounded goliath before he bit it himself.

Ragged laughter interrupted Jason's thoughts, spurring him to turn back towards the fallen mountain of a man. He looked on intently, Providence's face just out of view from where he was sitting.

"For ten thousand years, I have held vigil over this world, kept it safe. I've watched entire civilizations crumble to dust, witnessed the blind cruelty within the hearts of men time and time again. I've done battle with entire armies; I've made gods bleed ...

and yet, here I am, on the brink of death ... I suppose it was my folly, thinking I was ever anything more than just a man.”

“Whatever you are, you’re not human, and even if you were, you’re not anymore,” Jason said matter of factly. He was met with more hoarse laughter from Providence.

“What I did, was for something *bigger* than myself. I gave up my humanity willingly, to become something more; to become Providence. What I did, was done out of my guilt for my past mistakes. Becoming ... *this*, was my way of atoning for my missteps in life,” Providence retorted strongly, putting as much strength into his words as possible.

“Please, enlighten me then pal, whatever was so terrible that you felt obligated to give up being human?” Jason asked sardonically, attempting to get a better view of Providence’s hidden face. Sure, he himself had become less, or perhaps more than human during his time on the planet below, but he had been given no choice. He had to do what he had done, or else he’d have died. His actions were justified, in the name of survival.

“I would ask you the same thing, if the answer weren’t so brutally clear,” Providence fired back, suddenly beginning to move ever so slightly, shifting himself subtly, before groaning as he forced himself to sit upright, allowing Jason to finally see his face.

Except there wasn’t one. Indeed, Providence lacked any kind of facial features, and his skin wasn’t even visible. A thick, shifting layer of *something* appeared to be stretched over the entirety of his face, the strange, smooth material flowing down into his neck and presumably covering his entire body. It was unnerving to say the least.

“I killed the last Providence,” the giant said coldly, staring straight at Jason.

“*W-What?*” was the only thing Jason could even come up, rasping the question out hoarsely.

“Providence is not a name, it is a title. I gave up my name a very long time ago, when I donned the armor of Providence; when I put on this crown,” Providence said, pausing for a moment and looking over at his helmet by his side, grunting in pain as blood and black gunk continued to seep from his chest wound, “ There have been many

of us throughout history, some human, some not, but regardless of who carries the title, one thing has remained constant; we all eventually fail, we all fall, given enough time. I am still very much mortal.”

Jason took a moment to take everything he had said in, and the blaring sirens and crippling pain wracking his body didn't help his focus, but he believed he comprehended everything that had been said, even if it was all a lot to take in.

“But ... *why?* Why *this* planet, of all planets? Why here? Why attack a defenseless cargo vessel?” Jason inquired, still hungry for the gnawing question of ‘why’.

Providence shifted uneasily, grunting painfully as he brought a blood soaked gauntlet to his chest, covering his wound in vain, before replying.

“There are only so many planets in this galaxy, and only a handful of them foster any kind of life, much less intelligent life. As for your ship, and your crew, they were not directly to blame for my attack, and as such, none of them were harmed. They all made it out safely; I teleported them to the spaceport they initially set out from. You, and your colleagues could have made it home safely, but you chose to abandon ship before I was able to make contact with you. After that, well, the things you and the others did were simply unforgivable; you ransacked and murdered innocent, *sentient* creatures in my care. *You* sealed your own fate,” Providence said emphatically, raising his free hand weakly, and pointing a gauntleted finger at Jason accusingly.

“T-They ... they're alive?” Jason stuttered out in disbelief, a flood of emotions surging forth; anger, grief, bewilderment and shock all fought for control of his expression.

Providence simply nodded solemnly.

“Humans, the galaxy's greatest good, the galaxy's greatest evil. They came to this planet, searching for fortune, and they found it. They mined mountains into craters, enslaved entire races, and stole from both the natural and manufactured wonders of this world. They forced my hand, and they paid dearly for it,” Providence spoke grimly, his words trailing off into silence, before he burst into a fit of violent, gargling coughing.

“My time grows short,” he said, recovering from his outburst.

“CRITICAL ALTITUDE WARNING: 2,000 FEET” the ship’s AI shouted calmly, interrupting Providence.

“As does yours Jason. Take a moment, to consider your past deeds. Look back, and reflect as we approach our final destination,” the strange giant said sullenly, shifting in his spot, reaching over to his side, and gripping his crown shaped helmet firmly in one hand. Jason looked on intently, eyes going wide as he witnessed Providence’s form shimmering weakly with cerulean energy.

“Just know, even the dead can know redemption ...” Providence rasped out cryptically, his voice trailing off as he tossed his helmet over to Jason, the crown clattering to the floor beside him.

“ ... there must *always* be a Providence.”

With that, Providence’s shimmering form began to dissolve, crumbling to dust, starting from his head down. His armor and torn up shawl collapsed in on itself, metal clattering against metal as Providence’s form disintegrated beneath it. Jason could only look on in shocked astonishment as the giant turned to dust right before his very eyes, leaving him sitting there, alone, his final words still reverberating within him.

He managed to shake himself out of his shocked stupor just long enough to glance over to his left, where the crown had come to rest beside him. He hesitantly reached out to it with one hand, grasping the huge helmet firmly.

It was in that moment, as Jason made contact with the crown, that everything became so intensely clear. A rushing, stunning sensation coursed through Jason, as the latent power within the helmet seeped into him. It was as if Providence himself was *inside* his head, speaking to his own internal voice directly. Every single one of his questions, as it came to the forefront of his mind, was answered fully and instantly.

Everything, all of it, made sense in that moment. The strange sword? A layer of condensed plasma held within a uniquely sword shaped containment field. The teleportation? A molecular relay embedded within the gemstones of the crown. The black gunk, the weird, shifting bodysuit covering Providence? A symbiotic collection of nanomachines that were housed and repaired by the armor he wore, which was made out of a self-repairing metal-alloy with kinetic repulsion fields embedded in them; his “eye” was simply the refractive, iridescent sensor arrays made up by the nanomachines, allowing him increased, nearly preternatural senses.

These machines were what had repaired his wounds for so long, enhanced his physique, and kept him alive far beyond his normal lifespan. Even so, they had limits.

His wounds had been too grievous to mend this time around. Information about these little marvels of science flooded into Jason, revealing that they operated by repairing and reversing damage to strands of DNA after sufficient cellular damage had been sustained, by replacing and rejuvenating the wearer's telomeres.

The catch, however, was that with each reparation, the telomeres degraded slightly, shortening, and over the course of ten thousand years, they had been pushed far past their limit, time and time again, degenerating into uselessness. Providence had endured too much; he was simply too old, his telomeres too short, to have any hope of recovery. The symbiote had reached the limit of what it could do for him.

But perhaps, not for Jason. As he sat there, a million thoughts racing through his mind, his consciousness being flooded with a sea of information, he took the helmet in both hands, holding it in his lap, and gazing down into the shiny burgundy metal, finding his own distorted reflection staring back at him.

“CRITICAL ALTITUDE WARNING: 1,000 FEET. IMPACT IMMINENT.”

The AI's notice was unable to shake Jason out of his stupor as he sat there, staring down at himself through his cracked helmet. As knowledge poured into him, a stark realization dawned on him, Providence's voice resonating within him, even though he tried to deny what he knew to be true, what the power of the crown was telling him to be true. He began to shake his head ever so slightly, muttering under his breath incoherently as it all became clear.

'I-I'm ... the *bad guy*? No ... nonono, that's ... no this can't ... what I did wasn't righteous, but *goddamnit* what I did, I did to survive! I had no choice!' Jason shouted to no one in particular, attempting to rage against the voice of Providence in his mind.

You had all the choice in the world Jason, and you made your choice.

The age-old guardian's thoughts intermingled with his own, an internal conversation like he'd never experienced before taking place as the UES Contact Light hurtled ever closer to the ground.

Without warning, at that very moment, Jason's compromised helmet finally shattered, the sturdy glass-like material finally giving out, and falling to the ground in front of him.

He turned the crown in his hands, peering down at his mutilated, scar ridden visage for the first time in a long while. He took a deep breath, relishing the biting air flowing into his lungs as he quickly mulled over what to do. Providence's nanomachines were his only hope for survival now, and the only way to access them, was to put on his crown, to don his armor, to take up his mantle.

*Again, you seek only to preserve yourself; selfish. Become **more** than what you are. Even gods die. But heroes... heroes are forever.*

The voice of Providence rang in his ears, permeated his being as he sat there in silence. He was right, he *was* being selfish about the whole thing. Granted, in his mind, Providence was the one who had gotten him into all this mess in the first place, but at the same time, he had offered him a chance at redemption, a chance to live another day. After all this time, the need to survive, no matter the cost still burned brightly within him.

“CRITICAL ALTITUDE WARNING: 500 FEET. BRACE FOR COLLISION.”

Jason stared down into his own reflection for a long while, breathing in deeply, before closing his eyes and raising the crown over his head, the huge helmet morphing and shifting into a smaller size to accommodate him. He continued to stare at the ground, as Providence's armor shimmered with vibrant cerulean energy, each piece from the pile of metal disappearing for a split second, before appearing spontaneously on Jason, scaled down to fit his size. Even the guardian's tattered cloak instantly snapped into place around his chest and shoulders, as Jason suddenly found himself holding the massive broadsword of Providence in his now gauntleted right hand.

All the pain, all the suffering, all the heartache and stress was suddenly nonexistent as he felt a wave of cool relief washing over him, the layer of black nanomachines slinking up his body in tendrils until they covered everything but his head, and in an instant, as he began to stand up, feeling rejuvenated and more alive than ever, a single flickering glow began to radiate from the center of his face as the symbiote encapsulated him entirely, engulfing his head.

He rose to his full height, a shimmering, blue aura surrounding him as he did so. He clenched his free hand into a fist as the rents and dents in Providence's carapace armor miraculously repaired themselves, snapping back into place as the glowing orb of light in the center of his face flared up brilliantly.

Jason glanced over to the side of the bridge, watching the flames burning up the hull increase in intensity, and in that moment, as the roar and glow of the flames surrounded him, dark shadows dancing across his new form, he knew what his path was.

With a subtle shimmer, and a burst of brilliant light, Providence vanished, phasing out of reality as the UES Contact Light smashed into the planet, grinding and tearing apart the forest below with a terrible explosion, the entire ship erupting in a massive fireball, plumes of thick black smoke drifting off of the wreckage as the nearby flora was engulfed in hellfire.

As the beginnings of a wildfire took root, the twisted husk of the destroyed vessel still a raging inferno, the slightest twinge of radiant white light could be seen in the distance, among the darkened canopy of trees. It lingered there, a shining star amidst the darkness, as if it were watching, holding vigil; yet there was something inexorably *off* about it's gaze.

But it was only there for a short while, before flickering into obscurity.

EPILOGUE (TBD)

The crackling roar of an unchecked fire coming to a head, morphing into a hellish inferno was the only sound Jason could hear. Thick plumes of black smoke that would normally have a man writhing on the ground, gasping for dear life floated harmlessly past him. The massive plasma sword that was now his, hung limply at his side, the energized blade extinguished for safe carrying.

As he made his way through the disintegrating forest, the distinct roar of fire accompanying his every step, it became increasingly hard to breathe, let alone move. He did not cough, nor choke, as the suffocating haze of smoke closing in around him drifted by, bouncing off his all encompassing metal carapace. No, his shortness of breath came from within as his uneven gait slowed to a crawl, his every step causing

him to falter as the outside world faded into an inaudible drone, his new, artificial vision giving out as it grew spotty, and blurred.

You cannot turn away from the path you have chosen.