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PROLOG
Her great engines blazing, the mile-long vessel thrashed against the relentless pull of gravity that dragged her toward
the abyss. Violent tremors ripped through her hull like the convulsions of a dying animal.
The gaping hole in space vomited tendrils of gravity that coiled around her. With each twist, wave upon crushing
wave of force spiraled through her decks. Bulkheads crumpled beneath their own amplified weight. Support cables
snapped from their moorings like steel bullwhips. Reality tore apart.
The launch bay bucked violently. Over six hundred feet in length, the structure contained flight decks, hangars, and
vehicles. In a cloud of vapor and glittering debris the entire bay tore free from its pylon mounts amid the shriek of
tortured metal. It tumbled away, dissolving into the vortex like a fading shadow.
Two of her engines died in quick succession and the great ship faltered. With a sickening lurch she slid backward,
slowly at first, then accelerating, plummeting toward the cavernous hole in space.
Mortally wounded and out of control, the Ascension fell into the void.
As she did, the screams of her crew fell with her.

CHAPTER 1
Major Dan Ridgeway leaned against the curved inner surface of the transparent cylinder, allowing the overhead
nozzles to pound his neck and broad shoulders with a ceaseless barrage of hot water. The marine's eyes were half-
open, barely enough to make out the dull orange glow that suffused the lexan tube.
"Hotter. Pulse Two."
The water temperature increased by a pre-defined increment of two degrees. As it did, a second set of nozzles came
into play. The rapidly pulsing jets hammered Ridgeway's torso, stimulating cell activity in a body that had been
frozen for almost two years.
A dull groan crawled from the core of Ridgeway's chest. He didn't care in the least about the technical points of
post-cryogenic hydrotherapy; the fluid percussion that worked its way across his six-foot-three frame just felt good.
Damn good.
Ridgeway rolled his head to the left, stretching the taut muscles that fanned down from his neck to the starburst scar
sprawled across his shoulder blade. Somewhere in the bone, a tiny fragment of mortar shell scratched at a nerve. He
grimaced, feeling every bit of his thirty six years.
Waking years, he reminded himself, knowing full well that over a century had passed since he was born. Thirty six
years of consciousness, a great deal of that spent waging war on a handful of planets, and nearly twice that frozen in
an ageless cryogenic sleep as he hurtled across the great voids that separated them. Even so, this was his first trip all
the way to the Outer Rim.
Splayed along the fringe of charted space, the Rim was man's deepest probing of the unknown. Last stop on the road
to oblivion. If the universe had an end, you could probably see it from the Rim.
For the last twenty-two months the marine transport had hurtled through the darkness, piloted by an array of
redundant computers while it's crew and passengers slept like the frozen dead.
Eight hours had passed since Ridgeway first awoke in the sleek cryogenic tank that had been his home, or more
accurately, his tomb. Although the first to be roused by virtue of his seniority, Ridgeway had been the last of his
squad to seek the comfort of the lone recovery chamber. As always with Ridgeway, team came first.
Thankfully, he was as better prepared for that sacrifice than most. With twenty-four laps through the freezer under
his belt, Ridgeway had long ago grown calloused to Frosty's Revenge, marine parlance for the hangover-like state of headache, nausea and delirium that often followed prolonged cryogenic suspension. Most newbies would kill for that tolerance, particularly those who got slammed with violent cramps and freezer-blindness.

Still, Ridgeway winced as he rolled his right shoulder under the oscillating spray, Frosty was a tenacious bastard. The orange glow inside the chamber grew brighter and a delicious warmth enveloped Ridgeway's body. Curving around the tube's transparent wall, a full theraktin tunnel flooded the clear cylinder with far-infrared radiation. The pulsed FIR penetrated deep into waking tissues, accelerating the natural process of cell regeneration.

Ridgeway regarded the combination of radiant and percussive stimuli as the medical equivalent of a jump-start; just enough kick to get his body going and let it sort itself back into proper order. Beyond all of the fancy technology, he desperately needed some exercise and a decent meal before he'd feel completely human.

"Stop. Dry."

The nozzles immediately shut off. With a low sigh Ridgeway shifted his weight back from the wall of the cylinder, allowing the ring of nozzles to rise unobstructed to the top of the tube.

A sharp metallic click preceded an electric hum as the overhead fan kicked into gear. The downwash of air was warm and clean, buffeting droplets of water from Ridgeway's skin. He raised his arms above his head, flexing the muscles of his broad chest as he allowed the breeze to flood over him.

A sensor buried in the grated floor monitored the diminishing humidity and killed the fan when the moisture dropped to some pre-determined level. With a soft hiss, a third of the cylinder wall shifted outward, then rotated around the tube's axis.

Ridgeway emerged from the shower and donned a soft pair of black sweat pants and a marine-issue, olive drab T-shirt. Lacing a pair of black nomex boots, he looked at the front of the open cylinder. Rivets and rough welds affixed the base of the unit to floor. Power cables snaked out to an exposed length of wall conduit, further evidence of a hasty, improvised installation.

The sight was nothing new. In spite of the huge funding required to train and equip an elite military unit, travel accommodations were always spartan. The decision, Ridgeway knew, had nothing to do with cost and everything to do with secrecy. Covert operators never got their own tour bus.

Over the years Ridgeway's marines had spent most of their transit time sealed far from prying eyes, stuffed into anything from a commercial freighter to a cruise liner. On one short hop they been squirreled away in the belly of a converted garbage scow. He had lost track of how many basement-level storage bays like this one had been converted on-the-fly to accommodate the RAT Squad.

Turning towards the door, Ridgeway's gaze stalled on the image that stood before him in the mirror. Carrying two hundred and thirty pounds on his muscled frame, Dan Ridgeway still had the unmistakable look of an athlete. The connotation carried a measure of pride since his days on the university Hyperball field were now many years in the past.

He'd been a linebacker, a role which suited both his size and natural aggression. Hyperball was played in gleaming orbital stadiums where the zero-G environment allowed the game to rampage across the six inner walls of a forty-meter cube. Each wall had it's own relative gravity, allowing opposing twenty-man squads to run plays in three dimensions at once.

Dan Ridgeway had played the cube like a predator born to the game, crossing walls and ceilings with a speed that belied his size and strength. He had an uncanny ability to merge with the ebbs and flows of the game, sensing changes in a play as it unfolded all around him. A good player knew where the ball was at any time, but Ridgeway had a sense of where the ball was headed. Time and again he brought primal force to bear on an opposing offense with surgical accuracy. The game had left a permanent mark on Ridgeway's heart.

The chin as well, Ridgeway noted, tilting his head to see if he could still make out the faded traces of white along the length of his square jawline. He dimly remembered the lunge from high on a sidewall, an aerial blitz that blew three offensive linemen into the path of a zig-zagging halfback. But using his body as a battering ram came with a price, and the shattered jaw was just one of several injuries that Ridgeway racked up in a kamikaze pursuit of total domination.

A tired smile tugged at the corner of Ridgeway's lips as he glanced at the letters indelibly etched across his right bicep. The three-character monogram appeared in a blur of booze and camaraderie after his team won the Terran Divisional Banner.

DTO. Defense Through Obliteration, slogan of the 2108 SSU Predators defensive unit. Ridgeway's unit. He wondered briefly how many of the ten players who carried that mark were still alive after, what was it, eighty-something years? Ninety? He only knew of one, a big defensive lineman who remained the closest friend Ridgeway had in the world.

It struck Ridgeway just how much he missed his time in the cube, simple days when wars were won or lost in ninety
minutes and everybody came home. No politics, no hidden agendas, just the good guys and the bad guys, no question as to loyalties or motives.

Now he was a Marine, and that was a whole new game. No cheering crowd, no stadium, and for the most part, no rules. Every match-up was single-round elimination and nobody was kidding about the term "sudden-death overtime." The only trophy was coming home in one piece.

Ridgeway ran his fingers through a ruff of short-cropped hair. The severe, sand colored flat-top bristled into place. For an uncharacteristic moment, Ridgeway took stock of his reflection.

Not that different, he thought with a trace of sobriety, comparing the image before him to the wild young man who ruled the cube. Maybe a few more scars, he confessed, noting the variety of curves and slashes embossed into his flesh. Grenade fragment. Couple bullet holes. Chunk of a mortar casing.

He paused, suddenly losing interest in the catalog of his injuries. He had a lot of scars, more than he cared to remember. Half a dozen other mementos of battle lay spread across his frame, wounds inflicted in dark, miserable corners of the galaxy where many of his friends had died. Where a whole lot of people died.

Ridgeway's gaze tracked back up the mirror and fixed on the hard blue-grey eyes that stared back, eyes that at times had been unable to distinguish pieces of friends from enemies as they lay tangled in charred heaps on the battlefield. Staring silently from the mirror, Ridgeway thought the eyes looked very old.

A muted shout echoed from the next room. With earnest relief Ridgeway turned his back on old memories. The door slid open and Merlin's voice snapped into clarity.

"Oh yeah, that's what I'm talking about!" The young marine leaned over a small holographic gamepad and moved his fingers rapidly in the air. Thin mesh gloves translated his rapid-fire gestures into chorded commands that fed the video game console. In response, an amazingly lifelike projected creature lunged across the battlepad and threw a brutal crescent kick.

Ridgeway glanced across the table. While Corporal Jim "Merlin" Prentice clearly enjoyed the contest, his opponent was anything but jovial. Corporal Andrew "Stitch" Remuzzi glowered as his fighter, a furry biped with lupine jaws, reeled from the assault. The medic's brow furrowed above the dark rim of his datashades as he motioned his gladiator back into the fray.

"Doesn't this get old?" Ridgeway's question was genuine, if not a bit rhetorical. Being cooped up in a storage bay was a study in boredom, but Ridgeway couldn't fathom what drew his two youngest marines time and again to such a mindless diversion.

He shrugged. If that's what helps them unwind, who am I to be the killjoy? The team's operational gear was stored until final approach, and given the absence of liquor, multivision, or anyone to pick a fight with, the alternatives were pathetically slim.

Ridgeway allowed his gaze to fall back to the game where Merlin controlled a reptilian humanoid with brilliant green scales. The lizard circled to the left and edged in for what promised to be the kill.

Just inches away, Remuzzi's holographic werewolf stood flat-footed, almost stooped beneath it's simulated weight. Ridgeway had seen that posture in a thousand real-life fights. The body language had 'casualty' written all over it.

"I've got five on Merlin." Ridgeway suddenly offered aloud, wondering if anyone would care.

"Your on." The deep, bass voice could only have come from Monster, and Ridgeway grinned as the giant rolled off of a metal-frame cot that squealed in relief.

Gunnery Sergeant Darius "Monster" Braxton was the only person in the drab grey room who could make Ridgeway look small by comparison. At six-five and three-fifteen, Monster was a walking mountain of muscle.

To Ridgeway's left, Lieutenant Darcy Lonigan looked up as she flexed through what looked like the pantomime of a one-armed curl. Although she held no dumb-bell, Ridgeway could see the swell of her straining bicep. A single point of red glowed on the back of the fingerless metal gauntlet that encircled her hand as she huffed in a steady pace "forty nine... fifty."

The sniper's fist unclenched and the tiny gravitic coil in the gauntlet powered off; fifty-five pounds of artificial weight evaporated in a disintegrating cloud of magnetic fields.

"I'll take a piece of that." Darcy said as she rose and tossed the glove into the open footlocker at her feet. Her skin shone with perspiration and a V of sweat darkened her T-shirt. As she circled around Monster, she thumped one of the big man's melon-sized biceps with her fist. "Easy money."

Monster flashed a crescent of gleaming white teeth and nodded wordlessly.

The response was not at all what Ridgeway expected. Given all that he knew about his team, he paid little attention to their videogame prowess. It now appeared that he might be alone in this particular indifference.

Darcy leaned down to Stitch, close enough that her shoulder-length blonde hair brushed against the medic's ear. The sniper's eyes flickered up to Ridgeway and a devilish smile crossed her face as she whispered softly. "Cannonball."
While Stitch gave no outward sign of acknowledgement, Darcy stood back with a lingering grin. Monster leaned forward, nodding again. Even Merlin's cocky banter dwindled to silence. That's not a good sign, Ridgeway thought ruefully.

Stitch moved his hands vertically, one rising as the other fell, then reversed the direction. In response, the lupine form began to bounce up and down on its haunches. "Oh shit." Merlin's mutter did nothing to bolster Ridgeway's confidence.

The reptile lunged in a windmill of aggression but the wolf dodged with equal speed, using the bouncing momentum to carry it out of range. Twice again Merlin pressed the attack and still Stitch evaded, his bounds growing higher with every leap.

Without warning Stitch snatched his hands into a sudden joined fist and brought them slamming down to the table. The wolf leaped, knees drawn to furry chest like a kid on a high dive. It crashed down in a blur of descending claws and fangs, crushing the lizard into the floor. The wafer-thin speakers did remarkable justice to the sound of a snapping neck. A flashing orange beacon confirmed the game's obvious outcome.

Merlin cursed as he shoved back from the table as the lycanthrope spun through a victory dance in a puddle of red blood and green scales. "How the hell do you do that?"

The medic's face remained expressionless as he stood up from the table and peeled away the sensor-studded gloves. Angular datashades slid down the equally straight bridge of his nose. Stitch turned and peered over the lenses at Ridgeway with dark, piercing eyes. Only then did a smile creep across the medic's face. "Sorry Major, you may be CO, but cash is king."

The comment drew an explosion of laughter from Monster and Darcy. Feeling all-too-much like a well-played mark, Ridgeway fished the military dog tag from beneath his shirt and slid a gumstick-sized plastic strip from it's sleeve on the back. Tapping the end of the wafer with his thumb, he cycled past his identifile and medical history to financial management. He keyed up a pair of transactions and brushed his strip against identical ones held out by Darcy and Monster. Five credits soundlessly transferred with each contact.

Winnings in hand, Darcy turned and strutted off with an exaggerated swagger and a lilt in her voice. "Like candy from a baby."

Stitch and Merlin had already fallen into post-game analysis and they too wandered away from the table. "You watch, you smug SOB," Merlin blustered, "I'll figure out that damn cannonball trick yet. And then it'll be your ass."

Stitch only laughed as his lanky frame ambled across the room. Ridgeway felt a presence loom on his right and turned with theatrical deliberation to acknowledge Monster's barely restrained gloat. An unrelenting smile gleamed beneath the ebony dome of Monster's cleanly-shaven head. "Looks like I haven't been keeping up on the scoreboard." Ridgeway muttered.

The right side of Monster's brow arched up as he dipped his head in a slow nod. "Oh yeah, Stitch has that damn cannonball maneuver down."

"Nice of you to share that bit of analysis."

"Sorry Major. It's my job to know everything these marines think, see and do," Monster placed his hand over his heart as he recited the sergeant's role with feigned earnestly, "but that was 'need to know' information and since you were putting up the money--"

"Yeah, yeah," Ridgeway cut in, an accusing smirk spread across his face, "I didn't need to know."

Monster's grin broadened through another several degrees of arc and a deep laugh resonated within his chest. Ridgeway shook his head in chagrin, caring little of either the game or the loss of ten credits. All that mattered was that his marines were healthy and, at least for the moment, enjoying a well-deserved bit of relaxation. With less than 36 hours before the rapidly decelerating transport reached it's rendezvous point, the window for meaningless diversion would evaporate all too quickly.

Ridgeway's gaze swept mechanically across the storage bay. As he did, his mind ticked through a silent checklist of people and equipment.

Amid the numerous containers made of high-impact thermoform, one olive drab footlocker caught his attention. The name 'Caslin' was stenciled carefully along the container's long side. In their rushed departure, there had been no time to remove the designation.

"We doing all right?" Ridgeway asked the question in a flat, detached voice.

"Everyone above room temperature is just fine."

Ridgeway blinked twice, momentarily caught off-guard by Monster's irreverent response. Caslin had been with the squad for twenty-three months of Waking Time and his death on Euripides had taken a toll on everybody. But Ridgeway just as quickly recognized the cold reality in Monster's comment.

Killing and dying were all part of marine business and dealing with loss was a necessary skill. Caslin's frozen remains had been shipped home with his personal effects, leaving only his name on an mottled green container that
had served as his mobile workplace. Ridgeway knew that the oversized footlocker would get cycled back to carry another name. They always did.

"Armor good?"

"Five by five," Monster reported crisply. "Weapons too."

It came as no surprise that the sergeant had already checked on the status of their battle gear, and Ridgeway nodded in silent affirmation. The next item proved to be the surprise.

"The Ordinance Fairy came by while we were on ice." The big man shrugged toward a flat, green container covered with orange warning labels that bore the innocuous legend "Danger:HEDM".

Ridgeway walked to the reinforced box and opened the lid. Nestled in dense foam lay two rows of saucer-sized disks, each a little more than three inches thick. An uneasy feeling coiled in his gut as he read the designation M54 stenciled in bold black letters across each dull grey device.

"Not much to look at." Monster snorted dismissively.

Ridgeway shook his head and exhaled as he folded arms across his chest. "Head-em," he said with slow emphasis, "high energy-density material. You're looking at Detonex, thirty-five, maybe forty times the punch of conventional MIL-spec plastic explosive. Shaped charge like that'll punch a fist-sized hole through five meters of steel. Maybe more."

A muttered "damn" slipped from Monster's lips.

The discovery chafed at Ridgeway's mind as he shifted his weight and drew another deep breath. While the possible implications numbered too many to count, the first course of action was clear.

"Accelerate the prep cycle. I want the armor in pre-fight as soon as we transfer. Head-to-toe diagnostics."

Ridgeway's voice became increasingly businesslike as he snapped from one point to the next.

"Full weaps check, double-down on the commo. Max all loadouts for firepower, that goes for Stitch as well."

"I'm on it." Monster said sharply, but his gaze seemed to linger on the Detonex. The baritone softened as he added, "Where the hell are they sending us?"

"I don't know," Ridgeway admitted softly, suppressing his own concern as he closed the lid. "But if this is the package, you can bet it won't be pretty."

Monster shrugged as he turned toward Ridgeway, an unexpected wink only highlighting the gleam in his eyes. "If it was pretty, they wouldn't be sending us."

"Damn straight." Ridgeway broke into a grin, easily drawn into Monster's esprit de corps. The Major raised fist to chest and banged knuckles with the ham-sized fist that mirrored the gesture. Beneath the stretched fabric of Monster's sleeve, Ridgeway could make out the lower half of the familiar initials. DTO.

With a final grunt that doubled for hello and goodbye, Monster turned and strode purposefully toward the rows of armor.

The Detonex weighed heavy on Ridgeway's mind as he cut between two stacks of strapped-down containers and paused at the improvised mess area. The kitchen-in-a-box consisted of little more than a power supply, a microwave oven, and a coffee pot. The lower compartment was crammed full of vacu-sealed plastic packets of every shape and description.

Not exactly the Ritz, Ridgeway conceded, but with a bit of water they could produce a decent facsimile of coffee or scrambled eggs, topped off with strips of compressed protein that tasted vaguely of bacon. After six or seven trips in remote storage with nothing but MREs, the RATs had taken it upon themselves to improvise a minor concession to creature comfort.

The thermoform container marked "Spare Parts" had been an innocuous part of their caravan for the last eight Waking Years. While a clear breach of Marine regs and most quarantine protocols, Ridgeway secured the modest luxuries for his team with neither recrimination or concern. Few benefits came from serving as a very secret unit, but at least nobody looked through your luggage. The boost to morale was immeasurable.

Hell, what do they expect anyway, Ridgeway reasoned as he poured the strong black liquid, they trained us to improvise and overcome. This is just an occupational hazard.

His state of mind improved greatly as the aroma of steaming coffee flooded his nostrils. With aluminum mug in hand, Ridgeway angled across the bay to his own footlocker. Rounding the well-worn box he eased himself down onto one of the cots that had been spot-welded to the floor.

Ridgeway took another long sip before he opened the lid. The case, three feet long and two feet deep, was the only permanent home Ridgeway could remember since taking command of the RAT Squad. As a highly mobile force, the marines were called upon to move from ship to ship at a moment's notice. Everything that represented Ridgeway's private life existed within the case.

Even by military standards, his locker was spartan. Aside from a small collection of casual clothes, such as the sweats he now wore, the footlocker contained only his toiletries, a first aid kit and a personal computer. That,
Ridgeway thought as his attention shifted to the inside of the open lid, and the Three Moments. As always he thought of Grissom when he looked at the three artifacts taped conspicuously to the inside of the lid. Saul "Grizzly" Grissom had been his first battlefield commander and grew to be both friend and mentor. A decorated veteran who possessed a profoundly sage view of life, Grissom taught Ridgeway that a man should never forget three moments in life; his first, his finest, and his darkest. "Your first moment reminds you of where you came from," Ridgeway softly recited. The photograph was old and tattered along one edge. Still, he could not help but smile at the image of the blonde-haired boy who beamed from the cockpit of a mottled green military hovercraft. Although his feet couldn't reach the pedals at that age, young Danny dreamed of being a marine pilot just like his father. The senior Ridgeway had been killed in a tragically mundane accident just two years after the photo had been taken. "Your finest moment reminds you of what you can achieve." The laminated copy of the magazine cover had been reduced to half it's original size, but the bold headline was no less readable. The single word 'Unstoppable' appeared in all-caps above the image of black and gold-jerseyed players holding the Tri-World Hyperball Championship trophy high overhead. Ridgeway was just to the left of center, hoisted to shoulder-height by Monster's powerful arm. The faces caught in that dizzying instant had just handed the reigning champions a stunning defeat in an upset that nobody believed possible. At that instant they were immortals, warrior-kings, and as the headline proclaimed, unstoppable. He paused, very much wanting to break tradition before invoking the final memory. He didn't need to look to know what hung there, or to remember what it meant. "Your darkest moment," he muttered beneath his breath, "reminds you of what can happen when you least expect it." A discipline ingrained through repetition dragged his focus away from the magazine cover and brought it to rest on the medal that hung unceremoniously on the right. The points of a platinum-colored star peeked out from behind the globe and laurels of the Corps, suspended beneath a quilted ribbon of royal blue. The Medal of Valor, the second highest honor awarded by the United Systems Marines. Saving a platoon of besieged fellow marines may have been meritorious service, he thought grimly, but not if you ask the women and children of Cygnus Prime. He swallowed, the coffee soured in his mouth. If there were any of them left to ask. Ridgeway stared at the medal awarded to him after the Pelton's Bluff engagement, a medal he had never worn since. Some of his peers took the decision as some aberrant gesture of humility from the young officer, as though he had chosen not to take on airs from such a high honor. They couldn't have been more wrong. Only a few even suspected the truth. Grissom knew, but then again he knew everything in Ridgeway's heart. The Grizzly tried repeatedly to convince Ridgeway that his first duty was to support the encircled Marines, an assertion that provided little comfort. Trust me, the airlifters are coming. Ridgeway remembered the words with a cold detachment that held no hint of the confidence with which they were first uttered. He had urged the Cygnus leaders to stay put, speaking through a frightened translator. "Wait here. I'll be back. I promise." Well they waited all right, Ridgeway thought dismally, waited while I charged off to slog it out with a column of Rimmer tanks that had backed a platoon of Seventh Marines against a steep bluff. They waited while Rimmer airpower claimed the sky, driving the poorly-armed airlifters away like leaves in the wind. They waited, still expecting rescue when dark, bat-like shapes dove from the clouds. Not until the dandelion-puffs of ordnance bristled from sky-grey underbellies would the truth have become obvious. Then the waiting ended. Ridgeway had been a mere three clicks away, his small force staging a series of hit-and-run strikes against the flank of the column throughout the night. By dawn, seven tanks lay in smoking ruin across a field strewn with Rimmer corpses. He remembered the dull pink glimmer as the first of Cygnus' two suns broke the horizon, and the streaking roar as U.S. air support finally arrived. A swarm of stubby A-63s pounded the fractured side of the broken Rimmer arc straight to hell. Trapped between Ridgeway's team and the very pissed-off Seventh Marines, the Rimmer's unsupported left flank disintegrated. The images in his mind were blurred by fatigue, but he could not forget staggering dead-tired and hurt across three clicks of shell-blasted jungle to the smoking remains of Cygnus Prime. Frightened screams had long since faded, the only moan now came from the wind that crawled through the skeletized buildings. Airburst thermalite had carbonized them, along with vehicles and bodies, into an inseparable crust of black ash. Over four hundred people who had trusted Ridgeway to return, gone. He couldn't remember how long he knelt on that blackened street as he watched the ash swirl about him like flakes of dead snow. Closing the lid to his footlocker, Ridgeway pushed the memory aside for the thousandth time, knowing that his
Darkest Moment would wait quietly for his return. It would wait forever, just like the civilians of Cygnus Prime
waited-- the way a part of him would always remain, waiting for a second chance on the blackened hillside.
He turned his mind from dark memories to the unknown mission ahead, to the marines whose survival would be in
his hands.
A furrow creased Ridgeway's brow. Some things never changed.

CHAPTER 2

"Oh man, it sucks to be me." Almost two thousand meters below the planet's surface, Private David Jenner's
muttered lament was lost in the persistent noise of the tunnel. He paused at the four-way junction, looking down
nearly identical corridors that angled off in different directions.
Left and then right, or was it another left?
Jenner smoothed the crumpled yellow dispatch, trying to make some sense of the hand-scrawled map on the back of
the last page. Moisture had already transformed one leg of his route into an illegible smear of blue ink.
He held the paper aloft to better catch the meager overhead light. Rotating the dubious map on end, Jenner struggled
to align some part of it to his surroundings. Nothing matched.
With a forlorn sigh Jenner dropped his arms and opted for a mental coin-toss. With no sense of confidence he turned
right and plodded past a stained aluminum sign bearing the words 'CONTAINMENT AREA.'
Jenner's boots sloshed through an unbroken chain of puddles. Moisture leeched incessantly from the slabs of
reinforced concrete that made up the tunnel walls, leaving mineral streaks of chalky white amidst the burnt-copper
hues of rusted iron. A film of green mold spread web-like across the walls, fanning out from every crack and
crevice. Here and there, dark wet clumps of fungus hung from the walls like rotting grapes.
The air was thick with dank smells; corroding metal, musty ozone from electrical arcs, the acrid stench of fluids that
bled from old machinery. Miners with pale, stained skin told him of even fouler smells that seeped from collapsed
tunnels even further below, the putrid reek of bodies crushed into paste beneath countless tons of stone.
A shiver ran along Jenner's spine and he picked up his pace, nervously shifting the pack on his shoulders. The
private muttered without conviction as he shuffled along the narrow pathway, "They're just screwing with your head,
that's all."
Lighting functioned properly back in the main cavern, but here in the secondary tunnels things were hardly up to
par. Entire sections of corridor stretched out in tomlike darkness, broken only by brief pools of sputtering white
light.
In those twilight borders where light wrestled with shadow, the snarl of pipes that lined the walls took on an
ominous, serpentine appearance. Cables resonated with the hum of high voltage. Water dripped from heavy steel
tubes that groaned from internal pressure. Behind it all, the deep bass thrum of the massive reactor pulsed through
the floors and walls like a giant heartbeat.
With every plodding step Jenner's feet squished miserably against wet socks. "Waterproof my ass," he snarled,
glaring at the cheap codura boots. His toes buzzed with the nagging itch of pruned skin and he scuffed his steps
fitfully, but the tingle persisted.
"Man, I am not cut out for this underground shit."
In the brief time since Jenner unwittingly threw himself into the Outer Rim Alliance, things had gone from bad to
worse. Life on the filthy streets of the Los Diablos colony had been no picnic, but at least there a dull reddish
sunlight almost constantly suffused the atmospheric dome. The darkest basement in LD was brighter than the crypt-
like gloom of this subterranean hell. That world seemed a lifetime away.
Slogging through the frigid cold in wet army boots, Jenner could scarcely believe that only a few months ago he was
sitting behind the wheel of a sleek, silver-grey Vendetta, driving the one and only Eddie DelMonico down the back
streets of Los Diablos. The stainless steel attaché in Eddie's lap contained four kilos of lab-quality Rage. All Jenner
had to do was get Eddie to the deal and back in one piece and life would have been fine.
He recalled the warm evening breeze and the streaks of light that washed across the hood as the Vendetta slid with
liquid grace beneath an endless row of street lamps. He even remembered the music that played as Eddie walked
away from the car. Chad Bruce, 'Something in the air.'
The mental images that followed were smeared by the unsteady paintbrush of fear and adrenaline. A sudden drum-
roll of gunfire. Red flowers that blossomed on the lapel of Eddie's grey jacket. Window exploded in a shower of
diamond-like fragments, angry streaks burning through the air. Eddie reaching for the open door with bloody
fingers. All a blur.
The one detail Jenner remembered clearly was the sight of Eddie's eyes wide with fear as the Vendetta lunged
forward, leaving the gunfire, and Eddie's fading scream, in a cloud of dust. There Jenner's memory sank into a dark, muddy pool, surfacing eight days later in a rancid, back alley dumpster on the tail end of a drug-slurred haze. Eddie, the Vendetta, the Rage— all gone. Sold, lost, snorted... hell he had no idea. All he knew was that every streetrat in Diablos would be looking to sell him out for the money that would already be on his head. Eddie had friends.

Crusted with wet garbage and vomit, Jenner had staggered from one shadow to the next until he saw a small screen hawking travel to distant worlds. The sign sputtering overhead read Recruiter, something called the ORA. By the time Jenner sobered up he was showered and shorn, on an Army transport to some godforsaken place called Balratha.

Helluva career move there, Dave.

Jenner looked around the freezing tunnel as he flipped the collar of his jacket up around his neck. A soft cloud swirled with his every breath. At just under six feet in height, the lanky private felt lost in the oversized milspec field coat. Yet he was thankful for the thick insulation. The meager bristle of hair left on his scalp did nothing to keep his head warm.

He pawed at the quilted sleeve to reveal his watch, certain that he'd been wandering for hours. Instead, just over forty minutes had ticked away although he felt no closer to the destination typed across the transfer. Special Detail, Driver, HM-1. The gruff Duty Sergeant had called for a volunteer to drive some kind of garbage truck; not a popular job the Sergeant stressed, but one that would opt the volunteer out of any frontline infantry duty. Garbage detail sounded nasty, but it beat getting shot. Jenner had taken the deal in a flash.

The deal was a little clearer now, Jenner thought as his mouth curled downward. The son of a bitch sergeant never said anything about driving the garbage truck somewhere near the planet's core.

Stuffing the transfer into his pocket, Jenner hitched the backpack higher on his shoulder and set off in search of Garage 39-D.

The geeky seismo guy in the commissary had told Jenner that the entire planet was a series of natural caverns stacked one on top of another. Often as not, miners had only to bore down through the floor of one cavern to break through the ceiling of another below. The network of caves and tunnels made the mining operation a lot easier to run, and that made Balratha a very lucrative planet for the Outer Rim Alliance.

For the hundredth time Jenner wished he had taken the longer route through Cathedral. Named for its gothic size, the massive cavern was nearly half a kilometer long with a ceiling that reached up several hundred meters. Jenner didn't know shit about caves and cared less. But as big holes in the ground went, he had to admit that Cathedral was impressive. A maze of stairs and suspended catwalks transformed the space overhead into a hive of activity. Every scrap of level ground was jammed with mining equipment and machine tools. Brilliant panels lined the jagged ceiling, creating a timeless and unchanging light.

Rather than weave through the twisting gauntlet of men and machinery, Jenner had opted for the side tunnels that were supposed to cut straight through to the loading bay at the Cathedral's south end. The guy on the elevator had even drawn him a map. "Keep the reactor to your right," he had said with dismissive confidence, "you can't miss it."

Yeah. Right.

Thus far the so-called map had proved as useful as a graffiti-covered wall. Jenner paused in a dimly lit section of the tunnel and slowly turned to look back the way he had come. Back toward the world, toward light and air. Ahead, the coffin-shaped passage sloped even deeper into the abyss. Jenner hesitated, his right foot tapping against the wet stone floor. Something in the back of his mind began to whine. Overhead the glowing panel flickered anemically and without warning, darkness lurchedin from all sides, straining to engulf him. With a sharp hum the light surged bright again, shadows drawing back between the pipes in reluctant defeat.

Jenner's heart skipped a wild beat as he looked up at the stuttering panel and hissed. "Don't even think about it."

As if in disdain, the fluorescent panel abruptly gave way and the opposing walls of darkness slammed together. The impact sucked a gasp from Jenner's lungs. He fought to catch his breath, expecting his eyes to adjust, but as he blinked he could find no difference between open and closed.

Jenner inched forward, sliding his feet across the rough slab floor. The feral part of his mind began to claw at the bars of its cage, its pathetic whimpers growing more desperate. Relentless panic rising, his slow shuffle came to a gradual halt. He reached out to steady himself, wordlessly praying for the light to return.

Quivering fingers touched the wall and slid through a layer of something cold and slimy. He snatched back and wiped his hand feverishly on the front of his coat. "It's just the dark," he stammered, fitfully wringing his hands, "just the dark, just--"

A harsh, static buzz crackled somewhere overhead and Jenner's heart leaped with desperate hope. "Yeah, that's it. C'mon baby, come back on, just give it a second."
But the darkness survived for seconds, maybe for minutes. In total black, Jenner had lost all sense of time. Even the sounds of the tunnel had changed. Distant groans and metallic creaks whispered in the darkness. Was that the reactor, or something else? The thought burned through his mind. What if the tremor was stone shifting somewhere overhead, the dull scrape of millions of tons of rock inching toward the floor like a huge hydraulic press. Crushing. Unstoppable.

In spite of his heavy jacket, a cold sweat broke out across Jenner's body. In a frenzy of motion he furrowed through the cargo pockets of his BDUs, fingers desperately sifting through identifiable shapes. Allen wrench. Pocket knife. Pack of gum. "Where's the fuckin' flashlight?"

With a lurch, he shrugged the backpack off his shoulder and fumbled with a snap-lock that closed the main compartment. It popped unexpectedly and the pack slipped in his grasp. Items spilled from the bag in a blind cascade of metallic clangs and shallow splashes. The sounds scattered and echoed in all directions.

"Oh, son of a BITCH!"

Jenner dropped to one knee, now frantically pawing at the darkness. His fingers bumped into the pages of a field manual, then the familiar bristles of a hairbrush. Canteen, smooth and oval. Shapeless rumpled clothing. Couple of MREs in their crackly foil packaging.

Something small and damp flopped against the back of Jenner's hand and scuttled toward his wrist. The shriek exploded from his throat even before his conscious mind understood the prickly feel of tiny legs against his bare skin. Panic exploded.

Jenner flailed his arm, slamming it against the unseen wall. His head struck something hard, a glancing blow that bit sharply into his scalp. The taste of copper swirled faintly in his mouth.

With the mechanical crunk of a distant breaker, the tunnel lights snapped back to life. The glare lanced through Jenner's dilated pupils and burned fuzzy stars across his vision.

Like a carp out of water, his mouth moved but no sound came out. Caught in the sudden light, a four-inch cockroach scuttled off Jenner's arm and vanished into the shadows.

Tremors shook Jenner's body and the acrid taste of vomit bubbled up in his throat.

He was not cut out for this underground shit at all.

CHAPTER 3

Crimson eyes burned above a row of stainless steel teeth. The snarling rodent was clad from nose to tail in riveted plate armor. Reared on its haunches in a defiant posture, the creature brandished a fistful of stiletto-blade claws. The words "RAT Squad" stood out in bold red letters. Around the perimeter of the circular crest, a black ring bore the legend: Rapid Assault Team.

Ridgeway took a great deal of pride in the unit patch. RATs had been developed to conduct precision strikes in confined environments, places where tanks and jets couldn't go. Operating under a vapor-tight shroud of secrecy, RAT squads quickly established themselves in roles ranging from hostage rescue to counter-terrorism, demonstrating a unique ability to surgically excise a variety of armed malignancies in areas where traditional assault was not an option.

Looking up, Ridgeway's attention swung to the cable-covered uprights where a suit of deep grey armor stood at rigid attention. The figure, menacing even in repose, looked like a medieval knight on steroids. The words "RAT Squad" stood out in bold red letters. Around the perimeter of the circular crest, a black ring bore the legend: Rapid Assault Team.

Ridgeway nodded quietly. No sugar coating there.

In this case though, he conceded, 'a real bitch' might be a charitable characterization. For a brief instant Ridgeway flashed back across the countless times that he and Monster stood poised to enter the Hyperball Cube. The old sense of anticipation tingled in Ridgeway's spine and he could feel the acceleration of his senses, a process that would build to an electric blur by the opening gun.
Appropriate choice of phrase, he noted with a dark sense of irony. Still, Ridgeway could not dismiss the assurance that came with a friendship that spanned nearly a century.

Monster had gone on to play pro ball after college, while Ridgeway followed his family tradition into life as a Marine. For nearly six years Ridgeway had followed Monster's stellar career, at times with considerable envy. He remembered the day that celebrated career had come to a screeching halt. The hyperball world stood on end when league testing confirmed that Monster had used genetic augmentation, expensive and illegal manipulation of his genetic code, to further increase his already considerable size and muscle mass. Looking for an edge in a sport where the extreme was never enough, Monster had crossed the line and got caught.

Ridgeway saw his friend plummet from superstar to pariah; banned from the sport and bombarded with lawsuits from his team and former sponsors. Monster's life spiraled into a cloud of depression, synthehol and violence that nearly swallowed him.

With only the rank of Lieutenant at the time, Ridgeway had pushed his limits petitioning the Corps to arrange an opening for Monster, and had assumed personal responsibility for the outcome. It was only with Grissom's backing that the powers-that-be agreed, with the strict understanding that any blowback would fall entirely into Ridgeway's lap. The career-ending implications were obvious.

Ridgeway never regretted the decision and watched his friend absorb the culture of the Corps with all of the fierce intensity that had marked his play as a defensive lineman. For the last fifteen Waking Years, Monster had become a walking, talking embodiment of the super-Marine ideal.

Ridgeway tipped his head toward the cases set in a wide arc around the room. Open lids revealed an assortment of weapons and explosives. The RATs moved purposefully among them.

"We ready?"

Monster replied with a wicked grin. "We were born ready."

A faint smile creased Ridgeway's face as he saw the look in Monster's eyes. Hunger for the fight. Prep was well and good but at the end of the day, fighting was what brought them to the dance. It was time to cue up the band.

"All right partner," he emphasized with a thump of his fist against Monster's chest, "rally the troops. Full briefing in five."

"Roger that." Monster turned crisply and strode toward the team. Bodies accelerated at his approach.

A volumetric hologram floated in the air, rugged terrain modeled in exacting detail. Color-coded symbols marked a variety of waypoints and objectives. The image rotated slowly on its vertical axis.

"It's a quick strike op." In his usual fashion, Ridgeway jumped right to the meat of the briefing. "Confined space environment, highly restrictive ingress and a strict timetable."

"What's the non-traditional approach?" Stitch asked the obvious question in his usual wary tone.

"Sudden overload. Brass wants to airdrop two thousand Marines directly into the complex. With luck, the fight will be over before the Rimmers have a chance to react."

Merlin half-raised a hand. "Firehawk drop?"

As Ridgeway nodded in reply, the crease between his brows deepened. "Yeah, that's still the fastest route from space to surface. But we all know the catch; they're vulnerable as hell when they transition from ballistic freefall to aerodynamic flight. The Rimmers have outfitted Vostok with a solid air defense grid. If it's online, it'll burn a shitload of Marines out of the sky."

"And guess who gets to kill the grid." Darcy rolled her palms up like a game show hostess presenting the Marines behind Door Number Three.

A shadow played across Merlin's eyes as he nodded slowly. "Gonna be tight."

"More than you know," Ridgeway said, not at all surprised that the engineer connected dots that hadn't yet been shown. "Throw the switch too early and the Rimmers might get backup power online. Too late and--" The image of flaming debris and dead Marines raining down from the sky flashed through Ridgeway's mind. "Too late is not an option."

Darcy leaned forward and braced her elbows on her knees. "So where's the light switch?"

Ridgeway had no way to sugar coat the answer. "The target is a reactor in an old section of the mining operation, roughly two kilometers below the surface."

The room exploded with an outpour of questions and Ridgeway paused, allowing the team to vent it's understandable surprise. Confined space missions were one thing, he had told himself several times already, but
deep-core tunnel ops were quite another.

Using the hologram as a battle map, Ridgeway covered the insertion, the mission objectives, and how they expected to get out. With each phase the display zoomed and rotated. Textured surfaces dissolved into clean, color-coded wireframes to provide subterranean views. At the end of the presentation, Ridgeway sat back in his chair and folded his arms. His steely eyes looked around the table. "Any comments?"

"Even if we do get past the bloody door, and crikey that's a cocked-up plan, it'll be a real open slather."

Five Marines turned to look at Caslin's replacement, Lance Corporal Nigel "Taz" Kelly. His odd, amber-colored eyes snapped quickly from point to point on the hologram. Their unusual hue, coupled with his sharp features, gave the young Australian a distinctly feral appearance. The spikey brown stubble that sprawled across his scalp only added to the effect. While unremarkable in terms of height and weight, he projected an aura of wiry toughness.

The junior Marine continued passionately, oblivious to the stillness. "We'll have to root the bastards out of every cranny along this part, and in the slim chance the whole bloody dunny doesn't fall on our heads, we still have to--"

Taz paused, suddenly falling as silent as the room around him. His eyes screwed shut as he muttered under his breath, "Oh bollocks."

Ridgeway suppressed a grim smile. "Intermittent failures of military protocol" was how it read in the personnel file. But the often volatile Marine's history had been equally marked by uncanny scores in marksmanship and hand-to-hand combat. In replacing Caslin, Ridgeway wasn't screening for decorum.

On the other hand, he mused, gritting his teeth against the grin tugging at his cheek, maintaining professionalism was one of a Sergeant's many tasks, and one which Monster took as a personal measure of excellence. Even now Monster's entire mass flexed as he leaned forward only slightly, his right hand closed the arm of the chair. Metal and grey plastic creaked pitifully.

With the slow deliberation of someone reversing out of a minefield, Taz eased back into his chair. Both Merlin and Stitch shifted their gaze back to the hologram and remained motionless.

"It all hangs on the feint." Darcy placed a thin datapad on the briefing table as she spoke with analytical authority. "If the Rimmers don't spook when the mortars start falling, we're screwed. But if they slam the door, we're screwed as well."

Ridgeway glanced at Darcy with unspoken admiration, recognizing the none-too-subtle diversion she had thrown on Taz's behalf. While nothing would get him completely off Monster's hook, it spared the new guy a longer squirm on center stage.

Ridgeway snapped back to the plan. Regardless of her motivation, Darcy's conclusion was dead-on. He answered the implied question with a tone of confidence. "That's why the mortars have to come down right on top of us. Nowhere to run means no time to think."

Another rumble of questions erupted and Ridgeway fielded them in turn. The difficulty was undeniable, but while he shared his team's concern about the make-or-break nature of the entry, Ridgeway also understood what was at stake. He stood abruptly.

"Listen up!"

The room fell silent and Ridgeway paused for emphasis. "This is it folks, there is no Plan B. We get one shot with a couple thousand Marines betting their ass that we've got what it takes."

Darcy looked around the table. Two crescents of soft blonde hair framed her face, her good looks a disarming feature that had caused many to underestimate her. With a devilish smile she summed up the moment. "Well hell, boys, sounds like just another day in RAT-land."

A wave of testosterone-laden endorsement rippled around the table. Stitch extended a slow fist towards the sniper, who responded by rapping his knuckles with her own.

"Too right," Taz spat with a fierce nod. Merlin joined in with a hearty "Oorah."

Ridgeway silently watched the bravado, a mechanism for dealing with tension. As he shared their hungry resolve, his gaze made contact with each Marine in turn. The look carried a silent question. Not an eye wavered in response. The solemn nods said they would follow him to the end. Ridgeway's gusto softened for an instant under the weight of that trust. It never got any lighter.

Ridgeway slammed the door on his emotions and shifted gear into wrap-up mode. "Anything else?"

Darcy grinned as she pulled a heavy railgun into her lap, her right hand stroking the massive scope that ran the receiver's length. A predatory gleam flashed across her blue eyes. "Sniper has everything she needs, sir."

Another muffled "oorah" resonated from Merlin's side of the table and Ridgeway smiled in spite of himself.

"Then it's a wrap." Ridgeway clapped his hands and the RATs quickly dispersed, each to their appointed preparation.

Ridgeway glanced at the clock. Stealth drop planetside in six hours, another fifteen to reach the phase one insertion
point. Two hours to get sealed up, then to wait for their cue. Monster was right about one thing, Ridgeway thought, a dark furrow creasing his brow. This is definitely gonna be a real bitch.

CHAPTER 4

Jenner poked tentatively through the coarse carpet of hair and winced as his fingertips bumped along the raw furrow in his scalp. He was stained, rumpled and badly in need of a stiff drink. Slumped in the decently-lit garage at Cathedral's southern end, Jenner's composure slowly returned. By his own reckoning, his mood had upgraded from sheer panic to mere dismal surliness. "Talk about a shit day for the books," Jenner scowled. The black nylon backpack sat between his feet, his jumbled belongings draped out of the top like guts from a disemboweled carcass. Half his shit was either damaged or lost back in the tunnel. Jenner prodded listlessly at the small digital music player, its clear acrylic surface cracked and filled with moisture. Anger overcame a well-built foundation of self-pity and Jenner hurled the ruined device, which shattered against the rear of the truck. Grumbling under his breath, Jenner allowed his gaze to sweep along the length of the metal behemoth. The truck was a monstrous creature, over twenty meters from nose to tail. At its highest point, he figured it had to be almost five meters tall. The drab grey chassis looked to have started life as an industrial hauler, but the resemblance ended there. The windows were covered with the same thick armor plate that shrouded the rest of the cab. Heavy steel panels curved over the nose and down the skirt, enclosing the forward gravitic coils. Along the sides, Jenner recognized something from his brush with basic training; double-stack plates mounted on explosive bolts. His eyes narrowed. Reactive armor, the stuff you need when someone caps a missile at your ass. Jenner felt his jaw slack. Oh that can't be good.

Most of the vehicle's mass was its storage tank. Oval in cross-section, the tank was reinforced at intervals by thick metal bands that belted its girth. The outer surface of the tank, arguably a sandy beige at some point, was now discolored and pitted. Corrosion streaked down from every valve. Of the numerous messages once stenciled across the trailer, only a few were still legible. One, the designation MC-631, appeared just above a black and white diamond-shaped placard with a dissolving human hand depicted in its center. Three dome turrets sat evenly along the tank's spine, each bristling with an array of faucets and handles. A group of braided-steel hose lines ran along the top of the trailer. Jenner could make out the word DECON stenciled along one set, and COOLANT emblazoned just beneath another.

Jenner kneeled to peer at the undercarriage. The storage tank sat on a pair of grease-covered rails that would allow mechanics to slide an empty tank off in exchange for a full one. Hex, they had repeated endlessly, was best handled slowly and carefully. Hex; hydrogen hexafluoride. The Mother of All Acids. Jenner's gut had curled into a ball when he heard that one. Frowning, Jenner wiped his hands across the front of his shirt as he moved to the cab. He climbed onto the running board and tapped the silver release. With a pneumatic whine the heavy door gull-winged open to reveal a dark, cluttered interior.

The cabin exuded a disconcerting blend of smells that embodied both decay and disinfectant. The sickly-sweet odor of antifreeze seeped up from the badly stained floor mats while the upholstery reeked of old cigar smoke. "S'matter boy? Lose the keys already?"

Jenner practically jumped from his seat at the unexpected voice. The figure at the door looked to be in his early sixties, though his physique still carried the lean hardness of someone familiar with work. Swatches of grey at his temples were well on their way to overrunning the last vestiges of brown tenaciously holding ground on his skull. His skin had the texture of tanned leather left too long in the sun, although how anybody could catch a few rays down here struck Jenner as something of a mystery. Too surprised to reply, Jenner watched mutely as the old man fished a soiled red rag from his pocket for what seemed to be the sole purpose of exchanging the grime on his hands for older grime that had been saved on an earlier date. Neither the rag nor the hands came away any cleaner, but the hand rose up and reached into the open doorway. "Briggs. Hank Briggs." Stained teeth remained clenched on the wreck of an old cigar. "Hey," Jenner took the offered hand, thankful at the moment just to have some human company. "Uh, I mean,
Private Jenner, sir." He fumbled to follow the handshake with a sloppy salute, the two gestures colliding haphazardly.

Briggs snorted. "Don't 'sir' me boy, I'm a sergeant, I work for a living." Then, a little more casually, "Briggs'll do just fine."

Like most things in Jenner's new career, the rebuff seemed to reflect some tidbit of military culture beyond his understanding. But the fact that Briggs didn't make a federal case out of the whole rank thing was a good sign. The sergeant didn't seem at all like the ORA hardliners, most of whom Jenner felt took themselves and their little army routine far too seriously. Looking at Briggs' rumpled figure, Jenner wondered if all the fuck-ups got flushed to the garbage heap at the bottom of the mine.

Without waiting for comment or invitation, Briggs climbed into the cab and launched into what seemed a well-worn lecture. Briggs' job was to handle all the complicated equipment while Jenner drove. The apparent simplicity of that assertion failed to deter the sergeant's obviously hell-bent desire to point out every switch, dial and display in the cluttered cockpit.

Jenner's mind glazed over six minutes into the diatribe. His gaze meandered up a cluster of instruments on the cab's ceiling and fixed on a small hinged cover made of red plastic. He half-heartedly reached up to see what was hidden beneath.

"Don't even think about it." The icy tone stopped Jenner in mid-reach.

The private snatched his hand back as though from a snake. "What, what?"

Briggs eyed him with a flat, cold stare as his square jaw worked steadily on the cigar. Several seconds passed in dead silence. Jenner had become familiar with the tactic; authority figure trying to decide if a lecture was warranted. In his mind Jenner paced off a silent cadence.

One thousand one, one thousand two--

At one thousand six, the sergeant spoke. Jenner felt a twinge of relief when Briggs went straight into the answer without a nagging preamble.

"Detonator."

Any onset of relief vanished in an instant. "Detonator?" Jenner's tone jumped a full octave, "you mean like for a bomb?"

In mute reply, Briggs reached forward and tapped a switch on the dash. With a soft hiss of compressed air, the back wall of the cab slid open to reveal a sizable compartment, as wide as the vehicle and roughly a meter and a half tall. The inner walls were lined with yet another layer of armor plate, keloids of welded metal marking the seams where panel edges met. The left and right walls carried an impressive array of electronics. In the darkness, a myriad of tiny diodes flashed in ever-changing colors.

"You're looking at a sleeper cabin before the MIL-spec mods." Briggs slid into another bout of technical show-and-tell. "I made the bunk bed myself, rigged it together out of an old G-couch. These babies were designed to protect fighter pilots from the stress of all that violent hot-shit maneuvering."

Jenner looked incredulously at the huge piece of equipment and couldn't imagine how Briggs wedged the damn thing there in the first place. The slate-grey couch looked like it was made out of a smooth, high-impact plastic. A braid of cables stuck out from one end, clipped nubs splayed like multi-color porcupine quills.

"The main block isn't powered but I got Delkins in the motorpool to run a low-voltage line to the gelpacks. Talk about a bed that fits like a glove. A fellah lookin' to goldbrick for a few hours would be hard-pressed to find a better hiding place."

Briggs rolled a critical eye at Jenner. "Only don't even think about pulling that shit on me 'cause that's the first place I'll look."

Jenner nodded his concession, seeing no gain to be made with a verbal response.

Briggs continued in an offhand tone. "Anyway, some of that commo shit back there is pretty hush-hush, stuff they don't want falling into enemy hands. If you look under the G-couch you'll see how serious they are about it."

Jenner craned his neck to get a look beneath the gloss grey frame. Nestled in a coil of heavy black cable sat a bundle of bricks that looked like off-white plasticine clay. Each brick was wrapped in clear cellophane and carried the bold designation THERMALITE. A narrow metal cylinder, about the diameter of a drinking straw, had been driven through the wrapper and deep into the center of each brick. Wires ran from the exposed ends to a tight bundle that swept back behind the couch.

"That, boy," Briggs said, "is a twenty-kilo package of military-grade incendiary. As 'cindies go, Therms' the real deal. It'll do zero to three thousand degrees in a hundredth of a second. That's enough heat to turn steel into steam. If things go south in a big way, the last thing we're supposed to do is hit the magic button and the whole rig goes up in a puff of smoke."

Jenner's sense of comfort, much like a puff of smoke, evaporated. A foul edge crept back into his mood as he peered
at the stack of incendiary. Three thousand degrees.

"Technically," Briggs continued with an utter lack of concern in his voice, "you could still sleep back there, but any more I just use it to store extra gear and supplies. It's amazing what you can scrounge up when you look."

As if to emphasize the point, Briggs hooked a thumb back towards the compartment. "See that?"
The crumpled mass of violently fluorescent orange was hard to miss. Even badly smudged with grease, it practically glowed in the dark. Jenner nodded absently, his eyes and mind still focused on the Thermalite.

"Well, that's a genu-wine Garsons Drysuit, just about the best deep-sea survival wear ever developed. I scored it from Koslovski in surplus for a bottle of homebrew hooch."

Jenner's brow knotted as he looked at the suit's rubbery exterior. Sealable flaps covered each heavy-duty zipper. Black-rubber fingers stuck out from one side of the bungie-corded bundle. Thick-soled boots hung from the opposing side.

"I hate to be the one to bring you a news flash Sarge, but there ain't even a lake on this hunk of rock, much less an ocean." A brief veneer of intolerance played across Jenner's face, much like a child's disdain for the unbearable stupidity of a parent.

The sergeant's eyes narrowed. "Yeah, like you'd have a clue. Do you have any idea how cold the nights get up top around here? Real cold! The heating system in that sumbitch will keep my ass toasty in a deep-freeze. It's made of rubberized Kevlar that was designed to stand up to shark bite, so it sure as hell will stand up to a pounding wind. Now, you tell me Mr. Brain Surgeon, if we get stranded somewhere up top and have to bail this beast, what are you planning on wearing-- a T-shirt?"

A retort formed on Jenner's lips that he just as quickly discarded. Instead, he looked sullenly at the bare metal floorboards, muttered something under his breath, then fell silent.

Briggs snorted again. "Uh-huh, thought so." His teeth worked the cigar with a fervor that appeared to match his level of agitation. Jenner fixed his eyes on the dash and a long wordless interval ticked by before Briggs rumbled through some of the other junk in the darkness. "Got some other stuff, spare parts, shotgun, stack of MREs, couple grenades--"

"Oh great", Jenner spat, "what goes better with twenty keys of Thermalite than a couple of grenades? Guess the PX was out of nukes that day, huh?"

Briggs rolled his eyes. "Geeze boy! You always this whiny?" He didn't wait for a reply. "Listen, that compartment is sealed up as tight as the damn tank, maybe tighter. As far as HQ is concerned, the electronics back there are more important than we are so they're not about to let 'em get toasted by accident. The walls are reinforced and the wiring is top-grade. The detonator is on its own power source and it's shielded all to hell. You can't flip the switch cover without a key and without the switch you'd have to shoot the damn Thermalite to get it to cook off." He leaned forward, his bloodshot eyes fixed on Jenner's, "and we're not about to start firing guns in here, now are we?"

"No."

"All right then, quit yer sissy-ass bellyaching and start paying attention. Come tomorrow we're gonna find out just how good a driver you are."

CHAPTER 5

Jenner sighed wearily as an arc of yellow light swept through the darkness, rotating to the pulsing drone of a warning claxon. With a hammer-on-anvil ring, hydraulic rams withdrew a dozen steel lugs back into the reinforced doorframe. A widening shaft of light poured out as the sixteen-ton doors parted with a deep, grinding rumble. With a final, metallic clang the elevator doors stood open.

The surge of relief helped him ignore Briggs' most recent jab. "What'd I tell ya? Out and back. That wasn't so bad, was it?"

Truth be told, Jenner thought, "miserable" would have been a better description.

Driving the huge truck out to the chem facility had been a constant struggle, followed by a long wait as the empty hex tank was swapped for a full one. After wrangling a swimming pool full of hex back across the rough terrain, the lights of the compound looked like heaven.

Most of the tarmac was framed by a thick berm of gravel and slag that had been bulldozed into an expedient barricade. The top of the berm was laced with twisted coils of razor-ribbon. A pair of concrete guard towers rose above the makeshift wall, defining the forward edge of the courtyard.

The southern edge backed directly into the base of the mountain. Tons of stone had been cut away to create a sheer wall that rose nearly thirty meters. Centered in that flat expanse of granite, a lone window gazed down upon the courtyard. The wide elevator door centered directly below the window.

Orange-vested figures emerged from the mammoth elevator, followed by two small yellow tractors that bristled with
antennae. The vehicles moved to either side of the truck while technicians scurried about hauling power lines and air hoses.

Jenner tossed a weary nod, "What's the deal?"

"Security runs a scan of the tank," Briggs replied. "Gotta make sure we didn't pick up anything like a tracking device or a bomb."

"Aside from the one we packed ourselves?"

Briggs gave two rapid strokes on the fetid cigar but otherwise ignored the comment. "That scanner can look clean through the truck, it'll even spot cracks in the tank wall. Better to know out here before we haul this thing into the shaft. Last time we had a leak was when some idiot opened the pressure valve on the input line without checking to see that the backflush had been set." Briggs paused, watching Jenner process the information. "You wouldn't happen to know what happened next, wouldja?"

"No backflush," Jenner chewed his lip and squinted. "Well, the Hex would have run through the lines under pressure, but instead of flowing into the tank it would have bounced at the backflush valves and routed into the overflow tank."

"Yeah..." Briggs coaxed.

"At normal line pressure the overflow tank would have maxed out pretty quick. The extra would have nowhere to go but out, and end up as spillage." The private looked up to see Briggs staring blankly. Jenner grimaced, wondering which part of the process he had botched.

Before Jenner could utter a retraction, the grey stubble on Briggs' craggy jaw parted. Slowly, unbelievably, a grin crawled across the sergeant's face. "Well I'll be damned son, you go off and read a book or something when I wasn't looking?"

Jenner exhaled fully and smiled in return. "Nah," he replied off-handedly, "I've got a hardass boss who beats this crap into my head."

"Wha-- Oh, hardass is it?" Briggs snorted in mock anger as he snatched the cap from his head and swatted Jenner's chest with a lazy backhand smack. "Well it damn sure would take a hardass to pound some sense into that thick skull of yours!"

The rough camaraderie came as close to a genuine moment of friendship as Jenner could recall, and he liked the feeling.

Brilliant light flared at the truck's two forward corners, drawing closer as the scanner units crawled down the length of the truck in tandem. As the glow intensified, Jenner noted a foreign sound over the gusting wind, a whistle that grew deeper and louder.

Briggs snapped around, his eyes flared wide. "INCOMING!"

The whistle stopped abruptly as the base of the western guard tower exploded. Huge chunks of shattered concrete skipped across the tarmac as another descending whine cut through the thunder.

"Punch it!" Briggs screamed, stabbing a finger at the elevator.

As a second explosion thundered somewhere astern, Jenner shoved the truck's throttle into overdrive. The invisible gravitic cushion swelled abruptly, rolling over one of the scanners and stamping it flat into the tarmac. Technicians scattered as the truck lurched forward.

A third round slammed high on the stone wall, blasting rock from the face of the mountain. Granite hail rained from clouds of smoke.

Briggs jerked around in his seat, eyes fixed on the wounded guard tower. With a groan, the structure leaned unsteadily. Briggs' fist beat madly on the dash as he shouted, "Go, go, go!"

Darkness swallowed the truck as it lunged into the elevator. Jenner was thrown forward as the nose slammed into the far wall, but his eyes remained glued to the rear-view screen. The ponderous doors closed all-too-slowly.

Another descending shriek was punctuated by concussion as a starburst of white heat blotted out the fuel depot. Jenner barely had time to blink before his entire world was absorbed by a ball of blinding light.

* * *

Jenner hung somewhere between consciousness and coma. Throbbing pain wrestled with oily nausea for control of what little feeling he had left. Somewhere in the distance, a dull grinding sound echoed unevenly, displaced and intangible as though underwater.

The windshield screen was cracked and lifeless. A sharp tang of ozone cloaked the air, mixed with the acrid stench of burned rubber. Half the circuits in the truck had likely fried.

Still, he noted vaguely, another smell permeated the darkness, an odor that he knew for some reason should be important. Dull, coppery; a familiar smell.
With great effort, David Jenner raised a trembling hand to his face. The fingers came away streaked with blood. He
stared blankly at the red sheen, unable to divine a reason for its presence. Half-closed eyes swung downward in
detached curiosity, trying to see if more of the stuff was oozing from his chest or legs.
The search was purely mechanical, the act of a brain on autopilot. Past fear, past pain, Jenner tried to grasp what had
happened.
Depot blew, he remembered, big fuckin' explosion.
While the doors had blunted much of the blast, the air pressure in the shaft had spiked with a terrible violence,
popping rivets and blood vessels alike. Might have even popped welded steel seams. A wave of fear-driven nausea
rippled through Jenner's core as his mind latched onto the implications.
A distant buzz droned angrily from the damage control screen. Hanging askew on a cracked mount, the flat panel
flickered sporadically. Through one eye Jenner made out a fuzzy schematic of the truck splattered with red lights. At
least three gravitic coils were dead and one section of reactive armor had cooked off.
It hurt like hell to focus, and for a moment Jenner let the eye close once more. A moment passed as he drew a deep
breath through clenched teeth. With a grunt, Jenner opened his eye again and struggled to bring the display back into
clarity, his fear of a damaged tank increasing.
He fumbled with a series of buttons in an effort to cycle the display modes, but the procedure seemed mired in
mental amber. In frustration, he banged the display with a blood-slick hand, adding several more spots of red to the
image.
"She held."
Jenner's head swiveled around at the sound of Briggs' voice. The sharp movement invoked a fresh wave of nausea.
In the dim glow of flickering monitors, Jenner could see the sergeant slumped against his chair, head lolled back at
an odd angle, eyes closed. A meandering red stream oozed quietly from Briggs' right ear. His skin had lost most of
it's tanned-leather hue, faded now to a shade of dusty grey. He looked dead.
"If she'da blown," Briggs' slurred loudly, as though unable to hear his own voice, "mosta th' cab would be dissolvin'
right now."
With a charged hum, the damage console flickered again. Static writhed across the screen before it dropped to black,
then blossomed back to life. Slowly, a set of familiar gauges began to resolve from out of the video noise. Clearer
now, readable. Structural integrity was intact, volume was solid, internal pressure right on the mark.
Damn, Jenner marveled. She had held together.
The private leaned back and hissed a long, slow sigh of relief. Even breathing hurt, Jenner noted sourly, but it beat
the hell out of the alternative.
For several long moments the two men sat like the dead and listened to the metallic groans of the platform as it
dropped deeper and deeper into the mineshaft. The normal drone of the elevator was creased by a high-pitched
squeal of metal dragging on metal. A discordant vibration rattled the elevator car.
"Lift musta been damaged by the blast," Jenner mumbled. Maybe the plate of reactive armor that fired off had gotten
wedged between the elevator and the wall and now dragged against the stone surface like a fingernail on an
oversized chalkboard. Whatever it was, Jenner prayed that the elevator would hold out until they reached the
bottom.
The truck lurched hard and the ring of steel on steel shuddered through the cab. Jenner sucked in his breath, a fresh
stab of fear piercing his heart. Motion stopped. A series of smaller clangs followed in tight sequence as pneumatic
clamps locked the elevator into place.
Jenner exhaled a long overdue breath. We made it.
He fumbled for the seatbelt latch but his left arm failed to work properly. Pain lanced up his entire left side as his
weight shifted. In growing frustration he dragged a trembling right hand across his body to reach the aluminum
clasp, which popped open with a sharp click. Jenner turned to paw at the door handle when a flashing screen caught
his eye.
"Huh?" Jenner's hand froze, fingers brushing the door latch.
"What?" Briggs' lips moved, though his eyes remained closed.
"Sensors. Somethin' in the tank."
Jenner cursed quietly and blinked hard, trying to clear the cotton from his mind. He reached out with his right hand
and tapped a command on the console. Glyphs skittered across the screen.
Briggs opened his eyes and with a wheezy groan leaned across the center console. "Dammit boy, it's just--" Briggs' words trailed into silence. Vibration patterns emanated from inside the tank, distinct patterns. Jenner watched as the computer filtered for echo and reflection, resolving six rough forms in the center of the disturbance. Forms with
arms and legs. Jenner saw Briggs' eyes go wide.
"Briggs?" Jenner's voice was hesitant; the warning light in the back of his mind had already kicked into overdrive.
"Briggs, what the hell is that?"

Briggs' left hand slammed against the dash and the cab's rear door slid open. "Get in the back!" he shouted as he grappled with his seat restraints. The voice carried a ragged note of terror.

Raw fear burned bright in Briggs' eyes. In the space of a single heartbeat, that fear jumped across the cab and buried its frigid claws along the length of Jenner's spine. The icy touch was numbing. No thought, only the need to move.

Jenner's broken left arm folded back under his weight as he scrambled for the open rear door. He pitched forward and his head crashed with a thud between the seats. For a moment he was wedged in a ridiculous, face-down posture. Panic-driven limbs flailed madly and somersaulted him through the narrow doorway. He hit the base of the gravitic couch with a thud.

"Help me!" The ragged timber of Briggs' voice spiked as he shouted from the cab. "Dammit boy, gimme a hand!"

Jenner flopped to one side and looked through the door, past Briggs. Across the cab a brilliant flash of red pulsed angrily:

**WARNING**

The dash seemed to draw away as Jenner's world stretched out into an edgeless blur. A hand beckoned with surreal slowness. Eddie's fingers—no, Jenner shook his head, Briggs, Briggs' fingers dripped with dark blood. The old man's face looked back, eyes wide with terror as the claxon droned.

**WARNING**

Jenner banged the switch and the compartment door slammed shut. Tears ran down his face as he fell back into the darkness, away from the screams and the pounding at the door. When the explosion tore through the heart of the truck, even the screams were lost.

**CHAPTER 6**

The squeal of failing metal mixed with the moans of the dying. In the darkness overhead, a transformer blew out with a shotgun report and sparks rained down through the catwalks. Somewhere in the distance a siren howled mournfully.

The truck lay dead. Strips of linear shaped charge inside the tank had cut an instant doorway through her side, the edges of the gaping wound curled back like bits of torn paper.

Steam parted as an armored form emerged through the hole, oblivious to the Hex that streamed off of grey armored skin. Dan Ridgeway climbed out of the wreckage and fired a brief glance toward the front of the vehicle. Hex-laden sludge hemorrhaged from buckled seams, thick with dissolving electronics and upholstery. Some of the runny clumps oozing to the floor would doubtlessly be the driver.

Turning quickly, Ridgeway's attention swept the loading bay. Everywhere he looked, walls and equipment were pockmarked with smoking holes. Shrapnel from the blast, every scrap coated with Hex, had riddled the area.

Anyone caught in the open was already dead or dying.

A sea of liberated Hex now churned in a knee-deep pool that stretched across the sunken floor. Dark fumes boiled from the surface, forming a brown, corrosive fog that crawled steadily outward. With a loud crackle, power cables dissolved in the caustic haze, spitting blue-white ribbons of voltage. Hissing madly, severed hoses thrashed like beheaded snakes.

But on the fringes of the disaster, Ridgeway could see training take hold. A response team appeared at the far corner of the loading bay. He counted a dozen figures in rubbery suits as they raced across the overhead catwalks, bold Hazmat symbols prominent on their blaze orange helmets.

Almost a hundred yards away, a pair of huge steel doors parted with a pneumatic whine, clearing the way for a bright yellow maglev. HAZMAT-4 appeared along the curved skirt in day-glow lettering. The sled oozed toward the acid lake on a cushion of magnetic force, flanked by yet another column of responders. Twin chrome barrels belched streams of thick white foam.

For a brief moment Ridgeway was impressed. Faced with an immense crisis, the Rimmer responders fought back with courage and discipline.

A good way to die, he thought as his right hand chopped crisply in the direction of the nearest team.

In response, Monster's Gatling gun spun into motion. Flame roared from the muzzle with a howling scream as an incandescent finger reached out to the tightly massed responders. They disintegrated under its deadly touch, bodies churned into bloody bits by a withering hail of ammunition. A helmet burst into fluorescent shards while an air tank skipped across the metal floor, driven angrily by gas venting through its punctured shell.

The fiery stream swept left and came to bear on the maglev. Amid the staccato pang and whine of bullet hits on metal, ragged holes appeared across her hull, widening rapidly. Ridgeway watched the brilliant discharge of covalent ammunition as the onslaught ripped it's way to the vehicle's heart.
The gravitic core breached, incinerating the hapless souls who had scrambled behind the vehicle for cover. The powerful blast filled the air with white-hot frag and vaporized Hex. Thunder echoed through the cavern as Ridgeway scanned the aftermath. The explosion had gutted an area almost twenty meters in diameter. Behind his impassive mask the marine grinned; gravcore failures were always dramatic. Sections of catwalk hammered by the blast hung down from the ceiling in broken tatters. Fires burned by the dozen. A broken pressure line hemorrhaged compressed gas that added to the growing cloud of smoke and acid fumes. Nothing human moved amid the carnage. Ridgeway's right fist snapped up.

The spinning barrels of the Gatling stopped with a metallic click and the soft curl of rising smoke. Monster jumped down to the concrete floor and splashed through the acid with evident purpose. The rest of the RATs quickly followed.

Ridgeway cursed inwardly as he checked his mission clock. Behind the pace already. The elevator had descended far slower than projected and any margin for error was now gone. What had been a narrow window from the onset had become a flat-out race against time.

Ridgeway bolted forward, mechanized legs driving him through the knee-deep acid in a blur of acceleration. He hooked past the smoking crater left by the maglev's detonation, confident that nothing in his path had survived the initial room-clearing.

With his head encased in an opaque shell of carbonite, Ridgeway relied on synthetic vision pumped straight to his optic nerves. The days of laser-scorched retinas had long ago made clear visors obsolete. Multi-spectrum data gathered by each suit of armor was transmitted to the others, providing a shared tactical awareness. The TAC system resolved these streams of data into graphic icons and color-coded vectors.

As Ridgeway sprinted, Taz fell in on his heels. Darcy was moving to high ground, climbing a thin tensile grapling line to the catwalks above. Monster had broken right with Merlin and Stitch and now thundered across Cathedral on a direct line to the reactor. Ridgeway watched as the TAC displayed a series of threat indicators in Monster's path. Just as quickly as they appeared, they winked out.

In full stride, Ridgeway hurdled a steel rail. Ahead and to the left, a wide metal staircase led downward. The yellow and black sign on the wall read SECURITY with a prominent arrow pointing down.

Launching himself from the top of the stairs, Ridgeway hurtled through the air and landed with a bone-jarring slam on the grated steel walkway below. His inertia carried him into the midst of a Rimmer response team massing frantically.

Powered forearms hooked viciously to the sound of snapping bones as he drove through the crowd. A second heavy shudder told him that Taz was right on his tail. The two Marines carved into the security team like a pair of chainsaws.

A door slid open on the right side of the wide industrial hallway as a tyvek-clad engineer appeared in the portal. His squad number, 62, gleamed on both helmet and airpack. Ridgeway saw the eyes behind the respirator flash wide with last-second alarm as an armored gauntlet slammed into the facemask with the force of a sledgehammer.

Taz blew by as Ridgeway cut hard and spun through the still-open doorway. Inside, Alliance responders were in chaos. Hands grappled with hazmat suits and snatched at equipment as an orchestra of sirens blared at a deafening level. Reacting to a soundless cue, the Rimmers turned in stunned confusion at the dark metallic form in the doorway. The figure raised its armored hands, palms turned up as if in bloody supplication.

With a practiced mental command that had long become second nature, Ridgeway triggered the weapons mounted in his forearms and a dull roar whooshed from the compact flamethrowers. Twin streams of liquid fire swept across the writhing mass, igniting flesh and clothing alike. Thick with magnesium-phosphorous particles, the incendiary flared many times hotter than conventional fuel. Even the metal bunk frames began to burn.

Seven seconds after entering, Ridgeway backpedaled out of the room. The twin doors slammed shut with a sharp bang. He left the raging firestorm to quell any lingering screams.

Squad 62 will not be participating in the remainder of today's exercise.

Resuming his charge down the hall, Ridgeway scanned the TAC. The mission clock ticked incessantly near the bottom center of his visual field, its numeric display enhanced with a steadily diminishing time bar.

Three minutes, sixteen seconds. The first wave of Marine Firehawks were already burning in through the upper atmosphere.

Just ahead, another set of doors slid open. Smoke and flickering orange light broiled angrily into the corridor, perforated by sporadic gunfire. Taz burst from the inferno and flashed an upraised thumb as the doors slammed shut behind him. The TAC noted scattered damage across the aussie's armor, but nothing of consequence.

Storming down the hall in tandem, Ridgeway called up a tactical map and a crisp wireframe materialized across the upper portion of his visual field. Refined to minimize clutter, the display gave Ridgeway rapid access to the condition and location of each Marine. One floor above, Monster's squad had reclaimed nearly a minute against the
clock.

Ridgeway broke into a dead run, electroactive polymer muscles driving his legs like pistons. He broke left at a four-way junction and bolted across a cluttered machinist's bay.

The TAC scoured the path ahead, analyzing not only visual data but heat, acoustics, even the faint fields of myoelectric current generated by living flesh. Translated into a constant stream of EAD, expanded-awareness data, the heightened perception could give the Marines a nearly supernatural sense of a battlefield. Sometimes it simply gave him a split-second edge.

The sudden red bracket framed the corner of a black riot shield wedged hard against an oil-streaked air compressor.

"Break!" Ridgeway barked, twisting his torso as the carbine fired.

The world slowed as Ridgeway's enhanced nervous system kicked into overdrive. Combat noise pulled back, stretching as it faded into a hollow, cavernous echo. The image before him refined into crystal clarity.

Muzzle flash. White cloud of vented gas as the carbine cycled another round of caseless ammunition. Flash again, angry yellow-orange.

Ridgeway felt a string of impacts pound across his ribs. He felt pain as well-- something better given than received. A snarl boiled in his throat as the space between the combatants evaporated.

At full run, Ridgeway uncoiled with a vengeance and swung at the center of the shield. The smooth kevlar panel shattered like balsa wood. His gauntlet drove the Rimmer's sternum violently against his spine, bursting the organs that lay between. The body dropped to the floor like a stringless marionette.

With elastic suddenness, Ridgeway's perception snapped back to normal. The angry buzz of damage control led the way, shifting from dull to prominent. Points of orange blinked rapidly in a line that angled across his ribs. The shots had been well-aimed, only the severe rotation of his body had caused them to strike at a glancing angle. Still, at point-blank range the heavy rounds had inflicted damage; a cracked rib at the least, and several pitted dents across the armor plating. Durable did not mean indestructible.

Screw it, Ridgeway growled inwardly. In about three minutes a cracked rib would be the least of my problems. He pressed on, driven by mounting urgency.

The two Marines ascended a flight of stairs in powerful strides and cut back towards the reactor, scanning for anything that could pose a threat to Monster's squad. The rapid search produced no candidates. From the looks of things, Rimmer resistance had evaporated. The entire corridor stood empty.

Just as well. The time bar on the TAC was also vanishing, and now stood below three minutes. Monster's team should have the Detonex in place by now. Barely enough time to--

Ridgeway braked hard, his boots skidding on the metal floor as he stopped just short of the huge steel door that slammed down from the ceiling. An oddly flattened shout passed through the wall-mounted intercom. "I got you, motherfucker! Hey guys, I got 'em. He's stuck behind the--"

The sudden high-pitched whine of the Gatling was unmistakable, even through a foot of steel. The energetic voice cut off abruptly as Ridgeway watched a swath of bulges ripple across the metal door as though someone beat the opposite side with a million ball peen hammers.

A deep metallic thunk preceded the ascending whine of hydraulics as the door rose. Blood drooled freely from its lower edge as it withdrew into the ceiling. On the other side, Monster stood framed in a swirl of smoke.

Ridgeway stepped through the door, oblivious to the steaming slick of human mulch. "We good with the charges?" Monster's gravel voice was firm. "Roger that, six in the green."

Ridgeway glanced at the mission clock. Just two minutes and twenty-eight seconds before the powerful Detonex charges would turn the nuclear reactor inside out. The explosion to follow would reduce most of Cathedral to a subterranean slagheap, a party his Marines would just as soon miss.

Ridgeway stabbed a finger in the air, pointing down the hall that led back to the loading bay. "Marines! We are out of here!"

Like a pack of armored wolves the Marines fell into formation and swept down the corridor. They ran flat-out, their charge marked by only token bursts of weapon fire.

According to the TAC, they had thus far escaped serious injury. A dropship rigged with decon and medics would be poised at the top, more than enough to deal with the lingering hex and the smattering of wounds. All Ridgeway had to do was get his team out of this damned hole.

He prodded the TAC for a status on the Cathedral. The response was sorely lacking. While the facility map was clear and vivid, the TAC disclosed no data on enemy troops.

"It's the shielding for the reactor," Monster barked, anticipating Ridgeway's move and matching it. "We're still inside the containment vessel; it's playing hell with scanners and comm."

As if in confirmation, Ridgeway caught the broken fragments of a garbled ComLink. Darcy's voice crackled in his
head, her tone thick with urgency. "Tango char…ull platoon… ...epeat, Condit-- Re…"
"Say again!" Ridgeway barked as he rounded a huge block of transformers that hummed with voltage. At a dead run, the Marines went berserk as the first cluster of heavy shells chewed into the wall above Ridgeway's head. A hail of small-arms fire erupted, filing the air with the neon streak of infantry lasers.
The Marines fanned out in headlong dives for cover. Ridgeway rolled hard, his armored mass slamming into a stack of blue industrial drums. Several of the cylinders bounced away like oversized bowling pins. A trail of cannon fire chewed at his heels, blasting the containers apart into clouds of chemical mist.
"Delta three! Delta three!" Ridgeway shouted over the slap of bullets on steel. His right arm reached for the Covalent Assault Rifle holstered in the backpack section of his armor.
All right, Ridgeway snarled, No more Mr. Nice Guy. The CAR gave off a sharp whistle as protocol Delta Three went into effect.
On cue, Monster's huge right arm curled over the cab of a forklift and the Gatling blazed a vicious arc of suppressing fire. Incoming fire stuttered abruptly as Rimmers frantically scrambled for cover.
In the momentary lapse, Taz and Merlin bolted forward on the edges of the skirmish. As they ran, the charging forms suddenly became indistinct against the background of machines and electronics. Cloaked in active light-bending camouflage, the two ghostly forms blurred through the maze of smoke and tracer-streaks.
Stitch opened up on Ridgeway's right, adding the distinct, full-auto bass of exothermic fire to the din. The medic had disengaged the MP17's silencer, wringing out every bit of velocity the subgun could produce. A tongue of flame licked out from the muzzle.
The TAC devoured acoustic and visual signatures, plotting points of origin. Ridgeway quickly saw that the large gun was an Oerlikon 30mil on a mobile platform.
"Big bastard," he grunted, knowing that easily four centimeters of armor plate surrounded the gunner. The Oerlikon was a heavy-hitter designed to anchor a defensive line in the midst of a shitstorm. And doing a damn good job at the moment.
The Rimmers had bunched up around the Oerlikon, using the heavy gun for fire support and cover. Judging from the sand-colored BDUs and light ballistic armor, Ridgeway took the Alliance troops for regular army, probably a detachment from an upper level that had the brights to double-time it down here when the first sirens went off. Gung-ho types.
The TAC counted some fifteen guys to the left of the cannon, another ten to the right. At least six of them carried squad automatics, accounting for a lot of the Rimmer fire.
A lance of ionized air streaked in from the distance as the hypersonic bullet punched a fist-sized hole through the Oerlikon's gunner compartment. The cannon fell silent as a thunderclap rolled in from somewhere high in the Cathedral catwalks. A familiar female voice echoed in Ridgeway's ear. "Hammer time."
Ridgeway suppressed a grin as he rolled to his feet. The Covalent Assault Rifle roared, blue-white plasma flaring from its muzzle. The Rimmer line was pounded with a stream of charged covalent rounds that flared with cyan light on impact. The very fabric of matter destabilized by the disruption of covalent bonds, soldiers literally unraveled at the seams.
The CAR's underslung launcher barked sharply, lobbing Thermalite grenades over the massed opponents. Four airburst detonations thudded down the enemy line, white-hot flashes invoking a new wave of screams.
To either side, a pair of phantoms coalesced as Taz and Merlin raked the enemy flank with flamethrowers. Tongues of searing heat licked through the troops, withering skin to a blackened crust. Burning figures flailed on the ground, wrapped in shreds of dull, flickering orange.
A game Rimmer with Lieutenant bars on his collar tried to rally the survivors. Shouting commands over the roar of battle, the young officer struggled to shore up the center of the line. Driven by his commands, one squad automatic came back online before the Lieutenant's tan ballistic helmet launched in a burst of crimson mist.
People with rank insignia shouldn't wave their arms in combat, Ridgeway sneered as he saw the cloudburst of red. Dumb bastard might just as well have worn a bright yellow T-shirt that read SNIPER BAIT.
Any lingering shred of Rimmer discipline came apart like the Lieutenant's skull. With fire closing in from either side, the middle of the Alliance line bunched together. But in drawing away from the flames, they also backed away from cover.
Stepping out from behind the forklift, Monster brought the Gatling to bear and an incandescent stream of bullets carved through the exposed throng. Chunks of flesh, bone and kevlar sprayed wildly. The battle ended as abruptly as it began. Surround, divide and destroy; thirty-four seconds to chew an enemy platoon to shreds. From each corner, Marines swept the kill zone. Nothing survived.
Ridgeway snapped a glance at the chrono. Detonation in one minute forty-six; no chance of making it to the surface.
Their only hope was to get as far up the elevator shaft as possible. Ridgeway barked, “Marines, double time! Darcy, torch anything between us and the elevator!”

As the RATs bolted for the exit, a sudden chain of thunderclaps echoed ahead. The Marines abandoned everything in the name of speed. Nearing the gutted maglev, Ridgeway checked the time.

One minute.

The elevator shaft extended straight up the far wall and out through the ceiling. The way home. At nearly 40kph Ridgeway's hurtling form reached the--

crater?

The damned hex, Ridgeway realized. Trapped in the sunken floor of the loading bay, the insatiable acid had attacked the concrete with unexpected effectiveness. The fuming surface of the corrosive lake still boiled, but now some ten meters below floor level.

Reflex kicked in as Ridgeway hit the edge of the jagged pit. Synthetic muscles launched him over the gaping hole. The far wall came up fast. A subconsciously neural command flashed, survival reflexes firing madly. Bayonet-sized blades recessed along the outer edge of both forearms hinged at the wrist, pivoting ninety degrees to the axis of Ridgeway's arm. They locked into place just as he slammed into the wall. Even through the armor, the impact rattled his teeth.

Sucking for air, Ridgeway hung from the spikes buried in the wall. He looked down to see the steaming hole that yawned beneath him, its sides porous and crumbling from the caustic excavation. The truck lay crumpled at the bottom, only the front sections of the tank and cab still recognizable above the bubbling surface.

Dollars of red brackets filled the TAC, converging on the Marine's position. At the edge of the pit, Monster unleashed a wide arc of suppressive fire. Stitch spun back to back with the gunny, firing the MP17 in rapid, accurate bursts.

Merlin and Taz sprinted by and leaped over the smoking hole in a mimic of Ridgeway's lead. Better prepared to hit the wall, they immediately began a hand-over-hand ascent. Powerful arms drove their own blades deep into the rough concrete.

Ridgeway pulled himself onto a narrow ledge. A deep gurgle belched up from the acid pool as a massive bubble broke across the steaming surface. The Hex dipped noticeably, drawing back from the edge like a caustic tide. As it did, the rearmost section of the truck settled with a low groan.

A garish warning tone snared Ridgeway's attention. Flaring madly, a bright red bracket appeared on the left edge of his vision where the ugly nose of an RPG peered up from within a doorway. The conical head of the rocket-propelled grenade leered malevolently as Ridgeway perched on the wall like a fly. With almost a kilo of high explosive and a sleeve of titanium flechettes, the OG-9 would make one hell of a swatter.

Ridgeway flattened against the wall. The grenadier was tucked in tight, using the doorframe and wall for cover. Only the outer edge of his shoulder was visible, pathetically little to target.

The ionized wake of a railgun bullet punched through the metal doorframe like rice paper, blasting through the grenadier and into the concrete floor. Unfired, the launcher bounced once and clattered into the crater.

Forty nine seconds. We aren't gonna make it.

A 40mm grenade slammed viciously off Monster's chest, caroming only an arm's-length before it detonated. The concussion knocked the big man sprawling. His icon flashed furiously on the TAC.

From the walkways above, Darcy's rifle thundered in rapid succession. A string of white-hot concussions burned a swath through Rimmers that tried to close on Monster's position. The sonic boom was sharper now, explosive, telling Ridgeway that the sniper had spun the railgun's velocity to max. Uranium projectiles left the barrel so fast that air friction melted them into bolts of superheated plasma.

The gurgle of Hex suddenly amplified, a sucking roar that sounded like a jet intake. The churning surface bowed inward and twisted into an accelerating spiral. With an abrupt flush, thousands of liters of hydrogen hexafluoride drained from sight, dragging the dead truck in its wake.

Ridgeway blinked twice. The smoldering crater had become a tunnel shaft that ran deeper than the eye could see. Another cavern? The idea flashed through Ridgeway's mind as an image more than as words. How far? No way to know. Big hole, big enough for a truck. But to where?

Ridgeway's damage control screamed as machinegun fire chewed the wall around him. Sound flattened as the hammering noise slipped out of sync with reality. He caught a distant CRUMP and saw a huge black-orange fireball roll across thirty meters of Cathedral floor.

Thirty seconds. No time left. Ridgeway made the call.

"Down the hole. Move!"

Without question Merlin and Taz pushed back from the wall, tearing their climbing blades out of the concrete. The Marines plummeted feet-first into the crater, glanced roughly off the uneven slope and tumbled out of sight.
Ridgeway looked up to see the sniper holding ground on the catwalk. Ferocity tainted his voice as he screamed, "Darcy - get out of there!"

Ripping off two final shots, Darcy ducked for cover and snapped the rifle into two sections, slamming them into their backpack compartments. In a sudden burst she vaulted the railing and dropped to a lower catwalk. "Inboun--"

Through the ComLink, Ridgeway could hear the erratic percussion of metal on metal that played sharply over the wet gush of air driven from human lungs. A sudden hail of sparks appeared across the sniper's form as she was knocked off her feet.

Ridgeway tracked left; a fire team of at least eight Rimmers massed at the near end of her catwalk, pouring fire on Darcy's position. The sniper rolled frantically, scrabbling for cover as Ridgeway's CAR fired a five-round burst into the lead Rimmer. One squad automatic dropped out of the fight, but seven remaining weapons chattered ceaselessly. Staggering to his feet, Monster took the wholesale approach. The beefy Marine swung the Gatling straight up, vectoring in on the Rimmer team some fifteen meters overhead. The multi-barreled gun howled.

The first two hundred rounds tore the Rimmer stack to hell. But the Gatling continued, attacking the catwalk itself. Eroding metal burned with the electric fire of covalence gone awry and the hanging sidewalk parted with a metallic shriek. With the growing crash of chain-reaction failure, the length of catwalk succumbed to gravity amidst the whip-like crack of snapping guy wires. The end of the walk pitched down to form a long ramp with Darcy at the top. Her flailing body skated down the sudden slope. A trail of sparks framed her descent as armor scraped along grated metal. With tremendous speed she plowed into twisted wreckage at the bottom.

Ridgeway struggled to maintain cover fire as Monster grabbed the sniper with his left hand and hefted her from the wreckage like a rag doll. Shielding her with his own body, Monster staggered straight for the gaping hole. He hit the edge without slowing and dove over the rim amid a flurry of red streaks.

A rapid series of powerful thuds echoed from the far side of the cavern. Ridgeway didn't need to see the bright 0:00:00 flashing on the chrono to know the source.

Stitch screamed "Fire in the hole" and dove into the crater.

Ridgeway jumped. Somewhere in the distance, a huge gong reverberated. The sound was beyond all proportion to the noise of battle. Some eight hundred meters away, the south wall of the Cathedral bulged, shattering into a billion pieces.

Dan Ridgeway had a brief impression of sunrise shining through the cracks before the crater's darkness engulfed him.

CHAPTER 7

Muted bass ebbed and flowed in the darkness, the absence of treble oddly soothing. Only a persistent buzz disrupted the womblike environment, a gnawing, synthetic drone that refused to go away. Dan Ridgeway forced one eye open as his mind groped to find the source of the noise and kill it.

Explosion, big one. Fragmented impressions strobed in a fitful rush; freight train roar, yellow-orange brilliance, countless impacts fused into a single formless brutality. Then freedom, slow rotation, the sound of rushing air. A pane of blue iridescence hurtling closer, closer.

The Marine lay quiet as the memories congealed in his brain. His tongue slid across parched lips, the familiar taste of stale blood in his mouth. He was relieved to find teeth.

Ridgeway fumbled to form a mental link with the armor. The effort was like pawing through a wall of cotton to find a light switch. Somewhere in the back of his mind a synaptic contact meshed. His sight returned in a snowstorm of digital imaging, the harsh brilliance assailing neurons that had grown accustomed to darkness. He fought a wave of nausea as the envelope of augmented reality spooled up. With a bright flash, the digital static was replaced by an undulating blue glow.

"Dammit," Ridgeway cursed as he scanned the soft-focus haze. If visual was offline he would be in a world of shit. He pushed his perspective through several of the sensors that dotted the Carbonite shell. Nothing changed, even the TAC elements were dead. No targeting brackets, no maps; just the digital clock ticking silently in the lower center of his vision.

1224 hours. Shit, been out for a while.

Nearly twelve hours had elapsed since a carefully-placed string of Detonex charges had transformed the Vostok reactor into a nuclear bomb.

Power cells gotta be sucking fumes by now, Ridgeway thought with a start. If they hit zero, the armor would shut down and life support would fail altogether. Point one of concern.

Reluctant to see the answer, he queried the damage-control system. To his surprise, the DCS was operational and painted a vivid picture.
Dents and gouges covered the armor's exterior. Although several plates had stressed to the point of cracking, Ridgeway could see no catastrophic failures.

"Gotta live with it," he grumbled as he dismissed any thought of mnemonic reconstruction. Invoking the armor's slow regeneration capacity would burn through his remaining power in short order. He tabled the option, having neither the juice nor the time to dedicate to the effort.

The medical diagnosis proved a greater concern. Despite the armor's dense gelpack lining, the Marine had lost over a pint of blood from blunt-trauma injury. His major muscle groups suffered from deep-tissue bruises and torn fibers. A stress fracture ran across his left collarbone, adding to a list that included cracked ribs, strained tendons, and one hell of a concussion.

Ridgeway grunted through clenched teeth, "Today's menu, pain."

The DCS had already dumped a jolt of neuro-inhibitors into his bloodstream, enough to dull the debilitating edge and allow him to carry on until he could get formal medical attention. Infrared-assisted healing could help but that, along with repairs to the armor, would have to wait.

Ridgeway took a deep, slow breath. Given the holocaust he had just come through, things could have been a helluva lot worse. He hoped the rest of the team had fared as well as he ordered the TAC to run a perimeter scan.

The world remained an azure field, but familiar icons appeared one by one against the haze. With no reference map, the TAC simply generated concentric rings around Ridgeway's position, graduated in meters. Heading vectors radiated from the center point to each glowing symbol. Not as good as sight, but distance and heading were enough to get from one point to the next.

Sweeping the display, Ridgeway counted off the pulsing icons.

Merlin was twenty meters off, moving at a crawl. His icon flickered in and out like an old neon sign. Taz looked to be some twelve meters beyond, moving toward Ridgeway. Stitch and Darcy were off to the right, both motionless. The sniper's icon alternated between red and black. He could see no sign of Monster.

Gritting his teeth, Ridgeway forced himself to sit up. Pinwheels of light flared across his vision, driving another punishing wave of nausea. Ridgeway's equilibrium rolled like a ship in high seas. He braced himself and breathed slowly, willing the pain to pass. The DCS cycled a second dose of painkillers but Ridgeway cancelled the action. "Gotta keep my head straight," he muttered, "gotta stay clear." Swallowing back the taste of vomit in his throat, the words held little conviction.

Elbows planted on armored thighs, Ridgeway allowed his vision to clear. As the optical fireworks coalesced, he realized with a start that it was the environment, not his imaging system, that was awry. A hazy sapphire fluid swirled around him with a ghostly slowness, thick with sparkling particles.

A pool?

Thoughts of Hex flashed to Ridgeway's mind, but he discarded them just as quickly. Hex was sludge-brown, the color of burned motor oil. This stuff was like liquefied blue crystal. Thick and viscous, it radiated a gentle luminescence. He was damn sure it wasn't Hex.

His teeth grinding, Ridgeway stood, surprised when his head and upper torso broke through the surface of the lake. He wobbled, forced to rely on the armor's stabilization to keep him upright.

As he weaved in the unearthly glow that rose from the surface of the pool, Ridgeway gazed at a natural cavern of immense size. The radiant lake stretched on for at least a couple hundred meters in all directions. A dense white fog spread across its surface like a blanket of gauzy cotton.

Wicked spikes of black rock jutted up through the haze, many extending into the darkness above the glow. Each dark spire was coated with ice. Ridgeway struggled to focus on the bladelike tip of the nearest stalagmite. The conical spike reached lethally towards a sky it had never seen.

That would have left a mark, Ridgeway thought dully, imagining what would have happened is he'd fallen onto the spike instead of the pool.

Even with light-amplification, Ridgeway could find no hard measure of the cavern's actual size. The TAC estimated it at two to three times larger than Cathedral, but even that was a guess. They'd need a hell of a lot of light to see into the distant corners.

Ridgeway gave a brief thought to the powerful searchlights mounted in his shoulderplates, but forestalled that action. The TAC could assemble a decent composite based on passive sensors, enough for the moment at least. A spotlight would not only burn precious power, it could draw unwanted attention.

Lights point in both directions, one of Grissom's many axioms. Far better to quietly find out who might be in the neighborhood before appearing at one end of a sixteen million candlepower beam.

Turning in a slow circle, Ridgeway came to face a mangled metal frame lying dead in the mist. It took him a long moment to recognize the remnants of the truck.

The vehicle looked to have fallen ass-end first, its crumpled nose pointed skyward. The cab gaped open and Hex-
eaten metal framed a gapping wound where the passenger seat would have been. Aft, the heavy chemical tank was a tangle of steel. Parts of the upper shell were recognizable, but even these were bent and corroded. The blue light of the pool rippled silently across the decimated vehicle, casting eerie shadows through the gutted carcass.

Ridgeway turned from the truck and waded through the thick fluid toward the cluster of blips on the TAC. He could see Taz climb unsteadily onto a flat island of rock. The Aussie knelt stiffly and scanned the perimeter with his CAR shouldered. By the looks of him, Taz had come away reasonably intact. Most of the obvious armor damage was concentrated along his right side, from hip to shoulder. The young Marine picked his way over the rock to a crumpled form obscured in the fog. It took Ridgeway a long moment to recognize the shape.

Monster lay face down on the stone island. Ridgeway sloshed to his side, concern pushing back the pain wrought by every step. He reached the flat stretch of rock just as Taz rolled Monster onto his back. The sergeant flopped over and Ridgeway's concern doubled.

A huge, charred dent had cratered the left side of Monster's breastplate, cracks radiating out from the center like an erratic spider web. He tried to count the number of scorched starbursts that pocked the carbonite plating but was forced to give up by the sheer volume of damage.

Ridgeway fumbled for the release mechanism that would open the armor shell. Absent from the TAC, Ridgeway was left with nothing but a physical inspection to determine the big man's injuries.

A grave-deep groan resonated from the prostrate form, broken into syllables but beyond comprehension. Ridgeway ignored the sound and his right glove settled against a set of contacts that ran along Monster's ribcage.

The sound repeated as a clubbing forearm slammed into Ridgeway's chest. He toppled back and plopped squarely on his butt. The sergeant rolled to his side and growled angrily as he pushed himself into a seated position, "I said, I'm all right!"

Even Taz took a full step back at the bear-like sound, but Ridgeway moved forward once more. The visible evidence impeached any statements Monster could make as to his condition. Before he could reach the battered figure, Monster's head snapped up, his hand raised once more though this time with a barring palm extended. With an agonized groan, he wobbled to his feet.

Stubborn sonofabitch, Ridgeway grumbled. The world might fall apart but it wouldn't see Monster ask for help along the way.

He keyed Monster's private channel, unsure if the sergeant's comm was working any more than his TAC Link.

"Sometimes this superman shit gets a little old," Ridgeway muttered.

Before Monster could respond, the medic's voice cut across the open comm channel. "Major, we've got a problem."

Ridgeway turned toward Stitch, who hauled the fallen sniper onto the island that had by default become their logical LZ.

"What is it?"

Stitch reeled off the situation report, none of it good. "It's the Lieutenant sir. She's bad. Real bad. She took a ton of point-blank fire, punched one lung at least. Lots of internal bleeding, maybe some bile leakage. Between slugs and spalled carbonite she's got a shitload of frag floating inside her. I've gotta crack the suit to get a better handle on it but I can't risk the environmentals."

"Atmosphere?" Ridgeway asked as he helped set Darcy onto the island. Environment remained the first consideration in any off-world engagement. Deep underground, things only got worse; toxic gases could abound, while good stuff like oxygen could be in very short supply.

"Negative on that," Stitch muttered, his voice ragged, "air down here is better than it is topside, and that ain't right. I dunno, maybe they've got some kind of terraforming op running down here. Might mean a way out."

Ridgeway waved dismissively. "File it for follow-up. What's our immediate problem?"

"Hex decon."

Looking down at his own armor, Ridgeway recognized the unexpectedly enduring hazard in the Trojan Horse tactic. His mind scanned back across the operation.

The chemical plant, separate from the underground facility, had been identified as a weak spot in the Rimmer's security, likely because nobody in their right mind would ever choose to play near gallons of Hex. Seizing control of a poorly guarded factory on the edge of town had been an easy matter for the advance teams. With the factory secured, sealing the RAT squad inside a replacement Hex tank, was a simple matter of mechanics. Ridgeway had to give it to Grissom; who would look for intruders in a bottle of acid?

Therein lay the rub; the plan also called for the Marines to be on the surface by now, where a dropship rigged for decontamination would be waiting. Carbonite was impervious to hydrogen hexafluoride, but the people inside were not. Contact with even a lingering smear of the material could still prove catastrophic.

"We caught a break with the lake," Stitch noted as he jerked a thumb toward the expanse of luminous fog. "It's not water, but it's at least ph-neutral. If anything, it oughta dilute the corrosive."
Ridgeway pointed at the blackened pits in Darcy's armor. "What about those?"
"I think we're OK here," Stitch tapped Darcy's armor with a grey finger. "Given the amount of energy it takes to chew a hole in carbonite, any Hex around the impact area should have boiled off before the armor gave out. But it'll be a crapshoot to pop the whole suit without some kind of formal decon." The timber of his voice dropped an octave. "On the other hand, we're gonna have a dead Marine for sure if I don't pop it."
"And that ain't gonna happen." The voice on the ComLink was ragged but forceful.
Ridgeway turned to see Merlin slogging through the iridescent pool. The Marine hauled a rack of damaged cylinders and a tangle of braided steel hose. Fog swirled in his wake, clinging to the trailing strands of equipment.
Merlin wrestled with the snarl of loose lines. "Chem-rigs have suppression systems," the engineer explained wearily, "I figured a Hex-hauler to have a pretty good one." He held up the cylinders. "Two of the pressure tanks got scrapped, but one survived. Guess we caught a break."
With a heavy bang, Merlin set the mass of equipment on the rocks and began to untangle the silver-colored hoses, popping off the clamp-style brackets that had affixed the braided steel lines to the top of the truck. He paused once more, breathing heavily for a minute before he purged the lines and charged the power nozzle.
The decon rig had not been designed for manual use. Charged to several thousand psi, the high pressure jet would have broken the arm of anyone foolish enough to try. In powered armor, Merlin merely braced himself and threw the lever, directing the stream of white foam across Darcy's prone figure. He took care to focus on joints and seams where bits of the deadly fluid could lodge. He repeated the procedure on Stitch and Ridgeway before clanking off toward Taz and Monster.
Stitch had already turned back to Darcy, placing his grey armored palm into a recess along the sniper's ribs. Contacts met and a high-security code fired across the gap. With a burst of compressed gas, the entire torso of the suit gull-winged open and slid down along the sniper's sides, revealing the inert form of Lieutenant Darcy Lonigan.
Ridgeway peered over the medic's shoulder and grimaced. Darcy was beat all to hell. A dark, mottled bruise swept up her entire neck and jawline. Blood stained the left side of her olive drab T-shirt. Darcy's breathing was labored and the sniper's shallow breath fogged in the frigid air.
Ridgeway nodded once, then stood, his armored fist thumping a gentle rap on the medic's shoulder as he turned away.
Taz and Merlin were on their feet, checking each other's gear. Monster knelt at the island's edge where he re-armed the Gatling.
As Ridgeway approached, he could fully appreciate the beating Monster had absorbed. Aside from the grapefruit-sized dent sprawled across his chest plate, a multitude of lesser dents and furrows criss-crossed the armor in a haphazard array.
The TAC package at the base of Monster's skull had been blown to bits. Ridgeway could only imagine the pounding the skull inside had taken.
Ridgeway stood at Monster's side while both men scanned the distance. "How we doing, Gunny?"
"Merlin, Taz and Stitch are operational," Monster replied mechanically, adding with a dry note, "you look like shit,
but you're moving." Then his deep voice grew somber, "You already know about the Lieutenant."
The Major nodded in silent agreement. Ridgeway couldn't see the big man's eyes, but he knew they were full of concern. Although Darcy was quick to point out Monster's heroics, both men knew full well the role the sniper played in the entire team surviving Cathedral. Courage cut both ways.
"So what have we got?"
Monster paused a moment before answering, his head making a slow sweep of the dark horizon where lake light faded into blackness. When he spoke, his reply was insightful and succinct. "We've got some weird shit here, Major."
Of all the technical answers he might have gotten from a hundred other Sergeants, Monster to cut to the chase. The big Gunny elaborated. "The good news is it looks like we're alone down here. No life signs, nothing hostile we can see. I'm getting some real hinky readings bearing two-six-niner relative, but whatever it is, it's beyond passive scanner range. We'll get a better look if we go active."
Monster's torso rocked back, his faceplate angling up as he continued, "My best guess is that's where we broke through." A dented gauntlet pointed straight up.
Ridgeway looked up at the cavern ceiling, zooming his view and boosting light amplification. His rangefinder told him that the ceiling towered some seventy meters overhead, a jagged carpet of dark stalactites. An even darker hole, some ten meters wide, gaped in the forest of hanging spikes. Monster looked down and shrugged toward the glowing pool. "Without the lake, we'da been paste on the rocks. I'm not one to look a gift horse in the mouth, but that's weirdness number one: it damn sure ain't water. Too thick, too blue, and water doesn't glow in the dark. I've got Merlin running a check, but I'm laying heavy odds it's synthetic. If so, somebody had to put it here."
Ridgeway nodded, making a mental note. Another lower-priority item to be resolved later. "Go on."
"Weirdness number two, the atmosphere. Way too clean. Oxy-Nitro mix is solid, most of the right trace gases, it's damn near Earth-normal and that just doesn't happen, especially not underground. That suggests a terraformer down here."
Ridgeway's fingers drummed lightly against his thigh as he mulled the point for the second time. "Yeah, Stitch came to the same conclusion. But Intel said the reactor was at the deepest level."
Monster snorted abruptly. "Oh yeah, it'd be a real shocker if Intel missed something now wouldn't it?"
Ridgeway grunted, having a ground-pounder's typically low regard for intelligence officers. Safe in air-conditioned offices, analysts sipped coffee and peered through second-hand reports, often forwarding best-guess conclusions as gospel fact. The guys on the front line ate the mistakes.
Monster continued. "We took one hell of a drop. The Hex must have ate it's way into some kind of big crack, a natural shaft, something. Best estimate is that we pinballed through close to five hundred meters of rock before dumping out through the ceiling. Add another seventy of freefall, that puts us roughly twenty-five hundred meters below the surface."
The Gunnery Sergeant paused as if considering the weight of his own statement. Ridgeway mulled the conclusion carefully. Two and a half kilometers underground. Hell of a long way to dig.
Outwardly undaunted, Monster continued to present data in a steady stream. "It's way below freezing right here, about eight degrees Fahrenheit. We'd have to dig down to tap a lingering magma plane, and we sure as shit don't wanna get any deeper. That leads us to weirdness number three: You can't have fog without heat. If the cavern is stone-cold, what's heating up the lake?"
Ridgeway cast a suspicious eye on the thick haze that lay across the rocks. What indeed?
The report left Ridgeway with more questions than answers, so he focused on the practical aspects of their survival. "What's our op status?"
"We've got enough power in the cells to repair maybe eighteen percent of the total armor damage, but that would leave us dry on juice. I've got an ammo redistribution in the works to give everybody close to a thirty-four percent load-out. Our shit's hanging out a little, but we've got fight left."
Ridgeway nodded solemnly as his gaze snapped from one banged-up Marine to the next. With at least one critical injury on his hands, they had no time to sit idle. He keyed his ComLink to a team-wide channel.
"All right, here it is without the candy coating. We're two and a half klicks underground with no obvious exit. We need juice and shelter. There's no plan in the book for this one, so we've got to improvise."
The RATs turned to face him in silence, impassive faceplates fixed and unmoving. Ridgeway pointed toward the roof of the cavern. "That's where we came in, but we're in no shape to even see if the door is still open. Odds are the reactor slagged it behind us."
"So what's the plan, Majah?"
"Conditions down here indicate two things, a terraformer and a heat source. Taken together, it smells like somebody else has been down here. If so, then there's got to be a way back up."

The Marines edged closer as Ridgeway took a knee like a quarterback in the huddle. "Here's the drill. We're sitting in low-signature mode. We don't see anything, and thus far it looks like nothing has seen us. I want everybody locked and hot, we're gonna bring up the lights and get a better look around."

Ridgeway looked across the group at the sniper. She sat up, armor secured once more. The heavy rifle rested on her lap.

"How're you doing, Darcy?"

"Five by five, Major." The pain in her voice belied the reply, but Ridgeway couldn't do much to help. He needed everybody on-line and functional.

"All right Marines, let's make it happen." Ridgeway handed the final prep to Monster and shifted focus to his own last-minute readiness. He cycled through an onboard checklist of weapons and armor, measuring his ability to wage sudden battle.

Something rapped against his bicep, a six-pack of twenty-mil grenades in Taz's outstretched hand. Ridgeway accepted them with a nod and slammed the magazine into the CAR's stock. A two-line display on the rifle incremented to reflect the increased load-out; four HEs, three frags, two Thermalite. The select-fire mechanism would launch the appropriate round on command.

Just above the grenade counter, a second line glowed a steady seventy-four percent. The rifle's covalent accelerator was online, with a fair bit of firepower left. The CARs fired the same charged round as the Gatling, albeit at a much slower rate. Even so, the destructive power of covalent ammo made it a murderous weapon.

Ridgeway gripped the rifle firmly. If anything is out there waiting to jump, he thought grimly, it better be ready to have its ass unraveled in a hurry.

A glance at the TAC confirmed that the other Marines had reached a similar level of readiness. Ridgeway spun two upright fingers and the Marines formed up on his position. Shoulder to shoulder, they created a tight circle on the small island of rock, each Marine facing outward.

Pumped with enough drugs to numb a rhino, Darcy shouldered the Hammer. Monster squared himself on the suspect heading two-six-niner and held the Gatling level. Merlin, Stitch, and Taz completed the circle, their weapons up and ready.

"On my mark." Ridgeway's voice was low and deadly.

"Three."

Armor hummed softly as Taz settled lower in his stance, the muzzle of his CAR canted skyward.

"Two."

Quiet ascending whine as Stitch's exotherm ramped into magnum mode.

"One."

Taz's grenade launcher barked with a dull crump that echoed in the empty darkness. High overhead a pinpoint sun blazed to life as the flare burned away the shroud of darkness.

Monster's deep voice cut through the silence, "Oh my God."

CHAPTER 8

The searchlights on Ridgeway's armor could bathe a hundred meters of midnight in a blazing glare. Together, the six Marines could throw enough candlepower to light up a stadium. But this was beyond forty lights, beyond sixty. Their beams angled up and played along the immense curving hull like tiny fingers tickling the belly of a whale.

The sweeping bow towered easily three hundred meters above them, its metal skin a patchwork of greens and greys. The hulk lay slightly on one side, nose-high and listing to starboard. Towering stalactites reached down from the ceiling and nailed the dead leviathan to the floor. A mangled stump, remnants of a severed wing, extended toward the cavern roof as though reaching for a distant sky.

In the crawling splashes of light, Ridgeway could make out sections of crumpled framework through gaping holes in the skin. It took a hell of a lot to bend girders that thick, Ridgeway noted soberly. Whatever hit this thing had ripped parts off of it like they were made of wet clay.

"What the bloody hell is it?" Taz muttered, his voice low and guarded.

Stitch drawled, "You mean, aside from the obvious?"


Thermo-optic had been skipped, but Ridgeway knew for good reason. Darcy's sniper rifle was already crawling over the expanse of metal hull in a methodical hasty search. A sniper's first priority was always observation. More than
anyone in the group, Darcy was trained in the art of visual search, dividing a threat area into smaller and smaller quadrants, noting details and moving on. The imaging power of the Leupold Mk-23 scope surpassed even the armor's optics in terms of long-range scanning. If a gnat lurked in the darkness, Darcy would spot it.

Ghost time, Ridgeway thought as he ordered the TAC to cue up a telepresence. In a burst of radiant energy the TAC reached out to Darcy's armor and absorbed a replica of her complete sensory construct; sight, sound, the works. Creating what amounted to a splitter for virtual reality, the TAC captured everything Darcy could see and hear, and pumped it into Ridgeway's brain.

For some, the perception of jumping from one body to the next was disorienting. As a telepresence veteran, Ridgeway barely noted the gaussian ripple that passed when one reality melted into the other. The muddled double-exposure just as quickly vanished and Darcy's perspective snapped into clarity.

Crosshairs suddenly quartered Ridgeway's vision, the reticle sliding along rusted hull plates with mechanical precision. At the high level of zoom, Ridgeway could see small cracks with clarity. He followed the sniper's view through the rifle scope, noting a thick layer of ice that encrusted the expansive hull. Every twisted metal edge was lined with needles of frost.

Fifteen seconds ticked by and Ridgeway's perception jumped again. The crosshairs vanished, replaced by the thick suppressor of an MP17. Stitch tracked the weapon from one irregular breach to the next, pausing to gather shreds of vibration that emanated from within. Ridgeway looked for jagged waveforms to dance across the graph, relieved to see that the flatline was broken by nothing more sinister than the occasional drip of water.

At the fringe of the medic's vision, Ridgeway could see his own figure standing motionless. As callous as Ridgeway had become with the technology, the disembodied view of his own form always proved disquieting. He reminded himself of another piece of Grissom logic; you're not in trouble until you see your own body from above and your view keeps drifting away.

Ridgeway completed his lap, ghosting each Marine in turn. The electronic clairvoyance allowed a commander to peel a little bit off the top of the data stream. Satisfied that sudden death wasn't immediately ahead, he dismissed the ethereal perspectives and returned once more to the center of his own world.

A string of icons formed along Ridgeway's vision, noteworthy items detected by each Marine as they scanned their assigned spectrum. Nothing was discounted; energy sources, vibrations, points hotter or colder than their surroundings. As each bracket appeared, Ridgeway snap-focused on it and brought his own sensor package to bear, ranking each contact in terms of perceived threat. While comparative analysis of wildly disparate facts might reveal a hidden pattern at some point down the line, right now he would be happy just to know that they were alone.

At ninety-two seconds, Ridgeway leaned shoulder-to-massive shoulder against Monster. "What do you think?"

Ridgeway knew that Monster had been voraciously chewing through his own observations, sorting hard facts for a logical conclusion. Dual-layered pressure hull, conventional deck elements. The why made no sense, but the what seemed undeniable.

"It's a starship Major, and a big one at that," Monster made the statement firmly, then added, "but I'll be damned if I know what she's doing way the hell down here. Its damn sure too deep for a shipyard, and there's no sign of a tunnel wide enough to bring that big bitch down here in the first place."

Ridgeway stood silent, Monster's assessment matching his own. But he took no comfort in the conclusion. One answer opened a hundred bigger questions.

Still, a ship was likely to have engines, APUs, batteries. A million possible sources of power and right now, power was high on their list. The broader answers would have to wait.

"Threat assessment?"

"We've got no biosigns and no lights. There's a heavy weapon turret on the port wing, but e-mag is negative-- no juice in the gun or the wing. As far as we can see, the whole ship is stone cold on every spectrum." The sergeant turned toward Ridgeway and added, "Course, you know what that's worth."

The two had seen enough combat to know that invariably, the moment a zone is declared clear, something God-awful would pop out of the sand to bite them in the ass. 'Clear' really meant 'I can't see what's coming'. Ridgeway nodded silently, his helmet fixed on the hulk in the darkness. The prospect of boarding a ship of unknown origin was fraught with risk. But the threat of losing power for good was a far more pressing hazard.

"Listen up," Ridgeway barked on the team channel, "we now have one goal and that's to get out of here. The first step is finding juice." He pointed toward the ship, "whatever the hell that thing is, it's our best shot, so we're heading in."

Ridgeway turned to Monster. "Half arc, Taz on point. Give me an approach vector for max cover from the turret gun."

"Roger that." The sergeant spun quickly in spite of his injuries and set Ridgeway's orders into motion. Silently, Ridgeway gazed at the ship. Questions burned fitfully as he sifted through woefully limited data. What the
hell was a starship doing in a deep-core cavern? The contradiction chafed his mind and Ridgeway had long ago learned to distrust the incongruous.

His eyes tracked back to the island as he considered the approach vectors. A wide curve would let them use the closest group of stalagmites for cover. That would get them to within fifty meters. From there the curve of the hull would--

SCREECH!

The sound of groaning metal beat the TAC’s warning tone by half a second. As Ridgeway spun toward the tortured shriek, his CAR snapped up to his shoulder. The muzzle came to rest pointed at the truck where a damaged interior door had fallen open with a crash. Like a swarm of fireflies, six targeting laser dots converged on a bright orange glove that dangled in the opening.

Taz bolted forward, side-slipping through the waist-deep pool. In a dozen strides he reached the cab and flattened against the crumpled skirt. The muzzle of his CAR remained fixed on the glove. Merlin advanced left, matching Taz's pace. Moving as one, the two figures spun to the doorway. Their assault rifles swept a rapid four-corner pattern.

Taz grabbed the limp arm and yanked hard. An orange-clad figure slid free, bounced hard off the doorframe and flopped lifelessly into the pool. With barely a glance, Taz stamped his foot atop the rubbery form, driving it beneath the surface as he swung his CAR into the darkness of the rear compartment.

"Clear," he snapped, rifle rock-steady.

"Clear," Merlin echoed as his muzzle swept low and forward.

Clutching the CAR's pistol-grip firmly in his right hand, Taz reached down with his left and fished for the submerged figure. Backpedaling quickly, he dragged the lifeless form across the pool.

Merlin leaned into the truck. "Looks like a fair amount of Hex blew through here, Major. I've got a few pieces of seat-frame and some scrapped electronics. Top of the dash and the ceiling is about all that survived."

Turning to the rear of the cab, Merlin peered into the dark compartment. "Huh. They beefed the hell out of the back." His voice held a quizzical note as he continued his examination. "There's a whole bunch of shit back here. More electronics, survival gear, couple of MREs and -- what the hell is that?"

Merlin paused, then turned and looked back at Ridgeway as he hooked a thumb toward the compartment. "Hey Major, some clever bastard stuffed an old grav-couch back here. How's that for survival planning?"

Before Ridgeway could reply, Merlin swung back to the cab and resumed his inventory. "OK, clothing, spare parts, and a stack of-- well hello."

The abrupt change in tone riveted Ridgeway's attention. "What have you got?"

The engineer spoke calmly, his voice suddenly flat. "A shitload of plastic, major. I'm guessing Thermalite." The Marine's movements slowed dramatically. His upper body eased toward the front of the cab, gaze sweeping upward.

"Bingo." Merlin extended an armored finger toward the cab's ceiling. "Here's your trigger." The illuminated button sputtered briefly as if in recognition.

"Hey guys," the engineer backed quickly away from the wreckage, his voice an icy monotone. "Just a suggestion, but I'm thinking we give this bitch some distance. She's about one short-circuit away from solving all of our heat problems."

Ridgeway pulled his Marines back to the far end of the island before he turned to the medic and motioned towards the survival suit. "Stitch, what have you got?"

The medic slid a fluorescent baton rapidly across the figure's limbs and torso. The penetrating glow revealed a number of injuries. "Got a male, early twenties. I make six broken bones at first count, probably a few more once I get down to small fractures."

The baton shifted hue and Stitch drew the device slowly across the figure's centerline. "Internal bleeding, lot of soft tissue damage, bunch of teeth knocked out. Frostbite in all the appendages. No combat gear, no guns." Stitch paused, then added, "I'm guessing driver or nav."

"Might be," Merlin chimed in, "Looks like he had the brights to climb into the grav-couch. Even without power the gelpack would have sucked up a lot of pounding. Clever little weasel."

Taz leaned over the figure and with detached efficiency raised a clenched fist above the cracked orange helmet.

"Well this one is easy to solve."

"Negative." Ridgeway snapped the word with a force that froze Taz in his tracks and drew stares from the other Marines. Ridgeway understood their concern. In survival situations, prisoners were a huge liability. But this was an unusual scenario.

"If this is an Alliance dig, he may know something useful. Sweep him for weapons or wires, bundle him up and bring him along. We’ve got a starship to catch."
Taz oozed forward like a snake, cursing the glowing pool with every step. His slightest movement created ripples of light and shadow. Even at a snail's pace, the fog split around him in a growing wake that looked all too much like a giant arrow pointed at his back. The only thing that struck him as missing was a huge neon sign that read 'shoot me.' "Aw crikey, sod the bloody fog already." The litany of muttered curses did nothing to ease the malignant tingle that slithered up his spine. His rifle swept the shadows ahead, tracking from one darkened recess to the next.

Glistening stalagmites rose from the fog in mute ranks, dark spires of obsidian flaked with iridescence. At the touch of his searchlight, the ebony columns flared with life. Waves of silver and copper spilled silently into the deep blues and greens of translucent stone. As the light swept past, the dazzling surface faded once more to black silhouette.

For the hundredth time in as many meters, Taz fought the pressing urge to fire up the chameleon. Polarized particles in the Carbonite skin could flex like microscopic lenses, channeling light rather than reflecting it. With sensors analyzing the colors that around him, the lenses produced a very effective camouflage.

Taz knew the effect was far from perfect. Moving rapidly, his armored form would appear blurred and indistinct. At a standstill, the electrochromatic skin could resolve its color-matching to near perfection. He wouldn't be invisible, but at least he'd be wrapped in the hues and textures of his surroundings. In a shithole situation like this, any edge would be welcome.

Unfortunately the chameleon was a pig for power and juice was in short supply. So was just about everything else for that matter. The Marines were damaged, low on ammo and sloshing through a puddle of glow-juice; the situation was as close to a tactical nightmare as Taz could imagine.

Still, he reminded himself, the objective lay ahead. Swallowing his concerns, Taz did what Marines had done for centuries-- he advanced. The rest of the team would be some thirty meters behind his point position, fanned out in a half-circle formation. Their weapons were doubtlessly trained beyond him, poised to erect a wall of fire should their point man come under attack.

"Approaching Papa-Six." Taz spoke softly, referencing a large hole in the ship's hull, one of many breaches that pocked the dead vessel's exterior.

In terms of easy access, Papa-Six looked like the most promising option. Its upper crest visible above the fog, the hole extended down below the surface of the lake. The Marines were in no shape to try climbing up the outer hull. Thermal imaging had revealed a definable current in the pool. The glowing fluid moved in a slow circuit, warm at the onset, gradually cooling as it made its way along the wide, shallow basin of cold stone. If they backtracked the flow upstream, by all logic it had to lead to a source of heat. That path led into the ship's belly through Papa-Six.

Hunkering down, Taz examined the jagged hole. He judged it to measure some twelve meters across. Less than a meter of the opening extended above the pool's surface. Time for a swim.

Taz checked his sensors. The temperature of the fluid had already climbed several degrees. Whatever was inside the ship had the ability to heat up a few thousand deciliters of liquid on a steady basis. That could only mean one thing. Somebody left the bloody furnace running. A slim hope in a sea of desperation, Taz realized, but with the Lieutenant's condition on the downside of bad, it appeared to be their only hope.

Taz crouched low in the mouth of Papa-Six and allowed his armor to sweep the darkness ahead. Unblinking monitors sucked in heat and sound, radio waves and light, comparing data in ways that might disclose a hidden threat. The process took only seconds. Aside from the temperature variance in the pool, everything was cold and still.

Taz' fingers tightened on the rifle's as he whispered, "It's dead as a bloody tomb." He paused a moment before adding, "I'm going in."

As he moved into the hole, Taz looked up at the torn layers of metal. The observation was sobering. The ship's mangled skin was nearly half a meter thick. Extending an armored hand, Taz gripped a ragged flap of metal and leaned hard. It didn't budge.

"Hull's made of tough stuff," he reported mechanically. "Duraluminum maybe, or something like it. Bloody hell, there must be a thousand acres of hull plate alone."

Taz inched along, moving downslope until he was eye-level with the liquid surface. The glare of his searchlight cut through the gap between pool and hull, the obstructions allowing only a flat, thin blade of light to slice through the darkness beyond. Broken spars and twisted bits of wire lined the inside of the gaping wound, glistening with scabs of ice. Icicles leered like row upon row of conical teeth. From his perspective, Papa-Six looked like a hungry mouth. "Down the hatch," Taz whispered and slithered beneath the surface.

The Marine carefully picked his way through the irregular fissure, like a deep-sea diver of old exploring a sunken wreck. The fluid around him was hardly seawater. Between its viscosity and continual glow, the liquid cut his visibility to inches-- beyond that everything faded into a blurred luminescence.
Largely by feel, Taz weaved through kelp-fields of torn cables that swayed with unnatural slowness. With each step he was forced to reach out and sweep for unseen wires. The last thing he wanted was to get tangled in a submerged, low-visibility bottleneck. By comparison, the walk through the fog didn't seem quite so hazardous anymore.

Taz extended his right foot, feeling for the floor and finding none. The crumpled metal of the wound gave way to a smooth surface that sloped sharply down from the innermost edge of Papa-Six.

"I'm in," Taz reported, noting that the sloped wall extended down farther than he could see. "It looks like this bloody hole punched into a multi-story compartment. I'm at least one floor above any sort of deck, maybe more. I'm heading up to see what's at the surface."

End of the tunnel.

He turned to face the hull and groped for hand-holds that would allow him to scale the wall's inner surface. His armored gauntlet clamped down on a section of heavy I-beam that held when he applied his weight. Cautiously, Taz climbed.

Curved armored shoulders quietly rose through the surface, bracketing the dome of his helmet. Dripping with liquid light, Taz rose from the pool. As he cleared the liquid his powerful searchlights peeled back the deep shadows. The image was stunning.

He was in what he guessed to be an engineering bay, an immense room that would seem large even in a starcraft carrier. The bottom portion was flooded, the same lake-fluid stretched from wall to wall forming a radiant false floor. The room extended several hundred meters fore and aft.

Taz looked up and the twin white beams swept through a vertical arc. The ceiling loomed far above the pool's surface, an inverted maze of mechanical shapes dimly lit from below. By all appearance the design was unfettered by any concern of aesthetics. Industrial walls were encrusted with spaghetti-bowls of pipes and wires. Hazy grey ice glistened on every surface, shimmering under the searchlight's passing touch.

A suspended metal walkway rose from the pool, sloping more than fifteen degrees off the horizontal. The ship listed badly to starboard, which accounted for the incline.

Directly overhead, a huge tracked crane hung motionless. Icicles spiked the length of dangling chains and hydraulic cables. Beneath a mammoth electric motor, Taz could make out the four-fingered jaws of a grappling claw, equally sheathed in frost. Each metal finger ran well over twelve feet in length.

Taz was struck with a twinge of bug-like insignificance as he made his way through a giant world. To make matters worse, the blue light shining up through the fog gave the frozen interior an eerie, alien appearance. With every ripple in the pool, shadow and light undulated silently along the walls. Taz spoke softly, his tone laced with an uneasy awe.

"You getting this Majah?"

"Roger that" Ridgeway's voice replied softly.

Taz zoomed in on the nearby walkway. Certain that Ridgeway's ghost shared his point of view, Taz held a hand up to give the image a sense of scale.

"Walkway is about eight meters off, easy three meters wide but the siderail looks no more than waist high. At least something here looks bloody man-made."

Taz chewed on the unspoken inference. Thus far nothing about the ship screamed of a human origin. In two centuries of space exploration, mankind had yet to discover anything more lively than a smear of colorful algae. But if men hadn't built this thing, who, or what, had?

"Leave it to me to bloody well stumble across the first sodding ET," Taz grumbled as he imagined some bug-eyed extraterrestrial popping out of the darkness. A first contact scenario would downgrade their situation from dire to outright FUBAR. Taz flexed his hand on the stock of the CAR. "If anyone appoints me Mister bloody Ambassador, they better expect some sodding rough negotiations."

On the bright side, Taz reflected, the chance of finding anything alive on this rustbucket seemed remote. Judging from what he had seen already, the ship had been here for decades, maybe centuries. That concession alone however proved to be small comfort. Even if an alien crew was long-since dead, the task of figuring out a non-human technology would be a job for geeks, not a pack of beat-up Marines. It sure as hell wasn't covered in any training manual he'd ever been issued.

Taz snorted. Just cracking a Rimmer encryption scheme could take the intel wizkids weeks, even months. The Marine's timetable was measured in hours. The familiar appearance of the walkway gave Taz a much-needed shot of hope. If the ship was built by people, it could be repaired by people.

Ridgeway's voice broke crisply across the ComLink. "Call sign for your location is the Lobby. Taz, make for the tower bearing zero-four-four, it looks to lead up to more catwalks above the pool surface. Take a support position and be ready to cover. We are inbound."

"Rojah that, heading for the tower." Taz eyed the grid-steel walkway where a hexagonal pattern of steel grate showed dark beneath the layer of ice. The frosty coat looked like it would shatter with a stamp of his boot, but he
had no idea what effect that might have on the walkway itself. At this stage, Taz reasoned, it seemed best not to
stomp about. He took a tentative step and his boot lurched on the gloss surface.
"Its awfully slick in here Majah. With this tub layin over like this, walking will be one long ass-buster." Taz
grimaced as he made the decision. "I'm going live with magnetics."
The coils in his boots would give Taz a gecko-like adhesion to the pitched metal floor, but as with everything else,
the magnets chewed power. They also reduced speed. Still, Taz didn't need to complicate the hunt for power with a
slapstick chain of pratfalls and slides.
Moving as quickly as he could on an ice-covered slope, Taz headed for the tower and a long climb into the darkness
above.

CHAPTER 10

Darcy struggled to focus on the riflescope. The feat of concentration required to push her view through the complex
system of optics had long ago become effortless. Now waves of pain shuddered through her chest, repeatedly
dragging her out of the scope. The sharp graduated crosshairs vanished as her vision disintegrated into a blurry
static.
Sucking her breath through gritted teeth, Darcy lowered the rifle and glanced toward Papa-Six. Monster had already
gone through and Stitch was poised just outside the hole, making a last check on the rubbery orange figure that
floated on the surface of the lake. The buoyant survival suit had made easy work of transporting the Rimmer thus
far, acting as a floating stretcher. But the path ahead led below the surface. Dragging a human balloon underwater
would involve a fair bit of manhandling. In spite of her own pain, Darcy winced at the thought. Rough ride for
someone with a stack of broken bones.
As if in affirmation, a low moan echoed through the cavern. The Rimmer was coming around. Darcy grimaced, and
not from pain. Sound drew attention, and in the dead quiet, even a low groan would carry. Reflexively, her eyes
swept the darkness as the sharp airy hiss of a drug infuser caused the moans to dwindle to a puppy-like whine.
"You sure about this?" Darcy poised the question without preamble, knowing that the secure channel would reach
only one set of ears.
Ridgeway didn't turn to face her, but merely raised his right hand, index finger and thumb almost touching. "Just a
little while Darce, at least until we figure out what he knows."
Before Darcy could reply, another wave of pain dug into her torso. She hunched forward, muscles spasmed against
the growing agony. At the fringe of her vision she could see Stitch move into Papa-Six and slowly sink beneath the
surface. Dragged by an irresistible weight, the inflated suit folded and disappeared. She didn't want to think about
how many shattered bone-ends rasped against one another in the process.
A sudden uneasiness crawled up the sniper's spine, a hunter's intuition she had long ago grown to respect. The rifle
stock rose stiffly to her shoulder as she crouched low in the fog, her back to Papa-Six. With a deep, measured breath
Darcy focused her attention on the scope. In a flash of neural energy, her view zoomed outward in a world quartered
by crosshairs.
The reticle crept silently across the ceiling, scanning an inverted landscape of stone. The powerful optics cycled
through the visible, ultraviolet and infrared spectrums. In the dark, cold environment, anything alive would give off
some type of signature.
The strain of shouldering the big rifle mounted quickly. While the armor supported the weapon's weight, Darcy's
arms were still held high by the posture, exerting strain on her upper body. Battle-worn muscles began to twitch. A
tremor of pain erupted from her damaged ribs as the crosshairs swept across a faint blob of thermal orange amid a
forest of black spires.
Darcy reversed back to the point of contact. As she did, an explosion of pain tore through her side, blowing the
image into a billion dazzling pixels of color.
"Oh shit." The curse hissed through clenched teeth, elbows pulling together as her torso doubled forward. The taste
of vomit bubbled up into her throat and she fought for air, finding little. The surface of the lake tilted up towards her
before rocking back in a lazy, erratic wobble. She reached out with her right hand and clutched a piece of stone.
"Darcy!" From the tone she knew Ridgeway was coming even before she heard the slosh of his legs moving through
dense liquid. With a snarl of her own, Darcy pulled herself upright, throwing the rifle forcefully to her shoulder.
"I'm on it." The statement carried more snap than she intended, but based on the sudden lapse of churning lake
sounds, the point was clear. Darcy was already in the scope, rapidly trying to re-acquire the distant smear of
infrared. She tracked mechanically, the scope peering deep into the icy darkness.
"What have you got?" Ridgeway's voice was calm to the verge of nonchalance. Darcy was confident that the Major
was already ghosting her, trying to get a better sense of her condition than the vital signs on the TAC would convey.
She'd do the same in his position. "Just watching the back door." She was hesitant to declare a fleeting contact that was more than likely a pain-induced flare of color. Sweeping the roofline, she saw nothing but black.

Another tremor tugged at her guts. "Negative contacts," she muttered as she broke the mental link to her scope. Darcy spun the rifle and expertly snapped it apart at the breech, hoping that the dismissive gesture would cause Ridgeway to retreat to his own senses. She shoved the barrel and foregrip into its compartment, trying to conceal her pain in the practiced motion.

She couldn't tell if Ridgeway bought it or not. He faced her silently for a moment, then poked the first two fingers on his right hand towards Papa-Six.

Darcy nodded, sliding the receiver and stock into the backpack carrier. She eased away from the outcrop of rock, bending her knees to remain low in the lake. Ridgeway fell in alongside her as they reached the rim of the hole.

"Go ahead, I've got your back." Darcy uttered the words as firmly as she could, but Ridgeway pulled up short. "I'm serious," she added, "I've got it."

The carbonite dome that covered Ridgeway's skull remained frozen. The eyes behind that plate, Darcy knew, were assessing her, considering the likelihood that she could make good on the promise. "I've got it," she repeated, this time without the false bravado.

"Don't get lost." The senior Marine nodded once, then vanished into the hole.

Darcy breathed a sigh of relief and slumped against the hull, grateful for a moment without an audience. She sucked for air, her breath little more than a damp wheeze. Another round of wracking coughs renewed the salty taste of blood in her mouth. She stood unsteadily in the aftermath and allowed her head to clear while the armor made one last sensor pass.

Only frozen darkness surrounded them.

Still, Darcy thought, her eyes gazing upward once more, you can never be too cautious.

She reached down to a compartment on her left thigh and produced a slightly curved grey brick. Toggling the motion-sensor to standby mode, she pressed the mine against the ship's hull on the left side of Papa-Six, just above the surface of the lake.

"That should discourage drop-in visitors," Darcy muttered grimly as she watched the fog close over the mine. At the speed of thought, a coded pulse flickered from her armor to the packet of high explosive and densely packed tungsten flechettes. The now-active mine appeared on the TAC, its disarm and manual detonation codes available to each Marine. With the ability to distinguish friend from foe, the mine would provide any strangers with a very abrupt greeting.

Darcy gave a short grunt of satisfaction. Like most snipers, she had little concern of what lay ahead. The ones that crept up from behind were the ones that killed you. A claymore remained her favorite doorbell.

With a final glance into the cavern's depth, Darcy turned to Papa-Six. Like a reptile born to water, the sniper flowed into the jagged opening and slipped beneath the surface with barely a ripple.

CHAPTER 11

Ridgeway had played in stadiums that were smaller than the massive engineering bay. The room extended easily twenty stories above the lake; he had no idea how far below the surface. Countless balconies lined the walls, many edged with pneumatic clamps and loading arms. At some point, Ridgeway surmised, gravitic skids would have ferried equipment from one cliff-ledge dock to another in a beehive of activity.

Halfway up the wall a singular broad balcony circled the entire room. The cantilever shelf extended roughly fifty meters out from the plane of the wall. A handrail ran along the lip of the balcony, although from this distance the metal bars looked like fine thread stretched taut along an endless row of needles.

Higher yet, wide round ducts dotted the chamber ceiling. The distant air handlers were easily twenty meters in diameter. Pushing his visual magnification to its limit, Ridgeway made out the enormous fan blades, motionless in their dark shrouds. The rest of the ceiling was covered with a densely packed collection of pipes, components and grates. Looking up at the crowded surface from below, it looked to Ridgeway like a city hanging upside-down.

A dead city, he amended dourly, it's buildings covered in ice.

Shrugging off the uncharacteristically prosaic line of thought, Ridgeway shifted his attention across the flooded chamber to the tower rising through it's center. He made it to be a central transit column, most likely running from the submerged floor below to the ceiling far overhead. The irregular column served as a hub for dozens of walkways and drive-ramps that radiated out like spokes to the surrounding walls. Ridgeway mentally tagged the narrow skyscraper and the callsign TOWER materialized, adding to the slowly evolving map on the TAC.

The Tower offered the most obvious route to the heart of the ship. Inside, there would likely be banks of elevators,
though just as certain to be inoperative. But where you found elevators you would find stairs, ladders, avenues to the floors above.

Sliding his gaze up the Tower, Ridgeway considered his options. The exterior of the column was a mass of alternating ledges and depressions. Given the angle of the ship, he wondered if it would be easier to climb on the upper surface of the leaning Tower than to navigate a canted stairwell. Taz was already moving up the outside of the spire, clambering from one ledge to the next.

Darcy coughed again, the sound filled with a growing wetness. Although she held fast to her ability to soldier on, the deterioration was obvious. Twice Ridgeway had seen the sniper wobble unsteadily before gathering herself.

Ridgeway keyed a private Link. "Stitch, how's Darcy holding up?"

"She's got blood pooling in her lungs, Major. Even with the neuros, we'll be lucky if she makes it six hours before she drops." The appraisal was delivered in a flat, matter-of-fact tone that sounded like equal parts resignation and fatigue.

Ridgeway had seen enough death and dying to know that there was no way to sugar-coat bad news. Stitch was well-aware of Darcy's toughness, if the medic gave her six hours, the average guy would likely drop from the same injuries in four.

Ridgeway groped for options. As a last resort they could pool the final reserves from every suit of armor and hit Darcy with a short run of infra-red, but that would be no more than a delaying tactic. The cell-regenerating properties of pulsed infrared were therapeutic, but not miraculous. Given her condition, it might be of no use at all. Internal hemorrhage was taking a brutal toll on the sniper and little short of a full surgical unit could blunt that assault.

The other side of the argument was just as pressing. Dumping the last of their power to Darcy would leave the Marines defenseless, and that was not an option. Ridgeway had to save as many members of his team as possible, even at the expense of the one.

The image of the silver-grey medal crept unbidden into his thoughts and Ridgeway shook it off. He refused to admit defeat, clinging doggedly to the belief that he could save them all. They needed a break, he thought with growing anxiety, and breaks didn't just happen. You made them.

So get to work, Ridgeway chided himself, shrugging off the mental lapse. Make it happen.

He looked at the Tower and flagged additional target points in a blur of mental activity. "Monster, Merlin, the thermal flow is warmer on the starboard side of the Lobby. Head up the Tower and take the first ramp to the right. There's some heavy cable strung along the underside of the walkway-- follow it. If you get even a hint of voltage, run it down. Merlin, I need your best magic and I need it yesterday."

"We're on it." Monster growled. The bulky armored figure spun on it's heels, one gauntlet slapping sharply against Merlin's shoulder. The two set off at as aggressive a pace as they could force, magnetic boots clamping harshly to the pitched metal walkway with each determined step.

Ridgeway was already focused on the remaining Marines. "Darcy, you take Stitch and the Rimmer straight up the Tower. If the guys who built this bitch think at all like us, there should be some kind of command deck near the top with an overlook of the whole section. Maybe we get lucky and find a sickbay or an aid station."

He paused to look at the battered figures standing around him. Darcy leaned heavily against the metal rail, her posture screaming of pain and exhaustion. Ridgeway hated to push her any harder, but there was no other choice. Salvation, if any existed in this frozen grave, lay somewhere above. His voice filled with determination, Ridgeway gave the word. "Let's do it."

The Marines launched themselves without question. The objectives, as well as the stakes, were apparent to all.

As Stitch hefted the limp orange form across his left shoulder, one of the rubbery arms flopped oddly as though having two or three elbows. A dull moan drifted out, muffled by the suit's dense rubber skin.

The constant flex of unstable fractures was chewing steadily through the Rimmer's drug-induced haze. A screaming prisoner was an unacceptable compromise and soon Ridgeway would have to decide between burning additional drugs to keep him quiet, or silencing him for good. But the question of him having possible intel had yet to be answered. For now, the Rimmer would have to tough it out.

Darcy pushed herself away from the rail and one foot slipped in a sudden lurch that threatened to send the sniper sprawling. Grabbing the rail, she straightened as Stitch approached, leading the way with forced authority. Their boots rang solidly against the metal floor as they headed towards the Tower.

Ridgeway watched them go, knowing all to well the burden of responsibility that Darcy carried. She would march farther and fight longer for the men who depended on her than she would for herself. An ugly truth, but one that Ridgeway counted on.

As they fell into formation, Ridgeway keyed another private ComLink. "Taz, I need a sickbay and I need it now."

"On the way, Majah."
Overhead, the Aussie's plated form accelerated up the angled Tower like a carbon-composite spider. The Marine had gone from picking hand-holds to the brute force method of climbing spikes. With each hammering motion, Taz drove a thick blade into the sheet metal wall of the Tower, pulling himself up with relentless speed. Chunks of shattered ice cascaded down the side of the Tower, a pachinko rattle set to the steady beat of blades screeching through metal skin. So much for stealth.

Ridgeway called up Darcy's life signs on the TAC and noted her vitals with alarm. He toggled another private ComLink. "You holding up Lieutenant?"

"Feelin' strong, feelin' mean" she hissed back, quoting from a boot camp cadence. But what Ridgeway heard through her voice spoke louder than tough words. The wet rattle was unmistakable, a crackling wheeze that grew thicker with every labored breath.

"Hang in there Marine," Ridgeway instructed, his voice firm. She coughed once. "You never let me down yet Major."

Ridgeway grimaced, wondering if that would still be true in six hours.

CHAPTER 12

"Dammit Merlin, can you get it running or not?"

Ridgeway slammed his fist down on the smooth console and a spider web of cracks fanned out across frost-covered plexan.

"Shit," he snarled, immediately regretting the outburst. He side-stepped across the sloped floor and looked out through the gaping hole in the wall of the Tower. Merlin was somewhere between the Command Deck, where Ridgeway now stood, and the surface of the lake some sixteen floors below.

A hoarse cough drew Ridgeway's attention and he turned back into the room. Darcy was slumped on the floor, the front of her armor gaping open once more. Steam rose from her body and curled in the frigid air. Stitch kneeled beside her, trying to offset the bleeding that relentlessly filled her lungs.

There had been no emergency sickbay on the command deck, only a small eyewash station and a first aid kit whose contents had long since been removed. Thus far the Marines had found no medical supplies at all. Just beyond the recumbent sniper, a pair of mangled turbolift doors lay on the floor. Taz had ripped them out of their frame, using the elevator shaft as a faster route to higher floors. His trail wasn't hard to follow.

Although the room was just as cold as the rest of the cave, the volume of ice had decreased dramatically. A layer of crunchy frost coated most surfaces but this could be swept away with a pass of the hand. Sealed from the Lobby environment, at least until Taz carved his own doorway, the Command Deck had resisted the glacial progression seen outside the Tower.

Ridgeway could hear Taz moving above. The aussie's search method had eroded to charging down one dark hallway after another, kicking frozen doors out of the wall. They had run out of time for finesse.

He glanced at the chronograph that ticked relentlessly on the TAC. Almost four hours had elapsed since the Marines had entered the ship and they were still without power or sickbay.

Leaning forward, Ridgeway looked out the window and made a routine check on the figure in the orange suit. The Alliance driver lay in a heap on a retractable section of catwalk that extended no more than ten feet from the tower. On what amounted to a short plank high above the surface of the pool, the now-conscious trucker had nowhere to run. Not that he could run far on broken legs if he tried.

A mournful plea for help echoed for the hundredth time from outside the window.

Suck it up, pal, Ridgeway snarled inwardly. The incessant whining grated on his nerves. For the hundredth time he questioned the decision to drag the Rimmer along. A dubious source of information at best, the broken trucker had already proven to be a bothersome parasite. As the wails droned on, Ridgeway found himself sorely tempted to toss the orange-clad figure over the ledge.

He shook his head and shifted his attention to a neural switch. In a sudden blur, telepresence took him to a dark room where Merlin struggled with a tangle of equipment.

Through borrowed senses, Ridgeway assessed the scene. The cramped engineering room lay somewhere in the belly of the ship, its walls encrusted with switches and valves scattered among a tangle of heavy pipes. Ridgeway could see breaker boxes, fire extinguishers and a wide control panel. Glistening condensation beaded on every surface and droplets of water fell through the room in a slow, erratic percussion.

Water, Ridgeway realized, not ice. The room was warm.

As if they were his own, Ridgeway watched Merlin's hands rapidly splice paired wires pulled from a thick trunk of cable. Muttered curses drifted to Ridgeway's ears. "Come on you sonofabitch!" Merlin coaxed as his armored fingers moved with amazing dexterity.
"What've you got?" Ridgeway asked quietly.
"It's coolant Major, the damn lake is coolant." Merlin began to reel off his discoveries at an accelerated pace, the words racing as fast as the young engineer's mind. "Whatever punched through the hull tore open the coolant reservoir for one hell of an engine. We found signs of at least five different attempts to re-seal it, but they all crapped out for one reason or another."

The grey-armored hands snapped a series of fiber-optic cables into a translucent coupling as Merlin continued. "Loss of coolant would have left the crew with two pretty crappy choices; sit offline and freeze to death, or run the drive till it overloaded and things got toasty warm, to the tune of a million degrees or so."

With the destruction of Cathedral's reactor still fresh on his mind, Ridgeway was clear on the latter implication. Merlin continued to ramble while he worked. "But these bastards were clever, oh yeah, real brainy little fuckers. They couldn't maintain a frigid containment inside the ship, but they had nothing BUT cold outside the ship."

"So they routed the coolant through Papa-Six and used the cave floor as a giant heat-sink?"
"Bingo!" Merlin confirmed as his left hand fished among a set of relays. "The engines didn't need to push the ship through space, so they probably had voltage to spare. For some period of time, and I am talking a long while based on the wear and tear down here, this baby cranked out amps like there was no tomorrow. Then the shit hit the fan."

"What do you mean?"
"Well, for some reason--"

A loud bang echoed in the room and Merlin's view spun to the right. Riding his gaze, Ridgeway saw Monster lug a refrigerator-sized piece of equipment through the door. Tentacles of wire hung from its base, dragging along the steel floor.

"That'll do." Merlin motioned with a short wave. "Set it over here and start pulling the main fiber trunks. No, just the 4-gauge, yeah."

Merlin's attention swung back to the wires in his hands. With scarcely a moment to shift gears, he resumed his narration. "For some reason the crew needed to bug out, and from the looks of things, it wasn't an orderly evac. Just about anything that could make or store power was ripped out by the bolts. Generators, batteries--"

"APUs," Ridgeway injected."

"Right again," Merlin said with a nod. "The whole game is action and reaction. An antimatter drive can produce a ton of power, but if it shuts down, you need some tiny source of power to fire it back up. Without a kick-start, the next time the drive system scrambled, it was down for the count."

"I'm good so far, but if the core's been offline, what's heating up the coolant?"

"Latent antimatter reaction. These puppies never really die unless you flush the core into space, and that didn't happen. If you ignore one long enough, it'll back off to near-zero production; the equivalent of shifting into idle. The core is designed to crank out just enough juice to maintain its own containment field, otherwise matter and antimatter meet and, well, that gets ugly. It's been a fundamental safeguard for years now. We're not talking much in terms of power, but it generates a bit of heat along the way."

"And there's our fog." Ridgeway said, grateful that at least one of a million questions had been answered.

A convoluted assembly lay strung out in Rube Goldberg fashion across the sloped floor. Ridgeway remained silent as he focused on the odd chain of components cobbled together on the floor.

"I told ya Major, it's always the same game. Even an APU needs a good kick in the butt to power up. Normally, it'll charge itself with a trickle of current over time. The juice is stored in an array of capacitors that can be discharged in a single jolt. That jump-starts the APU, which in turn starts the core."

Ridgeway's attention was glued to the connector in Merlin's hands, the familiarity nagging. "So what did you find to
replace the cap array?" An odd sense of foreboding crept up his spine. "Not a damn thing, Major." Merlin's voice was stone cold. "Anything on this ship that had a prayer of firing the core is long gone. The Lieutenant is out of options, so it's time to improvise."

Ridgeway's gaze was pulled down to the open access panel on Merlin's breastplate. The engineer held the connector up for a final inspection. In that instant, Ridgeway realized where he had seen it, or at least one just like it. Marine issue; a charger interface for juicing armor in the field. Before he could speak, Merlin snaked it into his own armor and pressed firmly. It seated with a distinct click.

"Merlin, what the hell…?"

The corporal reached over his shoulder and pulled the CAR from his back. The covalent rifle surged to life, pulsing with its own power. Merlin tightened his grasp on the pistol grip where control and feedback contacts met those in his glove.

The powerfeeds meshed as well. While the rifle would normally draw power from the armor, in a pinch the flow could be reversed. Merlin threw a switch and with a sharp descending whine the CAR flushed its entire charge back into the Marine's armor. The power readout on Merlin's TAC spiked almost fifteen percent, cresting past one hundred and into the overload range.

"Needed a last bit of juice to max out," Merlin explained mechanically, "we only get one shot at this, and Monster had given me everything he had."

Sweeping through a blurred arc, Merlin's view settled on Monster. The huge sergeant was braced against the sloping wall, a makeshift control box in his hand. Ridgeway did not need the TAC to know that Monster's armor, as well as the Gatling, were all but drained of power.

Ridgeway heard Merlin's voice, flat and detached, utter the single directive. "Hit it."

Somewhere to the right, the APU hummed, awaiting the surge of power from Merlin's armor that with luck would breath life into long-dormant wires.

Or burn them out completely.

Ridgeway shouted at Merlin to stop, knowing he was already too late. With a fierce "Semper Fi," Merlin threw the switch.

CHAPTER 13

Stitch was slammed against the wall as the sloped floor of the command deck bucked violently. Rolling with the impact, he crabbed to his feet and stared out through the broad window.

The Lobby twitched like a patient hit with a defibrillator. Arcs of neon lightning danced along the walls, leaping from floor to floor. Like a radiant mold, pinpoints of light appeared randomly across the inside of the hull-- specks at first, aggregating into complex pathways of incandescence. Just below the command deck, a huge section of superstructure tore free from it's moorings and plunged into the darkness below.

Stitch felt more than heard the thrum of a huge machine as it surged to life. All around him, screens rippled with random patterns of color as countless systems struggled to awaken from an ancient, frozen sleep. Synthetic voices stuttered unintelligibly as static fought with streams of text and graphics in a raucous assault of light and sound.

One of the overhead lights exploded, showering the room with sparks and shredded acoustic tiles. Stitch threw himself across the prone sniper, using his body to shield the open panel in Darcy's armor. As another tremor shuddered through the floor-plates, Stitch wondered if the ship was coming completely unglued.

"We've got fire!" Stitch snapped around at the sound of Ridgeway's voice, his gaze following the senior Marine's upraised hand to a twisted coil of flame that convulsed in the ruptured ceiling. The angry electrical buzz was barely audible over the hiss of compressed gas.

"Move, move!" As he heard the words, Stitch felt two hands clamp down on the back of his armor and heave him into the turbolift shaft. The medic hit the open doorway at a forward tilt, propelled by Ridgeway's strength and the downhill slope of the floor.

Stitch jumped, launching himself to the far side of the shaft where his hands clawed frantically for purchase. The sheet metal walls flexed beneath his weight as he hit.

One hand closed on the rung of a service ladder as the dull CRUMP of a gas explosion struck like a hammer. The flash of blazing orange backlit a dark, multi-limbed silhouette that hurtled through the doorway.

One side of the over-stressed ladder tore free and Stitch grappled wildly. Three feet of the side rail peeled away from the metal wall with a sudden shriek.

Metal! As the recognition flashed, the medic swung his legs up and stomped, driving the magnetic-soled boots against the wall. Both feet stuck solidly.

One arm rising over his head instinctively, Stitch looked up, wary of debris plummeting from above that could tear
him from the wall. The shaft overhead held nothing but darkness. Shifting his weight further away from the bending ladder, Stitch reached out to the mangled section of wall that had buckled into the shaft. With a groan he pulled himself level with the doorway and peered over the ledge and into the Command Deck. Flames filled the room.

"Major!" Stitch shouted into the inferno.

"Down here." The voice was strained and groggy.

Stitch almost slipped as he looked down to see Ridgeway hanging from a lone climbing blade driven through the far wall. Ridgeway's right hand held fast to Darcy's ankle. The two forms swung like a huge, lazy pendulum.

With a jolt, the pair suddenly lurched downward as the climbing blade carved a growing furrow in the flimsy wall. Metal squealed like a dying pig as the blade was dragged inexorably down by the weight of the double load. Ridgeway's helmet rocked up as his form coiled. Stitch heard him snarl only one word--

"Catch."

Ridgeway heaved with a grunt and Darcy swung up like a rag doll. The throw lofted the sniper only a short distance before her speed bled off to a stall. In that instant before she fell, the medic's gauntlet darted out and grabbed her shoulderplate.

"Got her!" Stitch barked triumphantly.

His gaze flicked down the shaft and the small measure of relief evaporated. The force of the throw had torn Ridgeway from the wall and Stitch could only watch helplessly as Ridgeway began to plummet into the darkness below.

"Major!" Stitch screamed over a sharp bark and metallic pang.

Defying both gravity and inertia, Ridgeway's trajectory broke abruptly as a powerful yank threatened to peel Stitch from the wall as well. Reflexively the medic jammed his feet hard against the wall. At least for the moment, he held fast.

Sucking in a ragged breath, Stitch looked down to see Ridgeway hanging half-inverted, limbs in an awkward tangle. The Major's right arm was drawn across his chest, it's blade impaled once more into the wall. They whistled through nothing but air and Ridgeway began to plummet into the darkness below.

"Nice shot," Stitch grunted through clenched teeth.

"Shootin's what I do..." the sniper wheezed, a wet gurgle stifling the last of the comment.

CHAPTER 14

"What the bloody hell was that?"

Pinned beneath a toppled rack of electronics, Taz cursed relentlessly as the tremor subsided.

With a grunt, he bench-pressed the heavy rack off his chest. The wide metal framework groaned in protest, rising from the floor just enough for Taz to draw his legs up and into play. The powerful limbs acted like a forklift and drove the bulky mass even higher. Metal squealed as the rack bent in half, folding back on itself. One leg now completely free, he stomped the last of the confining debris into a crumpled freeform sculpture.

Taz scowled behind the faceless mask as he climbed to his feet and looked around the room. Evenly rectangular, the grey room was dominated by floor-to-ceiling columns of computer equipment. Rainbow shrouds of fiber optic cable had been woven around each stack. Throughout the tangle of wrecked equipment, countless tiny lights flickered. Power.

"Well I'll be buggered!" Taz shook his head and uttered the words aloud, "The bloody little bottler actually did it." A genuine note of awe suffused his naturally irreverent tone. For an armored Marine, power meant life.

"That just leaves us stuck in a gibber at the arse end of Hay, Hell and Booligal, but crikey, it's nothin to go all sarky about, right?" Taz grinned for a moment at the dark humor before he was struck once more by the urgency of his own mission and quickly scanned the room for any signs that might point to a medical facility. He had torn a path through a maze of rooms and corridors that spanned several floors. Thus far, he had failed to uncover so much as a first aid kit.

The signs weren't promising-- by the look of things much of the ship had been cannibalized. Countless walls were adorned with little more than severed bolts and dusty outlines that told of missing equipment. Taz chewed on his lower lip as he considered yet another glaring vacancy.

Who the bloody hell took all this shit, and to where?

A burst of static stopped Taz in his tracks. His CAR slid unconsciously into his grasp as he turned slowly, locking in on the garbled sound of a human voice in the hallway. A faint, mechanical click preceded the soft whine of the weapon's activation.
Taz squinted as he strained to listen. The voice was unfamiliar, definitely not one of his teammates. The Rimmer? He instantly discarded the idea— the Rimmer was in no shape to be out on a stroll. Friends of the Rimmer...? Taz felt his teeth grind softly, now that was a different story.

The Aussie took a step forward. His right boot met the pitched floor with a dull metallic clank as the magnetic coils snapped it securely in place. Easing forward, Taz lifted his left foot. At once a length of cable slid across the floor, following the motion of his boot. It crackled angrily as it snaked across the grated metal, popping a comet's tail of blue-white sparks.

Taz froze as his gaze surfed along the length of cable to an overturned rack of transformers where a red and black warning sign read DANGER: HIGH VOLTAGE.

"Oh doesn't that just bloody figure," he snarled as he scanned the serpentine tangle of wire that lay between himself and the door. Easing his left foot back from where it started, Taz watched the end of the cable relax in turn, laying down like a sightless viper.

"Well screw this," Taz spat derisively. "If the brainy little bastard needs something in here, he can bloody well fix it."

The CAR erupted with a brilliant muzzle flash as a stream of covalent rounds chewed ravenously into the high-voltage rack. Bullets discharged with a corona of cyan light as metal, plastic and rubber disintegrated. The net of wire went black.

Taz stood in the darkness, framed by rising tendrils of smoke. "No points for finesse," he snickered quietly, "but a bloody answer all the same."

Finesse had never been his strong suit. It remained his firm opinion that Marines were not screened for the fine arts of analysis and negotiation. His philosophy remained a simple one: If you want to build a bridge, send an engineer. If you want to kill every last bastard on the bridge, send a Marine.

Taz saw himself on the far edge of that scale. He'd been told that Monster could be a real bad-ass when the shit hit the fan but as far as Taz was concerned, even Monster was slow to the trigger. Plan this, plan that— for such a beefy bastard Monster could be a real broken record. When Taz wasn't fighting, he was looking ahead to the next fight. Planning didn't go much past re-loading.

He listened carefully to the stuttered speech that echoed down the hall. "Time to do what I do best," he muttered as he shouldered the CAR. With a deep breath he stepped through the door and snapped a crisp ninety-degree turn.

The corridor was empty. No Rimmers, no bug-eyed aliens. While Taz had no illusions of being a rocket scientist, he was bright enough to know that aliens wouldn't label their ships in English.

Which just left the Rimmer solution, he reflected, though for what dumb-ass reason they stuck a ship down here was beyond anything he could guess. But a Rimmer ship meant Rimmer troops, and Taz had a real good idea how to deal with them.

His sensors scoured the darkened corridor for signs of life. Intermittent light flickered along the length of the deserted corridor. Biometrics came back zero: no myoelectric current, no thermal change, no sweat in the air. But vibro-acoustic confirmed what his ears already knew; a broken voice echoed nearby.

The Marine advanced cautiously down the sloped hall, moving past one door after another until he came to one that pulsed with acoustic vibration. An armored foot lashed out like a battering ram. The metal door tore from the wall and clanged across the floor. Taz stepped in low as the barrel of the rifle swept the room.

Stainless steel counters stretched across the back walls, clear plastic guards angled to protect meals that no longer filled the empty shelves. Refrigeration units lined the right wall, their grimy plexan doors open to reveal gutted interiors. Tables and chairs lay tangled in the low corner of the room.

A synthetic voice, clearer now, rambled cyclicly from his left where a screen glowed behind its shattered frame. Most of the luminous panel was filled with a detailed floorplan. He fixed on a red dot that throbbed with the eternal legend, "You are here."

Taz could not suppress the grin that spread behind his armored facemask. An index scrolled below the floor plan and he scanned for the word SICKBAY. Passing through the Ms, he locked on a suitable substitute: MED CENTER.

"About bloody time," he muttered triumphantly, extending his index finger to give the button a light tap. In response the floor plan re-oriented, a red pathway tracing a direct route to the medical facility.

"Well too right!" Taz chuckled as he absorbed the path. Just two levels higher up, down the hall and on the left. Taz turned from the room and charged towards the turbolift, a single thought in his mind. So whose Mr. bloody Finesse now?

CHAPTER 15

Ridgeway grabbed the medic's outstretched hand and pulled himself out of the shaft. His bruised body wanted
nothing more than to tumble to the floor, but he didn't allow himself the luxury. The lift doors closed behind him with a soft hiss as Ridgeway pressed straight to his feet, shaking off the arduous climb.
The Marines had made their way up the shaft and exited above the wrecked command center. Damage from the explosion would prevent a liftcar from descending any further. At the moment, Ridgeway had no idea if the elevator system worked at all.
He looked around the room and tried to assess the situation. Rising levels of exhaustion and injury conspired to thwart even that minimal a task. A massive headache pounded his skull as he tried to pull up the TAC. Only sporadic bits of visual information skittered across his visual plane, none of it resolving to a useful clarity. The chaotic lights show only aggravated the pain that throbbed behind his eyes.
Dammit, Ridgeway snarled inwardly, explosion fried my TAC. The loss denied him location data for his Marines as well as some aspects of augmented reality. Telepresence was offline as well.
"Taz!" Ridgeway barked into the ComLink, his voice hoarse with fatigue. "Taz, come in."
"I copy Majah, but I can't get a fix on ya. Where are you?"
Ridgeway looked up at the frame of the turbolift. A large blue 37 was emblazoned on the pale grey wall.
"Level 37, just outside the turbolift shaft."
"How's the LT?"
"Not good." Ridgeway's voice dropped an octave, "Tell me you found a sickbay."
"I can do you one better." The reply was oddly upbeat.
"Dammit Taz, I don't need any bullshit right now. We are out of time and--"
Ridgeway was interrupted by a sudden hiss as the turbolift doors slid open to reveal a brightly illuminated lift car. Taz stood solidly in the door and jabbed his thumb upward.
"Next stop, Sickbay."

CHAPTER 16

Ridgeway's body melted into the padded chair, a thin blanket drawn tight around his shoulders. Even shivering from the cold, every fiber of his being was thankful to be out of the armor. Ugly smears of color covered his tall frame, sprawling patches of bruised purples and sick greenish-yellows. Running a hand through his short hair, Ridgeway would have given anything for a hot shower.

While the Sickbay still felt like a walk-in freezer, the temperature had actually risen considerably since the restoration of power. Ridgeway's breath still fogged into soft white clouds, but thankfully, rapid-onset hypothermia no longer remained one of the most pressing threats.
The overhead lights flickered, one of numerous random stutters that gave a persistent reminder of the tenuous link they had forged to an unstable power supply. Routing that power through a tattered network of wire was another matter altogether. Ship-wide environmental control remained doggedly offline, as did the artificial gravity system that would align 'down' with the angle of the deck.
The latter point was a small matter in context, Ridgeway conceded, but as battered as the Marines were, the two-axis slope made the simple act of walking a continual nuisance. A slip often resulted in a chaotic, cursing tumble to the aft starboard corner of the room where a variety of furniture and debris had long since collected.
At least the chairs are stuck in place, Ridgeway noted with dull gratitude. Merlin had tack-welded several of them to the floor, providing a welcome, stable perch. Facing the bow, the rearward tilt of the floor turned any chair into a natural recliner. At this stage, the mere chance to sit securely bordered on decadence.
Drawing in a long, slow breath of cold air, Ridgeway quietly considered the situation. That they had survived thus far was a miracle, an outcome as unforeseeable as the presence of an underground starship. For the hundredth time he sifted the scant facts at hand for a logical explanation.
The mystery of an entombed vessel had an undeniably gothic appeal, but a riddler of that scope could take months, if not years, to divine. As a Marine commander with a team in jeopardy, Ridgeway needed to know nothing more of the ship than how to wring from it's carcass the resources he needed to get them out alive.
The vessel's size alone made the task a daunting one. Extracting a piece of valuable data on a vessel this large, especially one so badly damaged, would be much like trying to find a specific rock in an asteroid belt. Ridgeway swagged the ship to be a kilometer in length, maybe more. As for decks he could only guess- fifty, sixty?
In many aspects, the ship's design was familiar. Engineering filled the ship's belly, a large part of that the immense drive system. Doors and chairs matched human ergonomics. So many things looked decidedly human, yet in other ways the stranded vessel looked like nothing Ridgeway had ever seen.
Sickbay proved to be one of those instances. The lab itself was a long rectangle that bottlenecked before opening into a circular room at the far end. Compared with the dense mechanical clutter that predominated the ship thus far,
Sickbay was spartan to the point of sterility. The walls were covered in a seamless grey veneer that gave the interior an oddly plastic appearance. Spread along this sea of grey, dozens of flat displays were flush-mounted at even intervals.

A series of extended consoles ran along both sides of the room, their curving decks covered by more of the seamless dove. Even the black rubber floor looked to have been cut from one large piece. If there was a crevice large enough to give refuge to a microbe, he couldn't see it.

Ridgeway's brow furrowed. Not so much as a stethoscope or a band-aid either. Had it not been designated as such, little evidence would have pointed to it having a medical function.

Truth be told, the room had proven better suited for a repair shop than a sickbay. Suits of powered armor lay scattered across the pebbled rubber floor in testament to that assertion, full-torso hatches clamshelled open to reveal empty interiors. Twisted cable snakes ran from each dark grey figure, weaving between chairs and other suits of armor to collect at an open panel below one of the consoles. Tiny lights blinked from within the aperture, confirming at least for the moment the flow of electricity.

Ridgeway watched Merlin move slowly from one suit to the next, monitoring connections and power levels. Each suit hummed as it devoured current. Though showing no outward sign of activity, Ridgeway knew that the damaged armor was doing more than just recharging it's batteries. With a decent stream of power the Carbonite plates would state-shift, becoming fluid. The nanotube structures slowly realigned themselves, conforming to a dimensional magnetic blueprint. Once re-ordered, the Carbonite would coalesce to it's former rigidity. The process was slow, far too slow to be observed by the naked eye. But given time and a good supply of juice, the armor would heal.

Complex electronics proved another matter entirely. You didn't have to tear a hole in armor to damage something inside. Severe dents, or spalling from a powerful impact, could play havoc with circuits. When that happened, wires and processors had to be fixed by hand or replaced. Technology could provide only so much magic.

He watched Merlin fuss over an ugly crater in Monster's armor. The engineer measured the width and depth of the damage with a small optical caliper. Grumbling under his breath, Merlin pulled a tube from his pocket and squeezed a thick metallic paste into the wound, an amalgam of fine carbon particles suspended in the silvery adhesive gel. Merlin worked the paste deep into the scorched depression.

Ridgeway was no tech, but he understood the process. Mnemonic reconstruction could redistribute material, but not replace pieces that had broken off. The paste provided a manageable supply of raw material that could be assimilated in the reconstruction process. Over the years, Ridgeway's armor had amassed several pounds of the stuff. As though he sensed Ridgeway's stare, Merlin paused and looked up. The engineer's left eye was blackened but the swelling had not closed it completely. The damage gave Merlin a distinct squint on one side that made his walnut brown eyes seem even darker. The discoloration swept back under the line of his jet-black hair.

Merlin had taken woefully little time to rest as he fought to establish a stable baseline of heat and power. He exhaled heavily as he mopped his hands on the front of his badly-stained T-shirt. Blood, sweat and grime had collaborated to transform a swath of olive green to near-black. Merlin stepped over the motionless armor and limped to Ridgeway.

With a remarkable level of professionalism, the engineer delivered his report.

"ReGen is running, but it's damn slow. The engine is cranking a lot of juice, but there must be a million shorts between the core and here. I've been fighting with the mains for a couple of hours now, trying to get the grid for this deck to reset. If I can get a solid line of power, things oughtta pick up. I'm close." Merlin's shoulders slumped, "I think."

Ridgeway nodded, one eyebrow arched. "Just don't do it by wiring yourself to any more panels."

Merlin blinked, then looked down. "I'm sorry Major, that was--"

"Stow it. You had the ball, you made the call. We're all alive because of it."

Merlin nodded, wincing noticeably at the word 'all'. He held up his right hand, the first two fingers crossed. "I'm on the power, major. I'll get it." He turned and sidestepped across the slope in the direction of the open conduit.

While he gave no outward sign of recognition at the time, Ridgeway had noted Merlin's response to the word 'all' and looked upslope to the circular room at the far end of the Sickbay. The room differed dramatically from the rectangle of soft grey. Its curved wall was made of a seamless piece of gloss black glass that stretched from floor to ceiling. A six-foot matrix of orange spheres hung from the domed ceiling, bathing the room in a fiery glow that pulsed slowly. Ridgeway was painfully aware of what lay beneath the throbbing lights.

A large metal-frame table sat center stage, thick cables draped from it's stainless-steel underbelly like dreadlocks. Darcy was stretched out on a plate of the same obsidian glass that made up the curved wall. Each of the table's four corners ended in what appeared to be an open, three-inch drainpipe. Tubes ran from each drain into the articulated pedestal that supported the table.

It looked more like an autopsy table than anything else, a fact that afforded Ridgeway no comfort. But a full-length IRA hung directly overhead and the dead would have had no need for infra-red therapy.
The array had proven to be one of the few devices in Sickbay that actually worked. Infrared therapy had long served as a medical standby for its ability to accelerate the natural healing process. A steady regimen of pulsed IR could cut down recuperation time for a variety of minor injuries, but it would be no replacement for surgery in the case of major trauma. At the most optimistic level, it bought them a little extra time. Very little.

Stitch hovered around the unconscious sniper, his face haggard. Eighteen hours had passed since the six Marines found themselves in the lake. The medic had stayed at Darcy's side since their arrival in Sickbay, taking only the barest time to shore up the team's other wounds as they were uncovered. What little sleep he had managed was done propped in a chair, his head against the cold table surface.

Stitch leaned unsteadily against the wall, eyes sunken into bruised-grey hollows. Dark red streaks crossed the front of the medic's T-shirt, although by now Ridgeway had little guess as to whose blood was where. He looked at the gaunt figure and wondered if the doctor would outlive the patient.

Not that Darcy was far from dead. She had slipped into a coma some seven hours before and thus far had shown no sign of emerging. The aggregate of injuries had been compounded by the delay in medical attention. The combination was proving to be a deadly mix.

Saving my ass in the turbolift didn't help, Ridgeway thought with a frown of recrimination. Even in the midst of dying, Darcy had been all Marine.

With a low groan Ridgeway stood from the chair and pulled himself laboriously upslope to climb the short flight of stairs that led to the unconscious sniper.

Darcy lay motionless in the oscillating orange light. The Martian glow exaggerated the bruising along her face and neck. Swollen flesh distorted her features, one eye and one nostril completely closed over. Her blonde hair hung limp and matted with blood.

She looked dead already, Ridgeway thought grimly. If they didn't come up with a miracle soon, that appearance would become a reality.

A portion of Darcy's Kevlar-fiber shirt had been cut open and pulled back to reveal the gaping wound in her ribcage. Over the last nine hours Stitch had made three attempts to close off sources of blood loss. In spite of his efforts, her condition continued to slide.

Air seeping into her chest cavity had allowed one lung to collapse, aggravating the fact that the other was half-full of clotted blood. Besieged with such a wide variety of injuries, Darcy's white blood cell production had kicked into overdrive. The monstrous flood of white cells was choking out any room for red cells to bring life-giving oxygen. Darcy was sinking under an endless chain-reaction of medical failures as her shutdown became increasingly systemic.

Ridgeway looked up as Taz limped across the pitched floor. A grey pallor sapped the hue from normally tan skin. Amidst the undressed contusions that sprawled across his frame, a small gauze patch clung to his left arm just below the black tattoo that read 'Oz'.

Taz drew up alongside the medic and leaned close. "Listen mate, I'm not mucking about here. You know we're the same blood type. If the LT needs more then let's have another go. I can run on a half a tank."

The medic was deadpan. "You're already down to half a tank."

The Aussie's cadaverous tone testified to the recent drainage. Taz shouldered closer, his voice a forced hush through clenched teeth. "Then bloody well run me to a quarter dammit, run it dry. We're not losing anybody."

Ridgeway saw Stitch flare for an instant before just as quickly deflating, too exhausted for anger. The medic said with a weary sigh. "Taz, if I thought I could save her by cutting your heart out with a dull spoon, you'da been on the table already."

"Too right!" Taz spat out. He blinked once, then his gaze fell to the table. His amber eyes had dulled to a shade of burnt copper. The Aussie ran a scared hand across the veneer of stubble that covered his skull and added with a solemn nod, "If it comes to that, you let me know, right?"

Stitch gripped him coarsely on the shoulder. "Count on it."

Ridgeway saw the medic grin just once, a feeble attempt that did little to ease the suffering that smoldered in both men's eyes. Then the moment faded and both faces fell back into furrow.

Taz looked once more at Darcy and sighed, his grey skin losing yet another shade. With a slow shake of his head he turned and limped away.

Stitch yawned heavily and backed away, rubbing his bloodshot eyes. He abruptly slipped on the angled deck and dropped hard to one knee. "Shit!"

Ridgeway grabbed a flailing arm and hauled Stitch back to his feet. Ignoring the weary protests, Ridgeway manhandled him to a chair. The medic fell into it with a huff.

"I'm running out of fixes Major," Stitch slurred. "She's in a spiral. I don't know what kind of Sickbay this is, but it hasn't got shit in terms of equipment. The supply lockers have been stripped. The fucking walls have more computer
screens than an air traffic control center, but there's nothing for them to display. If there's something here that can help, I'll be damned if I know what it is."

"What are her chances?" Ridgeway's question bordered on the far edge of optimism.

"Of surviving the next ten minutes? Half decent. Push that to an hour and they drop to zilch."

Ridgeway caught the note of resignation in Stitch's voice and fought his own growing sense of hopelessness. He drew a deep breath and groped for answers. The frigid air smelled of antiseptic, blood and old sweat.

"Any chance we can gut this pommy bastard for parts?" The unexpected question cut in from the left side of the room, laced with derision. Both Ridgeway and Stitch turned towards the sound.

Taz stood over the battered figure in Alliance coveralls. The orange survival suit had been cut away, strips of the material used to fashion splints for one arm and both legs. Hands and feet were swathed in bandages, but the coal-black stumps of fingers and toes stood testament to the brutal effects of frostbite. The lapel tape on the stained grey coveralls read JENNER.

The trucker looked up from the floor through eyes dull with pain. Another weary moan rattled in his chest.

Taz slid a combat knife from his boot as he expanded on his offer. "I'd be happy to fish you out anything you need; lungs, liver, you name it." The razor-edged blade glinted as the Aussie rolled his wrist as though making the first brutal incision.

Jenner's eyes widened, either the sight of the knife or the tone of Taz's voice piercing the shroud of his limited consciousness. A ragged sucking sound rose from his throat as his limbs wriggled aimlessly.

Ridgeway glanced at Stitch, their eyes locked for a brief instant. They replied in unison.

"NO!"

Taz slumped at the rebuke while the Rimmer flopped like a fish trying to walk. Ridgeway could see the Aussie's thumb flick absentely across the blade's edge. The copper eyes didn't blink, fixed with a shark's malevolence on the figure at his feet. Alarm snaked its way up Ridgeway's spine as the blade lingered outside of its sheath.

The moment was shattered by a sudden electrical thrum that surged through the walls. A hoarse yet defiant shout broke sharply from the next room. "OORAH!"

Ridgeway spun as a flood of activity rippled across the walls. Computer monitors everywhere flickered to life and data spooled out in volumes too great for the human eye to track. A torrent of clicks and whirrs resonated from within the walls as countless systems initialized. Overhead, a gush of stale air belched from the grated vents near the ceiling. The steady breeze that followed was decidedly warm.

Merlin appeared in the doorway, holding a charred metal box like a trophy. Strands of blackened wire splayed from the component like the shriveled legs of a dried insect. "Friggin phase inverter. I replaced it with one from the--"

A harsh, steel-guitar spang stopped Merlin in mid-sentence. In the midst of the round room, a cube of blue energy shimmered around the steel and glass table, and the unconscious form of Darcy Lonigan.

CHAPTER 17

Monster exploded from his chair, shifting from seemingly dead-asleep to full charge in the blink of an eye. Launching himself up the short flight of stairs, he slammed into the radiant pane like a fullback hitting the two-hole on a quick opener.

Ridgeway winced at the sound of impact; Monster might as well have hit a steel bulkhead. With a stunning concussion, the force field bounced him like a rubber ball, catapulting the massive figure back across the room. The big man covered nearly two meters before he slammed into the floor with a crash and tumbled down slope into the tangle of debris, arms flailing, eyes ablaze and a vicious snarl deep in his chest.

The whistle of high-powered weapons spun up around the room as CARs and exothermic pistols snapped to bear at the ceiling just above the force field. A lone voice broke sharply against the lull. "Hold it, HOLD IT!"

Ridgeway turned to the sound of the medic's voice. Stitch stared at what until now been a bare wall of curved black glass. The entire surface was alive with text and graphics. Columns of color-coded numbers and symbols washed down the screen at a breakneck pace.

Stitch was fixed on a portion of the display but Ridgeway drew nothing from the symmetrical blocks of data. Information slid across the screen in color-coded pairs, descriptors and numerical values in side by side columns. The ones in red rapidly diminished.

"Some kinda sterile field," Stitch concluded as he reached out in a palm-down waving motion. "Bacteria's dying off, dust particles--"

With a caustic snap, a blinding bar of light flared to life within the head of the table, shining up through the smooth black glass. The harsh white plane began to slide down the length of Darcy's body, traveling at a smooth and even
pace. As it did, a translucent apparition of a human skeleton resolved in the air above her. The sweeping obsidian screen exploded with light and color. A huge schematic of Darcy's skeleton splashed across nearly five meters of wall. The ribs flexed almost imperceptibly with the sniper's shallow breathing. Details ranging from breaks to old fracture seams blossomed in magnified call-outs, injuries taking on artificial tints of varied intensity. Color-coded text appeared along the skeletal outlines, matching those in the floating phantom. Linked to each point of injury, data spooled out in rapid bursts.

Class 3 Tibial Fracture with disangulation. Class 1 stress frac…

Ridgeway was no medic, but he'd seen enough trauma to follow along. He scanned the list, mentally ticking his way through the catalog of injuries when the table emitted a sharp whine. The white bar of light vanished, only to be replaced by a second of crimson hue. In like manner, the red bar of light tracked it's way down the sniper's form. As it did, the ghostly floating bones above her began to sprout web-like strands of blood vessels. The intricate network of veins and arteries materialized along the plane of moving light. Ridgeway could see the faint pulse that fluttered weakly in her neck. Once more, colored auras highlighted every damaged capillary.

"Triage." Stitch spoke the single word with a hushed reverence. "Son of a bitch its doing some kind of triage, checking system by system, prioritizing the damage. Look," he pointed out, "the minor bone break is blue, but the torn artery is orange; more life threatening."

As if in answer, a new sound erupted from the table, a wet, gurgling noise like a drain backing up. Maybe four drains, Ridgeway realized as the sound grew louder.

A thick, grey sludge vomited up through the four openings. the mud-like material pooling rapidly across the table's steel corners.

At once, an anomaly caught Ridgeway's eye. The table was pitched at the same slant as the floor but the viscous flow avoided the table's lower edge, moving as if on it's own accord towards the inert form in the table's center.

"What the fuck?" Taz spat the words that ran through the mind of each Marine. As more of the material erupted in thick gouts, Ridgeway could see that the sludge was less a liquid than a slurry of metallic sand. The grey ooze sparkled with a prismatic sheen as it crept up across Darcy's skin. His gaze followed the leading edge of the spreading slick. As it pushed forward unevenly, individual grains of sand broke free from the mass and scuttled ahead on their own.

"Oh shit!" Monster snarled, his own recognition matching Ridgeway's. "They're fuckin' bugs!"

As more of the material spread across her body, the growing tide of tiny crawling specks swarm rapidly across their fallen comrade. Every curve of Darcy's body began to glisten with a metallic sheen as the four opposing waves closed together. Moving like ravenous army ants, they swept across her torso and poured into the gaping hole in her ribs.

"Oh no way," Taz hissed, the whine of the CAR renewing. "No fuckin' way…"

Ridgeway was transfixed, his attention darting from the open wound to the hologram. Even at such a tiny scale, the crimson starbursts of laser light were unmistakable.

"Sonofabitch," he muttered, his gaze locked on a spot midway down the shimmering image. The bright red stain on Darcy's kidney had already begun to dim, softening in both hue and intensity. As he watched in stunned silence, the palm-sized slick of light faded down through the color spectrum to a soft blue haze. The cycle repeated itself throughout Darcy's body. Severed nerve cells reconnected, the flicker of neural messages sparking once more along repaired circuits. The sea of blood within one lung receded as the other lung slowly re-inflated. A shard of bloody shrapnel floated up from within the mass of torn tissue, pushed out through the entrance wound. It clattered to the table surface.

"I do not believe this," Merlin whispered under his breath. The hesitant smile that creased across his face proved the
hushed words a lie.
For almost two hours the bugs swarmed through the near-lifeless Marine. More shrapnel was extracted, along with tiny bits of frangible ammunition that had broken apart in Darcy's body. Each scrap of bloodstained debris was added to the growing pile on the table surface. As each point of damage was repaired, the imaging system would shift from one systemic level to the next, continually addressing the most pressing threat. One by one they faded away.
The last glimmers of holographic yellow dimmed to a hazy grey. Only a final, lingering wound could be seen on her ribcage. The crimson shimmer between the silver grains was even more visible on the surface. As though watching a movie in reverse, the torn edges methodically drew together, leaving an expanse of raw, fresh skin where a gaping hole had been just hours before.
Ridgeway stared at the silent hologram. It slowly cycled through each system at an even pace, only soft grey cloudiness breaking the translucent crystalline hues that made up most of the ghostly figure. The image of Darcy's heart beat steadily, her lungs rose and fell in the gentle rhythm of sleep.
"Is that for real?" Ridgeway prodded cautiously.
"I can't tell you for sure Major," Stitch replied softly, "but it damn sure looks that way."
With a soft crackle, the force field unraveled. The Marines inched forward like awestruck kids at Christmas, tentative and filled with anticipation.
The sniper's eyelids fluttered softly. Ridgeway gently took her hand, "Hey Darce, you with us?"
Darcy sluggishly opened one eye. The blue orb ticked from one hovering face to the next before it closed. She sighed wearily.
"For crying out loud guys," Darcy mumbled, "you act like you never saw somebody get shot before."
An explosion of cheers and high-fives erupted, exhaustion forgotten in the wake of a genuine miracle. Darcy's face wrinkled in confusion before her old smile tugged tiredly at one corner of her mouth.
"Hey, I'm touched and all, but give it a rest." she motioned them back with a weak, dismissive wave, "It's not like I came back from the dead or anything."

CHAPTER 18

Four in the morning.
Ridgeway squinted at the blurry digit, a fairly meaningless distinction given their current environment save that a full twenty hours had passed since Darcy's resurrection. In that brief time, their situation had steadily improved, if only by a modest degree. Still, the change of pace was welcome.
The now-functional environmental control system had raised the once frigid temperature in Sickbay to a balmy fifty-six degrees. That alone was a huge boost to both comfort and morale. Consistent power remained an elusive goal that hampered the last stages of armor regeneration, but the overall process had gone well. Merlin and Taz were well into the internal repairs, drawing from spare parts when possible and improvising where they could.
Monster had organized a two-on, four-off watch cycle that allowed everyone to catch up on some much-needed sleep. Aside from ravenous hunger, a shortage of ammunition and a brutal stiffness in his entire body, Ridgeway's world felt a hell of a lot better.
There is that lingering problem of being buried alive, he mused gravely, but he'd take his wins where he could get them.
Ridgeway rose to his feet, giving his aching legs a chance to steady before he took on the uphill hike to Monster and Merlin. The two knelt studiously on either side of Monster's armor where it lay stretched out on the floor. They looked up in tandem as Ridgeway approached.
"Morning Major," Monster tossed out, adding with stereotypical sergeant bravado, "Great day to be a Marine."
Ridgeway grinned back, mirroring Monster's nonchalance. Morale flows from the top down. Clapping Merlin on the shoulder as he took a knee, Ridgeway spoke with feigned gusto. "Yeah, I figure we've been on vacation long enough, how about we pack our shit and go home?"
"Hell yeah, Major." Merlin replied with an energetic nod.
"'Bout damned time," Monster concurred.
Ridgeway leaned forward and looked at the largest of the armored suits. The badly dented chest plate had almost completely reformed. While the surface still carried a blackened scorch mark, only a minor depression remained. Ridgeway knew that before his eyes, carbon nanotubes slid over one another to fill in the gaps.
Monster himself was another story. A band of syntheskin encircled his massive left bicep, a dark bloodstain on the elastic material. Ridgeway shrugged toward the injury and gave Monster a reproachful look.
"Y'know, two minutes on the table would clear that up."
Monster's face wrinkled forcefully. "Bull-shit!" he said, emphasizing the syllables. "You can dump my ass in a tank of bugs when I'm dead and gone, but ain't no way in hell them little bastards gonna crawl inside me while I'm watching, that's for damn sure."

Ridgeway's lip curled up in a wicked smile. "Monster", he chided reproachfully, "I've seen you stand up to tanks. Are you telling me that you're afraid of a few little creepy-crawlers?"

A poorly suppressed chuckle burst from Merlin as his face turned up to Ridgeway. "That's pretty good Major, Gunny afraid of a bug." Still laughing, the corporal turned left and ran nose-to-nose into a crocodile smile stretched below a pair of dark eyes that looked back with anything but mirth.

"Funny huh?" the big sergeant prodded, one eyebrow arched dramatically. Then his voice dropped a full octave, the smile belying a simple question that reverberated with menace. "You wanna go first?"

Ridgeway fought the tug of his own grin as the engineer blinked rapidly, all hint of amusement evaporating. "I'm thinking there's a repair job that can't wait," Merlin improvised, "I'm gonna go find it."

"Uh-huh," Monster affirmed, the carnivore's grin glued to his face as he nodded firmly. Merlin scooped up a pack of tools and eased down slope in obvious search of a less hazardous environment.

"Hit a nerve?" Ridgeway poked with a malevolent smile.

Monster looked Ridgeway dead in the eyes, the first trace of his own humor glinting in the dark orbs. "Yeah, go on. You may get to laugh, but he doesn't."

"SRD," Ridgeway intoned with mock reverence.

"Damn straight," Monster confirmed, "shit rolls downhill."

The two men shared a brief chuckle that all too quickly dwindled to silence. Ridgeway watched as his friend turned and made his way aft, doubtlessly in pursuit of the next item in a long list of duties.

While quick to jab in fun at Monster's blatant aversion to the bizarre medical system, Ridgeway could find no fault in the sergeant's logic. Given everything they had seen, there wasn't a RAT on the team who wanted to get within five meters of the steel and glass table. Darcy's reconstruction may have been a quiet miracle, but the truck driver's experience proved a different matter altogether.

Broken, frostbitten and hypothermic, Jenner had been the next to ride the table. At one level the decision was a genuine effort to save the Rimmer's life. On the other hand, the test was admittedly an experiment to see if the table worked consistently. As the only non-Marine, and a Rimmer at that, Jenner had been the obvious guinea pig. As his injuries were largely internal, there was no significant external wound to use as a portal. Undeterred, the micro-machines simply cut a door of their own. Lasers designed to weld flesh together proved just as able to cut flesh apart. Jenner's abdomen had parted with a wet slurp of breaking suction. Cauterization had reduced blood loss to a negligible level. The slit sagged open and the bugs poured in.

The remainder, focused largely on injuries to the head and upper thorax, chose to enter through Jenner's nose and mouth. The image had been revolting enough on an unconscious figure, Ridgeway reflected, but as the oozing tide of crawling specks rippled over Jenner's lips, the Marines discovered a major wrinkle in the system. Jenner woke up. Stitch later determined that small infusers in the table's surface should have doped the conscious Rimmer into a state of oblivion. Those infusers, it appeared, had run dry long ago. In lieu of strap and buckle restraints, the table immobilized a patient through some kind of electrical field that paralyzed voluntary muscle, but not the conscious mind. The next two hours were ugly to watch, even for Marines.

It had been really ugly for Jenner.

No one could tell if the burning skin was to blame, or an overloaded gag reflex, but the trucker snapped out of his delirium like he'd been hit with high voltage. Panic-stricken eyes bulged out of his skull, unblinking as tiny specks scuttled across glistening corneas. The trucker could only manage a constricted, high-pitched whine, but even that broke into a wet gurgle as clots of bugs passed through his windpipe.

Not for me, Ridgeway's lip curled down at the thought as he rubbed a hand unconsciously across his bruised chest. I'll heal up the old-fashioned way.

An abrasive hum reverberated through the walls and snatched Ridgeway's attention back to the present as the overhead lights fluttered for several seconds. Around the room, each Marine paused expectantly. Only Jenner, staring blankly into space, seemed oblivious to the threat of impending darkness. A thread of drool hung from the corner of his slack jaw.

As the light stabilized once more, Ridgeway wondered if the humane answer was simply to put the Rimmer out of his misery. At the moment though, he thought regretfully, humanity was a luxury he could ill afford. While Jenner's plight was pathetic, he remained their only likely source of first-hand human intelligence. Until they explored that possibility, the needs of the Marines came first. Ridgeway looked at Jenner with a callous stare.

"Tough luck, buddy. You shoulda' joined the Marines."

He gazed at the huddle figure. Technically, he may be healthier, but he looks like shit.
Ridgeway could see that the medical system had put function ahead of aesthetics. The priorities were obvious; while broken bones were welded together, coal-black pieces of frostbitten flesh had simply been cut away. Jenner's nose was gone, along with both ears and swatches of each cheek. A missing piece of lower lip left him with a grotesque cleft that extended down through his chin.

Wide patches of Jenner's scalp had likewise succumbed to the cold. Cold-charred splotches of hairless skin had been replaced by veneers of angry pink stretched tight as a drum across the curve of his skull. Dead, frozen fingers had been excised with equal indifference, the living stumps summarily closed over. Nubbins of fresh skin dotted the digitless hand like a row of smooth, shiny gumdrops.

Stitch had offered a plausible theory for the different results. The nanites worked like ants; they could move living material around the body but they were incapable of fabricating new flesh from scratch. Repairs to one required the cannibalization of another.

The explanation seemed sound. Darcy had a solid base of lean muscle to serve as a reservoir; the tiny bits of material stripped from muscles throughout her body would go unnoticed.

But Jenner was undernourished and out of shape. Worse yet for the Rimmer was the nature of his injuries. Unlike Darcy's puncture wounds, frostbite had claimed large volumes of Jenner's flesh.

What he needed, Ridgeway concluded, was the human equivalent of Carbonite paste to fill the gaps.

After watching Jenner's experience, not one of the Marines had expressed an interest in finding out for themselves. The dull ache of torn muscles were familiar friends and the RATs decided to heal as they healed, taking comfort in the infrared accelerators that helped them mend in a faster, yet quite conventional fashion.

Ridgeway turned slowly and looked upslope to Darcy. She sure looks normal, he noted. The color had returned to her skin and all signs of the jaundiced bruising had faded away. The torn flap still hung open on her blood-stained T-shirt but the skin beneath held no hint of its prior injury.

The sniper sat wedged into a corner with a gleaming rifle rail across her lap, methodically polishing a series of magnetic coils. One by one she extracted the chromium ovals and buffed their blue-mirrored surfaces to a shine with a soft cloth.

Ridgeway watched her work and took heart in the crispness of her motion. The sniper truly seemed no worse for wear. Perhaps of equally good fortune, she had no memory of her time on the table. The severity of her condition had likely suppressed her conscious mind beyond the reach of the physical world. Even after considerable thought, Darcy couldn't dredge up a recollection of the process.

Considering the alternatives, Ridgeway thought with a half glance at Jenner, a damn good thing. Although Stitch was firm that he could resolve the consciousness problem with conventional anesthetics going forward, Ridgeway knew that he would have to be near-dead before he climbed onto the table.

"I really thought we'd lost her." Merlin's voice caught Ridgeway by surprise, the younger Marine's tone edged with an unusual sobriety. Ridgeway nodded in quiet assent as he turned to the engineer.

Standing almost a head shorter than Ridgeway, Merlin always struck him as something of an anachronism. Unlike most of his comrades, Jim "Merlin" Prentice had a full head of jet-black hair worn in a short but reasonably modern style. He was lean, but his body carried a kind of casual toughness that would have seemed at home out on the range in the old west of American history.

Of all his Marines, Merlin remained the hardest for Ridgeway to classify. Too brainy for a grunt, too tough for an egghead. Merlin excelled as a combat engineer, his keen attention to detail and rabid imagination proving time and again to be an invaluable combination. Often as not, a life-saving one.

The lights shuddered once more, shadows lurching abruptly as now-recharged emergency lights snapped on momentarily. The room seemed to cough twice as the two sources of illumination wrestled for dominance. With a sharp thrum the overhead panels won out.

Ridgeway rolled his eyes towards the ceiling. "That isn't going to hold out forever, is it?"

A look of frustration crossed Merlin's face. "I swear Major, it's like trying to hit a moving target. I bypass one shorted line only to have the power suddenly jump back to cables that were stone dead hours before. It's like someone else is playing with the wiring. There must be some real meltdowns going on through this beast." He shrugged, hands raised. "Hell, I'm amazed half this tub isn't on fire with all these shorts."

"So what's the fix?"

Merlin scratched at the dark stubble that bristled across his chin. "Well," he began, somewhat hesitant, "I've been thinking of just ripping the breakers out of that wall and running a hot line straight to the mains for Sickbay. That'd cut out a shitload of variables, maybe give us a real boost in terms of stable current. If it works, armor regen would wrap up in half the time."

"How long?"

"Chainsaw bypass? Shit, maybe an hour tops. It'll be ugly but damn sure ought to tighten things up around here."
Ridgeway nodded his assent. "A tight ship, hell, a tight room, would be an improvement. Let's make it happen. Be sure and tell Monster."
"Roger that."
Before Merlin could turn, Ridgeway fired a second query. "How are we looking on the TAC fixes?"
Merlin fished a small brick of circuitry out of his pocket and held it aloft. A blackened furrow cut an obvious streak through the red and yellow security label and the silvery shell beneath. "Your transmitter took a hit. I can get tone out but it won't hold lock for more than a few minutes. I'm swapping it out for the spare, that'll get you back online. Monster's TAC is another matter. It's toast."
Ridgeway's jaw clenched noticeably as he folded his arms across his chest. "What can we do?" The question had become wearily repetitive.
"Can't do much on that one Major. He's got his own sensor feeds but he can't broadcast tactical at all. Just voice."
Ridgeway nodded slowly, pausing for a moment before breaking a wan smile. "Then we'll have to make do with voice and assume that anything that gets within fifty meters of Monster is dead meat."
"All right," Ridgeway concluded with a slap on Merlin's shoulder, "get on it."
The engineer turned to leave, then paused indecisively. Ridgeway noted the obvious conflict. "What is it?"
Merlin chewed at the side of his lip as he looked Ridgeway in the eyes. "Something's been nagging at me since we came onboard Major, but I still can't make much sense of it."
"What's that?"
Merlin waved his hands as if presenting the room behind him. "Everything we've seen here suggests that the ship is man-made, right?"
Ridgeway swept the room in concert with Merlin's gesture, noting nothing out of the ordinary. "Yeah," he said with slight hesitation, "which infers that this is some kind of Rimmer project. So what's your point?"
"That looks like the easy answer," Merlin replied cautiously, "but we've got three major conflicts working against the theory."
"All right," Ridgeway concluded with a slap on Merlin's shoulder, "get on it."
Merlin chewed at the side of his lip as he looked Ridgeway in the eyes. "Something's been nagging at me since we came onboard Major, but I still can't make much sense of it."
"What's that?"
"Number two, at some point in her life, this bitch flew and got her ass kicked in the process. You saw that severed wing Major, it looked like something grabbed it and ripped it off. I don't know about you but I've never seen a weapon that could do that. But if it wasn't a United System's weapon, whose weapon was it?"
Ridgeway's mind ran across the possibilities and came up with nothing.
"But that's not the kicker." Merlin paused once more and looked down, his eyes tracking aimlessly across the floor. "Modern English is what, maybe a thousand years old?"
Puzzled by the change in direction, Ridgeway struggled for a reply "Something like that, but what does--"
"And man has been in space since, call it the 1960s, but we didn't get past the moon in any real sense till the early 2000s."
"What are you getting at, Merlin?" Ridgeway was quickly losing patience with the historical detour.
Merlin looked up, his eyes unwavering. "Just this. There's some pretty damn big stalactites stuck right through this tub. Down in the engine room Monster and I came across one maybe twenty meters in diameter that came in through the ceiling and continued down through the floor. Geology shit like that doesn't happen in fifty years, not in a hundred. It takes thousands of years, I dunno, maybe tens of thousands."
Merlin's voice grew increasingly somber. He looked at Ridgeway with an expression that bore no trace of guile and said, "I know how weird this sounds Major, but unless I'm missing something, this ship doesn't just predate human space travel, it got stuck down here before man carved his first wooden canoe."

CHAPTER 19

Within the concealing shell of Carbonite and metal alloy, Monster grimaced. He would not have allowed himself the concession if anyone was watching. Although the electroactive polymer muscles in his armor supported the bulk of his weight, Monster's flesh and blood arm still rocked through a full range of motion. As he climbed down the turbolift shaft, a sharp pain lanced reminded him of that fact. Monster snarled quietly at the burning in his side. "Just one more damn thing to manage."
Nearing the base of the shaft, Monster pushed off the wall and dropped the last five meters. He slammed down onto the floor like a pile driver.

As he passed through a pair of open doors, the sergeant looked down at the grid-steel catwalks radiating from the hub of the tower. His focus locked in on the number ‘7’ stenciled boldly on the floor of the leftmost walkway. The yellow numeral remained visible beneath an uneven coating of ice.

Monster advanced carefully down catwalk 7 when he heard a resounding clang as Merlin landed behind him. The catwalk shuddered in response, vibration rolling right through Monster's magnetically-affixed boots. A section of tubular rail broke away with a brief shriek, then bounced off a lower walkway before splashing into the glowing pool below.

Monster eyed the floor warily and keyed his comm. "Bridge 7 is near failure," he transmitted on a team-wide channel. "If you're headed to engineering, take 6A or walk carefully." He looked down and imagined the course of falling wreckage should the catwalk fail completely. Another mess they didn't need.

A flicker of light below caught his attention. Distinct from the seamless blue glow of the lake, the flash was sharp, a stutter of white brilliance. The Gatling swung over the edge as its muzzle moved through a slow arc.

Merlin's voice came in from Monster's left. "What have you got Gunny?" The question caught Monster by surprise before he remembered that his TAC wasn't transmitting. Rapid developments would call for a running commentary.

"Seven o'clock low," he said clearly, emphasizing the direction with a thrust of the Gatling. "Flash of light, looked like a welder or something."

"Like a welder?" Merlin's body canted forward abruptly, his facemask peering down. "Oh, shit!" The engineer bolted for a downward-leading staircase. "It's the engine."

Monster scarcely had time to turn before Merlin disappeared down the staircase amid a rapid clatter of magnetic boots. Setting himself in pursuit, Monster's boot skipped off a canted step. His weight lurched wildly before his gauntlet clamped down in a metal rail so forcefully that it bent. "Dammit Merlin, hold on."

The engineer did anything but decelerate. Hooking a vertical support, Merlin took a fire pole slide down yet another level before breaking aft. Monster matched the move by necessity. As he slid down the pitched I-beam, another arc-welder flash of light erupted from below. This time he could see its source.

A tendril of immense voltage thrashed out of the wall below, emerging from a blackened panel surrounded by wormlike scorch marks. With the force of a frenzied Tesla coil, the panel gave birth to writhing fingers of lightning that stretched some twenty feet or more. As Monster swung in to the walkway floor, a huge bolt rippled out, dividing like capillaries as it spread across the surface of the pool.

Monster rounded the first junction, hot on Merlin's tracks. A door to his right stood open and smoke rolled out in thick gouts. Merlin's voice echoed through the flames. "We gotta put this fire out-- NOW!"

Monster shifted his vision to infrared and the smoke faded. A brilliant glowing blob broiled just ahead, burning intensely. Quickly scanning to either side, Monster's gaze fell on a large dark cylinder hanging on the wall. He stuffed the Gatling into its holster, snatched the extinguisher and squeezed down on the handle. The upper arm snapped like a scrap of balsa wood.

"Dammit!" Monster snarled, his eyes flashing back to the blaze. He clutched the cylinder with both hands as though to strangle it, shoved it into the midst of the fire and squeezed. The cylinder crumpled and burst apart in a thunderous release of halon and dusty-yellow powder.

Oxygen ripped from its lungs, the fireball collapsed on itself. Monster stepped back, still clutching the crushed tank as Merlin reappeared, an extinguisher of his own in hand. Merlin pulled up short, his head leaning slowly to one side as he looked at the smoking equipment. With a chuff he tossed the unused extinguisher aside and turned back to the console, wiping soot off the display.

"Shit Gunny, this isn't good."

Monster leaned in and looked down at the panel where color-coded bar graphs bounced up and down like a stereo system at a rock concert. Clearly not the heartbeat of a machine running smoothly.

Merlin tapped a pair of dancing orange columns. "Containment field." He leaned back and turned to face Monster. "Orange and climbing. If we hit red, the fail-safes take the core offline. Then it's back to the deep freeze."

"And if they don't?"

Merlin looked up and paused for a moment. "Imagine the surface of the sun."

The imagery was clear. Monster's voice dropped even lower than normal. "How long?"

Merlin shrugged. "Shit, Gunny. Hours, days, it's hard to tell."

"Not good enough," Monster barked forcefully. "I need to know what kind of timeframe we're looking at."

Merlin looked back at the console as his fingers tapped rapidly on the plexan surface. He stared at a series of gauges before reaching up as if to scratch his jaw, armored fingers tinking off the shell of his facemask. The hand dropped.

"I'd give it no more than seventy-two hours. If she cycles down I don't think she'll stand up to another jump-start."
Monster bristled. "Don't you ever have any GOOD news?"
"Gimme a few minutes. I'll see if I can cut some of the power running aft, maybe lighten the load. If the drive
doesn't have to work so hard, it oughtta hold out longer."
Monster gave a quick thumbs-up and stepped out of the way, his mind rapidly revising their timeline.
Seventy-two hours. His brow knitted behind the armored mask.
Ships don't just appear in caves, he reasoned, so there had to be some kind of tunnel leading up. It would be a hell of
a climb back to whatever remained of the Cathedral, but in seventy-two hours they could be a long way from the
ship. At that point, as far as he was concerned, the ship could freeze or cook off to its heart's content. "Nothing here
but dead steel anyway," he muttered.
Stepping across the black grated floor to a pair of wide double doors, Monster planted himself in the portal. The
doors led into an access corridor that ran the length of the drive system, some hundred and seventy meters at least.
From the doorway Monster had an unobstructed view down the hallway aft, and another fifteen meters forward
where the corridor dumped into the Lobby.
A good vantage point. He could watch over Merlin while the corporal struggled to keep the crippled ship alive a
little longer. Monster appreciated the scope of that task. He guessed that kilometers of fiber-optic cable alone lay
between here and the Sickbay. In terms of volume and complexity, the ship was literally a city in a can.
A city without citizens, Monster thought uneasily, wondering yet again what had happened to her crew.
According to Ridgeway, the question of when had emerged to rival the question of what. Merlin's theory about the
stalactites opened a lot of questions. There was an unmistakable antiquity about the ship, a sense of permanence as it
lay here in its frozen grave. Monster didn't have to work hard to imagine the ship sitting here when the planet was
young.
Monster brusquely dismissed the line of thought. The last thing he needed was to get prosaic about the bizarre
situation. Life broke down into scientific fact and tactical reality; nothing else. Still, the uneasiness lingered.
Monster found himself less disturbed by what he could see than what he couldn't. Nameless gut reaction had become
an intuition upon which Monster had long come to rely. That intuition told him something was wrong about this
place, even more wrong than the obvious. Although he'd never admit it, the ship gave him the creeps.
Shifting his weight, he stared down the long canted hall. In the broken light, the interior was a frozen study in
overlapping greys and blacks. Nothing moved except the lingering curls of smoke in the air.
He glanced back at Merlin and unexpectedly felt a quiet flash of pride. The young Marine was busting his ass under
shit conditions; no complaints, no excuses. That was the Marine way, and that made it Monster's way.
"Any less would be human," Monster recited the fragment of his own mantra, "and humans could be beaten." The
core belief that Marines were more than human was hammered into them from day one, an innate conviction that
allowed them to persevere when lesser men gave up. Set aside all technology, Monster believed with conviction, and
the man who wins is the one who simply refuses to die.
Monster had been born to the role. His size and strength quickly established him as a superman in the eyes of new
recruits, but there was far more to the role than physical presence. It demanded discipline and a can-do attitude,
consistency in a world where things changed in the thud of a bullet. Monster loved it like nothing else.
Merlin popped up from his work and his head swiveled through a four-point check of the room.
Monster grinned. Perimeter sweep on regular intervals, just like clockwork. Getting so buried in one task that you
lose track of what's around you, tunnel vision, put a lot of good men in the ground. Taking a page from his own
book, Monster scanned the corridor once more.
Nothing but darkness loomed down the aft hallway, irregularly-spaced lights dimming along the gradual fade to
black. Swinging his attention forward, Monster swept the length of the cluttered wall just in time to see the Lobby
doors smashed from their frames in a thunder of crushed metal.
"Shit!" Lurching back into the doorway, Monster's right arm snapped down and engaged the barrel cluster of the
Gatling. Safeties disengaged with an electronic click as he finished the draw stroke and brought the machinegun to
target.
A mass of tangled wreckage now obscured the Lobby doorway. Pieces of angle-iron and grate steel lay strewn
across the floor. Amid the wall of debris, Monster recognized a large yellow number 7 hanging askance beyond the
doors.
With a metallic scrape, Merlin slid like a base runner through the door, passing beneath the Gatling as he skidded
into the hallway. The engineer's CAR was shouldered, a familiar ascending whine crisp in the cold air.
"Aft," Monster barked, directing Merlin to watch their flank. The collapse was likely caused by one of his own
Marines, but a diversion wasn't out of the question. With his TAC scrambled, Monster had no way to know. As if in
confirmation of his worst fear, something shook within the mass of metal.
"Major!" Monster barked across the comm.
"I copy, go." The wreckage shook violently as Ridgeway's voice replied. A piece of metal tube rang like an over-
struck tuning fork.
"Need a Team Sitrep Major," Monster's muzzle snapped to a piece of vertical diamondplate steel that trembled with 
increasing fervor. "I need it now."
"Stitch is here with the Rimmer, Darcy's on recon up top and Taz is on patrol--"
"Shit." Monster yanked the Gatling a few degrees off-target. "Where?"
"Aft, then down your way, why?"
Bolts along the edge of the gridded metal panel snapped and skittered across the floor like chrome dice. The plate 
dropped out of sight with a guillotine blur, revealing a crushed limb. Pieces of metal, slick with blood, gleamed in 
the dark recess.
"Dammit Taz!" Monster's outburst spilled out across the open comm as he bolted forward. He slammed into the 
mass of metal and drove with both legs. "Told you..." he snarled as he heaved up against the wreckage, "to watch the 
bridges."
Metal groaned and the framework shifted upward. Monster dropped his shoulder beneath the rising lever and threw 
the full strength of man and armor into the lift. Sheet metal tore with a warbling pig-squeal.
"Crikey Gunny, what the hell are you on about?" The Aussie's voice on the Com was clear and calm, tinged only by 
a note of irritation.
Monster froze, the sudden silence broken only by a dull metal creak. His gaze fell to the crushed, bleeding limb just 
inches from his knee as he spoke in a husky whisper. "Where are you?"
"Thirty-nine starboard aft, right where I'm bloody well supposed to be. What the hell did I do now?"
The dark shape lay still, oozing a reddish fluid that Monster had first taken for blood. Closer now, he could see a 
metallic sheen to the liquid as it dripped in thick clots down an erratic staircase of broken metal. Buried in leathery 
skeins lay a mangled chain of cables and pistons. Monster felt the tension drain from his body.
Shit. Just fucking machinery, he thought with a sigh. Not one of my Marines. He shifted his stance and began to 
lower the weight supported on his shoulders. The broken thing snatched violently and drew back by half its length, twisting like a metal snake. In the dim light Monster caught the flash of curved steel blades that flexed finger-like in the shadows before the limb thrashed once 
more and disappeared, yanked back through the far side of the heap.
Monster lunged back and the pile fell to the floor with a smash. Through the crush of collapsing steel, Monster could 
hear an erratic pattern of footfalls rapidly vanishing into the distance.

CHAPTER 20

Jenner gingerly clamped a flexible water bottle between his palms. The three remaining digits on his left hand were 
too tender to be of any use. He raised the bottle to his mouth, careful to avoid brushing the fissure in his lower lip, 
another piece of meat lost to blackened death.
Squeezing the bottle between his flipper-like hands, Jenner closed his eyes and let the cool droplets trickle down his 
throat. He focused on every swallow, hoping to stave off the dark nightmare images that played through his mind. 
A metallic clang from across the room caused Jenner to flinch and the translucent bottle slipped from his grasp. It 
fell to the floor, bounced twice and rolled away.
Shit, Jenner cursed inwardly, realizing that the ongoing noise was just the doctor rummaging through a box of 
equipment. He felt a short wave of relief. The doctor didn't scare him-- not like the other one, the one with the 
hellish eyes.
Jenner shuddered, a tremor in his guts that spread quickly to his hands. He wrapped his arms tightly about himself 
and tried to will away the shakes. Despite his best efforts, Jenner's mind reached unbidden to the amber-eyed 
Marine.
Killer's eyes, Jenner told himself. 
All the Marines struck him as hard characters. Hell, even the girl is scary, Jenner admitted, but Taz was frightening 
in a way that Jenner had never known.
He wants me dead, and not just the way that a soldier wants to take the fight to the enemy. Jenner mulled dismally, 
the bastard is looking forward to killing me like a little kid looks forward to opening a new toy. Despite his abysmal state of mind, Jenner was surprised to find that dying itself had lost most of its menace. His 
recent memory was a twisted blur of cold and suffering. Nightmares hung just behind his closed eyelids, fitful 
dreams of drowning in living quicksand.
He wondered if his mind had suffered more damage than his body. Even in the worst of times, his grasp on reality, 
no matter how shitty that reality was, had always seemed solid. That had been before the voices began, dark
mutterings in a language he didn't know but somehow understood. The voices brought images of things that turned his stomach, scenes that played out like distant memories. Jenner couldn't begin to grasp what it all meant. Mystery voices, hallucinations, to Jenner they were all signs of a collapsing mind.

As a matter of self defense, Jenner tried to rivet his attention on the world around him, to focus on what was real. Briggs was dead, that much was real. The Truck was gone as well, blown all to hell. The exercise was not helping -- everything he knew was gone.

Hell, he whimpered inwardly, half of me is gone as well.

Jenner vomited the first time he saw himself in a small metal mirror. Lacking a nose, both ears and half a lip, his head looked like an animated skull. Wide chunks of his scalp were missing, flesh tones visible between irregular patches of brown hair.

I look like a chopped car, he reflected miserably, wheels missing, doors gone, hood ripped off. How many of the cars that he swiped as a kid ended up stripped to the frame? His fate struck him like some kind of cheap, karmic joke. Dying would simply bring this whole shitty story to a close. Fucked up life, fucked up career-- now I'm just plain fucked altogether.

"Hey."

Jenner lurched at the sudden sound, arms flapping up to curl around his head. Wide eyes peered between crossed forearms at the fabric strip on the figure's chest that read REMUZZI, but the Marines called him Stitch.

"Take it easy." The Marine's voice held no trace of warmth, but he seemed genuine in his desire to keep Jenner alive; that alone set him apart from Taz.

"Shorry," Jenner slurred, lowering his arms. "Uh, howshit goin?" The attempt at smalltalk was feeble and his missing teeth and lip conspired to give him a pathetic, wet lisp.

The only reply was a bright penlight beam in Jenner's left eye. Sudden brilliance caused him to blink rapidly as the beam jumped to his right eye. Jenner tried to hold still, having no desire to draw the medic's ire.

If the effort was noticed at all, Stitch gave no outward sign. The medic proceeded mechanically through a series of examinations, listening to Jenner's heart and lungs, peering into the gaping skull-holes that had at one point been garnished with ears and a nose. Jenner yelped when Stitch pinched several of the pink finger-nubs that transitioned slowly from compressed-yellow back to a normally irritated pink.

"Pretty shcrewed," Jenner slurred, looking at the remains of his right hand.

"Yeah," Stitch nodded, his attention fixed on his task. "Hope you didn't spend a lot on piano lessons."

To his surprise, Jenner broke a brief, wry grin, his first in a long time. The no-bullshit attitude was oddly reassuring. "I heard you guyshtalking about the..." he paused and tipped his head towards the table, "about the machine. ‘Shupposed to shome kinda miracle."

"I don't know about miracles," Stitch replied as he scraped a small bit of Jenner's skin into a shallow glass dish filled with something that looked like jell-o. "But it's the damnest thing I've ever seen."

"Sho what went wrong?" Jenner asked, wriggling the stubs on his right hand.

"That's what I'm trying to figure out." Stitch prepped a syringe, a process Jenner knew all too well. "The nanites, that's the little--"

"Bugsh?"

"Yeah, only they're not bugs, they're machines. Robots really, about the size of a human cell. No batteries, probably to minimize size. My best guess is that they convert body heat or run off myoelectric current." Jenner self-consciously wondered if he looked as clueless as he felt. The medic might as well have been speaking Martian. Jenner's brow wrinkled as he tried to follow along. Stitch must have noted the strain etched on Jenner's face because the discussion down-shifted abruptly. "Think of the table as a camera. It takes a photo of you, well, more like an X-ray. That tells it what shape you're in. Then it looks at your DNA; that tells it what you should look like if you were healthy."

The concept wasn't all that tough, Jenner thought as he watched the needle slide into his arm. He listened quietly as the clear syringe filled with a ruddy red fluid, noting what looked like tiny silver flecks in his own blood.

"The nanites can move stuff from one place to the next and weld it back together. If you get a whole bunch of 'em working together you can patch up a lot of damage." The medic placed a small adhesive gauze disk over the puncture wound and pressed firmly. "What the little suckers can't do is make living tissue from nothing. You lost whole pieces of meat--"

"Like fingersh." Jenner interjected, once more flexing a maimed hand in the air.

"Yeah," Stitch said with a short nod that might have held a trace of sympathy. "The nanites could only pull so much from the rest of your body before the salvage op started to compromise other systems. You got back maybe ten, twelve percent of what you lost, but that's all the surplus material your scrawny ass had to spare."
"Shoulda eaten a shteak for my last meal," Jenner muttered sourly, "maybe a gutful of meat woulda got me another finger or two."

Stitch paused in the midst of transferring the blood sample to a small stainless steel device. "Huh," he muttered as his eyes tracked back toward the table. "There's a thought."

A furrow creased Jenner's disfigured face, as close to a scowl as he could manage. "Shitloada good that doesh me now," he spat, left hand raised to his face. He fought back a rising sense of despair as finger stubs gently brushed across cratered nostrils.

Stitch didn't appear to notice. The glass vial in his hand tapped slowly on the stainless steel tray. "Might work," he said aloud. "Hit of midazolam would put you under." He looked down at the vial in his hand, absently tumbling the cylinder. "Yeah..."

As though he snapped out of a trance, Stitch blinked and looked up at Jenner. "Course we're kinda short on steak dinners and I don't think anybody delivers down here."

"Only luck I got." The comment escaped Jenner's lips without a hint of exaggeration. The question that followed slipped out before he had a chance to reconsider. "You guysh gonna kill me?"

The medic's eyes hardened. "If I were you," he growled, voice low, "I'd keep my mouth shut around Taz."

"Why? What the hell did I ever do to him?"

"We've all lost friends to Rimmers, some take it more personally than others. When you put on the uniform, you put on the history."

"That'sh bullshit, I never hurt any--"

Stitch cut him off, a stiff index finger snapping up to the gap formerly occupied by Jenner's nose. "Look, stupid, read my lips: no-body-cares." The medic emphasized the syllable as though talking to a small child. "If you've got any brains left, you'll keep your yap shut and ride this out. As far as I'm concerned you're an injured POW. That means you get my best treatment until you do something to jeopardize our safety."

Like what, slap you to death? Jenner felt weak and pitiful as he looked down at his ruined hands. Choosing only to nod his head, he remained silent.

"Good. So here's how it plays. If we don't find a way out of here we're all gonna die, you included. If you know anything about this boat or how it got down here, it could go a long way towards getting all of our asses back to the surface."

"Boat?" Jenner's head swung up and cocked over to one side. He blinked hard, trying not to appear lost as he groped for something intelligent to say. "Ish that why everything ish leaning?"

Stitch looked him squarely in the eyes as if trying to divine truth in a swirl of tea-leaves. Then the lanky Marine looked down at the instrument in his hands and sighed quietly. "Yeah, something like that."

Jenner gave a sudden start as the Sickbay door opened with a hiss. Four armored figures lumbered into the room, their feet clinging to the angled floor with reptilian surety. A sense of urgency crawled up Jenner's spine as his gaze settled on the word TAZ emblazoned on an armored breastplate.

Survival instinct gnawed at the back of Jenner's thinking. His ability to avoid contact was limited, and at some point he be stuck alone with the surly Aussie. Getting away from the Marines became increasingly critical in Jenner's mind.

He looked across the Sickbay to the table. As the medic's words played back through his mind, a glimmer of distant hope began to form.
Razor-sharp crosshairs tracked slowly along the heavy chain, each link a flattened oval of grey steel nearly a foot long. Ice coated its length, the hazy crystalline surface clearly visible through the telescopic sight. Small digits in the top center of Darcy's vision read 467m, the precise distance to the chain. A laser rangefinder served as just one piece of the complex weaponsight package. As range to target changed, the visible image area shifted to maintain a point of impact in the center of the reticle. Gone were the days of dialing in range and windage on scope turrets, or calculating holdover using black three-quarter mil dots spaced evenly along the crosshairs. Technology had given the mainstream sniper a tremendous edge in point-and-shoot engagement.

Anything but mainstream, Darcy relied on skill and knowledge over the infinite layers of gadgetry that forced its way onto the battlefield. "Gimmicks fail," she muttered with a faint smile, "trust your training." The axiom had been hammered into her brain throughout sniper school and remained a centerpoint of Darcy's existence.

Sliding her view down the massive hydraulic claw, Darcy absorbed and categorized details great and small. Although a solid-state drive stored digital reference images, retrieving a specific file could take time. Things in her mind were instantly available.

Size, shape, color, she ticked through the well-ingrained set of questions as she focused on the claw. Roughly four meters in diameter, shaped like a metal starfish, dark grey in color. A flash of red caught her eye, the triangular shape stenciled along the base of a heavy pulley. Condition? The claw looked serviceable, no outward signs of damage.

Appears to be? Darcy zoomed in closer, the massive steel grapple filling her vision. "It appears to be one heavy sonofabitch." Opting for a more technical description, she tagged the marker as CRANE, HEAVY. The designation joined the numerous features scattered across the electronic range card.

Wedged in a narrow crevice near the Lobby ceiling, Darcy remained deathly still. From her vantage point she commanded a wide view that included Papa-Six, the Tower and most of the catwalks. She had committed the entire layout of the Lobby to memory, with a focus on points of entry. To the best of Darcy's limited knowledge, the gargantuan engineering bay still represented the easiest way in and out of the ship. Her hunter's mind told her that keeping an eye on the front door was a prudent idea. The path of any foreseeable attack would lead through the cavernous metal expanse that stretched out below the sniper's railgun.

The exercise proved far easier said than done. The Lobby amounted to a steel canyon whose walls were littered with balconies and windows. Darcy's very organized brain was stressed to the point of numbness as she tried to collate the boundless volume of information. If bad guys started popping up, she could be facing a world-class Hogan's Alley.

"Draw a bead and make 'em bleed," Darcy drawled with a measure of malicious anticipation, confident that she could make this particular shooting gallery decidedly inhospitable.

In retrospect, Darcy acknowledged, the odds of a shooting scenario seemed awfully slim. Whether fifty years old or fifty thousand, the ship struck her as little more than a dramatic, frozen tomb. Whatever brought the vessel down here, nobody survives for long in sub-zero cold with no light and no food. Darcy wasn't lost on the double-edged irony.

On the other hand, Monster's encounter was a disturbing anomaly. No matter how implausible, the possibility of survivors could not be entirely discounted. The ship was certainly big enough to hide another energy source deep in its bowels. Beyond the ship itself lay an untold expanse of caverns with who-knows-how-many sources of geothermal energy. In Darcy's military experience, the only constant was uncertainty. She prepared as if for war.

The familiar routine felt good and offered a welcome point of focus. Despite long hours crammed in the aerie-like hide, Darcy suffered no aching muscles, no cramps. In point of fact, she felt pretty damn good.

What the fuck was that?

Darcy jerked back out of the scope, her attention snapping to the torn balcony hanging askew just overhead. On reflex her mind engaged the chameleon and the tangled hues of her surrounding spread across her like a rapid-growing mold.

Darcy's mind struggled to categorize the unexpected sound. Not a footstep or the tell-tale creak of a stalker's weight, the tone was more like a murmur. With a falcon's eye she swept the line of torn railing. Not even air moved between the broken bars of steel.

Sound warbled once more, dull and distorted, from somewhere near the ceiling. Fighting the urge to sit upright for a better view, Darcy slid backward in the crevice and drew the railgun close to her chest. Rolling slowly to one side, she rocked the heavy weapon skyward; the barrel a scant few inches from the wall. As the stock snugged into her shoulder, the scope engaged.
The ceiling was a chaotic mass of ductwork and pipes. Thick corrugated conduits snaked between angled girders of structural steel that measured meters across. Immense air vents dotted the ceiling in a regular, grid-like pattern. Each circular air handler measured roughly four meters in diameter, the louvered grates edge-on like the maw of a turbine engine.

Darcy eyed the network of composite fiber tubes. The immense air ducts criss-crossed the ceiling like an enclosed highway, a possible explanation of how something could have crossed the Lobby unseen. She tracked along the largest one in search of a missing grate.

An odd sensation tugged at her mind, a glimmer of déjà vu. She had not yet conducted a detailed sweep of the ceiling but the inverted field of equipment oozed an eerie familiarity. Through the scouring optronic eye, Darcy could make out patterns of corrosion running along metal plates, the crust of ice clinging to every crevice.

"Open grate," she muttered under her breath, "just behind a busted compressor." She screwed her eyes shut, focusing on the image that hung clear in her memory. The compressor's torn drive chain hanging loose from cracked pulleys. The number 41.

Another sound broke her concentration, now level with her and to the left. Darcy flattened into the wall, trying desperately to zero the source.

More than one, she recognized, her teeth grinding. Bastards are talking to each other, coordinating.

The eroding situation demanded a tactical change. Whatever moved through the Lobby walls did so invisibly and Darcy wasn't going to wait for them to pop up in her face. With great deliberation, her fingers slid down to her hip and closed on a familiar curved slab. As she positioned the device near the rim of the ledge, she felt the words FRONT TOWARDS ENEMY embossed faintly along the curved outer shell.

Sneak up on this, motherfucker.

Darcy quietly pulled a fistfull of dirty fiber insulation from a breach in the wall and placed the cottony pink wad in front of the antipersonnel mine. Wriggling methodically backward, Darcy slithered feet-first through several feet of torn wall and emerged in a dark hallway on the far side, her original point of entry.

To her right the hall led back to the turbolift, but the view from that angle was sure to be limited. Darcy looked aft as she quickly stowed the rifle, her mind trying to picture the layout of the Lobby cut into single floors. She had seen a wide section of catwalk extending from somewhere aft, angling up in a series of staircase landings to the ceiling. The vantage point should give her high ground and a flanking position. Pivoting to her left, she bolted downslope, her concern over slipping lost in the urgent need to move.

The metal rungs barely caught her eye as she bolted past a half-open hatch. She braked hard, dielectric actuators causing the polymeric gel in her soles to deform in a high-grip tread pattern. Cursing the sneaker-like squeal, Darcy ducked through the hatch and launched herself up the ladder.

Reaching the top, she pushed up on the circular hatch that sat over the ladder-tube like a hinged manhole cover. It lifted with barely a creak. The scant crescent gap allowed Darcy to peer out at floor-level from the highest balcony in the Lobby. The ceiling hung just overhead and a set of tiered landings rose to meet the roofline. Motionless, Darcy strained to listen. The silence told her nothing; her flanking maneuver might have put her out of earshot as intended.

Or not, she snarled, and the bastards are just waiting for me.

Taking a deep breath, Darcy raised the hatch enough to slither through. Arms outstretched, she dragged herself forward with only fingers and toes, her progress measured in inches between intermittent pauses. The sniper edged her way to a pile of mechanical debris, where she looked for a gap that would allow her to use the heap as a screen. An overhanging flap of crumpled sheet metal proved the best she could find. Keeping the muzzle behind the improvised blind, Darcy gazed out through the scope.

Rapidly quartering the room, Darcy tore through a hasty search that would pick up only the most obvious tells--motion, shine, striking difference in color. She hadn't expected to catch someone out in the open but couldn't pass up the chance for a lucky break. Finishing the wide z-pattern, Darcy reluctantly accepted that her allotment of good karma had been burned on the table. If she was going to get an edge now, she'd have to earn it herself.

A scrape, metal on metal, short but distinct. The image in the scope streaked up to the landing closest to the ceiling. Slowly now, the crosshairs crawled right to left across a battery of air handlers. Condensation chambers rose two abreast from each compressor. Even through the grime that encrusted the blue-painted unit, the number 43 was visible in yellow.

A full heartbeat late Darcy registered the familiarity and the scope centered the numerals once more. She slid her view to the right where condensor 44 appeared to be intact. Reversing her track, the sniper swept left across three units, coming to a halt on a cracked pulley, the split chain hanging motionless on one side. Her breath quickened. The darkness beyond was blurred by the depth of field but she could still make out the dark louvered circle. Darcy pushed the zoom forward with delicate care until she drew the grate into sharp clarity. A shattered lock dangled limp
on the mangled frame. Beyond, the entire grate hung askew. The skin rippled along Darcy's spine. Pulling off the riflescope she craned over the balcony lip and struggled to spot her first hide.

"No chance," she muttered, knowing full well that the huge structure that blocked her view down would have blocked her view up just as well. It would have been impossible to see any of the compressors from below, and yet 41 stood before her, and the open grate beyond, precisely as she--

Imagined? Remembered? She struggled to frame an impossible event in some logical rationale, but nothing fit. She could not have known the grate was there, any more than she could know what was beyond. And yet somehow, she did know. She remembered.

Darcy drew the rifle back to her shoulder and peered at the grate. Darkness beckoned beyond, where the curved sides of the duct ran straight and true to a four-way junction some thirty meters in. She knew the way the metal groaned under great weight, how the seams snagged more going in than coming out. The picture grew sharper in her mind, details of sound and feel resolving to unnatural clarity. The sensations became immersive, absorbing her. Her mind moved quickly through the ductwork, advancing in improbably long strides. One leg after another reached forward, clawed talons biting into the curved walls. A metallic clatter filled her ears, sounds that were at once alien and yet somehow perfectly in place. Voices murmured, slurred voices she could feel more than hear.

Emerging from one section of duct, Darcy reached out with a metallic claw that should have been her hand; at least it felt like her own hand as it clamped down on a length of pipe. The metal tube crumpled in her grasp. Her immense weight swung effortlessly between two heavy columns, a fan of arms to either side of her body snapping at every conceivable foothold. Just as quickly, she plunged headlong into another tube, this one smaller than the first. Blue light wavered at the end of the dark tunnel. Lake light, Darcy recognized as she scuttled closer. The disk of blue expanded quickly to reveal details beyond. She was lower in the Lobby, perhaps halfway down to the lake surface. Gazing from within the tube, she could see some of the catwalks that angled towards the Tower.

Motion on one of the suspended walkways caught her attention and she felt her wide body hunker down between a pair of vent frames. Tension gathered in her numerous arms and legs as she made out two shapes that moved slowly along the steel bridge. One of the grey figures was decidedly larger that the other, a Gatling gun unmistakable beneath his right arm.

Her perspective edged closer.

CHAPTER 22

"You're fucking dead, Rimmer."

Jenner tried to twist away from the armored hand that pinned his throat against the wall. The Marine's other hand, clenched in a fist, hovered just off the tip of Jenner's nose. Crumpled bits of foil and vacuseal sprouted between the carbon-clad fingers.

The fist cocked back and Jenner yelped, eyes clamped shut as he turned his face from the blow. Thunder echoed in his ear, a tooth-rattling vibration that proved remarkably painless. Somehow he thought having his skull caved in would hurt more. Jenner opened one eye in a fearful squint.

Taz stood frozen in place, his fist buried in the wall alongside Jenner's head. The Marine's entire body trembled. With a metallic screech, the first tore free and Jenner felt his body lurch, shoved away by the hand at his throat. He slid across the wall and crashed to the floor, bouncing down the pitched floor in a jumble of flailing limbs.

"The Majah'd have my bollocks for breakfast if I fragged you now you bloody little wog. But when he find out you've rifled our bloody rations," Taz hurled the fistful of torn wrappers, "then you and me are gonna 'ave a go."

Jenner's stomach twisted as he watched the bits of foil flutter to the deck. He had come so close, watching the Marines store their food, their medicines. The plan had been a simple one, but not without dangers. Getting caught by Taz with a gutfull of MREs and a pocket of empty wrappers was just about as dangerous as Jenner could imagine.

Taz paced to the center of the room as a string of curses spooled endlessly under his breath. The odds, he knew, were slim. Monster and the mechanic were supposed to be fixing something and the girl had gone off on some kind of lone patrol. He had overheard the Major talking to Stitch about finding a bridge, although Jenner couldn't imagine anybody building a bridge where there were no roads. Whatever the case, Jenner feared that every possible source of protection was scattered, too far to hear a single scream. Watching Taz spin the knife, Jenner doubted that he'd last long enough to
scream twice.
As if in confirmation of Jenner's worst fear, Taz spun around abruptly and barked, "What?"
Jenner's hands flinched up to his chest, palms out. "I didn't shay anything," he bleated, his tone high-pitched and quivering.
"Where are you?" The long knife disappeared into its sheath as a stocky carbine took its place in the Marine's hands.
Taz took two long strides toward the door before Jenner realized that the Marine's comment was directed at someone else. The urgent chatter continued as Taz blew through the doorway and vanished down the hall. "Hang on, I'll be there in two mikes..." The voice disappeared before the pounding footsteps faded to silence.
Jenner sat breathing heavily and listened for the rapid return of footsteps that would reveal the cruel joke. Seconds ticked by in silence. For the first time since awakening, Jenner was alone.
A hand nervously crept to his face, gums closing down on a nub that had no nail. He looked at the hand and regarded the lumpy appendage with an equal measure of disgust and self-pity.
A flicker of silver caught his eye as a scrap of foil glinted in the light. Jenner's heart skipped a beat; he still had the plan. Accelerated perhaps, but he was way past going back now.
The MREs weren't steak dinners to be sure, but each square block of sawdust-flavored gel was packed with nutrients. He had tried to make sense out of the labels; protein, polydextrose, cyanocobalimine-- whatever it meant, the stuff was made to keep Marines alive so it had to have some value. Looking across the room, Jenner made his decision.
Driven by a mounting urgency, he scrambled to the counter where the Marines had stacked their supplies. Clumsily he tore into the remaining packs, shoveling wads of food down his throat. Wrappers he couldn't tear he simply chewed with his back teeth, sucking gooey contents from tattered strips. Jenner choked down the last of the sparse supplies and cast about for anything else that looked remotely like the stuff humans are made of. He rummaged the first aid supplies, sifting through the stack of candidates.
"Syntheshkin bandage, gets abshorbed by the body." He tossed the roll onto the gloss surface of the medical repair table. "Plashma pack," he read, holding up the small ceramite container of condensed blood. "Shounds about right." He flipped the second item next to the bandage. A spool of sutures and a tube of antibiotic followed, Jenner's criteria having no clear definition. He tossed a set of thermoplastic splints over his shoulder and paused to read the label on a small box of green pads before deciding that it too was worthless.
The word MIDAZOLAM caught his eye, small black letters that nearly wrapped around the vial of cinnamon-colored liquid. He grabbed it with nubby fingers, ignoring the raw twinge. With considerable effort Jenner forced an infuser head over the neck of the vial and pressed firmly, noting the hiss familiar to junkies across the galaxy. If the life offered any consolation prizes, he knew damn well how to work an infuser.
His heart beat like a jackhammer as Jenner scrambled to the door and peered down the hall in both directions. Nothing moved, not a sound in either direction.
Shuffling quickly back to the table he took a deep breath and pressed the infuser against the flesh of his neck and thumbed the release. A descending hiss cut through the air and a delicious haze began to wind its way through Jenner's senses.
He exhaled a long slow breath and laid back onto the table.

CHAPTER 23

Ridgeway hurtled down the sloped hall, toward the Tower and the drumbeat of gunfire. Light flashed through the open doors at the end of the hall, the yellow-orange blaze of muzzle-flash. CAR in hand as he rounded the corner, Ridgeway burst into the Lobby.
Darcy was somewhere high on the stern wall. Ridgeway couldn't see her but the sniper rifle's pulsing muzzle flash was brightest along the ceiling. Straight across the room, a section of air duct disintegrated in a blistering hail of fiery impacts. Below, Monster and Merlin stood out on a long section of catwalk, back to back, weapons held high. Defense formation, Ridgeway recognized immediately. Unknown targets, maybe multiple. His CAR snapped to his shoulder as he swept the convoluted maze of ducts that hung above the two Marines. At least two sections were already riddled, smoke curling from fist-sized holes. Darcy was reducing a third to burning scrap.
Something tore with a horrendous shriek and a thirty-foot section of ductwork tore free. Amid the corkscrew of unraveling metal framework, a large, dark shape plummeted toward the walkway.
Monster spun low and drove a shoulder into Merlin's midsection, lofting the smaller Marine in a brutal fireman's carry. The falling mass slammed into the catwalk with a fury, smashing through the grated floor and plowing down into the lake in an eruption of glowing coolant. The two Marines vanished from sight as the floor collapsed beneath them.
Ridgeway dimly heard his own voice shout Monster’s name as he vaulted over the rail and dropped some thirty feet to the next landing. Polymer muscles sucked up the shock as he slammed down on the floor. Three long strides and a second drop landed him on the bisected walkway. He charged forward, running for the four grey fingers dug into the ledge of twisted steel.

Sliding like a base runner, Ridgeway’s gauntlet slapped down on the outstretched hand. "Gotcha!"

Metal groaned in reply, a shudder that rattled through Ridgeway’s chest as the floor dropped several inches. "Hang on," he snarled through clenched teeth as his left groped wildly for a hold.

"What the hell’d you think I was gonna do, clap?"

Ridgeway peered over the uneven rim of folded steel and traced down the massive armored limb to a facemask only a few feet from his own. Draped over Monster’s shoulder, Merlin hung head down, his boots waving. Ridgeway only grunted as he hauled at the double load.

Monster’s left hand groped up and clutched a piece of the catwalk’s frame. In a clumsy tangle of arms and legs, the ball of armor inched its way up the hanging metal flap and collapsed in a heap onto the first few feet of level walkway. Just an arm’s length away, the damaged section of catwalk tore away and crashed down atop the dark mass at the lake’s surface.

Merlin rose unsteadily to his feet as Ridgeway leaned over a broken rail and looked down. Wreckage lay smashed across the lowermost stretch of catwalk, which itself was crushed down just below the lake’s surface. In the midst of the knot of girders and grated steel sat the dark metallic shape, tendrils splayed out in a lifeless snarl. Ridgeway studied it for several seconds before he rolled to his elbows with a tired sigh.

"You wanna tell me why you lit up a turbine?"

Monster’s facemask drew back in a brief jerk. The big man rolled to one knee and peered over the edge. As he turned back toward Ridgeway, oversized shoulder plates rose in a slow shrug. "Shit if I know."

"We were headed back to Sickbay," Merlin chimed in, rapping the side of his helmet with the palm of his hand as if to clear water from his ears, "at least we were until the LT started pounding the crap out of the plumbing. At that point it was all we could do to just stay out of the way."

Ridgeway looked up towards the ceiling, unable to spot the sniper amid the acres of metal and shadow. What the hell was she doing? He tried to raise her on the comm but found nothing but hiss in reply.

"Probably the static Major." Merlin jerked a thumb at the random threads of lightning that rippled across the aft bulkhead wall. "All that voltage is playing hell with comm."

Ridgeway stood silently, his eyes fixed on the mass of smoking metal below. The ball of wreckage slowly sank beneath the lake surface, dragging the lowermost walkway along. Air escaped the machine with a breathy rush as it sank from sight. In a moment Ridgeway could see only bubbles.

"All right, let's get back to sickbay."

Before he could finish, something yanked Ridgeway off his feet. Not explosive, he knew instinctively, but powerful. Merlin dropped to the floor in a heap while Monster staggered drunkenly. Ridgeway’s hands lashed out and he caught himself on the rail. As quickly as it hit, the effect passed.

"What the hell was that?" Monster demanded of no one in particular.

Ignoring the question, Ridgeway gripped the rail as a deepening vibration rattled up through his gauntlets. His sense of balance already grasped the change as his attention jumped madly from one anomaly to the next. The huge magnetic claw swung like a pendulum as shattered ice flaked from suddenly moving links. Scrap metal and debris clattered from a hundred ledges around the Lobby, falling not at an angle to the walls, but parallel with them.

Oh shit.

"Move!" Ridgeway’s command exploded as he grabbed at Merlin’s collar. The entire surface of the pool was already beginning to roll into a gargantuan swell. "Go, go!"

Ridgeway shoved Merlin ahead, breaking into a dash that was no longer impeded by a sloping floor. The glowing lake, flat to where gravity had been just a second before, now leaned impossibly up the far wall. Tons of coolant surged to find its own level in a world that had just shifted in alignment.

Picking up speed like a luminescent avalanche, the mountain of glowing fluid toppled toward the running Marines.

CHAPTER 24

In the midst of cornering, Taz felt the world swing out from beneath him. He fought to maintain his balance for two wild, stumbling strides before he slammed into the left-side wall. The CAR clattered to the floor and Taz threw himself into a forward dive, hoping desperately to capture the rifle before it slid down the long, downhill hallway.

He Pancaked the deck hard, stunned to find neither himself or the weapon in motion. Flat, he realized abruptly, no slope.
Taz scooped the carbine and rolled to his feet, immediately resuming the single-minded track that led to his fellow Marines. The TAC put them one level up, just beyond the closed double-doors at the end of the hall. He snapped the CAR to his shoulder as he ran and squeezed the secondary trigger.

The larger barrel gave a throaty bark followed by the dull crump of the grenade's detonation. The left of two doors bowed outward, jumping the track that ran the length of the doorframe. "Close enough," Taz snarled as he closed the gap at a dead run. Shoulder down, he slammed into the door and ripped it from the wall.

Lobby, he recognized as he skidded to a halt. The great room echoed with an incomprehensibly booming rumble. On the catwalk above, three silhouettes ran straight at him, dark against the towering wall of liquid light that thundered at their heels. Taz gaped as the muzzle of his CAR drooped slowly to the floor.

Bloody hell.

Merlin led the sprinting trio, running flat out. Monster and Ridgeway ran side by side in his wake. The radiant tsunami angled across the room, smashing the catwalk behind them to pieces. Outpacing them.

"Merlin!" Taz screamed, waving his arms, "down here!"

The engineer's only response was a sudden shift in direction. He broke right and hurdled the rail, launching himself across the void. Taz lunged out of the way as Merlin’s armored form slammed down feet-first and tumbled into a forward roll. Monster and Ridgeway followed suit, the force of their tandem landing nearly tearing the balcony from its moorings. As he blew through the doorway, Monster's shoulder clipped the remaining door and sent the metal panel clanging across the hall.

Taz scrambled after them as deafening thunder blotted out the sound of his own feet on the hallway floor.

No way, he thought, no bloody way.

The wall behind him exploded beneath a titan's hammer-blow, every tear hemorrhaged jet-streams of brilliant blue. A frothing piledriver of coolant and mangled steel caught Taz from behind and swept him along like a cork in the rapids.

Taz tried to curl into a ball, wrapping his arms across the top of his head. Something huge rode up on top of him, a crushing weight that scraped him brutally across the floor. The freight train of debris surged forward with a terrible force, plowing through a second wall before it curled back against a third. Churning froth battered Taz with light and force before it finally subsided. With a deep, sucking backward the radiant tide withdrew, leaving a tide-strewn tangle of wreckage and Marines.

A groan echoed from beneath a bent steel truss as Taz grabbed the end with both hands and shoved. The truss shifted, relieving the painful weight that pinned his left leg to the ground. "Oh bollocks," Taz grumbled as he pulled himself out from beneath the slab of steel. "Majah, gunny, you all right?"

A lone gauntlet rose slowly from behind a crumpled metal locker, forefinger unsteadily touching the thumb in a rough OK. Beyond Merlin a pair of oversized legs stuck out from beneath a pile of sodden garbage. Taz grabbed a lidless metal drum and tossed it aside as he reached for Monster's hand. The sergeant sat up groggily, shaking off strands of wet insulation. "Shit," the big man mumbled, "this is getting old."

Far to the right, Ridgeway rose to his feet, shedding garbage as he leaned back against the wall. Taz nodded in his direction, the senior Marine responding in kind.

"Crikey," Taz stammered, sloshing through shin-deep fluid, "what the bloody hell was that on about?" He grabbed the edge of the metal locker and heaved back, tossing it aside as he clutched Merlin's hand. "What'd you do bright boy, leave the bloody tap runnin?"

Merlin rose to his feet and shook his head slowly. "Not me hoss," he muttered breathlessly, "something else, someone else had to--"

"Don't be balsmaid you stupid shite, d'ya think we've never felt an AG kick on before?"

Merlin drew himself up and leaned forward until his facemask bumped Taz. "I know the AG came on dumbass, what I said was that I didn't fix it."

"Oh and I suppose the bloody gravity faery came along and nogged it with her little wand then, eh?" Taz felt the rush as adrenaline and frustration boiled together, "C'mon, who the bloody else on this tub knows how to fix a sodding gravity coil? You almost got us killed you stupid git!"

Merlin shoved Taz and snarled something that garbled with a deeper voice that barked off to the right. Neither one registered as the Aussie's composure snapped like an over-stretched rubber band. He stepped forward and threw a left hook at Merlin's skull.

The blow never landed. His left arm flailed wildly as he slammed to the deck, blind-sided by a tremendous impact. Taz rolled to his feet and looked up as a deep voice coalesced into a clear roar.

"I said STAND DOWN!" Monster loomed over him like a storm.

Taz felt his right leg tighten, felt the push as his weight shifted forward. His right arm drew back to his hip, fingers closing.
"Don't even think about it." Monster's husky whisper had lost all emotion.

His perception became crystal clear, the taut muscles of his arm and fist, the massive form of Monster standing unflinchingly. An unfamiliar sensation wriggled in the back of the Aussie's mind, one that straddled the hazy line between fear and common sense. Taz felt the muscles of his back twitch, tension and anger draining into the puddles across the floor. "I...I just--" he groped for words until his head dropped with a slow shake. "Ah fuck all."

Silence hung in the air, broken only by the random raindrop noise of coolant that dripped from the ceiling. The three men stood breathing heavily until Ridgeway's weary voice cut in from across the room.

"If you three are done playing, come look at this."

Taz saw Monster's head snap to Ridgeway, then back. The sergeant grunted brusquely before he turned away and sloshed across the room. Taz fell in alongside Merlin as they followed suit, trudging quietly. At the broken wall he moved to Monster's right and drew up alongside a silent Ridgeway. Following their focus, Taz gazed into the room beyond.

Fancy, Taz realized with a start, not your run-of-the-muck pipes and cables here.

Shadows wavered as the ankle-deep coolant threw uneven puddles of moving light. In contrast with the grim industrial design that comprised the rest of the ship, the room before them struck Taz as oddly decorative.

And useless, he amended, mentally separating the wash of debris from the otherwise spartan interior.

The walls were made from interlaced panels of marble and a bronze-colored metal. Eight in all defined the small octagonal room, each panel curving up to the peaked, dome ceiling where a lone light fixture glowed. The conical beam fell straight down atop a fluted stone column that stood a meter high in the center of the floor. Something was affixed to the beveled top, a plate of the same bronze-like metal.

"What?" Taz queried, "Some kinda chapel?"

Ridgeway high-stepped over a pile of junk and moved along the left side of the column, wiping at the plaque with one hand. Taz felt a wave of ice pass through his belly as he heard his commander's voice, flat and hollow.

"Holy shit."

Monster moved forward and peered over the top of the column while Merlin and Taz swung around to either side. Taz could see the plaque fully now, some two feet wide, octagonal like the room. Across the top, large embossed letters spelled out the word ASCENSION. Beneath the title, smaller print listed senior officers and some flowery quote about new horizons.

Ridgeway shook his head slowly, hands braced on either hip. Merlin leaned in and muttered "You gotta be fuckin' kidding me."

Taz waited for a moment, expecting some great shock of awareness to fall upon him. He scanned the plaque again but drew only a blank. "Uh, not trying to be a total nog here," Taz interjected, "but what's the big bloody deal?"

Merlin looked up abruptly, "You're kidding, right?"

Taz folded his arms across his chest. "No, why should I?"

Merlin reached out and tapped the nameplate as if for emphasis. "The Ascension? One of the biggest disasters in spaceflight history?"

A tickle of memory burned in Taz' mind, followed by an even greater sense of irritation. "Oh what, the bloody ghost stories they tell to scare witless cadets? I'd sooner believe in the Gravity Faery."

"Oh she was real all right. The somber voice from behind startled the hell out of Taz and he spun around. Stitch stood framed in the breached wall, backlit in wavering shades of blue. The medic nodded to Ridgeway as he approached. Stepping into the light, Stitch reached out with one hand, pausing briefly before he touched the polished metal surface. He exhaled forcefully as if he had been holding his breath, then looked at Taz.

"She was a colony ship back in the day, biggest one we ever built. Crew alone ran four thousand, with some ten thousand colonists. She had terraformers, manufacturing, heavy construction, the works."

"Some of the top scientists of the day as well," Merlin chipped in, "engineers, geneticists, real cutting-edgers."

"We are talking about the same bloody brainiacs who blew their own bums to bits, right?"

Stitch shrugged, then looked back at the plaque. "That was the official line. Sensors picked up a huge emag event at the launch point. Rescue ships hauled ass out there but all they found were pieces of wreckage floating in space. Just scraps, not enough to prove what happened or where the rest went."

"Went? It bloody well got atomized."

"Maybe not," Merlin's voice had become energetic, "at least it sure doesn't look like it now. We read about it back in Marine Engineering, you know, study what went wrong so you don't make the same mistakes. Most of the theories ran around the drive system. Conventional wisdom always said that it failed to maintain a stable warp bubble and just imploded in its own little black hole. But this," he placed his own palm on the plaque, "this changes everything. Geez, you think about every wild theory that got floated out, unstable wormhole, temporal rifts. He turned, holding up both hands. "Hell, this could re-write everything we know about physics."
"You're missing something," Monster interjected. "That accident happened what, maybe a hundred and fifty-some years ago? You said yourself that this thing's been down here a lot longer than that. And how'd the Rimmers get a hold of it?"

"I'm not sure they did, Gunny." Merlin gazed down at the plaque once again. "I'm beginning to think the Rimmers didn't even knew it was here."

"Come again?" Ridgeway prodded.

Merlin took a deep breath, hesitant only for a moment. "What if one of those crazy theories was right? Imagine something like a brief wormhole or a rift in space-time."

Four impassive facemasks stared in silence.

"Oh shit," Merlin groused under his breath, "didn't anybody go to science class?" Before anyone could answer, Merlin held up his hand. "OK, look, simplified physics. We're all good with three dimensions, length, width and height, right?" He continued amid a series of nods. "Right, so time, duration, whatever you want to call it, that's a fourth dimension. We can travel in any direction through the first three, and only one way through the fourth."

"A rift." Merlin held up both hands. "You tear a hole in space and for lack of a better explanation, you can fall through that hole here," he wriggled the fingers of his left hand, "and blink, you end up over here." The right hand mirrored the gesture.

"Nice trick," Monster muttered, "but how do you steer?"

"That's just it. So far this stuff is all theory. Nobody knows what would actually happen. According to a number of theories, you could end up not only any place... but at any time."

"What, like pop out in the middle of the sun?" Monster's tone conveyed the obvious disdain for such an outcome.

"Or the middle of a planet," Merlin stated firmly. "That explains the stalactites-- they didn't grow through the ship, the ship appeared in the middle of them."

Oh crikey, Taz sighed and shifted his weight. Scientific mumbo-jumbo gave him a headache and he was relieved when Ridgeway cut through the boring ramble.

The Major's voice was sharp as he turned to Stitch. "Why aren't you in Sickbay with Jenner?"

"I told you this morning I was gonna scout around for any med supplies that might have been overlooked. I left Jenner..."

Any relief Taz might have felt evaporated as Stitch turned to face him, an index finger rapping his breastplate.

"with you."

CHAPTER 25

Darcy stood in the Sickbay door and stared at the carnage. A section of the left wall was missing, revealing a maintenance corridor beyond. The ceiling was ravaged as well, an elliptical hole torn into the room overhead. The sniper studied the edges of the damage. It looked as though someone had carved the ceiling and walls with a hot knife. A downward smear of the ripped metal marked the direction of the blow.

That's some big-assed knife, Darcy mulled. The slab of missing wall measured an easy three feet in thickness; the mangled ceiling had been even thicker.

These factors made the flattened smear on the floor all the more difficult to understand. While the rough oval footprint encircled the mangled wall and ceiling, the volume of crap on the floor could not have been five percent of what had fallen from above.

She looked down carefully. The layer of debris was compressed into the floor itself. She could see no sign of heavy metal having been dragged from the room, no scrapes in the smooth floor outside of the damaged area. A huge hydraulic press might just as well have slammed down on the floor above, crushing everything beneath it.

Amid the slick of dull greys and shiny silvers, a splatter of red glistened vividly at one edge of the impacted floor.

The blood trail curved away from the damage and angled out the door.

Fresh, Darcy noted, her boot sweeping the nearest droplet into a crescent streak. Whoever it was couldn't have gone far.

The hiss of a turbolift preceded the sound of boots rushing up the hallway. Darcy reached across the doorway and grabbed the opposing frame to block the five Marines who rounded the corner. A flurry of curses filled the air.

Ducking under Darcy's arm, Ridgeway took one measured step into the room. His helmet tracked slowly across the damage.

Darcy knew what would be going through his mind. Explosives would be the first assumption, discarded immediately on the lack of scorch marks or frag damage. Heavy equipment would be next on the list, something capable of pounding a section of ceiling and wall down into the floor.

Not pounded, she now understood. Pulled.
"What the hell happened here Darce?"
She casually pulled the rifle to her shoulder, the railgun aimed over the center of the damaged ellipse. "Watch."
Before anyone could yell the gun roared and a heavy bullet streaked from the muzzle on a razor-straight tail of ionized air. Straight for several feet at least, when it crossed into the damaged zone and hooked down like a rock and slammed into the floor. Not a fragment of spalled metal splattered from the impact.
"I'm not the math whiz," Darcy said dryly. "What do you figure Merl, twenty, maybe twenty-five G's?"
Merlin responded with a long, low whistle as he slowly edged around the right side of the room. He paused at half a chair that lay next to a smear of grey plastic and slivery chrome flattened into the floor. With a short snapping kick he launched the remains of the chair into the ellipse. As it crossed the edge, it crumpled into the floor, splattering flat as though stamped with incalculable weight. He exhaled softly as he drew out the single word. "Shit."
"Yeah, no kidding," Darcy quipped, her tone laced with sarcasm. "Y'think maybe when you chopped through all those safeties that you mighta cut the ones that regulate the artificial gravity coils in the floor?"
Merlin's fingers tapped along his thigh. "Guess so, but I wasn't expecting AG to be an issue." He moved along the right wall and slid under a console to the open panel where he rummaged through the wires. Fishing out a heavy cable, Merlin wrapped a loop around either hand and yanked. The cable snapped with a brilliant arc. "That ought to do it."
Darcy looked at the room and noted no visible difference. "Fine, you walk in there."
Ridgeway's head snapped around and fixed on her for a long moment before he grabbed another chair and tossed it into the zone. It bounced along the pebbled floor until it banged into the far wall.
"OK, but how do we know it's going to stay off?" Making an effort to lose the attitude, Darcy posed the question with a flat sincerity.
"Shit LT, I don't know how it came on in the first place." Merlin pulled the two ends of wire farther apart, wrapping one in a wadded cocoon of black tape. "I'll make sure the power here is squared away, but I don't have a damned idea why half the shit on this boat is doing what it's doing. It's like it has a mind of its own."
"Maybe the bloody Rimmer done it." Taz moved abruptly into the room, swinging wide of the damaged floor. "Set it like a bloody trap." The Aussie's CAR was tight to his chest as he swept along the wall in an aggressive forward hunch.
"Our boy isn't here." Darcy watched Taz stop dead in his tracks as she pointed to the stains on the floor. "He's hurt, but he's mobile."
Monster stooped and gathered a handful of empty wrappers from the floor. "Looks like our food went with him."
"Dammit, the sonofabitch rifled med as well. Bloodpaks are gone, some other shit too." Stitch fell silent as he rummaged through the plastic bin that had become their impromptu warehouse for medical supplies. A silence fell over the room. No food, practically no first aid and now a confirmed hostile wandering loose. Jenner had graduated from a pathetic pain in the ass to an overt threat.
Darcy turned silently and followed the blood trail with a hunter's eye.
Left at the door. A crescent of red spots swept up the right wall. Right arm, she concluded, swinging as he turned the corner. The irregular splatter width spoke of arterial spray, pulsing with every beat of his pounding heart. She smiled grimly as she noted the width of the pattern. Nasty cut, he won't get far.
The sniper moved slowly down the corridor, projecting herself into the wavering trace that marked Jenner's escape. He'd swung left for a couple paces, then stumbled back to the right, banging into the wall. She ran her fingertips across the wide smear that marked the collision.
Fear, pain, left hand trying to staunch the hot liquid that bubbled from the wound. Not the misshapen stump of a frostbitten limb but a complete hand, corded, misshapen fingers that gripped fiercely. Had to get to the sphere. They'd find him there, take care of him. Take him home--
"Darcy!"
The sniper's eyes blinked rapidly. Ridgeway stood in the hallway behind her, his voice sharp.
"Sorry Major," she muttered. The vivid image dissolved as she turned back towards Sickbay.
Ridgeway planted himself in her path and folded his arms across his chest. "You coming apart on me Darcy?"
Fair question. She'd been wondering the same thing ever since her unwanted daydreams started playing in her head in high-definition. But something about the visions seemed inescapably real, not like some lunatic hallucination. Her brow furrowed behind her mask. Let's hope not anyway.
"I'm OK," she gave the assurance with all the confidence she could muster. "I know it seems like I've had a couple of, I dunno, moments, but I think there's something to it." She hesitated, chewing her lower lip. Then it spilled out.
"Look, I think I'm wired into this guy. I don't know how or why but I'm getting a read on him. He's on his way to meet up with..." she shook her head, "with somebody who can take him home."
Darcy quickly raised her open hands. "Don't ask me to explain it, but I think I can find him."
Ridgeway stood motionless, regarding her for a long moment. "You know how this sounds."
Darcy sighed heavily, the edge in her tone resurfacing. "Of course I know how it sounds Major, I may be seeing things but I'm not stupid. You're worried you've got a looney-toon with a railgun on your hands. Should you pack me off to a psych ward? Shit, maybe so, but we don't have a psych ward or very much else right now. What we do have is something out there," she jabbed a finger aft, "something more than one fucked-up Rimmer. And whatever they are, they're coming."
She leaned forward, her voice now icy. "It's your call Major, but I swear to God we're gonna need every gun we've got, and we're running out of time."

CHAPTER 26

Ridgeway's eyes moved constantly as he advanced through the steady downpour. The AG wasn't the only thing that had brought itself back online, a fact he noted with a frown. Environmental control was fighting to bring temperatures up all across the ship, slowly transforming tons of ice into a relentless rain. Erratic patter in a dense haze played hell with motion sensors.
A thread of neon danced along the sheen of a narrow puddle as voltage crackled from a cluster of torn cables. Grumbling under his breath, Ridgeway stepped over the ambient hazard, motioning to the next Marine in line.

One more down, only a million or so left to go.

On the hunt now, the Marines ran a rolling overwatch that struck a lethal balance between speed and security. At each set of doors the first two would split, weapons swinging out as the others slid between them. When the group had moved fully past, the now rearmost two would merge once again into the back of the stack. The cycle kept eyes and guns aligned in every direction.
Discounting bulkheads, the corridor spanned nearly six meters from wall to wall, giving the Marines a little extra room to maneuver. Ridgeway ducked under a low-hanging section of ceiling and noted that any advantage could be quickly degraded by the endless piles of debris. Structural damage grew more pronounced as they traveled aft. Huge components sat crumpled where they had long ago crashed down through the ceiling; others jutted up through the floor.

With ingrained precision, Ridgeway maintained a knees-bent duck walk that allowed his torso to glide forward without bobbing. A level shooting platform meant greater first-shot accuracy; the shot that made all the difference in a close-quarter battle. Monster paced him on the left, his stride a bold lumber.

Ridgeway failed to suppress a momentary smile. 'First-round' was a meaningless term to a Gatling gun.
The grin vanished as Ridgeway's left fist snapped up to shoulder height, freezing the Marines in place. The corridor ended just ahead at a wide set of double doors. Judging from their thickness, Ridgeway made them to be airlock doors-- heavy sealers used to divide the ship into separate airtight compartments in the event of a hull breach. They would be tough, possibly driven by pneumatic rams that could slam them shut in a heartbeat.

With the way things are fixing themselves around here, Ridgeway thought ruefully, that might be worth remembering.
The left of the two doors was badly warped and sat askew in the track, creating a wedge-shaped gap that extended from the floor to the top of the high doorframe. Through the triangular opening Ridgeway could see blue-white strobes in the darkness beyond.
Easing towards the barrier, Ridgeway held the CAR at arm's length and allowed the weapon's electronic sight to peek between the doors. Intense thermal and EM signatures danced erratically. Nothing registered as biological, a meager result but likely as good as Ridgeway could expect.
"Pretty torn up." A wary edge tainted Monster's understatement.
Ridgeway nodded slowly, listening to the hiss of a scalding gas leak that turned infrared imaging into a haze. "You could park a tank in that mess and not see it."
A clammy tingle crawled up Ridgeway's spine; the wedge-shaped gap threatened to act as a deadly bottleneck if a hostile lay hidden beyond. He scanned the damaged doors, assessing their integrity.
"Something's leaking in there, might be a flammable. We can't risk blowing the door." Ridgeway jerked a thumb towards his own chest. "Knock Knock, on me."

Monster acknowledged the order by wordlessly firing a combination of hand-signals down the line. Ridgeway watched the Marines flex outward from their positions, each dropping low against the walls to take advantage of available cover. Weapons swung to bear, and leveled at the bent door.
He sucked in a deep breath and counted off quietly. "On three, two, one."
Ridgeway burst forward, closing on the barrier in three strides. He planted hard and rotated his hip, driving his foot through the tight arc of a powerful back kick. The armored boot struck the damaged door like a battering ram. The
topmost guides split away and the door groaned as it toppled into the room beyond. Ridgeway threw himself flat to clear the line of fire as the heavy door slammed into the floor with a crash.

Hugging the floor, Ridgeway counted a full three seconds without the sound of rampant gunfire blistering over his shoulders. He lifted his head and took an unobstructed look at the exposed corridor, dimly aware of his jaw going slack.

The long, wide hall corkscREWed axially as though long ago grasped at both ends and torqued by a giant. Wall panels had crumpled like thick sheets of aluminum foil. Less than ten meters beyond the now-open doorway, a massive girder stuck up through the floor at a severe angle. The beam sat at the leading edge of a catastrophic swath cut through the floor and far wall. Stunned curses blended behind him.

Ridgeway's gaze followed the girder all the way to the ceiling. Torn apart at the seams, the disemboweled overhead plane hemorrhaged a torrent of cable and equipment. Electricity crackled throughout, raining sparks from a hundred locations. The hiss of pressurized gas whistled clearly now from somewhere deep in the wreckage. A thick haze hung in the air, steam mixed with the smoke of charred plastics. Water dripped from every surface.

"Well this sure as hell wasn't on the bloody tourist guide."

Ridgeway ignored the comment, his brow knit as he began the impossible task of picking a route through the chaos. He turned to the sniper. "C'mon Darce, this guy couldn't have made it through this shit." Ridgeway gestured towards the helical tube of wreckage.

Darcy stood quietly as her head ticked left and right in short increments. Her hand rose to the side of her helmet, palm pressed firmly as her fingers splayed out over the curved upper dome. She sighed and looked back in the direction they had come, then forward once more. "'I'm tellin' you Major, he's trying to get to something, a sphere..." she jabbed a finger toward the girder, "and it's that way."

Ridgeway stared at Darcy for a long moment, trying to make up his mind how much stock he could afford to put in her newly-found psychic powers. She had described several items along the path that once discovered had proved undeniably accurate, enough to convince Ridgeway that some connection existed. His concern was the level of confidence he could place on a nebulous link between Darcy and a suddenly mobile Rimmer. If she was somehow being fed bad data, the Marines could be marching into a trap.

He glanced forward, hard pressed to imagine a better environment for an ambush. The floor buckled upward and rolled to the right before it dumped into the gaping wound left by the girder. That very destructive piece of steel, sixty to eighty tons by best guess, sat squarely in their path. It bisected the corridor at a forty-degree angle, rising from the rightmost floor edge and extending through the ceiling high and left. A knotted shawl of cable draped along its length like seaweed from the prow of a shipwreck.

"I'm sure of it Major."

Ridgeway grunted. He didn't like the choice but saw no other. "I'll take point. You keep everyone tight here, watch your six." His faceplate swiveled to hers as a curled index finger tapped his own temple. "You get anything, anything at all, you let me know."

Darcy nodded, extending her fist. Ridgeway rapped it solidly, then stepped through the open door. The floor groaned uneasily beneath his weight.

Ducking under a loop of cable, Ridgeway edged forward towards the jagged rip in the floor. Ahead and to the left he could see into the next room where the fissure continued fully across and beyond. The ceiling had been badly warped where the rising girder passed through it and into levels above.

Darcy's voice floated across the comm, "That took a helluva push."

Ridgeway glanced back to see the sniper stretched prone atop a pile of wreckage where the unblinking orb of a riflescope tracked his every move. The rifle represented the only support he could expect to safely thread the maze in the event of a sudden threat. The company brought a shred of comfort to a very uncomfortable world. "Yeah," he replied as he stepped over a buckled floor plate and braced his right foot against a section of exposed bulkhead. "This damage isn't like anything I've ever seen." He leaned over a folded steel rod roughly the diameter of his arm. "I can't find any trace of scorching."

"Roger that," Darcy concurred. "I've got no explosive signature at all, no energy weapon residue. It's like something with really big hands just grabbed the boat and squeezed."

Ridgeway leaned on a twisted crossbrace as he clambered up onto the girder. A crevasse yawned below that passed through a couple of decks. He leaned forward to assess the depth.

Shit, that's some hole. The thought had barely crossed his mind when the duct crumpled with a short high-pitched squeal. Ridgeway pitched forward as a dark blur whistled up from below.

"Duck!" Darcy's warning cut sharply through the noise.

Ridgeway dropped to his knee as a snakelike tendril whipped over his skull, vomiting a cloud of white vapor. The Marine swung fiercely with the back of his fist but struck only air. His boot lost traction and he skidded hard on the
metal beam. Off balance, Ridgeway's gauntlet flashed again and snapped on the bullwhip trace as it darted into range. Braided steel crushed flat in his grip, stifling the release of pneumatic gas. Clutching the girder fiercely with his free hand, Ridgeway looked at the hose in his grasp. A silky voice chuckled in his ear. "Good thing it wasn't a snake."

"Har har," he replied slowly as he knotted the severed line. "I don't suppose you have anything useful to add?"

"Not unless you plan on wrestling something bigger than an air hose," Darcy chided. "If you do, you let me know."

Wobbling slightly, Ridgeway paused before rising once more to a low kneel. "Good to know you're backing me up."

"Always there for ya."

Ridgeway smiled in spite of himself as he shifted back to the immediate problem. A gap of some seven meters separated him from the far side of the metal canyon. Given the extent of the damage, he figured he'd need to cover another meter or two to reach solid floor.

Nine meters, Ridgeway considered, a tough jump from a narrow perch, but not impossible. The twisted corridor beyond did not appear to harbor additional fissures like the one below him. Ridgeway's mind played out the crossing; a long dive into a forward roll would carry him beyond the bulwark of wreckage and back onto solid deck.

Hunkering down, Ridgeway coiled his body, hands clamped on the edge of the girder. Loose cables hung off to the left along the rise of the beam, tangled amid the tundra of floor plates and heavy grid panels. To the right, the gap beckoned.

Ridgeway's hands snapped open, his legs driving hard as Darcy's voice barked "Hold it!"

The words came too late as Ridgeway's powerful legs pistoned out, driving his armored form across the divide. He sailed over the mangled floor, over the huge elliptical coil torn from it's moorings. The gravitic coil for the floor ahead.

In mid-leap the Marine felt a sickening lurch of equilibrium as the direction of gravity shifted unexpectedly. His trajectory changed just as abruptly. Body twisting, he slammed shoulder-first off the side wall and down into the crevasse. Without so much as a curse, Dan Ridgeway tumbled out of sight in a blur of snapping cables and banging metal.

CHAPTER 27

Footsteps crossed the metal floor above Jenner's head, the slow tread of a predator. Though he longed to breathe, he didn't dare, and his lungs screamed for the air just beyond his clenched teeth. Instead he inched backward, wedging his body even further beneath the angled girder.

Jenner's belly growled, the sound of a disgruntled animal that moaned fitfully. He clutched at his gut, hoping to stifle the gastric tremor. Overhead, the footsteps suddenly paused.

ohshit. ohshit. ohshit.

A vibration ran down the girder, noticed only because his spine was plastered against the cold metal surface. One step, followed by a second. Someone was climbing onto the beam just a few feet overhead. A tremor radiated from Jenner's core and he bit down on his new lip, eyes screwed shut as a third footfall carried down the beam's length. He almost cried out when the squeal of friction matched the sudden hiss of venting gas. Something heavy banged into the girder. Hidden in the darkness Jenner could feel the flurry of motion before the angry hiss sputtered into silence. Only then did he hear the voice, faint and muffled. Too deep for the girl, not deep enough for Monster. Ridgeway maybe, not that it mattered. Whoever found him, Jenner was sure he'd end up dead all the same.

At least it wouldn't hurt, he noted with resignation. Not much of anything seemed to hurt anymore. Jenner glanced down at the ragged flap of meat stretched across his right forearm. Only a few hours had elapsed since the Sickbay ceiling collapsed without warning. A piece of falling metal had cut his arm open to the bone. Now it didn't even bleed.

Jenner's leg pressed against the warmth of a thick insulated cable. Reflexively edging toward the heat, Jenner felt the onset of sluggishness. He huddled quietly and drew his arms tight across his chest. Warmth was important, somehow it helped the healing. More a dawning conviction than a fact he could state with certainty, Jenner chalked the notion up as one of the many new instincts he had developed lately.

Maybe the voices told me, Jenner thought dully. Certain at first that the sounds in his head marked the erosion of sanity, Jenner had since come to accept the guttural noises as real. Voices, he concluded, growing louder. They spoke in no discernible language, yet Jenner found himself able to divine their meaning with increasing clarity. For one thing they were hungry, ravenously so. They were also very, very angry.

Jenner's head bobbed and his eyelids drooped. Dim images flickered unbidden into his mind, visions blurred beneath the weight of time. He remembered the ship long ago, brightly lit, people crowding her corridors. He could recall the
terrible violence that left her a crushed and twisted wreck. The darkness. The cold. The screams. Struggling to think clearly, he wondered if this was all not just some horrible dream from which he would soon awaken. Maybe he was still in that dumpster on Los Gatos, strung out on Rage and having the hallucination of a lifetime. Jenner focused on the pinpoints of ember-glow burning brightly beneath the tattered skin of his right arm. This shit's way too real to have crawled out of my imagination.

He prodded the wound with a fingertip. Very little blood seeped from beneath the clotted seam. Quick little fuckers, Jenner mused, watching the dim incandescence of a microscopic repair crew hard at work. The question of raw material seemed less a sticking point since his second run on the table. Like the syntheskin bandage, patches of his shirt had been... eaten? Absorbed at least, and put to use in the repair process. A strip of living skin on his arm carried the shirt's pattern and color, even its fabric feel. Tracking down the arm, Jenner looked at the new fingers that extended from his hand. He didn't need the medic to tell him that they weren't made of normal flesh and bone. Smears of plastic and fiber melded seamlessly with skin and nail. Apparently the bugs in his system had shed any reluctance about non-human materials. Jenner quietly imagined himself one day as a shambling heap of scrap plastics and textile fibers. The image drove a chill up his spine.

A train-wreck of sound erupted from above, plummeting quickly. Before Jenner could grasp the origin, it passed by, a grey blur that crashed down into the decks below. Shouts and the heavy tread of rushing boots stormed in, making no pretense of stealth. The activity centered on whatever, or more likely whoever, just fell through the torn floor. Adrenaline surged in Jenner's veins. Under the concealing blanket of chaos he slithered forward and pulled himself quickly into an open crawlspace. Heading to starboard, he scrabbled through the wreckage, gathering speed as he moved.

Just gotta dodge the Marines a little longer, he thought with a sardonic smile. The others are almost here.

CHAPTER 28

"Major! You all right?" the voice echoed down the metal crevasse. "Looks like you hit a gap in the AG."

"No shit." Ridgeway cursed under his breath as he twisted his body in a hammock of rubber-clad cables. With every motion, water dripped in shifting streams. A loud pop cut the air just above his head and sparks showered down through the darkness like dying fireflies.

Caught your ass by surprise, didn't it? Ridgeway's lip pulled back in a sneer of self-reproach. In space, hitting an AG void would have extended his leap until he hit a wall or another source of gravity. But when the ship's AG failed here, the planet's gravity took over. Ridgeway had felt the sudden shift in mid-jump when the invisible force pulled his body abruptly off-course. The rest was just inertia; six hundred pounds of armored Marine didn't stop on a dime. Sheer luck alone kept him from plowing into something lethal. As he tumbled down the gaping fissure, Ridgeway ping-ponged off the walls like a crash test dummy. Hitting an open source of high voltage could have ruined his day. Then again, he reminded himself, hitting nothing at all could have been worse. Punching down through the ceiling of the Lobby would have really sucked. Ridgeway's brief thought took on a grimly prophetic air when he realized that he had no real idea what, if anything, was beneath him.

Another violent pop of electricity flashed somewhere to Ridgeway's left. White-orange sparks skipped like burning pachinko balls through the tangle of wires.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm moving," Ridgeway snarled as he pushed through a veil of cables. He peered out from the web and realized that he hung inverted, perhaps five meters above a curved metal ledge. The room beyond was too large to estimate from his current position.

With a powerful heave Ridgeway expanded the gap between the cables. A metal junction box, roughly the size of his helmet, tumbled free from the knotted mass. It dropped straight to the floor below with a loud bang, bounding once before it came to rest.

"Looks like the AG is all right down here," Ridgeway reported dryly, grunting as he twisted his upper body against the confining loops. Still another crack of voltage jumped just to the right of his head, the arc a vivid blue-white in color.

OK. That's enough of this shit.

With his left hand, Ridgeway grabbed a fistful of thick, rubbery cable. Drawing right hand to his chest the Marine snapped out a climbing blade and swiped viciously. The strands parted in a blur and Ridgeway felt himself slide free. His firm grasp arrested his upper body's descent and allowed his feet to swing beneath him. In a fluid motion, Ridgeway opened his left hand and dropped into a cautious kneel on the balcony floor below.

With a harsh electric crunk, hundreds of lights came on as one. Ridgeway's right hand instinctively swept back where his fingers closed on a familiar grip. The carbine swung up in his grasp as he quickly backed against the
nearest wall.  "You coming back up, Major?"
"Negative," Ridgeway's voice held an odd note of awe. "We've got something here."
But I'll be damned if I know what the hell it is.
The walls of the room formed the curved inner surface of a huge sphere, easily a hundred meters in diameter. Ridgeway stood on the topmost of several balconies that wrapped fully around the room. The railed ledges, three in all, were evenly spaced along the vertical height. Much of the sweeping wall was composed of hexagonal plates, each with what appeared to be a small window set in its center. Judging from the wide hinges and heavy lock-handles, the plates were pressure-seal doors. A rectangular LCD panel was affixed above each door, some glowing brightly while others flickered or remained dark. A number of the doors hung open and many oozed a soft white vapor that crept down the sphere's inner surface with ethereal deliberation.
In the middle of the room, a pair of heavy rails ran up to the centerline, pole to pole on the sphere. Ridgeway could see streaks of lubricant gleaming black against the steally silver. The rails passed through a heavy crane parked near the roof. The orange and black boom ended in an articulated forklift of some sort, but the appendage sported three heavy forklift blades instead of the traditional two. The opposing boom carried a sizable counterweight, presumably to balance the crane-arm at full extension. A coil of thick pneumatic line hung from the ceiling and looped lazily into the crane's motor housing.
Reversing direction, Ridgeway followed the lift rails all the way down to the floor. From his vantage point, the bottom of the sphere was a Sargasso of tangled wires thick enough to daunt the most aspiring engineer. Vapor seeping down the walls coalesced amid the cables, adding to the oceanic illusion. An island rose from this sea, a mass of electronics roughly ten meters in diameter. CRT screens grew like barnacles in haphazard clusters, plastered atop the dead parts of older equipment. Even here, cables snaked through every gap, black rubber eels in an artificial reef. Ridgeway guessed that parts of the haphazard construct were held together with little more than baling wire and duct tape.
"Merlin's just gonna love this," Ridgeway drawled, gazing at the abstract sculpture of electronics. As if invoking an ancient spirit by speaking its name, a resounding metal clang marked Merlin's arrival. "Damn," the engineer grumbled absent-mindedly as he rose to his feet, "that's one hell of a way to--" He paused, voice dropping in tone as he scanned the sphere. "What the hell is this?"
"Damn good question," Ridgeway replied casually, still looking down at the floor far below. "I'm counting on you to figure it out."
Ridgeway pointed down to the hummock of machinery rising from the fog. "The Island," he stated firmly, indicating the new callsign. As he uttered the words, a matching reference appeared on the TAC. "Darcy thinks someone is inbound to evac the Rimmer from someplace called the sphere. Unless there's two of these, I'd say this is a good candidate. If they have a way in, we have a way out."
He turned to Merlin. "The Island looks like a command center of some sort. We need eyes Merlin, as many as we can get. These bastards may try to slip in and out on us. If they pull it off, we're screwed."
A much larger bang marked Monster's none-too-delicate arrival. Stitch and Taz followed suit and spaced out along the balcony. Noting a distinct absence, Ridgeway turned to Monster. "Where's Darcy?"
"Perimeter sweep," he replied, drawing a short circle in the air with his left hand. "Got one of her voodoo feelings and went to check it out."
A curse formed, then faded, on Ridgeway's lips. He thought for a moment of calling her back, reconsidered, then dismissed the thought entirely. Unable to comprehend her expanded senses, he had little choice but to trust her judgment. Time to work with what he did understand.
He stabbed a finger at each of the balconies in descending order. "Three, Two and One. I want Stitch up here on Three holding high ground, Taz at the far side on Two. Merlin has the Island. Almost absently rapping Monster's chest with the back of an armored fist, Ridgeway's voice softened. "You stick with Merlin and watch his back. If something is out there, anything, I need to know yesterday."
"We're already on it," Monster barked with a sharp nod. He spun on his heels and fired a flurry of commands as the Marines scattered around the sphere's inner surface. Ridgeway took heart in Monster's relentless enthusiasm as the broad-shouldered figure slid Navy-style down a long metal ladder to the floor. It would take the very best that every Marine had, and a damn bit of luck besides, to pull their asses out of this. Ridgeway knew that he'd get their best. The luck worried him.
Coming full circle on his mental checklist, Ridgeway tapped a ComLink channel. "Darcy, how're we doing?" A long delay followed. "Darcy, come in."
Only a dull silence hung in reply. Ridgeway repeated the attempt across the team-wide and emergency channels to
no avail. The sniper was missing from the TAC as well. Out of range, he reasoned, or behind some obstruction that blocked their transmissions.

While he was used to Darcy operating on her own, even a brief breakdown in comm gave rise to concern under these conditions. Ridgeway made a mental note of the time and set yet another stopwatch running in the back of his mind.

Drive system overload. Starvation. Darcy coming undone. Running into things that lived in frozen darkness. With a degree of morbid curiosity he wondered which timer would run out first.

Pushing the question from his mind, Ridgeway set out on a clockwise lap of Tier Three. He fired a quick wave to Stitch who matched his move on the far side of the same level. The medic nodded briefly in reply as the muzzle of the MP17 carved a slow, mechanical arc across the tiers below.

Due to it's position near the top of the sphere, Three was the smallest of the tiers. Ridgeway quickly walked the full circuit, examining the walls as he moved. Power-handlers and battery back-ups occupied most of the space at this level. Green indicator lights pulsed all around the tier, silent testament to the restoration of power.

"Looks like the backups are maxed on Three," Ridgeway noted aloud, sharing his observations on a teamwide channel. He opened a limited visual feed that could be viewed by the others in what amounted to a small window floating in their line of vision. The technique allowed them to take part in his search while they carried out their own duties. Often, a second or third pair of eyes would catch a detail missed by the first. Ridgeway looked at another set of gauges, fully recharged as the first. "This place must have been one of the first things to come back online."

"You got that right Majah," Taz muttered in response. "The short-term reserves on these cryotubes are juiced up as well. Assuming they were dead to begin with, that shoulda taken some thirty-eight hours at le-- Oh, buggar!"

On reflex, Ridgeway pivoted towards the sudden shout as Stitch leaned over the rail, subgun angled down aggressively. Planted solidly in the clutter of the Island, Monster stood back-to-back with Merlin as the Gatling swung up to cover the balcony above.

Ridgeway bolted to a wall-hugging staircase and slid the rails on heels and palms. He hit Two on the move, his CAR at high-ready by the time he got to Taz. "What have you got?"

Taz kept his back to the balcony rail. The barrel of his own CAR pointed at a mangled cylinder door. Disgust oozed from the Aussie's voice as he said, "See for yourself."

Ridgeway followed the line of the weapon to a door that looked to have been pried open with the jaws of life. The number 2437 remained boldly legible on the damaged plate. Along the door's perimeter a thick pressure gasket hung limp and rotted. Ridgeway could see that the thick glass viewport was shattered. Crumbled fragments glittered on the deck like dusty gemstones in a smear of reddish black.

The coffin-sized compartment was unmistakable. CryoTube. The tech was older, but fundamentally Ridgeway stood before the same kind of freezer the Marines occupied on long voyages.

But if these are cryos, Ridgeway puzzled, there should be med gear, thermal showers, stuff to offset cryogenic sickness. He leaned to his left and glanced down at the Island, then up at the room-traversing crane with its three-bladed lift. Turning back to the mangled door, Ridgeway ran his fingers across one of the slots cut through every other side of the steel hexagon. A matching set of slots framed the tube itself, doubtlessly running the full length of the unit.

"Removable freezers." Ridgeway spilled the conclusion mechanically. "Insertion and extraction took place down on the Island. Pull a tube completely out of the wall and handle inserts and extractions down below." Given a large volume of passengers, the idea had merit. Slower to be sure, but each sleeper could be handled with the utmost care. Ridgeway gazed at the bloodstained wall. Whoever slept in tube 2437 had not been removed with care. The door had been literally ripped from its hinges. Dark bits reminiscent of leather or beef jerkey hung from the jagged metal edges.

Not leather, he realized, strips of flesh. Meat scraped off when some poor soul had been dragged out through the halff-open door.

An irregular piece of curved shell lay on the floor among the bits of broken glass. Badly stained, Ridgeway almost missed it. He knelt and carefully rocked the fragment to break it free from the crusted floor.

The smooth outer surface was covered with a random crosshatch of scratches. In contrast, the inner surface was deeply furrowed, the uneven ridges spread out in a leafy pattern. The frayed edges of the fragment looked to have been worked over with a bench grinder.

"Looks like a piece of ceramic, a bowl maybe." Ridgeway concluded, "Somebody took a dremel to it and scraped it all to hell."

"It's not a bowl, it's a plate from somebody's skull." Even without the flattening effect of ComLink transmission, Stitch's assessment came through with the detached efficiency of someone describing a carburetor. "Probably parietal, left side, unless I miss my guess."
With a start, Ridgeway realized that he had left his video feed in transmit mode. He held the curved fragment steady between his thumb and index finger. "Take another look Stitch. Whatever it is, it sure isn't bone."
"I said it's a piece of somebody's skull Major, I never said it was original equipment." The medic's tone remained clinical. "It's an artificial plate, probably some kind of biopolycarbonate. See the branching indents along the inner surface?"
Ridgeway flipped the piece and looked at the pattern of twisting organic depressions. "Yeah, I see 'em."
"They're called meningeal grooves. They make room for the blood vessels that run along the outer surface of the brain. Cranial reconstruction has come a long way from the days of metal plates. For a while the big thing was hydroxyapatite, a combination of calcium phosphates. It's a major component of human bone and got around some of the rejection problems. Ultimately though, we gave that up in favor of laser-cured polymer extrusions manufactured right off a 3D scan of the patient's head. That's what you're holding now."
Ridgeway looked closely at the damaged fragment as Stitch continued. "They don't machine those things at all. Each one is built up, a particle at a time, using the 3D model as a template. By the time it comes off the cradle, there's not much to do but sterilize it and drop it into place. That's why the grooves on the inside have such an organic look, they're modeled from an actual scan of the patient's brain."
The oily taste of revulsion began to form in Ridgeway's mouth. "So why is this thing chewed all to hell?"
Stitch grimly confirmed his commander's insight. "I think you hit the nail on the head Major. If I was making a forensic analysis, I'd say that the damage looks consistent with teeth of some kind scraping the meat from the bone."
Taz took another step back, fingers flexing on the forestock of his CAR. "So you're saying that something dragged this poor bastard out of cryo and ate him like a frozen dinner?"
"It sure looks that way." The medic's voice remained stoic, but Ridgeway knew Stitch well enough to recognize the curtness that masked emotion. The evidence suggested a ghastly reality. The helplessness of anyone in cryogenic stasis had long been established as a core taboo, even in times of war. Fucking with somebody on ice just wasn't done.
Ridgeway looked at the scrap in his hand. Gnawing on their frozen brain was way out of bounds.
"Bloody hell Majah, we've gotta frag these fucking bastards."
Drawing a deep breath through clenched teeth, Ridgeway gripped the mangled piece of skull. He turned towards Taz and jabbed the younger Marine in the chest. "The only thing we have to do is get the hell out of here. I don't understand how a ship warps into a planet or what they woke up to when they got here. All I know is it's my job to get five Marines home. My war is with the roof of this cave."
Taz flexed his shoulders once and turned away from the CryoTube and its grisly remains. "Shit Majah, I know. It's just that…"
Ridgeway's prodding hand opened and settled on the young man's shoulder. "I know, I know," he leaned in, his words little more than a forced whisper. "I'd like nothing more than to fry whoever did this." Ridgeway paused as Taz slowly nodded in concurrence. "But right now I've got the lives of five Marines to account for and that's the mission."
The young Marine visibly settled as his CAR rocked once more to a firm port arms. "Rojah that sir." But as armored fingers flexed repeatedly on the pistol grip, Ridgeway could see that Taz was far from comfortable letting the issue end there.
"All right," Ridgeway spoke firmly, his command voice returning, "head to the far side of this tier and stay one-eighty from me. Stitch, you stay ninety degrees off our axis on Three, no bunching up. When I roll, we all roll, got it?"
"On the way," Taz growled as he trotted quickly around the tier. Stitch flashed a thumbs-up and adjusted his own position.
As a cold resolve settled upon him, Ridgeway quietly set the fragment inside the open tube. He turned away from the mangled door and advanced around the ring in a clockwise direction. Stitch and Taz matched him step for step, guns at ready.
Ridgeway moved carefully, scanning the walls with care. Tier Two was darker, the shadows of upper tiers splayed across its walls.
As he walked, Ridgeway could see that literally thousands of CryoTubes made up the wall at the Tier Two level. Tier One looked much the same. Making a quick estimate of tube density per ten meter section of deck, Ridgeway calculated the total at roughly eight thousand cryogenic suspension chambers.
Eight thousand. A ripple of discomfort crept up Ridgeway's spine. How many of the sleeping passengers ended up as undigested bits scattered across the floor?
The likely answer grew all the more obvious as he completed his circuit around the tier. While only one in ten showed signs of forced opening, sections of Tier Two looked like a charnel house. False teeth and glass eyes were
just some of the inedible parts found scattered on bloodstained floor. Small broken crowns gave mute witness to the fact that even teeth had been consumed. A stainless steel hip joint lay beside the gnawed remains of a pacemaker. Ridgeway turned to the rail and breathed deep, trying to fight down the bile that bubbled at the back of his throat. Gone, all gone. An old sense of tragedy clawed at his heart.

Ridgeway had slogged hip-deep in bogs of mud and broken bodies at Chungan Swamp. Soldiers who had signed up for the job, who went into a fight with their heads up and a gun in their hands. His jaw clenched painfully as he looked back at the detritus that littered the floor. But this wasn't combat, and these weren't soldiers.

Something beyond the scale of the tragedy festered in Ridgeway's mind. His imagination grappled with the thought of being torn from the all-numbing cocoon of cryogenic sleep. Just the shock of sudden chamber decompression could prove fatal. He had seen all too well what could happen to a man when his CryoTube came apart. It wasn't pretty.

But with some eight thousand attempts, Ridgeway reasoned, a fair number must have survived extraction. They would have lurched violently into awareness as their minds struggled to reconnect senses with conscious thought.

The sense of hearing was always the first for Ridgeway. His longest stint in cryo had been eighteen months, a year and a half of suspended animation in which he did not age or think or dream. His first memory of retrieval was the dull realization that he was immersed in hyperbaric fluid that suffused his cells with both heat and oxygen. Light followed, flickering blobs of brilliance and shadow that resolved slowly into human forms, familiar faces that smiled and spoke in comforting tones.

His eyes flashed once more to one of the mangled doors. A woman's face stared silently from a small rectangular screen set into the face of the door. Brown hair, hazel eyes, a harmless face that probably went unnoticed in even a small group. Sherry Chalmers, age thirty-seven. PhD in biophysics.

What was the last thing you saw Sherry Chalmers? Ridgeway's gut felt like it would twist its way into his heart. Did you get lucky and just die in the black void of stasis, or did you fight your way back far enough to realize the crunching sound that filled your ears was something chewing on your bones?

"Dammit," Ridgeway spat as he punched the hanging door. Hinges cracked and the heavy metal hexagon fell to the floor with a loud clang. The snap and clatter of Marine weapons echoed from points all around the sphere. Dan Ridgeway could only stare at the empty tube.

Too late for you Chalmers, too late for anybody with the shit luck to have ended up in one of these frozen food lockers.

"Two hours, two centuries, civvies waiting on me are in trouble." He regretted the muttered words as he spoke them, rejecting the illogical self-pity from which they arose. Whatever happened here took place long ago. He could help his Marines here and now, he could get them home.

Still, he growled with quiet savagery, let so much as one of these fuckers show its face... Ridgeway gripped the forestock of the CAR so hard that it creaked. He would show them how armed humans fought.

"Major," Merlin's voice popped over the ComLink. "I think you oughta see this."

"On the way." Ridgeway turned, thankful to be drawn away from the remaining bits of Sherry Chalmers. In a rush he vaulted the rail on Tier Two and clattered down the inwardly curved wall to the tier below. A single makeshift ramp extended from the edge of the sphere to the coastline of the Island. Oversized floor plates had been scavenged from somewhere and placed in drawbridge-fashion across the moat of cables. Judging from the angry hum that resonated up through the fog, the addition was mandatory.

With Gatling poised, Monster stepped aside and allowed Ridgeway to pass. As they brushed shoulder-to-shoulder on the footbridge, the larger Marine's deep baritone muttered in Ridgeway's ear. "The shit just keeps getting weirder."

Great, Ridgeway thought as he acknowledged Monster's comment with only a curt nod.

Turning sideways, Ridgeway shimmied between two monoliths of angle-iron and electronics. Hubs, routers and miles of cable formed a thick web that filled the voids between dozens of video screens in each wide rack.

Merlin sat at what was clearly one of the original consoles, although two complete bridges of additional equipment had been layered on top. From the center of the console, Ridgeway could see fifty, maybe seventy-five monitors. Screens of every description hung crowded along the framework.

Merlin didn't look up from his work. His fingers tapped in a furious blur on the keyboard as he spoke. "Well, we're damn sure at the center of things. Half the ship has been jury-rigged into here. It's like they didn't want to have to leave the room, but your guess is as good as mine as to why. I did figure out one thing though; nobody is running around making repairs on this tub."

The statement struck Ridgeway as non-sequitur. "I don't follow; you said that you didn't--" "Not somebody," Merlin cut in, emphasizing the last syllable, "some thing. Well, more like a few trillion things. Look."
An armored finger pointed to a monitor on the first overhead bridge. It showed a room filled with large air-handlers. Sparks flickered intermittently from an unseen short above one of the turbine-style blowers. The overhead lights stuttered occasionally, but maintained enough light to see the room clearly. Nothing appeared to move.
"Empty right?"
"Looks like it."
"So who's doing the welding?"
"Welding?" Ridgeway's eyes snapped back to the occasional rain of glowing orange dots. The image zoomed in at a stunning rate as Merlin rocked a control switch. "Check this out."
The camera view dove in on the source of incandescence, resolving on a small broken flange.
"Sonofabitch." Ridgeway's tone was suddenly quiet.
"You see 'em, don'tcha?"

Ridgeway squinted at the tiny silver specks that flowed across the metal flange like wet sand. Sparks popped among them. "But I thought--"

Merlin jumped in again, "I know, we all thought the same thing. Medical nanites designed to fix the human body. But we didn't get the half of it. These little suckers can fix anything. Hell every one of these monitors is a different repair in progress."

In the moment of extended silence, Merlin continued. "Think about it Major, it's like they used to say about the pyramids. Given enough manpower, you can build anything. Well, if a million of these suckers can repair a damaged lung, what can a billion do, or a trillion? Shit, medical repair is just one application of the technology."

Ridgeway had his arms around the concept but the theory seemed fraught with holes. "So why wasn't the ship in good repair when we got here?"

Merlin turned and raised his index finger. "Stitch got that one. These things run on pure thermodynamic conversion, heat to energy. So when the ship's engine crapped out and the whole place became a freezer--"
"They went into hibernation." Ridgeway interjected.
"Bingo. And they stayed that way until we turned the heat back on. Things got warmer, and they woke up. The warmer it gets, the more energetic they become."

"Hmph," Ridgeway grunted, his head nodding slowly. "So what's controlling them?"

Merlin slumped and his fingers tapped rapidly as he looked back toward the console. "That's the part I'm trying to figure out. There's gotta be some central control that manages them, prioritizes what they do." He pushed back from the console and shook his head, "But I can't find shit in terms of a memory core. It's like they're thinking for themselves."

Rising slowly from the chair, Ridgeway rolled a stiff shoulder. With the CAR cradled in his left arm, his attention lingered on an abstract point in space. Timetables rolled through his mind as his right hand unconsciously sought familiar purchase on the CAR's pistol grip.

Given a choice, Ridgeway mulled, I'd say screw the bugs, the repairs, all this shit and leave this wreck like we found it. Reality offered a different perspective; they were stuck and had to keep the lights on until something showed him the way to the door. "Any sign of Jenner or an evac team?"

Merlin shook his head. "Nada."

Before Ridgeway could utter the invective that pushed to the front of his mind, Darcy's voice crackled over the ComLink. "Looks like I'm not crazy after all."
"Good to know," he murmured as he stepped away from Merlin. "What have you got?"

"You'll have to see it to believe it." Darcy's voice held an odd edge, her tone vaguely triumphant. A small icon blinked on Ridgeway's TAC, the announcement that Darcy had had queued up a telepresence. Ridgeway initiated the link and stepped into Darcy's world.

In a blur of shifting perspective, Ridgeway found himself in a narrow compartment. He followed what was then his own arm as it pointed to a mangled piece of equipment hanging from the wall. Darcy's voice floated in all around him. "That's no fucking delusion."

Ridgeway's eyes flashed wide behind his faceplate as he looked at the severed arm. Half a dozen heavily-clawed fingers were buried in the composite wall, anchoring the limb in place. With a grunt Darcy pried the fingers loose one at a time. Dark fluids dripped freely as she wrenched the arm from the wall. The sniper's senses pouring into his own brain, Ridgeway could feel the arm's weight as it flopped in her grasp. He felt it twitch as well.
"Shit!" Darcy cursed as the multi-fingered claw snapped convulsively. She dropped the limb on the floor and lurched back, drawing her sidearm in a sudden blur of motion. The front sight hovered on the writhing appendage. Ridgeway could feel her finger draw slack from the trigger, holding just shy of the break-point.
"Sonofabitch isn't dead yet!" Darcy snarled. Judging from the arm's motion, Ridgeway could only concur. He knew the sort of random, post-mortem spasms that a body went through when its head was blown apart. That dance was random and chaotic, a freeform performance triggered by the discharge of whatever nerves were still hardwired to the rest of the body. This was methodical, Ridgeway realized with growing concern. The hand clasped and opened as the wrist rotated through a full arc of motion.

While clearly an arm, Ridgeway had no clear sense if its origin was mechanical or biological. Skeins of what appeared to be living tissue stretched in and around a mechanical construct. The hand itself looked to have been some kind of complex Hurst tool, the kind of device designed to cut victims from badly wrecked vehicles. Crescent claws gleamed in the darkness like slices of a stainless-steel apple.

Ridgeway followed Darcy's front sight as it tracked down to what would be termed an elbow. There the limb ended abruptly. Shredded flesh and torn wires marked the traumatic amputation. Fluids oozed steadily from the mangled stump.

"Son of a bitch." Ridgeway muttered as the arm slowed to a stop. "Damn straight," Darcy huffed, breathing hard. She holstered the pistol slowly, but kept her right hand firmly on the grip. "I built this hide just a few hours ago and left a Claymore here to watch the door." She nudged the severed arm with her toe, "This is what was coming in when the doorbell rang."

"Roger that," Ridgeway said softly, his mind racing. "Do you have any idea where it went?"

She had clearly given that point careful thought. "Whatever the fuck this thing is, it ate a Claymore right in the face. It lost one limb, there's no telling how many other parts came off. If we're lucky, the rest of this thing is chunks spread across the Lobby."

"Can't make that assumption." Ridgeway was firm. "We've got to operate on the basis of at least one wounded and who knows how many others. Do you have any idea which way they went?"

The sudden nausea took Ridgeway by surprise. Telepresence was still an emerging science and the tricks used to transmit perception were sketchy in places. Amid the tremendous mass of data that defined the five basic senses lay an undercurrent of less-understood feelings, that region where memory and emotion blurred what was real and what was imagined. Living as he was in the envelope of Darcy's senses, Ridgeway felt a sudden chill in his guts that he knew was not his own. It crept up from the pit of his stomach and wormed its way into his chest.

His reflex was to pull back, but Ridgeway recognized the sniper's unspoken distress. He breathed slowly and reached out, opening himself more fully to the transmission. As he did, even peripheral sense of his own body diminished. With each second, he melted more and more into the fabric of Darcy Lonigan.

Darcy's eyes had returned to the arm, her focus riveted on one of the wounds. Bright edges of metal curled back from a jagged hole made by one of the Claymores numerous flechettes. Strips of meat and cloudy plastic tubing lay tangled in the chasm. The wound glistened in the darkness as tiny starbursts of orange light played through the sheen of silver sand. The creature was full of nanites, Ridgeway realized with a start. The same shimmering nanites that flowed in Darcy's veins.

Oh my God.

Darcy looked down at her own hand and flexed her fingers slowly, her voice inexplicably soft. "Guess we know why I'm getting a sense for these things, huh." Her gaze swept beyond the tunnel entrance and climbed high to the air ducts that criss-crossed the ceiling. Her voice carried a distant note of urgency. "They're close, real close."

"Get out of there Darcy."

"Not close to me Major." Darcy turned aft, her voice suddenly sharp. "Close to you."

CHAPTER 29

The wall exploded in a thunderclap of tearing steel. Metal screamed as fragments showered the Cryosphere. Ridgeway saw the huge dark shape plow through the wall above Tier Two. A curved metal plate spanned the front of the car-sized mass, the blade's lower lip sawtoothed with triangular spikes. The rest looked like a column of compressed junk without wheels or armament. The mechanical mass hung up on the balcony, bucking madly.

Ridgeway's mind raced as he scrambled to regain his footing. Was it a weapon or just some freakishly large battering ram? If not launched for it's own deadly effect, he thought quickly, then its importance was the hole it left behind. Ridgeway looked up at the breach. A damn big hole.

Something scuttled in the darkness beyond. From the midst of the Island, Monster rose to one knee and fired the Gatling in an arc across the dark aperture.

As if in response, a loud groan reverberated through the sphere. A twenty-meter section of Tier Two sagged
downward, failing under the thrashing weight of the battering ram. That burden shifted radically as the slug-shaped
mass unfurled an array of legs that grappled wildly for traction.
In unison, three blazing streams of gunfire reached out to the Ram from points around the sphere. The creature's
exterior sizzled as jagged lines of covalent discharge unleashed a wild display of near-ultraviolet light. Tiny bits of
molten metal rained down across the floor, red hot splatters that belched columns of steam as they fell into the
supercooled moat.
Drawn to the glow of sensors, Ridgeway aimed at a dark slit just above the heavy blade. At the fiery touch of
covalence, one of the reddish orbs burst in a shower of glass. The aperture slammed shut with a bang and the Ram
lurched backwards.
Taz shouted something and the stream of fire from overhead shifted. The Marine leaned forward into the rail as he
cut loose with tight, controlled bursts over the Ram and into the hole.
Ridgeway's eyes went wide as a white-orange starburst of incandescence appeared behind the focused Taz. It slid
rapidly across the wall in a wide arc, leaving a glowing trail that seeped molten metal.
"Taz! On your six!" As Ridgeway screamed, a wide section of metal folded back into the darkness and the solid wall
at Taz's back became a gaping doorway. Ridgeway's rifle snapped fiercely to the multi-limbed form that burst from
within.
Nearly a dozen mismatched mechanical limbs carried a torso even more haphazard than the Ram's. The right
forelimb bore some kind of welder's torch, though the speed with which it moved belied any sense of the tool's
considerable weight. Given what it had just done to the wall, Ridgeway had no desire to see what the torch could do
to armor. The blazing tool swung in an arc that would pass through Taz somewhere around the collarbones.
But Taz dropped and the torch sizzled through the air above his head. Twisting as he fell, Taz jammed the CAR's
muzzle into the belly of the beast and fired.
The creature arched upward as a storm of disintegration chewed into its guts. Powerful legs flexed madly as the
creature's torso rose almost six feet into the air. One of the flailing limbs caught Taz on the hip and drove him into
the floor.
Ridgeway tracked a long burst into the center of the creature's mass, carving a wound edged with burning metal.
Legs thrashed as it tried desperately to climb out of reach of the blazing rifle. As the wound gaped wide, Ridgeway
could see the gleam of metal against the muted tones of muscle. The cutting torch flared, its blinding glare bleaching color to black and white. Grappling figures of light and shadow fought madly on the balcony. Ridgeway tried to aim but even with the armor's imaging system, he felt like he was staring at an arc-welder without a mask.
The ball of light dropped low, blocked briefly by the creature's own hulking mass. For an instant Ridgeway saw the
dark outline of the limb as it swung upward. On gut instinct he snapped the muzzle of the CAR just ahead of the
blur. He knew the moment he squeezed the trigger.
Missed.
The torch sped clear of Ridgeway's fire. The bullets slammed instead into the creature's arm. Bone, or whatever
stood in for it, broke apart in a shower of wet fragments.
The nearly-severed torch veered wide of Taz and cleaved the rail in a starburst of sparks. Locked in mortal combat,
the two combatants fell together through the gap.
* * *
On the Island below, Monster felt the tremor behind him but had no chance to turn and gawk. Merlin lay half-buried
at his feet and the two creatures in his face demanded his full attention.
Though badly damaged, the Ram continued its ponderous advance. The second creature, only slightly smaller in
size, emerged from the jagged fissure. Vaguely crawfish-like in shape, it scuttled quickly into the light. On one
forward appendage, six wide barrels extended from a drum-like rotary mount, a clumsy-looking approximation of
Monster's own weapon. Without hesitation, it aimed at Merlin and fired a single barking shot, the gun kicking up in
sharp recoil. A spike of bright steel, almost as long as Monster's forearm, buried itself into the floor next to Merlin's
skull.
With an industrial clatter, the creature's six-gun cycled and the next steel spike jacked into the firing chamber.
Monster caught a sharp ascending hum as electrified rails quickly charged. Sixgun leaned forward on a dual tripod
of legs and brought the weapon to bear once more.
Oh no you don't. Monster's lips pulled back in a snarl as the Gatling spoke first.
Two of Sixgun's rear legs vaporized in a blackish spray and the creature lurched back, forelimbs swinging. The
spike-thower barked again, sending the second javelin high into the far wall.
As Monster scrambled to reach Merlin, Sixgun flopped onto one side and thrashed to regain it's footing. Scrabbling
to an angled stance, it braced itself against the headquarters of the Ram, adding its own considerable weight to the
burden on the damaged wall. The chatter of gunfire was punctuated with the sharp crack of steel stressed to the break point. The wall gave way.

The thunderous roar of collapse engulfing him, Monster took a wild swipe for Merlin's exposed hand. A cloud of thick grey dust broiled across the Island as a large steel beam fell from above and drove itself into the floor. Directly below the cascade of metal, a tank of liquid nitrogen ruptured with an airy crump, vomiting thousands of liters of super-cooled liquid. Clutching the gauntlet in his grasp, Monster threw himself into a desperate dive.

As a major piece of Tier Two crumbled, a huge crack zigzagged its way up the wall like inverted lightning. All around the Island, hot metal met liquid nitrogen in furious bursts of steam. Severed power lines convulsed on the floor, unleashing blue-white arcs of voltage that rippled through the haze.

* * *

High overhead, Taz clung by one hand to the lip of the balcony, swinging like a pendulum over a boiling sea of fog and lightning. The edges of burned rail still glowed cherry-red. Only feet below, the Torch hung, its limbs flailed madly. The left side of its torso yawned open, drooling fluids in thick, lumpy streams. The cutting-tool arm swung aimlessly, held on by little more than lingering bands of sinew and cable. Taz flinched as it caromed off the wall in another burst of sparks and molten metal.

A heavy limb swiped at the Marine, metal claspers snapping. Taz cursed and kicked viciously as he struggled to maintain a grip on the ledge. Pounding footsteps beat heavily through his hand as something closed from above. Pain flared as the creature clamped down on his ankle. Sudden weight yanked brutally downward and Taz felt his fingers tear through failing metal. A sick sense of acceleration blurred the dim screech of metal sliding on metal. The whiplash shock tore at Taz' shoulder, arresting his descent too suddenly for the burden below to maintain its grip. In a slow-motion flurry of limbs the Torch peeled away. The blazing light orbited the plummeting mass, a comet caught in the gravity of a falling star.

With a terrible crash, the Torch slammed into the moat of liquid nitrogen. Searing heat hit extreme cold in a volcano of steam and fragments. The angry crackle of voltage rip-sawed through the rapidly closing fog. In an instant, only a column of steam marked the creature's demise.

Taz blinked, his breath coming in rapid, shallow gasps. He snapped his eyes up to the scarred gauntlet clamped tightly over his own.

"Bloody good timing mate." Taz hissed through gritted teeth.

Stitch only grunted. Taz could see the tip of the medic's climbing spike where it had punched completely through the balcony floor. The medic groaned again, more forcefully, as he heaved upward and drew Taz within reach of the ledge. The damaged Tier sagged downward with a dull metallic moan.

"For crying out loud," Stitch snarled as the floor gave another lurch, "how much do you weigh?"

Not me, Taz realized, as a dark shape rose to loom up behind the medic. Before he could cry out a warning, a curved pickaxe spike slammed down on Stitch's thigh. The blade-tip drove through to the floor in a burst of scarlet.

* * *

The scream reached Merlin's ears, the first clear sound he could discern after the thunder of collapsing steel. Twisted rubble and dust surrounded him. Monster was nowhere in sight.

Pneumatic whine, the heavy clank of metal on metal. Merlin couldn't fully process the meaning. Something coming, he realized dimly, something bad.

The crustacean silhouette emerged from the haze hauling a six-barreled gun nearly as big as a footlocker. The weapon glowed brightly as the powerful arm extended.

Merlin's legs drove out like pistons as a silver blur hummed through the air. The spike struck a glancing blow against his outstretched arm. It felt like he'd been belted with a baseball bat.

"Shit!" Merlin spat as he skidded face-down across a shale of loose debris. The brutal impact had cracked the armor on his forearm. Given the degree of pain, he was certain the arm within had broken as well.

Cradling the injured arm against his chest, Merlin did a one-handed lunge across the piled debris, looking frantically for his rifle. Industrial rubble covered everything in sight.

Think, think-- need a weapon. Merlin's gaze feverishly swept the area.

Sixgun advanced through the dust, dragging its ponderous form along a broken slab of floor. Several crushed limbs trailed limpily, hemorrhaging dark gouts that smeared in its wake. The heavy gun rocked up towards the ceiling and clattered through another rotation.

Merlin's hand closed on a grenade and stalled-- Monster had to be somewhere in the pile of rubble. A frag grenade could kill the Gunny as easily as the creature. Dammit, not an option. His hand flexed open.

Sixgun staggered badly. One bleeding limb braced against the slope as it weaved drunkenly. The oblong shape of the spike-thrower rose, a dark shadow against the towering rails of the crane.

Merlin's eyes flashed high overhead. Racing the fraying edge of panic, he launched himself at the console.
Be running, please be running. The dim aura of a computer screen glowed beneath the dust. Merlin swiped at the display with his arm, the hard-edged armor doing a piss-poor job of wiping it clear. In a flurry of keystrokes he toggled the system to active. Far overhead, servos whined. The lift assembly spun ninety degrees, three heavy blades pitched down towards the floor. Loose debris continued to shift beneath its weight, but Sixgun leveled the massive weapon. From Merlin's perspective, the wide barrels gaped like railroad tunnels. With a feverish slam of his hand, he punched the release and spun towards the crippled beast. "Eat this, motherfu--" The defiant curse froze in his throat as the giant trident hung motionless at the top of the room. Merlin didn't need the warning buzzer or the words SAFETY LOCKS ENGAGED pulsing on the screen to know he was screwed.

Oh shit. The sound of gunfire hit Merlin's senses before the spray of gore shot skyward. Sixgun twitched violently as it disintegrated in a bloody fountain. Relentless muzzle flame vented up from the rubble at its feet amid the high pitched scream of a Gatling gun. Merlin exhaled in a burst of pent-up air as one hand groped reflexively across his own chest for the spike that had never fired.

* * *

Ridgeway heard the Gatling howl below but had no time to look. The beast on top of Stitch demanded his full attention. More symmetric than the others, it had the look of a thick, powerful spider sculpted from scrap metal. At a dead run, Ridgeway fired another long burst, trying to drive the thing back into the breached wall. Taz reached back and drew a short-barreled magnum pistol. Ridgeway could see the hanging Marine brace the pistol on top of Stitch's helmet and pump five rounds into the creature's low slung jaw. The heavy slugs whiplashed the creature's skull. It tore the pickaxe free in response, and raised the bloody pike above the medic's outstretched arm. A blur of fire streaked past the creature's head, covalent rounds that splattered burnt metal as they slammed into the wall. The Spider's head snapped left and a cluster of half-orb eyes flared malevolently at Ridgeway. Sections of shattered jawbone swung lazily on bits of wire or skin, giving the creature a hideous, gaping overbite. Ridgeway tracked in on the eyes, squeezing the trigger as the reticle pulled a slight lead on the turning skull. In a sudden lurch the Spider vanished into the torn wall, chased by tracer-streaks of gunfire. Ridgeway skidded to a halt at the mouth of the breach and fanned another long burst into the darkness. Rifle at his shoulder, Ridgeway scanned the void. Only erratic bangs and the shriek of bending metal receded into the distance.

A groan at his feet grabbed Ridgeway's attention as Taz hauled himself up onto the mangled ledge. Ridgeway grabbed the back of the Marine's collar and heaved him the final distance to safety. "Thanks Majah," Taz wheezed breathlessly. "I was just about to kick his bloody arse."

Ridgeway half nodded at the Aussie's bluster; the ability to crack a joke meant that Taz would likely survive. The more pressing concern was Stitch. Ridgeway quickly surveyed the damage. The puncture-wound in the medic's armor was square in cross-section, nearly two centimeters across. The pickaxe had struck the back of his thigh, just outside of center. Although the gelpack had constricted automatically, Stitch looked to have lost a good deal of blood at the onset of injury. If he could take any measure of consolation, Ridgeway noted, the medic's unbroken stream of profanity confirmed that Stitch had fight left in him.

Ridgeway dragged Stitch away from the edge of the tier and helped him to sit up against a solid piece of wall. Stitch leaned forward and sucked for air, the hiss of every breath audible on the ComLink. "Mostly muscle," Stitch spat, scanning his own diagnostic. "Nicked the femur, missed the femoral." The medic struggled to continue as the painkillers hit his system, but the commentary quickly eroded. "M'okay." Stitch muttered weakly as he rocked his head back against the wall. "G'wan," he slurred, "check th' rest." Ridgeway watched the medic's vitals pulse solidly on the TAC until Taz flopped down, breathing hard, and draped an arm across Stitch's shoulder. "I got him Majah, he ain't goin' anywhere."

Hardly fooled by the Aussie's weak bravado, Ridgeway quickly scanned his injuries as well; dislocated shoulder, stress cracks in the pelvis. He nodded solemnly before he turned to the center of the room and peered through the broken rail. Amid the settling haze he could see Merlin drag Monster out from beneath a pile of rubble. "You two all right down there?"

Merlin looked up and waved weakly. "I think Monster busted a--"

"We're fine." Monster snarled angrily.
Ridgeway could see from Monster's unsteady rise that the sergeant was anything but fine. The big man's left shoulder drooped noticeably.

As though reading Ridgeway's mind, Monster pulled himself fully upright and braced his left hand on his hip, forcing the shoulder into position. "I said," his gravel voice paused for emphasis, "we're fine."

Ridgeway nodded wordlessly, knowing that argument was pointless. Monster would be fine until Monster was dead, with no grey zone in between.

In a typical move that blended diversion with genuine concern, Monster turned the focus to his men. "How's Stitch and Taz?"

"Better'n you," Stitch growled as he climbed to his feet, Taz under his left arm. "Wanna arm-wrestle?"

With a short laugh that sounded more like a cough, Monster waved off the challenge with his right hand. "Nah," he replied with a suppressed groan. "But I'll kick your ass in a footrace."

A soft grin tugged at Ridgeway's lip. As long as you got heart, he recited from the book of Grissom, you've got a chance. As he quietly regarded his haggard team, Ridgeway tried to put that chance into definable terms.

His Marines were alive, at least the ones he could see. Darcy was a question mark but with no mayday call, Ridgeway had to hope for the best. Several enemies had been engaged, leaving two dead and at least one wounded. The latter was no small achievement. The aliens, or whatever the hell they were, were big, mean and damn tough. The Marines had burned a lot of ammo, for which he had no re-supply. The combination of attrition and injury was relentless. Time was running out.

"Merlin," he barked. "Where'd they go?"

The engineer had steered Monster to a spot clear of rubble, where the big sergeant now leaned against a rack of monitors that had survived the collapse. At Ridgeway's query, Merlin turned to the main console. "I'm on it boss."

"Find 'em Merlin, we can't lose them."

"Roger that." Merlin's fingers flew across the keys. His response came back in moments. "I got nothing Major." Ridgeway's fist closed fiercely and bent the railing in his grasp. "Dammit Merlin, it's as big as a fucking car, how the hell do you lose--"

A female voice interrupted. "I'm on 'em, Major."

Ridgeway stopped short, the sound of Darcy's voice more surprising than the content of her terse report. The sniper's tone was cold as ice.

"Darcy! Where are you?"

"Out in the cave. While you guys were duking it out, the bad guy's Team B snatched Jenner and hauled ass. I got a shot off at one before they dropped behind cover."

"Damn straight Major," Darcy replied, "I'm looking at the back door."

Ridgeway closed his eyes and exhaled, head tilting back as he spoke. "Good job Darce, good job."

For a long moment Ridgeway stood silent as the faint glimmer of hope grew within him. They had a doorway out. But the door would likely be guarded and that meant another fight. He looked down at the Marines huddled on the Island.

"Last play."

"This one is for all the marbles. If we die, everything we've learned dies with us. We're gonna take that door and anything, I mean anything, that so much as twitches in our direction gets toasted. Do you read me?"

Before anyone could answer, a low rumble surged through the floor. The mountain of debris on the Island shifted, cracking apart into rough landslides of wreckage as the Ram struggled from where it had lain buried. Black fluid streamed from its cracked outer shell as it dragged itself across the still-smoking corpse of Sixgun.

A sharp, descending whine cut through the air as the crane dropped like a guillotine. Three steel blades slammed through the Ram's torso before the lifting arm followed suit, driving the creature through the floor and out of sight.

Merlin looked up from the console where the words SAFETY LOCKS DISENGAGED burned brightly beneath his fingertips.

"We read you loud and clear Major."

CHAPTER 30

Dan Ridgeway slogged through the lake at a determined pace, his armored legs churning through the sapphire liquid. Monster and Taz flanked him to the right and left respectively, matching his aggressive stride. The three Marines drove towards the far shore, leaving Papa-Six, and in fact the entire ship, far behind.

And two Marines as well. Ridgeway frowned at the thought, but he told himself that the decision still made sense. Stitch was all but immobile and Merlin would watch the medic's back while the rest of the team cleared the way.
At least one thing had changed in their favor, Ridgeway noted. Restoration of power had produced yet another unforeseen side-effect. As the engine pumped out heat in abundance, the fog around the ship had literally tripled in density. Instead of a waist-deep layer that highlighted the Marine's passage, the Londonesque fog now devoured them, masking their movements within its great amorphous boundaries.

He was grateful for the concealment and the speed it allowed them. Darcy was still far ahead, keeping watch on the cavern exit. Given the durability of the alien species, Ridgeway didn't want his sniper to tangle with one by herself, much less with several. The sooner they regrouped, the better.

The fog thinned as they left the lake behind. On bare rock they struck a balance between speed and the amount of pain their damaged limbs could withstand.

Ridgeway scoured the jagged terrain ahead. Most of the cavern's inner surface was made of bare, irregular rock. His night vision peered deep into the gloom where a forest of jutting stone extended boundlessly. Darcy was somewhere among those rocks. Even now she would be using the powerful scope to burn across the expanse of cavern. Motionless against a rough terrain, the sniper's camouflage would render her almost invisible. If one of the creatures appeared anywhere but on top of her, the first clue it should have of her existence would be a bolt of molten uranium through the skull.

With luck, Ridgeway hoped earnestly, that first fiery clue would be its last.

As he jogged steadily, Ridgeway glanced at his companions. The tower-sized Gunnery Sergeant kept pace with a fierce determination. With every jarring step the crack in his shoulder would flex and trigger a fresh dagger of agony. At Stitch's insistence, Monster had quietly locked out some thirty percent of the mobility of his left arm. Inducing a degree of rigidity to the armor at both the shoulder and elbow, the tactic allowed the carbon sleeve to support his arm and act as something of a cast. The measure was a subtle one, but doubtlessly a profound relief.

Taz was another story altogether. Sporting a severe concussion and a shopping list of cracks and contusions, the scrappy Marine held together remarkably well, a small miracle considering his dangling act from the balcony. Judging from his uneven gait, the injured hip had been badly aggravated. Taz mimicked Monster's lead, but he was anything but stoic. The loss of his rifle was driving the Aussie to distraction.

The missing weapon sat uneasily on Ridgeway's mind as well. Lost somewhere in the battle of the CryoSphere, it seemed likely to have fallen into the moat around the Island. But transponders in each primary weapon had long been standard equipment for the Corps and no amount of scanning could pinpoint the CAR's location. Either the drop into the electrified cryogenic soup simply slagged the weapon altogether...

Or it had been carried off. Ridgeway grimaced at the thought. From everything they had seen, the oversized creatures lacked the comparatively small digits needed to pull a trigger. But the prospect of a covalent weapon in the hands of the enemy was a sobering one.

While a tactical consideration to Ridgeway, the loss hit Taz like a slap in the face that spun him into a whole new level of incendiary malice directed at the alien species. If there was one way to truly piss off a Marine, it was to mess with his rifle. Though perhaps less dramatic than the attachment felt between Darcy and her Hammer, each Marine has a personal relationship with his service rifle.

"We're gonna slag the whole bloody lot of 'em, you know that?" The Aussie's statement was more affirmation than question, spoken to nobody in particular. The sentiment was re-expressed every few minutes with varying degrees of color. As he jogged along, Taz's fingers flexed energetically on the magnum pistol, steadily milking the grip. "Oh yeah, they're fuckin' dead."

The muttered monologue faded out before once again expounding on the details of their imminent vivisection, although Ridgeway was certain that certain would resume anew in the next few minutes. And it might have, had Darcy's voice not broken the silence of their advance.

"I've got blood."

Without breaking stride, every weapon in Marine hands snapped up, the barrels locked ahead toward Darcy's location. Between the darkness and the sniper's ECM, they couldn't actually see her, but the TAC displayed a familiar icon that marked her position. Ridgeway noted the display. Four hundred meters and closing. The sniper hid along the shallow wash they now followed, just on the edge of a traversing ridgeline.

That they could see the terrain at all was another improvement. The volume of light that poured from the revived ship had illuminated a great deal of the cavern, although this far away the Marines had engaged night vision to enhance the diminishing glow. The real advantage was the ability to move without searchlights.

The sniper expanded her report with a small note of professional pride. "I've got a good spray pattern, solid hit. Too dark to make out the color but from the shine I'd say it's fresh. No body, but I'd bet my rifle that it couldn't have gone far."

Ridgeway picked up speed. Dead opponents were not a concern, but wounded ones could be very unpredictable. Ridgeway was the only one who gave voice to the question. "What's your threat assessment?"
The Com hung silent for a long moment. Ridgeway knew that Darcy would be scanning the area once more to insure that her next words were accurate.

"I am negative on threat, Major. The ground drops off just past this point, sloping down fairly steep with a lot of intervening stalagmites. I've got a crevasse just ahead, maybe another hundred meters from here. Can't see how deep but the sucker is wide, easily three hundred meters at this end."

"Good. We're on your position in two mikes."

"Roger that, I'm pushing ahead to the rim."

Moments later, the Marines crested the small ridgeline. As the sniper had reported, a distinct splatter of gore decorated several meters of stone floor. A significant puddle of liquid had formed just beyond the point of impact.

"Looks like LT put the bloody Hammer to one of 'em," Taz muttered, his voice thick with obvious pleasure. "From the gut-pile I'd say she right turned the pommy bastard inside out."

Ridgeway knelt and considered the scene in silence, mapping the physical evidence against his knowledge of catastrophic injuries. As he absorbed the image, the event played out in his mind.

You never saw it coming. One second you're crawling along, then it's flat on your back with your guts draped out of a steaming hole.

Though it had lain here for some time, the lack of a corpse meant that the damned thing had managed to crawl away. His eyes looked up and scanned the perimeter. It would not have gone far. A wide smear of fluid streaked away from the puddle. Intermittent splotches zig-zagged through the rocks ahead, the erratic path of a dying beast drunk with pain.

Ridgeway raised his hand, two extended fingers making a rapid circle. The Marines fell into a tight circle, weapons bristling in all directions as they crept forward.

Ridgeway spotted Darcy only a few meters ahead, wedged tightly behind a large outcrop of rock. The rifle was at her shoulder and she peered silently downslope. Without a word the sniper extended her right hand palm-down, moving as though gently patting a dog's head.

Ridgeway stopped instantly and squatted low, ducking into a shallow vale as each Marine sought his own point of hard cover. He eased himself into a seated position and leaned back against a broad slab of near-black stone.

Darcy remained on the scope, wrapped in subtle shades of obsidian and granite. Had it not been for the motion of her hand, it would have been easy to take her for a statue carved from the very rock upon which she leaned.

Ridgeway caught the crescent of orange that gleamed along the curve of her faceplate. The glimmer might have been unnoticeable but for the dull, monochromatic surroundings. It took half a heartbeat for Ridgeway to realize that the sniper had trained her weapon on some new source of light, something that came up from the ground.

He pushed himself up to peer over the rim of the chasm.

"Uh-uh," Darcy whispered urgently as her hand snapped into a tight fist. "Ghost me."

Ridgeway grunted as he caught himself. Whatever lay ahead, Darcy didn't want to risk being observed. He eased back and, with a soft mental push, allowed the sniper's senses once more to become his own.

In the flicker of synapse, a set of graduated reticles bisected his view, testament that he once more gazed through the scope's powerful optics. That much he expected. What he saw through the scope left him stunned.

The chasm stretched down for several hundred meters, a jagged highway of sharp ridges set row upon row that gave the intervening space the look of a demented trench warfare exercise. The tunnel snaked downward, leading to a warm orange glow that pulsed steadily from the far end.

Unbidden, the crosshairs tracked down to the end of the washboard passage. At the base of the slope it dumped out into a cavern room of moderate size. The texture of the walls inside seemed odd and it took a long moment for Ridgeway to realize why.

The whole cave is lined with machinery. Equipment flowed up the walls and across the ceiling. Glittering streams, like fiery veins, appeared to flow among the cluttered patches of hardware. Wide channels of ember-red branched endlessly throughout the blackened hollow. For a moment Ridgeway was struck with the irrational thought that he was somehow inside a huge artificial heart.

"It's Escher drawn by Geiger." Darcy offered with what seemed an uncertain balance of amusement and revulsion.

The ruddy glow cast the scene in an eerie, hellish hue. But something about the pulsing light seemed familiar, although completely out of scale. Ridgeway shifted his focus from the target and scanned the data that ringed the scope's view. Visible light, barely twenty percent amped. The answer, Ridgeway realized, lay a little lower on the scale.

"Go thermal."

The sniper responded immediately and pushed the scope to resolve waves in the ten micron range. The even-hued scene blossomed in artificial color as the imaging system displayed minute changes in the heat that radiated from every point within the scene.
It took Darcy only a moment to recognize the pattern. "Shit, the whole thing is one big IR array."
"Yeah," Ridgeway said quietly, following evidence to the inevitable conclusion. "So whatever they are, amid all that
hardware is flesh and blood as we know it."
"Well, you are what you eat," Darcy drawled quietly.
As revolting as the image was, Ridgeway had to concede the logic. He wondered if one species could assimilate
the genetics of another. Maybe the Ascension's crew wasn't eaten so much as cannibalized for parts. He tried to picture
the muscles entwined along steel bones. Had they been grafted on or grown in place?
"That could explain the silver in their blood," Darcy muttered absently. "Maybe they just chowed down on
somebody who'd been on the table." Her offhand comment lacked any real conviction.
Ridgeway groped for a reply as the crosshairs tracked to the brightest heat source in the cavern, a collection of
equipment that glowed in the artificial tones of thermal imaging. Through digital sleight of hand, Darcy merged the
visible and thermal channels, producing a layer of detail and surface texture.
Quick to offer her conclusions, Darcy pre-empted the prior line of conversation with a businesslike analysis.
"Roughly twelve meters high, heavy steel construction. Lot of moving parts, it's definitely serviceable. Looks like
some of the old oil rigs we used to have back home."
"Close." Ridgeway replied softly. He'd seen units just like it on the frozen plains of McFarland's World. Unlike oil
derricks that drew liquid from the planet's core, these sucked heat. "Geothermal Rig. They're mining for heat."
As he stared at the unwieldy machine, Ridgeway recalled Monster's first report. Maybe two klicks down to hit the
magma plane. The hardship inherent in drilling through cold stone was staggering. He shook his head, that's one hell
of a mining op.
"Bet that took a while." Darcy muttered, as if reading Ridgeway's mind.
A while indeed, Ridgeway assessed, noting with equal focus that the only visible dig went down instead of up.
Disappointment welled, its growing weight tugging at his resolve. Dispair threatened to drown out any last shred of
hope when he was struck by epiphany.
"They aren't locals."
Darcy was caught by surprise. "Come again?"
"These things, they can't be indigenous. They came here from somewhere else." Excitement gathered in Ridgeway's
voice.
In contrast, Darcy exhuded skepticism. "How the hell did you get that out of a drill rig?"
"Think about it. We have an experimental colony ship that blows a gasket. It vanished from point A and ended up
here at point B."
"I'm with you so far."
Ridgeway continued. "Up till now we figured the crew opened the door and got jumped by something native. But if
these things had evolved down here, they'd be used to the cold. The fact they need heat, and that they had to go to
such artificial lengths to get it, means they came from somewhere else."
"Maybe they came in with the Ascension." Darcy remained guarded.
"Huh," Ridgeway chuffed. He hadn't considered that option and pondered it for a moment before his head shook
abruptly, "I don't see it. The Ascension blinks out of near-earth space and skips straight here. Where did they pick up
an alien life form?"
"Shit, I don't know. That's a Merlin question." Darcy exhaled sharply. "OK, let's assume you're right and they're
tourists like we are; what does that get us?"
"Well, I'm betting they didn't come through Cathedral like we did, so that suggests a second tunnel." He paused, his
brain clicking at high speed. "Then there's the mining operation itself. They have a shitload of gear down there,
maybe enough demo to blow the roof. Either way, my money says the way out begins here."
Resignation gave way to determination and Ridgeway the commander resurfaced. "Darcy, go visual, light amp thirty
percent. Pull back to frame the whole scene."
The image seamlessly slid back to provide a full view of the area below. Artificial rainbow tones gave way to the
ember and black starkness of the cave. The callsign seemed obvious as Ridgeway added a new marker to the TAC.
To the right of the shimmering waypoint, a single word glowed softly.
HIVE.
Ridgeway stared at the long downward ramp and plotted a course through a stealthy approach. Somewhere in the
Hive was the key to going home. All they had to do was go in and find it.
In the distance, a dark shadow crawled across the orange hued ceiling. The crosshairs tracked up to the blob of
darkness cast by an unseen creature that scuttled somewhere within the room like a giant roach.
The sniper's voice echoed softly in Ridgeway's ear. "Welcome to Bug Central."
CHAPTER 31

Hie eyes closed, Stitch swallowed the wet lump that clogged the back of his throat. The wound in his thigh throbbed fitfully, showing disdain for the paltry dosage of painkiller. While the option to wrap himself in a soft blanket of drug-induced haze was seductive, Stitch could not afford the mind-numbing effects of morphinol. Given their current situation, that could easily become a permanent nap.
The medic tried to adjust himself in the chair, using his arms to lever his body upright. The shift, though minor, was enough to trigger a fresh assault on his senses. Pain shot up from his leg and twisted his bowels into a knot.
"SonofaBITCH!" The curse hissed between his teeth as the medic screwed his eyes against the pinwheels of light that sparkled on the edge of his vision. His fingers dug into the chair and he counted the seconds as the flare burned away.
"You all right?" Merlin's voice was soft on the ComLink, one of the few sensory inputs that came without an added degree of suffering.
Stitch unclurled just enough to force the reply. "Peachy."
Merlin's legs, the only part of the engineer that stuck out of the under-console cabinet, wriggled to the sound of clinking tools and the cyclic grind of a ratchet.
Leaning back, Stitch drew a measured breath, wary of a secondary tremor of pain. His attention flickered back to Merlin. "So how's it going?"
"You mean compared to five minutes ago?"
The medic glanced at his chronograph and noted that in fact, six minutes had passed, but he got the message. Merlin's efforts to get the surviving monitors back online were critical to perimeter surveillance. Constant disruptions added nothing to that progress, but minutes dragged out endlessly when measured as the gaps between gut-wrenching pain. Stitch was dying for a distraction.
The medic drummed his fingers on the chair and reminded himself that regardless of his shape, he was there to watch Merlin's back as much as the inverse. His hand closed tightly on the submachinegun, thankful for its reassurance as he scanned the tiers overhead. Only curls of lingering smoke drifted among the balconies.
The sweep completed, Stitch accessed his own medical status and frowned for reasons that had nothing to do with pain. His report to Ridgeway had been abbreviated to say the least, in a civilian world a failure to disclose at this scale would constitute malpractice.
So sue me, the medic groused inwardly, we've got bigger worries.
Unfortunately, the undisclosed aspects of his condition were rapidly becoming a real problem. The heavy pickaxe did not miss the femur as Stitch had inferred. The sharp metal tip carved an ugly furrow through the largest bone in his body. And while the femoral artery wasn't severed, enough collateral vessels were torn to present a serious threat of death by internal hemorrhage.
The armor squeezed his thigh in a python grip, the unrelenting pressure its own source of discomfort. Plasma packs served to replace some of the lost fluid but only a couple had escaped Jenner's scavenging. Stitch was engaged in a very short war of attrition.
"How long do you think it'll be before we hear from the rest of the team?" The words were past Stitch's lips before he could bite them off.
Something metallic dropped, clattered and rolled to a stop, the string of sharp sounds trailed by a weary sigh that echoed from within the cabinet. Stitch winced and turned his face from the verbal scathing that never materialized. The bangs and scrapes from within the machine resumed amid an undercurrent of low mutters.
A long moment ticked by before fear of further nuisance drove Stitch from his chair in spite of the pain. He braced himself on the console and limped to the last standing bank of monitors. The array of screens stood black and dead.
Switch boxes and amps littered the crannies between every dark rectangle.
Stitch studied the snarl and tried to divine some sense of order. A gut-cavity full of twisted intestines was easier to understand. His gaze fell on a boxy component made of grey metal, its corner-edges adorned with strips of yellow and black-striped tape. Among a smattering of inert lights, several buttons ran across the face of the device. Stitch extended a finger and aimlessly poked a button, hardly surprised when nothing happened. He sighed, shifted his weight uneasily and punched a second button to no effect. Piece of shit, he muttered as he poked a third.

"What the hell are you doing?" Merlin's voice was edged with irritation. "I've got all of the camera feeds unhooked so don't fuck around with anything, all right?"

"Shit," Stitch huffed as his head rocked back. "How 'bout I just climb in one of these fucking freezers, would that make you happy?"

"Is that an option?"

"Oh screw you," Stitch snarled as his finger stabbed angrily at the last button in line. The device hummed sharply and the rack of screens flared to life.

"Whoa!" Stitch snatched his hand back as though he had grabbed a viper. "Hey Merl..."

"That's it." Merlin's legs thrashed as he twisted free of his confinement. "Listen, if I can't get a live feed back online we can't see shi--"

The engineer froze as his facemask locked on the image that spanned the entire block of monitors. He rose slowly to his feet as Stitch limped back. The two stood side by side when Stitch pointed at the wall of monitors.

"Well if that isn't live, what the hell is it?"

A dark figure stared from the screen, nearly lost in the shadows that surrounded him. He wore badly stained coveralls of an indeterminant color layered with patches of frayed fabric and worn duct tape. Above the nametag, pieces of unkempt beard hung down across his chest, the tangle of grey cleaved by scars that crossed the figure's neck and jaw. His cheeks carried a deathly pallor, so free of pigment that Stitch could see the blue web of capillaries beneath the translucent tissue. Below his creased brow, splotches of blood mottled the sclera of one eye, streaking the jaundiced orb with red. The other eye was missing, Stitch noted, or simply lost in the deep shadow.

Before the figure, a small glass cylinder sat framed by two weathered hands. The left lacked a thumb while the right was oversized and mis-shapen. The appendage seemed bound in a pebbled leather instead of skin. The figure spoke, the voice thin and raspy. What might have been a human voice was boosted by something decidedly synthetic. "Shipwide systemic failures continue beyond our diminishing ability to repair. Progressive thermal shutdown has crippled the nanotech. Drive failure has finally become a foregone conclusion. Our supplies are exhausted, our food..."

The figure drifted into a lengthy silence as gnarled fingers nudged the glass cylinder. The vial held a dark, faintly emerald hue. Tiny lights blinked softly from one silver endcap.

"Abrupt cryonic failure grows epidemic and even the most--" he struggled for the word, "dramatic, extraction efforts have proven catastrophic. We are left with the unavoidable strategy of genetic consolidation." His lip curled back as he spoke the last two words with unmistakable distaste.

Stitch felt the ripple of gooseflesh across his arms before he consciously registered the motion along the figure's torso. Something slid beneath the ruined shirt, a serpentine ripple that oozed out of the camera's view.

"You see that?" Merlin's voice was hushed.

Stitch swallowed, his throat suddenly dry as he nodded slowly, unsure just what he had seen. A forboding chill coiled around his spine as he stared at the screen.

White digits burned at the bottom right corner, the columns incrementing sequentially from the right.

"Timecode," Merlin said. "tracks the runtime of the recording."

"Yeah, I know," Stitch replied, but something is screwed here." He tapped the screen, fingertip tracing the numbered pairs from right to left. "Seconds, minutes, hours--"

"Then days, months, and," Merlin stalled, motionless for a moment before his head tipped slightly to one side.

"Three digits?" He muttered as he pointed to the leftmost group. "That oughtta be four digits, for the year."

Stitch turned slowly and asked "What if they didn't know the date?"

"I don't follow."

"Your rift," Stitch turned to Merlin. "Your hole-in-space theory. You said that it could also be a hole in time right? Maybe forward, maybe backward?"

"Yeah..." Merlin drew out the single word as he turned back to the cluster of screens.

"So a hundred and sixty years ago a ship has a very bad accident, one that throws it to the far side of nowhere. What if you got bounced to someplace where you couldn't see the stars? Your ship is fucked all to hell, you don't know where you are, you don't even know when you are. What do you do?"
A long silence ticked by before Merlin answered. "Start over, count from day one."
Stitch nodded again, his eyes fixed on the digits 772.
Days, weeks, months... years.

CHAPTER 32

Ridgeway watched silently as Taz oozed through the break in the rocks. Although the gap was narrow, the fact that both Ridgeway and Monster had made it through vouched for its navigability.
The forward edge of the Hive stood only a few meters away and the orange glow grew brighter with every step. Already the long midnight valley gave way to scattered puddles of shadow that grew like moss on the back of every red-hued rock. The Marines were forced to follow an increasingly serpentine path, leveraging the most from intermittent splashes of darkness.
Thus far, the gambit had worked. Three Marines now crouched behind a slab of stone pitched sharply up from the floor. Ridgeway was on point with Monster almost prone just behind him. Taz trailed Monster by several meters, spreading their line.
The last of the group was far behind, looking down from high ground. Several times already, her one-word directions had caused the advancing trio to freeze, hugging the shadows until the path ahead was clear of movement.
Ridgeway was glad to have the cover as he peered over the final crest, barely a meter tall, that separated the Marines from a shoreline of humming machinery. He fired a pair of hand-signals at Monster and Taz, then eased his left leg over the low wall of stone. His belly and chest pressed flat against the crest as he slid over the obstacle.
"Hold it."
Ridgeway froze at Darcy's terse command, snarling at the damned poor timing. He was trapped in the open, too far advanced to pull back, yet an agonizing arm's length from the cover of a thermal inverter just ahead. Willing himself into stillness, Ridgeway called on his own chameleon to fuse his image with that of the surrounding rock. He hoped it would be enough.
Glancing back, Ridgeway saw Monster's gauntlet tighten on the grip of the Gatling.
Not a good sign.
A metallic clatter grew audible over the dull thrum that pervaded the Hive. The sound of a dozen kitchen knives tapped an oddly cyclic pattern across a hard, unyielding surface. As Ridgeway listened, the noise grew louder with every heartbeat.
Without warning, the curved shadow of the inverter sprouted waving appendages of darkness that swung erratically across the cave floor. One of the shadows stretched improbably, it's intangible length falling across Ridgeway's outstretched leg.
"Don't... move..." The sniper's measured words came as a hushed whisper in Ridgeway's head.
Teeth clenched, Ridgeway clung to the cold ridge of stone, his every muscle coiled. Ominous silence stretched on before the knife-edge clatter resumed. He couldn't tell if the sound was retreating or advancing.
Ridgeway braced for the shuddering wake of a railgun round that would have to pass just inches above his head. At that proximity, even the shockwave would be brutal. He hugged the stone until his brain registered the change. The snicker of steel receded.
"Clear."
Darcy's single word came as welcome as any Ridgeway could remember. He exhaled slowly and allowed his leading leg to finish its descent.
His boot met the floor with a wet plop and Ridgeway looked down at the silvery flow that coursed uphill. The splattered bits thrown aside by his footfall regathered, the clumps oozing forward to rejoin the column that marched relentlessly forward.
Nanites? Ridgeway squinted at the gritty quicksilver stream. Bits of debris floated along in the current. Not debris, he realized suddenly, but parts, carried to some destination like food hauled home by army ants.
His gaze tracked up and swept the area before him. Gutter-paths of silver and ember wound their way throughout the Hive, splitting like rivers into smaller and smaller tributaries. He swallowed a lump of unease that grew in his throat and advanced.
The Marine found concealment at the base of an industrial grade power inverter. He motioned for Taz and Monster to hold, then crabbed along the base of the truck-sized device, hugging the shadows. At the far edge of the inverter, Ridgeway peeked around the corner. Nothing moved. Ridgeway rattled off instructions as he scoured the way ahead.
"Monster, you're on the left, Taz, you've got the right. I'll take center. Steady sweep. We're looking for anything that could get us out of here so be ready to improvise. Darcy, you good on cover?"
"Like a blanket, Major."
"All right then. Stay low, stay fast. Don't engage anything you don't have to. We do this right and we're outta Dodge before the bad guys know we were here."

Taz nodded in affirmation, a muffled but defiant "oorah!" under his breath. The two-note sound echoed on the Comm, the deeper rumble rising from Monster's chest.

"Oorah" Ridgeway mirrored the whispered battle-cry with suppressed ferocity as the Marines went to work. With Monster and Taz on either flank, Ridgeway advanced into the maze of equipment dead ahead. He passed one large column after another, machines plastered together like huge, freeform sculptures.

A stack of oddly-contoured cylinders caught Ridgeway's eye, not so much because of their shape as their considerable size. He edged closer and recognized them as spools of steel cable. Half a dozen were overturned and empty, while another handful lay heavily wound with twisted steel about the diameter of Ridgeway's thumb. A worn stencil on the side of the closest spool read "CABLE, 12MM" just below the faded red and black firebird emblem of Phoenix Metalworks.

"Guess this is where a lot of the crap from the ship ended up," Ridgeway muttered as his finger flattened the label's peeled-up edge. The paper cracked into dry flakes and fell away.

A sharp hiss cut through the air to Ridgeway's immediate left. The Marine dropped to one knee behind a pile of worn power tools as the CAR snapped to his shoulder. Peering over his limited cover, he watched as steam vented from a large octagonal chamber. The walls were made of a translucent material, each pane framed in heavy metal.

Something dark twitched inside.

A tremendous burst of high pressure gas flushed from within the tank as it blossomed open. Wet globs of metallic mud dripped from the swinging panels as they retracted.

Even before the hulking shape rose on a cluster of mechanical legs, Ridgeway recognized the Spider. Nanites ran off the creature in glistening streams. The monstrosity rocked its broad head from one side to the other, flexing its new jaw. The mandible yawned wide to reveal a sawtooth set of gleaming metal fangs.

Ridgeway's mind flashed back to the CryoSphere. He had seen the shattered jaw swing aimlessly on cords of muscle. If it had any teeth at the time, they were nothing like the conical daggers that now lined the powerful maw. Shit, upgrades.

The dental work appeared to have been roughly plastered right on top of the old broken jaw. While improvised, the crudeness of the modification did nothing to diminish its apparent lethality.

The import of that capacity grew far more dire as the Spider flexed the length of its body. Orange light glinted off a heavy piston in the creature's rising forelimb. Ridgeway guessed that the powerful framework started out on an industrial backhoe. Where a heavy bucket would have normally capped the assembly, some sort of gas-driven pincer opened and closed. Ridgeway could see braided steel pneumatic lines that coiled from the forearm and disappeared somewhere in the armpit.

The threat of the hand vanished as Ridgeway tracked back to the forearm where a familiar silhouette caught his eye. A Marine-issue Covalent Assault Rifle sat fused atop the arm's steel framework. Wires webbed out from the receiver and trigger pack, instantly lost in the amalgam of electronics plastered along the limb. As unbelievable as it seemed, the tiny glow from the CAR's display confirmed that the rifle was live and ready to fire.

"Be advised," Ridgeway whispered tersely across the ComLink, "Hostiles now have covalent capacity, I say again, hostiles are covalent."

Ridgeway was thankful that Taz had the presence of mind to mute the stream of profanity that likely spilled from his lips. The Aussie would be just as certain as Ridgeway that the CAR was his own.

The insult, however dire, was meaningless compared with the hazard. The CAR represented a dramatic enhancement to the type of firepower the aliens had displayed thus far.

If the rest of them have beefed up, Ridgeway mulled grimly, the next dance is gonna be nasty.

Ridgeway settled even lower into the pile of power tools. Some were obviously destroyed, evidenced by shattered casings and mangled blades. Others were of more questionable utility. Ridgeway noted a rivet gun that looked workable, as well as a rail-type spike driver much like the one carried by Sixgun, though perhaps only a third of the size. Two chainsaws and a plasma torch likewise looked intact.

Dammit. Ridgeway realized that the Hive would be crammed with welders, drills and saws. Any one could prove a formidable weapon. As far as the aliens were concerned, the Hive was one big armory.

The Spider turned towards the rear of the Hive and lumbered off. Ridgeway's mind burned feverishly; the odds of contact rose with every moment. He needed a systematic approach.

"What have you got Darcy?"

"You saw what crawled out of the oven. If it'd moved a foot in your direction the son of a bitch would be sucking on hot plasma right now."

"Roger that," he replied, glad to know his cover remained tight. "It's the rest of the situation I'm worried about."
"You've got motion at Lima-One, Michael-Two headed deep and Romeo Two and Three," she reeled off, using a simple tic-tac-toe location grid. Left, middle and right, three rows deep. Ridgeway nodded and followed the sniper's plot of hostiles on his TAC. One to the left, not far ahead of Monster. Another deep center and retreating, clearly the Spider. Multiple contacts spread along the mid-to-deep right. That meant one known and at least three new bogeys. Three wild cards.

"What are we looking at?"

"Lima-One is a big bastard, maybe a couple tons. Looks like six or seven heavy legs around a single-piece torso. No obvious weapons, I'd guess surveillance if it weren't for the size. You sure as hell don't wanna let it step on you."

"I'll make a note of it." Ridgeway said dryly. Getting stomped was very low on his list of preferences. A new callsign flashed on the TAC: Bigfoot.

Darcy continued to reel off data. "Contacts at Romeo Five and Six are inconclusive. I've got vibro-acoustic and some moving shadows, but nothing has popped up long enough to give me a good look. They could be anything."

"Stay on it." Ridgeway grunted, knowing the last directive to be superfluous. Darcy would give him whatever she could see, the rest would be up to stealth and a bit of luck.

Too much traffic on the right, Ridgeway thought tersely, especially with two unknowns. He opted for the logical course and quietly opened a ComLink.

"We're going downtown. Form up on my point and hang close. Darcy, let me know if anything starts to drift our way."

The Marines fell into a loose wedge with Ridgeway in the front. Snaking his way into the growing forest of steel towers and bastardized equipment, Ridgeway led his squad into the depths of the Hive.

The team passed yet another column of odd components fused one atop another like so many barnacles. Ant-lines of nanites coursed endlessly through cracks and crannies.

Monster growled, "Somebody needs to give these little bastards a schematic."

Ridgeway spoke without turning his head. "What was that?"

Monster pointed toward the claptap fusion of metals. "Looks like they just slap shit together and start welding." He looked up and down the column, "you can't tell what the hell this thing was to start with."

Ridgeway glanced at the dark, misshapen form and had to concur. Creative license was one thing but this had become abstract, form lost in function. Something Merlin had said scratched at Ridgeway's memory as he reached out to touch the column's lumpy surface.

"Bloody hell!" The Aussie's voice snapped across the Com, but Taz was nowhere in sight. Ridgeway spun quickly and his muzzle carved through a wide arc as he and Monster went back to back. "Taz, where are you?"

"Thirty meters bearing one-ten Majah, and you'll never guess what I found."

"Tell me it's a way out."

"Fair dinkum."

Ridgeway puzzled at the phrase but not at the tone. He bolted forward in a low crouch while Monster followed on his heels, back-pedaling with the Gatling held high. The two Marines covered the distance in seconds, rounding a battered blue thermopump to find Taz atop a flatbed barge some eight meters long.

"A skid?" Ridgeway felt the wind taken out of his sails. The gravitic haulers were a common sight on tarmacs and tank bunkers. "What good is a vehicle if we don't have a tunnel to drive through?"

The scarred dome of Taz's helmet rocked slightly to one side and drew back in faceless amazement. He placed one foot atop of the engine cowl and struck an oddly casual pose. "Hell Majah, this'll blow open the door we already got."

Ridgeway stood mute. He could see no weapons on the skid, no ordnance of any sort.

"All right, look," the Aussie's words poured out in a flood of energy, "We wire the skid with the detonex we have left and send it up to the blocked tunnel. Boom, we're outta here."

"Damnit Taz, don't you listen to anything?" Monster barked, his voice laced with fatigue, "There's at least fifteen meters of rock in that tunnel, maybe more. We don't have enough detonex to punch through that."

Taz slumped and wearily shook his head. Then he looked up, his words tightly clipped. "No shit Gunny. I know how much rock we're looking at, and how much explosive we're packing. I'm not as bloody rock-stupid as you think."

"One. You've got one last Detonex charge packed on your rig. Merlin put it there because you wanted to have backup charges for Cathedral. Now, one lousy charge can't scratch the bloody tunnel, but it can cut through damn near a meter of steel."

Taz took a step closer as second finger snapped up. "Two. The steel containment vessel for the gravitic coil in this heap is substantially less than a meter thick."

Almost nose to nose with the towering sergeant, Taz added the third finger. "Three. The Marine Corps taught even stupid grunts like me that when a gravitic coil blows out, it goes off with a bang."

Both hands came together then
jumped apart, ten fingers splayed wide. "One hell of a bang."
Ridgeway blinked twice as the light came on. "The skid isn't the delivery platform, it's the payload."
Monster closed the loop. "And the Det charge is the initiator."
Taz executed a short bow then folded his arms across his chest and huffed. "Crikey, and you say I'm the one that
doesn't listen to briefings."
"Never again," Ridgeway chuckled, still taken aback by the clarity of Taz's thinking.
"Adapt and improvise," Monster muttered. "Damn, but there's a Marine in you after all." He reached a closed fist
towards the Aussie, who punched the offered hand with his own.
"Too right."
The jovial moment lasted only a second. The three Marines knelt in the shadows as Monster turned to Ridgeway.
"What do you think Major? It sounds like a plan to me."
Ridgeway was drawn to the idea on several levels, both from its simplicity and the fact that all of the necessary parts
were now within the Marine's control. He watched the chronograph tick steadily on the TAC.
Decision time.
"It's a plan. Monster, give this thing a once-over before you turn the key, I don't want to draw a lot of attention if it
isn't airworthy. Taz, you and I have watch."
"Roger that." With a quick nod Taz spun to the right and disappeared.
"Darcy, you listening?"
"Just trying to figure what we're gonna do for a gunslinger when Taz gets shipped off to engineering school."
Darcy's crack brought a scowling undercurrent of Aussie slang on the Com. A smirk creased Ridgeway's face,
fueled by the irresistible energy of hope.
"We'll all chip in on his tuition when we get home. For the moment I want you to update Merlin and Stitch, have
them prep for evac and be ready to go. We're not hanging around for tourist photos."
"Roger that."
Ridgeway turned to his left and looked as Monster burned through an abbreviated pre-flight. Externals looked solid,
he noted in rapid appraisal, hopeful that the interior followed suit. Turning to his own task of securing Monster's
flank, Ridgeway quietly slipped into the shadows.
He crept along a row of upright cylinders that ran like a fence line, crouched low as he moved. The muzzle of the
CAR kept pace in a slow repeating arc as he moved past a break in the impromptu wall. Ridgeway entered the gap
before his brain registered the anomaly.
Color intruded on the largely monochromatic world. Tinges of green overlapped the predominant orange hue that
glinted from polished surfaces. Warily, Ridgeway stepped forward and peered around the corner.
The device sat on a low pedestal, roughly a meter square. Most of its volume was filled with small glass cylinders,
each no more than ten centimeters in length. A dark green fluid swirled within each one, bathed in a light that
radiated from the device's core.
"What the hell is that? A scowl played across Ridgeway's face as he edged closer to the rack. Glass tubes sealed with
metal endcaps. Tiny diodes flickered incessantly throughout the mass of vials like distant stars on a clear night. A
chill sense of foreboding slithered up Ridgeway's spine.
"What the bloody hell is it, Majah?" Taz stood on the far side of the cube, giving voice to the natural question. His
weapon was trained on the device.
"No idea." Ridgeway's measured reply was genuine. "But I've got a hunch it's bio."
"Bio?" Taz took a quick step back.
"Maybe." Ridgeway scanned his memory for anything that looked like the cube at his feet. "But I've only read about
'em, never seen one. I'm just guessing, but it looks like some kinda CBS, Clustered Biological Submunitions. Fleet's
got 'em for long-term area denial. Little glass balls loaded with UVX."
"Aw shit, you mean that flesh-eating virus shit?"
"Yeah, that stuff. They case it in spheres of high-impact glass so nobody opens one by mistake. Missile-dumped;
subbies go brittle from atmospheric friction so when they hit, the shit inside goes everywhere. Real fast stuff,
spreads like hell."
"But what would these things need with a bioweap?"
The question had already crossed Ridgeway's mind. "Dunno," he knelt closer to the device, hoping to divine some
clue as to its origin. "Doesn't figure it came off the Ascension. They set out to build worlds, not scorch 'em."
"Maybe these bastards were planning a homecoming surprise if the neighbors upstairs ever came knocking."
Ridgeway tried to imagine the scenario. You're miles underground with a mining operation overhead. Could you
hear the drilling through that much rock? He glanced back towards the main cavern. Maybe so, maybe you know
something's coming but you don't know what. Maybe friends, maybe friends of the guys you ate.
He thought about his own protocol. Stuck in a box with unknown inbounds, his eyes fixed once more on the cube, you hope for the best and stick a claymore at the door.

As he looked at what by all logic was one hell of a claymore, a ghastly image entered his mind. By now a couple thousand Marines would be on the surface along with thousands of civvies and Rimmer regulars. Something like UVX, if this was a bio weapon, could cut them down like wheat. Who could guess how the shit might spread.

"Buggar me, Majah" Taz snarled as he lowered the magnum pistol. "We're not trained for bloody bio. Let's stuff some grenades in it and haul ass, let it eat the whole sodding Hive for all we care."

"Can't," Ridgeway shook his head. "If we knew it was a direct-contact agent, maybe. But if this shit is airborne transmissive, the whole cave becomes a Hot Zone. Maybe beyond. We can't take that chance."

Taz shrugged, then knelt by Ridgeway. "What if we're on the wrong track, Majah? What if it isn't a weapon?"

"What are you thinking?"

"You've seen these bastards, they're like bloody hermit crabs, all cobbled together from junk parts, right?"

Ridgeway nodded his concurrence. "So what are you thinking?"

Taz crouched a little lower, his voice strained with discomfort. "What if some of the parts these things are made of were scrapped from humans, from the crew?"

Ridgeway was surprised that Taz had come to a similar point of analysis. Humans cloned spare parts all the time, replacement organs and limbs a commonplace occurrence. But those parts were grown to be indistinguishable from original equipment. Grafting across species added a huge level of complexity. Still, Ridgeway thought, with nanotechnology in the mix, anything seemed possible.

"That's what I'm on about," Taz muttered, picking up on Ridgeway's rapid glances about the area. "Cryogenic shit, little blinky lights on each test tube. This isn't some big batch all made of the same stuff, it's individual samples of DNA, a bloody spare parts farm so they can go on cannibalizing people for parts and eating the leftovers."

The snake in Ridgeway's gut pushed its way up his throat on a rising column of bile. He quickly scanned one side of the cube, making a rough tally of rows and columns. Eighteen, maybe twenty vials to a row, about the same in height. Somewhere over six thousand individual test tubes racked and stacked. Accounting for losses, that added up to most of the empty cryotubes in the Ascension. The odds were too great for coincidence.

Ridgeway stood rapidly. "It goes with us."

Taz holstered his pistol and walked around the device like a mover who eyeballed a piano. With a deep squat he wrapped his plated arms around the steel frame and grabbed the larger metal rails. With a groan he dead-lifted the refrigerator-sized collection of glass and steel.

"Remind me again why I joined the Marines." Taz hissed through clenched teeth.

Ridgeway patted him in the back as he stepped to the lead. "If you wanted to sit on your ass you shoulda joined the Air Force."

Taz only grunted as he plodded after Ridgeway. The duo had barely covered three strides when Darcy's voice exploded on the Com.

"I don't know what you just did guys, but it got everybody's attention. You've got inbounds from Lima, Mary and Romeo and they're all moving fast. It's about to hit the fan boys. I'm going loud."

CHAPTER 33

A sharp whine ripped through the air over Ridgeway's head, a rifle's deep thunderclap hot on its heels. Somewhere behind the evacuating Marines, a spherical tank burst in a huge ball of vapor that ignited half a heartbeat later. Flame rolled across the Hive floor.

With a burning wall at his back, Ridgeway's entire focus turned forward. His CAR snapped through a three-point sweep as he jogged at an urgent pace, providing constant cover for Taz as they closed on the skid.

Three more rounds from the railgun struck points around the Hive, each one punctuated by a shuddering explosion. Columns of black smoke rose to the ceiling.

Ridgeway sidestepped at a bottleneck and motioned for Taz to pass. As he did, a new set of tremors rattled through the floor, beating out a thunderous rhythm. From the sound of things, the sniper was carving a line of destruction to bar pursuit.

Kick some ass, girl. The thought had barely crossed his mind when he realized that something was missing between the storming drumbeats. No whine, no thunderclap.

That isn't Darcy.

Ridgeway planted hard and torqued his upper body as the massive shape smashed through an intervening line of machinery. It came on like a rhino, crushing everything in its path. Streamers of flame trailed from its enormous legs.
Bigfoot.
Ridgeway's eyes went wide at the sheer size of the behemoth. The damn thing was pissed enough to run right through the fire.
Two grenades jumped from Ridgeway's rifle on pure reflex. The volatile munitions slammed barely an arm's length apart on the front of the uneven metal sphere.
The creature's torso rocked back for an instant, then rebounded with elastic acceleration. Through the growing pall of smoke, Ridgeway could see that two gaping holes had little affect on its mobility. The floor shook with renewed violence as Bigfoot charged.
"Go, go, go!" Ridgeway screamed as he aimed at the closest of Bigfoot's knees. The first grenade flew wide but the next two struck home. The joint splintered in a burst of metal and plastic. As the creature's full weight came down, the shattered limb snapped. Bigfoot pitched forward and crashed to the floor, bulldozing a trench of metal and rock.
Ridgeway had no false illusions of trying to finish it off. At best he'd bought a good head start.
Just stay down for a minute.
Bigfoot thrashed for barely twenty seconds before it hauled itself up on five remaining legs. Still connected by strands of sinew, the shattered limb swung wildly with every stride. Twice, the creature tripped on its own broken limb, allowing Ridgeway to add to his precarious lead.
The advantage was short-lived. Bigfoot's violent gait caused the final strands of fascia to tear away and the drum-sized severed limb fell to the wayside. The creature surged forward with new-found speed.
A freight-train rumble closed from behind and Ridgeway threw himself into a flat dive as a massive leg slammed down, hurling fragments of shattered stone in every direction. The Marine rolled frantically as impacts trailed with a piledriver's ferocity. Ridgeway scuttled across a stream of nanites and felt his hands slip out from beneath him.
Oh shit.
Ridgeway's senses exploded as something slammed him into the floor. The TAC skittered and broke into discordant lines that coalesced into the silhouette of an oak tree growing from his own chest. The curse on his lips hung unspoken, abandoned by airless lungs.
The huge blur leaned back and lifted the wire-splayed stump of its shattered leg from the chest of the prone Marine. The underside of the sphere clamshelled opened to reveal a cluster of cold glass lenses. Moving only the stump, Bigfoot assessed the amputation with mechanical detachment, as though noting for the first moment that half of the limb had been lost.
Ridgeway seized the apparent confusion and extended an empty right hand towards the exposed inner surface. A stream of liquid fire lanced out from his forearm and filled the compartment. The hatch slammed shut as the great mass staggered backward.
Ridgeway sucked for air as he rolled to his feet and launched his body over a section of pipe that ran parallel to the floor. As close as his own shadow, an intact foot crushed the plumbing into the floor.
Ground equipment squealed as another dark shape scrambled rapidly in Ridgeway's direction. A third silhouette bore in from above as Bigfoot wheeled back from its last charge. Motion closed from every side.
Too many--
The fringe of a gravitic field knocked Ridgeway to the floor as the skid hurtled past on his right. Metal crumpled as the heavy barge plowed into Bigfoot with horrific force. The nose of the floating skid climbed up across the creature's torso, the gravitic cushion peeling strips from the creature's side. A second leg crumpled under its own exaggerated weight and Bigfoot fell.
The skid wheeled about and Ridgeway could see Monster wrestle the controls with one good hand as he brought the craft to a hover. Taz lay prone on the deck, arm outstretched. "C'mon Majah!"
In a thunderous return, Bigfoot's mangled form rose from the floor. Ridgeway bolted up the side of the crumpled shell and launched himself from the apex. Carbon-clad hands met in a vise-like grasp as the skid lurched skyward. A powerful heave yanked him up over the rail and he sprawled across the deck.
Metal shrieked as a picket line of spiked legs, each the size of a man's arm, curled over the port rail. Sharp tips left pockmark holes across the duraluminum skin. In a blur of motion, a centipedal mass curled up and over the flattened rail. Mismatched legs bristled along both sides, fanning back from a lamprey-mouth carpeted with drill bits and grinders.
Fighting the sudden weight, Monster struggled to counter the sharp portsides list. Warning buzzers howled as the skid slewed wickedly into a yawing, downward spiral.
The creature slammed into Monster's back and pinned him against the console. A torrent of machine shop squeals filled the air as the lamprey's maw sealed itself flat against the big Marine.
Ridgeway's voice boomed over the maelstrom. "Down!"
Taz dropped to the deck beneath a sudden lance of covalent fire. White-hot metal sprayed as round after disruptive
round tore a chasm through the writhing invader. Ridgeway screamed in rage as the wound gaped wide, then peeled apart.

For a moment the headless body clung to the skid as black fluids vomited from the severed neck. At least a dozen legs kept a deathless grip that dragged the skid from the air. Suddenly the portside rail tore away with a squeal and the body tumbled from sight, ripping floor plates and skirting as it fell.

Monster lay motionless on the deck, the curved lamprey head still affixed to his back. Ridgeway heard the continued chatter of drill bits and threw his shoulder into the vibrating mass of metal. Armored fists pounded the forward edge, crushing metal with every blow.

In a sudden lurch the head peeled free and swung up like a heavy car hood. Whirring carbide bits chewed the air scant inches from Ridgeway's facemask, slinging specks of blood and carbon.

The skid clipped a tower and Ridgeway was thrown to one side. The maniacal head skidded across the deck, cutters still spinning madly. Eyes wide with adrenaline, Ridgeway threw a brutal kick that drove the bloody cuisinart through the gap in the rail.

His chest heaving, he scrabbled to the prone Monster. The shock of what he saw stole what little breath remained in Ridgeway's lungs.

Frayed carbon fiber edged the gaping hole where Monster's armor had finally given out. Shards of broken blades and chirred plating wallowed in the blood that ran from the wound in thick rivulets. With Monster's TAC long disabled, Ridgeway had no way to know if the sergeant was dead or alive.

The skid nosed up and settled into a wobbling hover, Taz braced at the controls. Ridgeway met his gaze and flicked a thumb toward the ceiling. The engine revved in reply, climbing quickly. Ridgeway sagged against a metal framework, thankful for the growing separation from the Hive floor.

He tracked down to the glass cylinders that shone with a soft emerald glow. Magnetic latches had kept a solid grip on the cargo throughout the roller-coaster ride. As far as Ridgeway could see, no trace of green splattered the deck.

With a groan Ridgeway stood to his feet. The haze of pain that radiated from his battered chest was so severe that his stomach threatened to eject whatever acids it contained across the inside of his helmet. Searching for one good breath of air, Ridgeway rocked his head back. As he did, his gaze swung up to the ceiling overhead.

The Spider stormed across the top of the Hive, zigzagging the inverted cityscape with an abandon that defied its great bulk. Muzzle flash sparkled from its forelimb and wild fluorescent streaks rained down from overhead. Several rounds thudded into the skid where the unmistakable flare of covalence burned craters in the deck.

"Hang on!" Ridgeway heard the shout as Taz slammed the throttle. The skid surged forward, gaining meager ground against the Spider's considerable speed.

Ridgeway wasn't interested in a fair race. "Darcy, on the ceiling. Nail his ass."

The only reply was static that crackled on the open channel. Ridgeway spun to the bow and scanned the jagged rock along the valley entrance. His eyes were drawn to the pall of smoke that rolled from a blackened gap in the stone.

Taz shouted from the wheel of the skid, pointing frantically at a figure that crawled from the smoldering hole. The vehicle dropped abruptly, nearly slamming into the cave floor.

Ridgeway leaned over the bow, poised to hurdle the front ramp and drop to the floor below. Wind from the skid tore the dense column of smoke into whispy veils and revealed the near-limbless thing that dragged itself across the ground. Smoke, or the steam of boiled blood, rose in swirling trails from the blistered body. A charred arm reached forward and grasped rough stone to haul itself another inch. Amid the smoking mass, Ridgeway could make out an armored shoulder plate. Marine armor.

"Oh my God." Ridgeway watched in shock as the crusted hand clawed for purchase on the rock floor. Amid charred flesh a cluster of steel blades scratched across the unyielding surface.

"It's not her!" Ridgeway blurted as he groped absently for his rifle. "It's not Darcy."

Before his hand could close on the weapon, the skid whipped into a sharp tail slide. The engine howled over the crackle of brittle stone as the powerful gravitic cushion swept along the ground. They slid over the crawling form, adding the wet sound of crushed melon to the ruckus. The skid completed its pirouette and revealed a wide, dark slick of flattened machinery and gore.

Taz growled from the driver's seat. "Then its not alive either."

Though impressed with the quick solution, Ridgeway's gaze scoured the area. Darcy was nowhere in sight. The Marine stood frozen, his attention locked on an icon that stood out black and motionless on the TAC. The sharpshooter symbol floated silently over the open hole in the ground, a dark glyph against the rolling ebony smoke. His throat went dry; the black marker was used only for body recovery. The tiny lifeline below the icon scrolled free of the peaks and valleys produced by a beating heart. A tremor rippled through Ridgeway's body and his legs wobbled beneath him.

An urgent shout dragged Ridgeway from his gutsick slide. The Spider's dark shape, clear of the Hive entrance, now
closed with undiminished speed. Other shapes scuttled in its wake; dark, aberrant silhouettes framed against the fiery backdrop of the Hive.
Ridgeway fixed on the icon and swallowed hard. Black icon. Dead. The words barely cleared his throat. "We gotta go."
"But Majah, we can't just leave--"
Ridgeway spun face to face with Taz and stabbed a finger toward the great ship that glittered in the distance. "I said MOVE!"
A cold sickness closed like a fist around Ridgeway's guts as the barge banked and accelerated. He watched in silence as the column of smoke fell behind and faded into the all-consuming darkness.

CHAPTER 34

Stitch loped down the hall like a competitor in a three-legged race, left arm draped across Merlin's shoulder. His damaged leg swung stiffly with every stride, a useless slab of lead. The nerve block deadened the pain enough to endure the jarring evac, but loss of all control in the limb and hip left him a veritable cripple. An unfamiliar burden bounced erratically against his ribs, the device wrapped in wads of stretchy insulation torn from a CryoTube. One hazard-striped corner of the metal box poked out of the cocoon and scraped along armored ribs.
Merlin gestured forward. "Break right at the next junction."
Stitch nodded brusquely and grunted through teeth welded by pain. Attached to Merlin like a siamese twin, he maintained the awkward stride-and-a-half gait as the two sought a route back to the turbolift, the Lobby, the way out.
The injury to his leg had ruled out a climb back up through the top of the CryoSphere. Instead, the two Marines found themselves in unknown corridors at the sphere's ground level. With luck, they would find a turbolift that could reach the Lobby floor. If not, Stitch would face a forty-story descent on a disintegrating femur.
Oorah.
"How ya doing?" Merlin barked the question, his own voice thick with strain.
"How do you think," Stitch snarled. "Wonderin' when you're gonna quit lagging."
Merlin's facemask pivoted around. "Anytime you're up for a race, you let me know."
"Cold day in hell when I can't outrun your candy assshiiiit…" Stitch lost the words in a slur of profanity as he came down hard on the leg. His weight dragged sharply on Merlin's shoulder for several floundering yards before he found his stride once again.
The medic sucked a sharp breath and gasped, "Can't leave you behind anyway, Major'd have my ass."
"Damn straight." Merlin hitched the medic's weight further up on his shoulder. The pair hooked left at the next intersection and slammed the brakes amid Merlin's sudden curse. "Son of a bitch!"
Stitch doubted that the characterization did justice to the obstruction in their path. It looked like the Grand Bitch herself.
A tapered column of stone jutted up through the floor and extended well into the ceiling. Just a slice, Stitch realized, of a huge stalagmite, but wide enough to block most of the corridor.
Stitch looked back and forth before he slumped against a door in the right hand wall and struggled to cement his bearings. The door swung in beneath his weight and Stitch nearly fell in to the room beyond. He edged left until his hip found solid support on the doorframe, then bent forward and wheezed, "You figure this one." He threw a blind wave at the massive barricade. "Gotta catch my breath."
Stitch struggled for air as Merlin paced slowly down the hall. The engineer's fingers tapped rapidly against his thigh as he surveyed the dead-end. When his head rocked up toward the ceiling, the fingers froze. Stitch followed the gaze.
The bottom half of a tool cart stuck down through the ceiling, the remainder all too easily pictured sticking up through the floor above. Though juxtaposed, neither showed signs of damage. They simply coexisted. Merlin reached up with one hand and tapped the cart, hard armor ringing on sheet metal. He gripped one of the castor wheels and gave it a solid push. The cart held fast, fused into the framework of the ship. "I never woulda believed it."
"Whassat?" Stitch asked breathlessly.
"The whole wormhole bit." He nodded toward the ceiling. "Shit gets unsolid, stuff overlaps. This thing falls through the floor and gets stuck halfway. This is what happens when good science goes bad."
Stitch bobbed his head in return. "Bitch luck huh? Zillion light years of empty space and these poor bastards intersect with a rock."
Merlin’s hands settled on his hips as he took a step back and looked once more at the huge spike of rock that passed through the ship. “Guess it coulda been worse.”

“How you figure?” Stitch could image few fates worse than the nightmare around him.

The engineer answered in a flat tone, his eyes never drifting from the obstruction. “Coulda come out inside a star.” Stitch fell silent, the recorded message still fresh in his mind. Survivors of the accidental jump found themselves trapped inside a ball of cold stone. Terraformers established a breathable atmosphere but with no sun and no soil, nothing grew. Years passed in an endless fight to keep the ship alive. Appearing in the core of a sun would have been fatal, but at least it would be quick.

“Would you have done it?”

“Done what?”

“Put everybody back in cryo,” Stitch said quietly as he patted the device on his side. “Leave a few beacons like this one and hope the tubes held out till somebody arrived.”

The engineer didn’t turn, but answered as he paced around the stalactite. “Shit, I dunno.” He shrugged and shook his head slowly. “Self-contained tubes, each one’s supposed to last a couple hundred years. Popsicles don’t eat, they don’t need warm environments. As far as crapshoots go, it probably had the best of limited odds.”

A shudder passed through the medic as he thought about the haggard narrator on the beacon’s transmission. "I meant would you wanna be one of the guys who stayed out.”

At that, Merlin turned and his head bowed with a sigh. “Somebody had to do it. Hell those guys kept shit working on this tub two, maybe three times as long as anybody would have dared hope. Nobody coulda guessed that it would go on that long.”

“Immortality isn’t all it’s cracked up to be,” Stitch muttered. “Not like that.”

He drifted into silence as Merlin sorted through a pitifully small handful of supplies. “You’re looking at it, three strips of LSC, two bricks of Therm and a wad of Detonex.”

Stitch picked up one of the metal strips and turned it slowly in his hand. An unassuming piece of channel by all appearance, Stitch knew the angled titanium was lined with a very fast high explosive. When detonated, the Linear Shaped Charge would produce an explosive scalpel that could slice a steel girder. But three strips wouldn’t go far against a ton of rock.

A deep tremor echoed from somewhere astern. Stitch handed the explosive to Merlin and hopped along the wall back to the intersection.

Another tremor, this one even deeper in tone.

Getting closer, Stitch realized, close enough already to make out the thump of rapid footfalls. He drew the MP17 and popped the magazine from its well, glancing furtively at the few remaining rounds. With a slap, he re-seated the mag. His eyes never drifted from the hallway as he spoke.

“Whatever you’re gonna do Merl, do it now.”

Merlin’s voice came back quickly, flattened by a detachment borne of focus. “How far?”

“Hard to tell, but it’s coming fast.” He listened to the growing volume. The crack of a bursting door reverberated sharply.

“A minute, ninety seconds on the outside.” Stitch heard Merlin curse under his breath amid the sound of sledgehammer impacts.

The noise from astern grew louder, close enough now for Stitch to make out the whine of pneumatic pistons. “Make that forty five.”

He glanced over his right shoulder to see Merlin wedged into the narrow gap along the left edge of the hall. Light poured through from the far side but the opening wouldn’t possibly allow them to wriggle through. Stitch’s eyes flicked aft once more. "Thirty seconds partner, if we’re gonna get through that thing we need to move now.”

His fingers closed on the subgun’s molded grip and drew the stock firmly to his shoulder. “Twenty!”

The tremors resolved into frightening clarity, their source no more than one corner away from view.

Out of time, Stitch thought with grim resignation as he keyed the targeting laser. But I can buy Merlin a chance.

“Haul ass, Merlin--” The shout was cut short by the crash of a heavy door that burst from the wall. Something huge slammed itself into the reinforced doorframe, a broad mass of short, stocky legs and huge snapping teeth. The fleeting image looked to Stitch like the hellish child of a bulldog and a great white shark. The doorframe split with a brittle pang and Jaws surged through the gap.

Stitch squeezed the trigger and watched as starburst impacts rippled across the dark silhouette. The thunderous beat of charging feet devoured the subgun's chatter.

Something yanked Stitch backwards with great force, the subgun's final rounds scattering on an erratic line across the ceiling. Then the world was lost in darkness and the concussion of high explosives.
CHAPTER 35

Ridgeway fought to keep the skid level as it hugged the ceiling. Smoke poured from the hole in the port side, an acrid black plume that marked the vehicle's path. The dead starship stretched out below them, specks of light glimmering from a million points across her massive hull.

Two sharp bangs resonated from within the skid. Ridgeway gripped the controls against another lurch into bucking frenzy. Instead of turbulence, he got Taz.

"It's wired Majah!" The young Marine's upper torso popped up from the engine hatch. "The charge is planted right up against the coil housing. You set it off and sure as shit the core'll go off like the fourth of bloody July."

"What broke down there?"

Taz fired off a dismissive wave. "Don't worry about it. The bloody bug tore a coolant line so the engine's running hot. Too much heat and the Detonex might cook off on it's own. I punched out a couple of floor plates to let the cold air come through."

Ridgeway nodded in approval, developing a fondness for the Aussie's brute force innovation. He tapped the command console and the skid lurched uneasily into a side-slip just below the ceiling. He dropped almost three meters to avoid a ridge of stalactites.

Three and an half might have been better, Ridgeway winced as the lowest spike of ebony rock clipped the skid and left fragments of brittle stone scattered across the deck. Taz rolled to one side as the broken spire missed him by inches.

The Aussie popped up and turned sharply toward the con but said nothing. Ridgeway could imagine the glare that burned behind the carbon mask. He shrugged and muttered, "Yeah, sorry."

Taz mumbled something and stepped around to the wheel. "Howzabout I drive and you check on Gunny?" The shoulder that bumped Ridgeway to one side made it clear that the question was rhetorical. He looked down at the recumbent form propped against the bow ramp and said in a low tone, "It's yours, get us to the Papa-Three."

"Rojah that."

Ridgeway moved forward and dropped to one knee. Monster had a small touchpad in his hands, the device connected to his armor by a rope of fiber optics. The sergeant moved slowly, challenged by the task of fine motor control.

"How ya doin?" Ridgeway spoke over the din of the engine, trying not to shout.

"Like shit." Monster slurred. His hand opened and allowed the touchpad to slip to the deck. "Life support is running but that's about it. Exo's shot."

Ridgeway had been stunned that Monster was alive at all. Still, he frowned as he processed the news. While Monster's armor could still provide heat and oxygen, the system of electroactive polymer cables that served as the armor's muscles had failed. The gravely injured Sergeant now wore un-powered armor.

"Lemme see." He placed a hand on Monster's right shoulder and stepped around to assess the damage. The sight made him draw a sharp breath.

Ragged trenches criss-crossed the pack that housed the power supply and vital systems. One of the thick scapular plates had torn away completely and the other was spider-webbed with fractures. The feed track for the Gatling hung broken and empty. Thick gobs of blood covered the ravaged mechanics.

"Shit Gunny, you've got--"

Monster's hand grabbed the front of Ridgeway's armor in a grasp that felt like the suit was still powered. He yanked Ridgeway so close that the two helmet domes touched. "Nobody quits."

Ridgeway looked at the shawl of injuries, "Listen to me--"

"Nobody," Monster said, his voice rock hard. "Are we clear?"

Ridgeway slumped, recognizing both the logic and the futility of argument. He nodded slowly. "Crystal."

Monster's grip relaxed and his deep voice softened as he extended the open gauntlet. "All right then. Give me a hand and let's kick this fucking door down."

CHAPTER 36

Jaws rounded the corner so fast that it ripped away a piece of left-side wall before it skidded to a halt. Its immense mouth snapped convulsively, baring a crescent of jagged triangular teeth that scissored together like a piston-driven beartrap. Standing now in the dead-end strip of hallway, it shook in what seemed a frenzy of anger.

Nothing stood between the creature and the huge geologic obstruction. To the left, smoke drifted from a newborn cleft burned through the wall. The channel, too small for the creature's bulk, was barely large enough to allow a
human to wriggle past the column of stone. Light poured from the far side of the scorched opening. The shambling mass of junk stepped forward, spun back, then turned to the barrier. Mechanical feet shuffled until it threw itself at the gap with a fury. Powerful jaws tore massive shark-bite chunks from the damaged wall as it ripped, thrashed and hammered its body into the widening crevice.

With a flash, the wads of Thermalite plastered along the top of the makeshift tunnel went off, a sudden spike of over eighteen hundred degrees. White-hot liquid steel poured down across the creature's back and legs. Particles of Thermalite burned craters through the creature's outer shell. One rear leg, knee poised high at the moment of incineration, came down a charred stump. In an explosion of sound that was at once organic and synthetic, the creature screamed.

Stitch watched Merlin roll out from behind the door, CAR in hand. The engineer's rifle burned a hellish breach into the creature's flank. A second leg disintegrated under the merciless touch of covalence gone awry. Steam boiled from the gaping holes in Jaw's back as thermalite continued to blaze.

Wedgeled and unable to turn, the creature thrashed violently. It drove forward instead, away from the onslaught until it broke through with a sudden lurch and pitched forward to collapse on the floor beyond with a horrendous thump.

Stitch looked at Merlin, whose muzzle remained fixed on the smoking hole. He stared into the gap and watched for movement.

Only flame moved in the fissure, spreading fast. The Thermalite had kicked off a fire that now grew rapidly. Feeding on a smorgasbord of combustibles, the flames rolled up the wall and fanned out across the ceiling.

Stitch looked up as the fire oozed overhead like a living thing. He shouted over the growing roar. "If we're gonna go, we'd better go now." He pointed at the ragged gap left by the creature's passage, now twice as wide as the one created by Merlin's small breaching charge.

For a moment he considered the strength needed to rip through that much steel. Stitch glanced at Merlin. "You figure it's dead?"

Merlin shrugged in a half-committal gesture. "Dead, dying or just pissed off; either we go now or we cook. We'll figure the rest out on the other side." The engineer took Stitch's outstretched hand and hauled him to his feet.

With a groan Stitch hopped twice on his good leg to catch his balance. He put a hand on Merlin's shoulder and grumbled, "No time like the present." and the two Marines bolted into the flaming portal. Stitch split from Merlin as both men hurled themselves toward opposing walls. Eyes swept across the corridor their gazes merged on the floor ahead, on... nothing.

Stitch snapped around, a sick moment's fear that the creature had somehow mimicked their deception and lay in wait behind them. Only flame and rock stood to his rear. Less than a heartbeat elapsed before he pivoted forward once more. "Clear" Stitch said with forced conviction.

"Clear" Merlin confirmed.

His eyes fixed on the darkness ahead, Stitch swallowed hard. "Figure it crawled off to die?"

"Dunno," Merlin replied mechanically. "Let's hope so." The engineer took several cautious steps forward, the CAR snapping from point to point as he advanced.

Stitch nodded and his arms went slack. The fading adrenaline rush was already giving way to a new wave of pain. He hobbled forward, one hand on the beacon while the other gripped the wall. "I don't wanna be here when it gets back."

Merlin shifted the CAR to his left hand and stepped under the medic's outstretched arm. They covered two lengths of corridor before Stitch spotted turbolift doors at the end of the hall. Four levels above Sickbay, the two had to cover a lot of ground before they reached the Lobby floor. That still left a lot of climbing and hiking. As crippling spasms of pain crawled up his back, a thought flickered once more through the medic's mind.

Merlin grunted. "You really thinking about it?"

Beneath his mask, Stitch chuffed. "That transparent, huh?"

"Shit," Merlin muttered "If I had that leg I'd think about it. But do we have the time?"

Stitch had given the matter a fair bit of thought. "I'm betting it's a function of injury. The worse you're hurt, the longer it takes. Darcy went over an hour because she was torn all to hell. Just about every system she had was shut down or in shock. One big hole," he chuffed, "hell, ten minutes, maybe twenty."

Merlin shook his head slowly. "Yeah, but to have that shit crawling all over you, all through you..." Revulsion tinged his voice.

Stitch wheezed, his breath gilded with pain. "Sometimes you reconsider your priorities, besides," he tapped one of the kits on his belt, "that's why God gave us narcotics. I didn't say anything about being awake. Screw that."
Though badly hurt and dog-tired, the Marines laughed, the senseless laugh of the damned that bubbled to the surface when dying no longer seemed like the worst of alternatives. Propped against one another, the two staggered into the curved hall that wrapped around the turbolift shaft. The door stood only yards away. They moved through piles of debris, like so many others scattered throughout the ship. But only one pile was smoking.

Stitch felt himself thrown forward as the mass of living wreckage erupted from the floor, blackened jaws gaped wide. The sickening crunch of steel echoed from behind as he slammed into the door. Bursts of light and pain starred his vision as he slid to the ground. Fumbling for a weapon and finding none, Stitch looked back and felt the bile rise in his throat.

Merlin was pinned beneath the charred and smoking hulk. The engineer's CAR lay in pieces, its receiver crumpled into the wreckage of Merlin's left glove. The rest of Merlin's arm was clamped in the gnashing jaws. Though badly wounded, Merlin slammed a punch into what should have been the creature's neck. The armored fist drove elbow-deep and a gout of dark fluid sprayed from the hole. Merlin yanked back with a scream, dragging a fistful of entrails.

In response, Jaws snapped at Merlin's right hip and found it's mark. The heavier armor held fast, but the joints gave way beneath tons of wrenching torque. Pieces of Merlin tore away as the beast shook him like an angry dog. An armor plate, one of several that bridged the curve from hip to ribs, sprang free and skittered across the hallway. Blood, dark and arterial, geysered from the broken right arm that flopped about like the limb of a crash-test dummy. Stitch shoved aside the foam-wrapped beacon as he groped for his last grenade. Padding tore and the device slapped hard against the floor as Stitch pulled the explosive sphere.

His gaze fell on Merlin's bloody form. If not already dead, the grenade would certainly finish him. Me as well, Stitch realized as he keyed the release, a modern-day equivalent to pulling a cotter pin. A sick snarl pulled across his face as he looked at his friend.

You go, we go.

Without warning, Jaws froze. It's frame shifted bolt-upright as far as its mangled legs would allow. Bloodstained teeth glimmered obscenely and tiny bits of Merlin fell free as the angled blades slowly rasped one against another. The oversized mandible sucked back into it's skull.

With a drunken lurch the creature spun ninety degrees, the heavy legs trodding absently on Merlin as if he were a forgotten doormat. In abrupt, cyclic motions the creature hunkered down, then raised itself once more as if seeking a better vantage point.

Twelve meters, maybe a little more.

Twelve meters, maybe a little more.

With a stiletto snap the climbing blade on his right arm levered out, rotating ninety degrees from the hand that clutched the grenade. Stitch reached back and drove the tip into the floor, wincing at the sound as his eyes flashed to Jaws.

The creature gave no sign of noticing. Stitch pulled with all his strength and the wicked point squealed as it etched a jagged furrow across the floor. He bore down harder and willed the blade to bite.
It did. With a heave of one of the few working limbs left between the two Marines, Stitch hauled himself backwards, dragging Merlin in his wake. He reached the closed doors and used the blade-tip once more to press the button. He couldn't remember if the lift chimed on arrival and found himself praying that the electronic bells, if they existed, would fall among the ship's countless broken items.
The doors parted soundlessly and Stitch resumed his stab-and-pull pilgrimage. With each agonizing stroke, the medic's eyes were glued on the wide, dark shape that wobbled further and further down the hall.
Thunk.
The sound brought a jolt of alarm before Stitch realized that he had blindly stuck the blade into the back wall of the turbolift. He drew his body up against the wall as far as he could go and sighed as the doors began to close.
They just as suddenly reversed, their sensors noting the engineer's armored foot that stuck out into the hallway. Dammit, Stitch hissed, as he struggled to pull Merlin into his lap. The engineer's torso slid up against Stitch, his back to the medic's chest like a drowning victim being hauled through the water. Stitch wrapped his left arm around Merlin's collarbones while his right reached out to hook the trailing leg.
The grenade in his grasp made that hand ineffective, but he was loathe to sacrifice their final weapon. Stitch took two clumsy swipes with his closed fist, hoping to bat Merlin's leg hard enough to clear the door. The abrupt motion caused both Marines to lurch and Merlin groaned.
The sharp clunk of metal against floor had little meaning, even less than the orange light on the box that now flickered slower and slower. With a descending whine the device shut down. Fear gripped his chest as Stitch looked down the hall.
Jaws shook its head as if jerked from a deep slumber. It looked in both directions before it turned fully around. Even in the streaks that divided the corridor into patches of light and shadow, Stitch could see the battery of mechanical eyes zoom and adjust, fixing on the open turbolift. The metal jaws burst from their fleshy encasement, still dripping with bits of shredded Marine. Backlit against a wall of fire, Jaws charged.
Stitch hurled the grenade into the creature's path, reaching forward from the end of the throw to clamp down on Merlin's knee-plate. His fingers curled over the forward edge and he yanked back fiercely. A full second passed before the door sensors registered the movement and began to close.
"Two," he muttered.
The grenade hit Jaws on the shoulder and bounced off to the left.
"Three."
The doors slid shut, closing off the image of the beast that thundered in like a freight train. Stitch wrapped both arms around Merlin's chest.
Four.

CHAPTER 37

Fog closed over the dark cube, masking the bubbles that rose to the pool's surface. Luminous coolant ran off his armor in sheets as Ridgeway pulled himself up over the skid's rail.
"Think it'll work Majah?"
The barge climbed as Ridgeway rolled onto the deck. "It'll have to."
In reality, Ridgeway knew that the decision was as much a lack of options as anything else. Submerging the cube in the lake would not conceal it for long, but Ridgeway knew that extended timeframes had ceased to matter. For the Marines, it had come down to now-or-nothing.
Light poured from the hull breach high above Papa-Six. As the skid closed in on the gaping hole, Ridgeway reeled off directions. "We still can't raise Stitch or Merlin. They should be somewhere along the straightest line from the Sphere to the Lobby. Taz, you find 'em and bring 'em here, double-time."
"Rojah that."
Ridgeway continued without a break. "Monster, you're at the base of the Tower. Anything moves inside and you let me know." The skid swerved, its demands for constant attention grew more petulant with every moment. Ridgeway cursed under his breath as he countered the imbalance.
"Once I drop you off," he continued, "I'll arm this bitch, send it up on autopilot and blow it as soon as it reaches the roof. I'll hold the perimeter until you make it back with the troops."
"But Majah, you can't stand off those bastards by yourself."
Ridgeway leaned forward at the wheel. "This isn't up for a vote. You have your job so do it." The barge scraped against the side of the hull with a nails-on-chalkboard screech. Taz took two steps back and rocked his weight on the balls of his feet, preparing for the running leap.
Ridgeway's hand closed on the Aussie's shoulder, his voice calm in the midst of crisis. "Get my team out of there
Taz. I'm counting on you."
Taz paused for an instant. "I will Majah. Count on it." Then he took two running strides and launched himself from
the skid. Taz cleared the twisted folds of ship skin and tumbled roughly across the grated floor beyond.
Monster stepped up to the launch point and extended a scarred gauntlet.
Ridgeway took his hand in a firm grasp. "We're not done here." he said quietly, "Not by a long shot."
"Hell I know that," Monster said with a dismissive air that belied his exhaustion. "I'll just stick with the pups to
make sure they get along."
"You do that."
A cold chill flooded Ridgeway's heart as Monster turned to jump. The mangled armor, the Gatling all but empty.
Survival rested on the man within the shell.
He watched as Monster leaped, falling far short of the Aussie's mark. He belly-flopped on a curved flap of hull skin
and grabbed frantically for purchase. With just his right hand, Monster dragged himself over the crest and down to
the deck beyond.
Ridgeway felt a moment of awe. Monster moved not like a collection of fractured bones and torn flesh, but like a
man with a mission. The two figures set off across the catwalks to the distant Tower.
A rough shudder from the engine reminded Ridgeway that he could not afford to monitor their progress. With his
own mission to accomplish, he pushed the prow of the skid into a right-hand slide and spiraled down to the lake.
He brought the vehicle to a hover less than a meter above the surface and punched the final codes to arm the
Detonex charge. Tripping the autopilot to ACTIVE, he scooped up his rifle, knowing that only two grenades
remained in the spent weapon. With a silent prayer on his lips he watched the flatbed rise to its rendezvous with
incineration. The hope of every surviving Marine rose with it.
Tentacles of black smoke trailed the vehicle as it ascended, pouring through the panels that Taz had punched out of
her underbelly. A violent cough echoed down from the engine within.
C'mon sweetheart, just a little further. Ridgeway willed the skid to rise as he glanced back at Papa-Six. In a few
minutes the dark silhouettes of his Marines should begin to emerge from the sunken doorway. As if in response to
his own thoughts, a blip on the TAC marked the first sign of movement.
Ridgeway gripped his rifle and looked up as the warning tone's scream overlapped the pulsing red bracket in a single
neural flash.
The movement centered directly above him.
It looked like a hand falling from high on the hull, a hand the size of a tractor. The spider's outstretched limbs were
spread like jointed sections of telephone pole as it slammed down on Ridgeway like an iron bomb.
The world exploded in a numbing crash of light and sound as Ridgeway was driven below the surface of the lake.
Sapphire haze sloshed violently across his vision as the shockwave drove Ridgeway's tumbling form away from its
epicenter.
A second wave pushed the Marine across sharp rock before he could regain his footing. Massive mechanical legs
churned the luminous coolant into froth. The creature was enraged, frantic, thrashing desperately through the fog.
Ridgeway twisted away and dove back into the shallow liquid, desperate to buy separation.
When he surfaced, Ridgeway could see that the Spider had been injured in the fall. The stolen CAR clattered on the
creature's shoulder, its barrel bent askew. Ridgeway's own rifle was lost, now somewhere on the bottom of the lake.
The dense liquid concealed the weapon as well as it did the cube.
Only one priority burned in Ridgeway's mind. Blow the skid.
He spun his focus to the TAC and found nothing. Only a tiny treble buzz marked the system's demise. No TAC, no
transmit. Ridgeway's fury and frustration boiled so fiercely that even the pain in his body was forgotten.
The Marine lunged to one side beneath a mammoth limb that swept overhead. The Spider drew itself upright, rising
above the shimmering surface.
With three slogging strides Ridgeway launched himself into another shallow dive. His armored hands grabbed one
jutting rock after another on the lake's floor until he slammed into a mass of metal.
On pure reflex, Ridgeway threw a powerful fist that crumpled steel on impact. He blinked rapidly in surprise before
he realized that he had just punched a truck. At least the remains of a truck, lying battered and broken in a shallow
lake.
Corroded metal crumbling in his grasp, Ridgeway clambered up the dead vehicle and over the driver's side of the
cab. The door was gone and Ridgeway could see debris scattered throughout the gutted interior.
The lake erupted behind him with volcanic fury. Ridgeway tried to jump past the door but the pitted frame collapsed
beneath his weight. He tumbled into the cab, bounced hard across the center console and tore away a line of half-
eaten flatscreens on the dash.
The truck heaved violently amid a crushing bang and the din of ripping steel as the spider threw itself into the attack.
Ridgeway thrashed in the cramped space before a second lurch threw him down into the footwell as the rear of the truck pitched up dramatically.

Items tumbled into the cab through an open panel between the two seats. Rations in foil packages, wrenches and screwdrivers. Amid a bundle of oily rags and a small hydraulic jack, Ridgeway caught the flash of a black rubber grip that slid across the opening. A pistol grip.

The cab fell flat with a tooth-jarring slam as the sound of tearing metal was replaced by another violent thrashing in the lake. Something other than Ridgeway had grabbed the Spider's attention.

He was not about to question the diversion. Ridgeway hurled himself between the seats and fished wildly for what he prayed was a gun. Slithering madly, he forced his body further into the dark cabin until his gaze fell on the Thermalite.

Merlin's warning resurfaced as he shuffled through the crap strewn in the darkness. Under a tangled wad of coveralls, his hand closed almost naturally on a textured rubber grip.

Shotgun, Ridgeway recognized with a measure of surprise, an old-fashioned pump. He pressed the release and half-pulled the slide. The red plastic case of a large-gauge shell sat nested in the chamber. The word SABOT was stamped along the waist of the shell. Ridgeway looked at the tube. Seven rounds max, he thought, that's if the tube is full. He had no time to pump the rounds free and check.

Outside the cab, the wild flailing continued unabated. Cautiously, Ridgeway stuck his head up through the missing driver's door.

The Spider writhed in the lake, slapping its forelimbs madly in the coolant. One limb was disintegrating before Ridgeway's eyes, the metal foaming with grotesque effervescence.

The Marine looked back along the truck where he fixed on the barrel-sized drum that hung from the mangled frame. The cylinder, now crumpled and split, drizzled a stream of Hex. The word OVERFLOW could still be seen stenciled across its upper surface, just below the word WARNING.

"That's what you get for ignoring warning labels motherfucker." Ridgeway muttered the words with a malicious snarl as he raised the shotgun. The cluster of camera-like eyes seemed his best target. If he didn't kill it, he could at least try to blind it. Ridgeway drew careful aim at one of the bobbing red orbs and fired.

A tongue of muzzle flame licked from the barrel and the glass sphere exploded from the Spider's skull in a cloud of glittering fragments. Ridgeway fired three more rounds in rapid succession, punching one fist-sized hole after another through the creature's whiplashed cranium.

The Spider pitched forward and collapsed into the lake. Ridgeway tracked its fall with the shotgun, wary of a feint. Without waiting for motion, he hammered two more rounds down the creature's centerline, starting at what he took for the base of its skull.

Ridgeway paused, breathing heavily. A ragged sound echoed from high above.

The skid wobbled badly as the auto-pilot fought to maintain its programmed location, but the slow death of the engine took a toll. The computer was not designed to compensate for such wild surges in power and the skid slammed into the stone ceiling with a screech. Bits of the bow ramp broke off and fell to the lake.

Ridgeway slapped the side of his helmet as he struggled to re-boot the TAC, but the system doggedly refused. He looked desperately for a way to trigger the Detonex before the skid lost power. He considered the shotgun in his hands and weighed the odds of throwing one round through the missing floor plate to hit the charge inside.

One in a million shot, Ridgeway thought, something even Darcy would have been loathe to try. If he hit the engine instead, the skid would fall out of the air and slam into the lake. The shock would likely set off the charge, unleashing the fury of a gravitic core breach in Ridgeway's face instead of against the ceiling.

Bad idea, Ridgeway told himself, but he had no other.

Bracing as firmly as he could atop the crumbled truck, Ridgeway raised the shotgun's muzzle. He pushed his vision as hard as the optics would allow and peered into the choking smoke, hoping to find a flat disk inside a bucking, veering hole.

One in a million my ass, he chided his own audacity, more like one in a billion.

He could see nothing but the black smoke that poured from the hole in thick, tuberculin coughs. A stalactite clipped the damaged bow and put the skid into a slow spin. Ridgeway strained to track the oscillating target.

Dammit, Ridgeway snarled. One shot, just give me one shot.

Ridgeway exhaled slowly as he drew the slack from the trigger. Riveted on the target, he never saw the monstrous tattered arm until it smashed into his legs.

CHAPTER 38

The thunderclap of the skid's detonation was overdue and Taz glanced back as he dashed across the catwalks. He
was just shy of the Tower when the sounds of gunfire rang from outside the ship. "Majah's in trouble," Taz snapped over his shoulder, "We gotta help him."

Monster answered the statement with a shove that propelled Taz even faster. "I'm goin, I'm goin," Taz bitched. A second volley of gunfire sounded, heavy booms that came from no weapon in the Marine's inventory. The pace was quick but measured. Whatever was shooting was taking aim, and nothing was shooting back.

Taz started to turn back when a second shove sent him sprawling. Cursing madly, he rolled up to one knee. "Shit Gunny, we--"

The shape above him looked like a flattened egg on a mass of whipping tentacles. By far the smallest of the creatures, it moved with a striking agility. The oval body angled down, a dozen shimmering orbs spread across the front of its hull. Amid the eyes, a cluster of small appendages flicked in Gorgonesque fashion, one pair sparking with voltage as they touched. A flat metal bar extended like a tongue turned on-edge, the curved edge a blur of spinning chain.

Taz drove his boot-heels into the creature's underbelly, but it held fast, anchored by the grasp of a dozen prehensile limbs. It forced itself down, driving the howling chainsaw blade closer and closer to the Aussie's facemask. Taz watched the blade dip inexorably closer until a dark shape plowed into the creature's side. Monster's crushing tackle drove the thing to the deck with a loud crash.

As Taz rolled to his feet the Gatling gave a short bark that ended as quickly as it began. Monster fired from one knee, the handful of rounds left in the chambers carving a short but horrific swath across the creature's face. It flinched away, then spun back with a fury. Monster roared, left arm pressed tight against his chest as he swung the Gatling like a massive club. The blow drove the oval body to the floor where the spinning blade threw a fountain of sparks. In a blur of ferocity the heavy gun swung down brutally again and again, sledgehammer blows that spalled metal plates from the creature's shell. When Monster paused, chest heaving, a crumpled ruin lay at his feet. "Crikey Gunny, I think you killed it."

Monster's only reply was a looping overhead blow that crashed down with so much force that the Gatling tore away from his arm. The creature's torso cracked open and a thick, dark sludge gushed from the wound. "Bloody hell." Taz could only whisper the words, awestruck at the display of feral violence. The fucking thing never got in a shot.

As he watched Monster back away, a second image flickered through his mind, the image of an angry young Marine who not so long ago stood on the verge of calling Monster out. Buggar me, his lip curled ruefully, what the hell was I thinking?

A deep, heaving growl in his chest, Monster staggered to the tower door and jabbed at the dark control switch. The door refused to budge, an ill-timed decision given Monster's state of mind. The sergeant hauled back and threw his right forearm into the door so hard that the metal rang. On the third blow it folded. He sagged against the now-open doorframe and motioned for Taz to pass.

As Taz reached the portal, a hand clamped down on his shoulder. He turned to the bloodstained figure. "Major's doin his job." Monster swallowed loudly, then huffed a deep breath. "Now I've done mine." The big sergeant leaned forward and hooked a thumb toward the turbolift just inside the door. "You find 'em, bring 'em home, that's your duty."

Taz tried to swallow the dryness in his throat. He only nodded and stepped through the door. The turbolift opened with a hiss and as he boarded, Taz realized what he wanted to say. He looked back at the battered figure that filled the doorway, and the dark cluster of snake-like arms that rose behind him.

Taz screamed.

The big Marine ducked as a metal arm smashed the doorframe just above his helmet. With a snarl Monster slammed his shoulder into the center of the flailing limbs. His legs pistonned madly as he drove the creature backward into the rail with such force that the metal snapped. Locked together, they tumbled from sight. "Noooooo!" Taz ran forward as the sounds of breaking steel echoed up from below. He reached the ledge to see the ragged gaps smashed through several catwalks below. Bits of metal rained down into the pool, tiny splashes speckling the huge ring of disturbance that spread across its radiant surface. He stared down at the lake until the ripple dispersed and the broken fog closed together once more.

A scream erupted from his lungs as he turned and slammed his fist into the wall. A second blow followed, four-knuckle dents aggregating on the smooth surface. At half a dozen he stopped and slumped against the lumpy, bowl-shaped depression. Curses of vengeance gave way to tortured mutterings.

Duty, he told himself, Monster's last words. Gotta find the team. Monster, Darcy, Ridgeway; he wondered for a moment if anyone was alive to find.
CHAPTER 39

The wide blood slick extended from the turbolift all the way to the Sickbay door, stretched out like a flat crimson serpent. Streaks of dark red gleamed against the industrial greys of the hallway.

The sanguine trail hooked sharply at the door where the wide pool gave mute testament to time spent trying to get the door to open. Few motion-sensors were attuned for bodies that dragged themselves across the floor.

Once past the door the blood slick curved to the right, avoiding the damaged floor. Merlin lay in a gloss red puddle, free from the remnants of his broken armor that now lay scattered about him. The last of his blood seeped from the wounds that covered his body. He breathed, weak and shallow, due largely to the stimulants Stitch had dumped in his system.

The medic dragged himself along the far wall, activating the system that he hoped would save Merlin's life. Dozens of monitors flickered with activity as he leaned back and fumbled to load the infuser with a brain-numbing mix of narcotics and Versed. If the first failed to keep him in oblivion, the second would insure that the ghastly images would be forgotten.

"Merlin, Stitch, do you copy?" The voice on the Com was broken but recognizable.

"Taz!" Stitch could barely speak, his voice a dry rasp. "We're in Sickbay, where are you?"

"On the way."

A small sigh escaped Stitch's lips. Cavalry's coming.

He looked across the room at Merlin and keyed the mike. "Taz, how long before--" The sound of movement in the hall cut short the medic's question.

That was quick, he thought with clouded amazement. The sound in the hall fell suddenly silent and a ripple of uneasiness crawled up the medic's spine. Too quick.

Stitch set the infuser on the floor and reached up to the lip of the console. Cursing against the pain, he dragged himself up the wall. His left leg hung rigid in a cast of carbon armor.

"Taz?" The heavy scrape that came from the hall was not the sound of a man in motion.

With a lurch, Jaws dragged itself around the corner, leaving behind its own trail of fluids. Whips of smoke still curled from the holes burned in its shell. The mangled creature's eyes locked on the medic and its mandible extended weakly. The sawtooth grin snapped only once.

Stitch tried to lean from the wall but could no longer balance on one leg. His chest rose and fell as the twin climbing spikes snapped out on both arms, edges glinting in the light. The medic took a deep breath and steeled himself for what he knew would be his last fight.

"All right motherfucker," he spat, "you're in MY house now."

The legless hulk gnashed its teeth with renewed defiance as Jaws heaved itself forward like a walrus on land. Thudding forward one heavy wet slap after another, the toothy slug squished along on a slick of its own leaking goo. Stitch raised the spikes to chest-level as the creature slowly closed. He spoke into the Com, a steely urgency his voice. "Taz, if you're coming, you'd better come quick."

The creature was only feet away when Taz's voice came back across the line. "I'm on the lift, almost to your level. Crikey it's a bloody mess in here"

Two more wet, heavy flops moved Jaws ever closer. The glistening teeth yawned wide, so close that Stitch could see the carrion scraps of human meat that dangled from each serrated blade. The creature drew itself in for the lunge that would bring those teeth down on his own immobile form. Stitch threw a wild, roundhouse right, swinging the heavy blade for all he was worth. As his arm swung wildly, he knew. "Not on my watch, you bloody shite."

Even grunted with such exertion, the accent was unmistakable. Stitch looked up to see the metal maw snapping inches from his face like a blood-frenzied shark, unable to comprehend why the beast slid backward.

"Not on my watch, you bloody shite."

Even grunted with such exertion, the accent was unmistakable. Stitch looked up to see Taz, both of his own blades buried in the creature's flank. The Aussie heaved backward, his feet scrabbling for purchase on the blood-slick floor. Another powerful grunt marked a second rearward lurch before Jaws seemed to grasp the change. It folded back, teeth swinging wildly aft as it snapped in the air. Taz lunged to one side, refusing to let go with what struck Stitch as a determination worthy of his namesake.

The medic winced as one blade tore free and Taz was whipped around in a bull-riders nightmare, avoiding not horns and hooves but a bite the envy of any Great White to swim the Barrier Reef. Taz held on doggedly, kicking aside the bloody jaws as they chomped ever closer. His feet caught floor and he heaved once more, throwing his full weight into the pull. The climbing blade snapped at the hilt and Taz launched back toward the door.
Stitch felt his heart sink as Jaws flopped on one side like a beached fish. The rough crumpled texture of the damaged floor beneath its belly helped it turn toward Taz. Stitch pushed himself forward, sprawling to the floor as his leg gave out beneath him.
"Game over, motherfucker" The words from the right side of the room were laced with wet derision. Jaws swung its head to the bloody wreck of a human being sprawled beneath the console. A severed piece of cable lay pinned beneath the shattered arm, a matching piece clutched in his bloody left hand. Merlin spoke through bloodstained teeth clamped down on a strip of electrical tape as he brought the exposed ends together.
"Cannonball."
With a caustic thrum, power surged and the damaged gravitic coil threw itself into overdrive. A massive spike of artificial gravity slammed down like a piledriver and crushed the uncomprehending Jaws into the floor.

CHAPTER 40

Ridgeway knew the shot went wide before the muzzle flash dissipated. Blindsided by the flailing limb, he sprawled across the roof of the truck. The shotgun skipped off the hood and disappeared with a splash.
A primal scream tore from Ridgeway's gut as his blades snapped open. He slashed at the nearest arm, cutting through a cluster of hose. The heavy limb sagged amid the squeal of pneumatic gas.
The truck's frame crumpled beneath Ridgeway's feet as the Spider heaved itself up in a whirlwind of thrashing arms. He fell beneath the sweep of a corroded stump, the hex-eaten metal bright and pitted. In rapid succession the creature threw two more blows. The limbs swept aimlessly through a wide arc as the head hung skewed to one side, empty sockets bejeweled with fragments of shattered lens.
Blind. The word flashed through Ridgeway's mind as a load-bearing limb stomped down to his left with a crash. He rolled to his right, sloshing through coolant as the roof crumpled down into the lake.
The huge torso hung just above Ridgeway's face. Battle-damage scored the collection of metal plates, stained dark by an amalgam of blood and oil. In the midst of it all, tucked in a shell of heavy steel, Ridgeway spotted a large fleshy mass that pulsed with blood vessels.
"There you are you son of a bitch." Ridgeway hissed the words as he drew his legs up beneath him. His right arm hauled back, fist closing around the blade's upper grip.
A crushing impact caught Ridgeway on the shoulder and suddenly coolant surrounded him. He struggled against tons of pressure, raking the limb with a flurry of blows. Somewhere in the blue haze, something powerful grabbed Ridgeway's arm. He was yanked up, bursting free of the lake to swing wildly in the creature's grasp.
The creature shook Ridgeway so violently that broken pieces of carbonite came loose. Curved plates spun away as Ridgeway's shoulder screamed. He fought the onrush of darkness and swung weakly with his free arm but struck only air. Blackness devoured him as his imaging system burned out with a flash. All sense of pain and motion subsided.
Several seconds ticked by before he realized that the shaking had actually stopped. Ridgeway's eyes fluttered, dull surprise forming as he noted the flicker that came with every blink.
Facemask gone. Deprived of artificial vision, his brain transitioned on its own to conventional sight. He squinted hard, trying to force the blur before him into clarity.
The creature leaned forward, close enough to bring the dangling Marine within arm's reach. Lost in numbness, he could only watch in silence as a section of torso rocked open like a bulldog's lower jaw.
Great, motherfucker's gonna eat me. His brain processed the thought with detached resignation.
With a broken grind the underbelly maw yawned toothlessly. Something moved in the depths of the throat, a fleshy mass that rose and extended, bringing the innermost surface to front.
Cold cut through the layers of pain that swaddled Ridgeway's brain. He struggled to focus at the thing that shuddered between the metal panels. Fluids drooled from the aperture, but Ridgeway's gaze went beyond the edge, fixed on the face within.
A single glassy eye sat deep in the left socket, framed by skin whose translucence was that of deep-sea fish who never saw sunlight. Only a hint of a nose remained, bracketing two misshapen nostrils that flexed rhythmically. Filigree capillaries fanned out across both cheeks, fine blue-grey threads that merged into strings as they swept down beneath sparse patches of dry grey beard. Thin wizened lips were drawn tight around blackened, toothless gums.
The pale eye squinted at Ridgeway as though unaccustomed to light. A corroded stump of mechanized arm reached up and, with unexpected care, brushed aside the remaining scraps of Ridgeway's helmet. The Marine was drawn even closer, where the ancient face peered at him with wordless intensity. A long moment passed before the hazy
eye widened. The hideous figure began to shudder, moisture glistened on the ghostly eye. How many parts could you replace and still be human? The ghastly answer stared at him from within the metal shell. The words spilled from his lips in a horse whisper. "The crew. You're part of the crew."
The spider slowly lowered Ridgeway to the ground and released its grip on his arm. He staggered for a moment, then looked at the shape before him, a living thing encased in metal. Ridgeway raised his hand and flexed fingers encased in carbon. Armor. The notion struck him like a thunderbolt. Not designed, but patched together like some kind of ad hoc evolution, layer on layer, year upon year.
He looked up at the ancient face, breath fogging in the intense cold. "I didn't... we didn't," his mind burned with the enormity, "recognize each other." Ridgeway had no idea if the creature could understand his words.
"Run!" Ridgeway barked, urgently motioning the creature back. He grabbed the doorframe and yanked, splitting Hex-eaten metal. The spider stood motionless, gazing at the Marine with its one pale eye. "RUN!" Urgent fear clogged his voice as he repeated the command. Ridgeway shoved a battered mechanical leg but the creature wouldn't budge. "It's gonna fall, right here. This is all gonna blow!"
The spider's heavy forelimb reached up and planted itself against Ridgeway's chest. When it shoved, Ridgeway toppled back in a sprawl. "Wait," he sputtered as he floundered in the lake. "you don't understand."
The sound of tearing metal stopped Ridgeway in his tracks. He does understand. The roof of the rear compartment folded back with an agonized squeal. As the Spider brought the stump of a second limb into play, a third shoved Ridgeway farther back as effortlessly as one would push a child from a powertool. The Marine backed away in slow, sloshing strides. Without warning, something lanced through the air like a thunderbolt, the streak ripping past the spider's torso. A voice crackled over the Com, weak and gravelly. An impossible voice. A dead voice. "Get down."
Darcy?
Ridgeway spun around and stared into the long dark cavern. "No, NO!! Hold your fire, hold your fire!"
He turned back to the truck where the Spider had clamsheled the cabin apart and now crushed the truck's sidewall down into the lake, exposing the cargo within. Mechanical arms reached inside, lifting the bound blocks of thermalite into view.
From within the core of the creature's ruined frame, the tear-streaked face looked at Ridgeway before the eye closed and the head bowed low. It raised the incendiaries high overhead. It'll blow the skid. Ridgeway saw the chain reaction, massive heat rising to engulf the vehicle above. He choked out a whisper. "The thermalite Darcy, hit the therm" as he dove beneath the surface. A streak of white-hot plasma ripped through the air and slammed into the wire-strewn package. Even underwater the shockwave hit Ridgeway like a sledgehammer as twenty kilos of thermalite transformed the truck, the Spider and a couple thousand gallons of coolant into a column of superheated steam that rose like a nuclear cloud. With a temperature of over eighteen hundred degrees, it enveloped the overstressed skid. The gravitic core of the skid went off like a suitcase nuke. Huge chunks of rock rained from above, crashing down on the charred bit of lake bed that until moments ago had been the truck and the Ascension's last guardian.

CHAPTER 41
Taz found Dan Ridgeway flat on his back, drifting in and out of consciousness. Blood ran in red rivulets from both of his ears, pooling in the hollows above his collarbones.
"Majah! Can you hear me?"
Ridgeway's eyes drifted for a moment, rolling beneath half-closed lids before they fixed on the anxious corporal. His right hand rose awkwardly.
"Crikey but you've been through the bloody meatgrinder." He tried to count the injuries that criss-crossed the figure at his feet but even gross assessment proved daunting. Taz couldn't tell where one injury ended and the next began. "Don't worry Majah, we got you reserved at a table for one."
Ridgeway's expression remained distant.
"Just as well," Taz muttered. Ridgeway hadn't seen the machine used properly. Even now Merlin lay in quiet repose as his injuries were pieced together with microscopic care. He hefted Ridgeway from the ground, careful to avoid needless josteling.
"Can you walk?" Taz shouted, hoping to penetrate the haze that seemed to enshroud the bigger man. Ridgeway nodded slowly and he took a hesitant step. His weight wobbled aimlessly.
"Whoa there Majah," Taz said firmly, "let's take it one step at a time there, eh?"
The senior Marine pulled up short and waved a hand toward the bowl-shaped depression burned into the rock. "Not alien," he stammered, the shattered arm swinging aimlessly. The grey dome of Taz' helmet bobbed. "Yeah, we know." his voice was solemn. "Stitch found some kind of log. It tells the whole story."

Ridgeway's left hand clutched Taz' collar in a sudden grip and the Marine stood fully erect. "The cube." His eyes danced rapidly around the surface of the lake. "Did we save it?"

"It's fine Majah," Taz interjected, patting his hand against Ridgeway's fractured chestplate. "Tucked safe and sound." Taz felt the sudden tension drain from Ridgeway's body, weight sagging once more against his shoulder. "Pretty clever idea using the truck and all." He tossed a nod back toward the crater. "Punched a right clean hole through the ceiling."

He glanced up at the circle of light that sparkled down from the cavern's black sky. Searchlights swung back and forth along the rim. Marines above, the invasion force, had secured what was left of Cathedral and were already dropping emergency supplies.

"Bet they bloody well shit their knickers when the floor fell out, eh?" Taz hitched Ridgeway's bulk a little higher. "So how'd ya set it off?"

"Railgun," Ridgeway said, his voice a little clearer in tone. "Shot the Thermalite."

Taz stopped short and rocked his head abruptly. "Railgun--" He paused in mid-sentence as his mind replayed the terrible scene on the edge of the Hive. "But Majah, we didn't find the LTs rifle."

"Lucky you." The ragged voice echoed in from the left. "If you'd touched my rifle I'da had to kick your ass."

Taz felt a sudden rush as the sniper emerged from the fog, the long silhouette of the rifle in her grasp. Like Ridgeway, her armor was a scorched, broken wreck.

"LT!" Taz spun so hard that Ridgeway almost slipped from his grasp. "I don't, I-- shit LT, you were dead, flatlined."

Darcy limped to a stop. Charred bits of ash flaked away as she removed her facemask. Taz took a sharp breath as she looked up. Tiny pinpoints of ember light sparkled among the blackened stretch of flesh along her throat. "Yeah. I was," she said quietly, then added with a shrug, "at least I think so." The sniper raised a hand and tapped at the neckline of her armor where the swath of burned flesh dipped out of view. "That bastard I gutshot went kamikaze on me; don't know what he had but it went off right in my face. Everything went black. Dead black." She paused and took a slow breath. "Next thing I know, something hit my chest like a thousand volts and the lights came back on."

"Crikey," Taz muttered, shaking his head slowly. "No wonder the bloody creepys-crawlers could suck up so much and keep coming back."

"Yeah, maybe so." She looked back towards the Hive and her voice lost all emotion. "I just wonder how far the similarity goes."

"What, you mean you going all buggy on us?" Taz shook his head emphatically. "Ain't gonna happen."

A glower passed across Darcy's eyes as she jerked a thumb back towards the Hive. "Tell that to them."

Taz shook his head. "You're asking the wrong bloke for a science lesson. Merlin can explain it better than I can. It's like they're all a one big brain, right, each little bug talking to each other."

"Yeah, neural processing, so?"

"Well, the more you get, the smarter the brain gets. Only the guys that built em didn't know that the bugs could talk over a distance. So instead of a bunch of little brains, they got one big brain. The ones in their bodies, the ones in the ship, zillions and zillions fixing everything, all on the same channel and all getting creative. Pretty soon the little bugs could throw away the rulebooks and make parts out of just about anything. All the little buggars had to go on was keeping things running, not how it looked. Improvisations compounded." He paused and looked down at his feet. "So did the errors. Only these poor bastards didn't figure that part out until it was way too late."

"So I'm not gonna--?"

"Hell no, not s'long as you get out of here and don't go back on the table again. Two runs puts too many in your system and all bets are off." Taz shifted to an oddly encouraging tone. "You ain't gonna be alone either. Merlin got tore all to shit and he's on the table now. Stitch'll hit it after we get the Majah fixed up. He's busted up pretty bad, so we're likely to be two hours before I bring up the tail of the dog."

"You look like you came through all right."

Taz shrugged then looked Darcy in the eye. "You go, we go. We're a team."

Darcy opened her mouth as though to speak, then simply nodded and reached out a fist. Taz thumped it roughly and they turned to the entrance of Papa-Six when Darcy added, "What about Monster? Don't tell me he's still pushing his tough-guy routine."

"The Aussie's voice fell to a somber note. "Gunny didn't make it."

Darcy stopped in her tracks. "No--"
Taz nodded a grim affirmation as the breath flowed from his body. "Yeah. He saved my ass. Guess he needed some of those little crawlies of yours in his blood."

"Like hell." The gravel voice was far too deep to have come from Darcy's throat. Taz flicked a reflexive glance at Ridgeway before his head snapped to Papa-Six. The figure that lay crumpled against the hull looked like an old piece of wreckage dredged up from the sea floor. A single word exploded from Taz' throat, "Gunny!"

Monster raised a gauntlet from the lake and offered the weakest of waves before the hand dropped once more with a splash. Taz and Darcy hauled Ridgeway quickly across the gap in a flurry of questions.

For the next several minutes Monster was forced to recount his fall and survival. "I just hung on," he repeated, "and let that sonofabitch take the impact." He emphasized the point with a knuckle-down jab of his fist. "It took me a while to pull my shit together and crawl out here."

"Bloody hell, Gunny. I looked for you, I swear. I got nothing on--"

"The TAC?" Monster interjected as he reached out and thumped the dome of Taz' helmet with an armored finger. "The same TAC I'd been off since getting my ass chewed back in the Hive?"

Taz felt a tightening in his chest. "Oh shit."

"Stow it, you had a mission and you stuck with it." Monster added with far softer a tone than Taz expected, "about damn time, too."

"Well boys," Darcy cut in, "you both can enjoy a nice hug or whatever, but somebody's gotta get the boss to Sickbay. And if you think I'm hauling your oversized butt up the Tower," she nudged Monster with her knee as a tired smile broke out across her face "you're forgetting-- I'm just a girl."

"Shit," Monster chuffed as he waved Darcy away like shooing a pet. "You take your skinny butt upstairs, girl, I have a real Marine to lean on."

Taz found himself chuckling at the playful banter before the compliment registered. He snapped a glance at Monster then turned back to Darcy. "I can handle this LT, you go on with the Majah."

He caught the momentary flash of the sniper's eyes as they tracked back and forth between the two men. Her smile softened and she said with a nod "I can see that. Then I leave this mess of a sergeant in your capable hands."

"Yeah?"

"Be sure to grab that claymore I stuck by the door. I'd hate to see one of our rescue boys get spread across the lake."

"Rojah that," Taz replied crisply. "I'm on it." He stood quietly as Darcy and Ridgeway disappeared through Papa-Six, then turned to the recumbent sergeant. "You know you gotta go too."

Monster struggled to his feet, sloshing unsteadily as he rose. "Don't need any damn bugs," he muttered.

Taz ignored the comment as he knelt to look for the errant claymore. His hand slid quietly along the surface of the hull until it met the small flat brick. Data blurred across the TAC until three words appeared, INERT, IFF ACTIVE and DETONATE. He decremented the status from the second to the first, disabling the mine's sensors before he pulled it free.

"No choice now Gunny, it's a team thing." Taz turned, flipping the mine in one hand. "Darcy didn't get a choice, and Merlin didn't either. I made the call for the rest of us; they go so we all go."

"You made the call?" Monster barked incredulously. "I leave you alone for five minutes and now you're running things?"

"You were dead, mate," Taz slapped the mine against Monster's belly, "and corpses don't get a vote."

Monster clamped his left hand on the mine as Taz shifted beneath the sergeant's massive right arm. "So that was your plan, no forethought, everybody dive into the unknown together?"

"Just learning from the examples set by my commanding officers Gunny," Taz said with a shrug.

Monster began to reply, then paused.

Taz seized the chance to change the subject. "Well, look at it this way Gunny, Stitch'll hit you with some kinda cocktail that'll put you on the dark side of the moon for the whole ride. You won't have to go through the bloody awful shit the Rimmer went through."

"You have no fucking idea what I went through." The synthetic voice trembled, wet and twangy.

Taz and Monster turned at the sound, their eyes agape at the silhouette that loomed in the fog.

One of them, Taz realized with a start, and yet much less so. The thing was far more humanoid in shape than the others, bipedal at least, though its legs seemed nothing like those of a man. Gears spun in the twin pillars that carried the fleshy torso above the surface of the lake. Torn strips of rubbery orange fabric were grafted in uneven patches across its skin, making room for the additional mass of motors and electronics contained with the body. Although the head now sprouted an ugly cluster of optic sensors along the left side of its skull, most of the human face still remained. Taz's gut twisted as he recognized the features.

Jenner.
"Bloody hell, it's the fucking Rimmer!" Taz spat the words in a combination of shock and anger.
"Hell ish right" the strange voice wheezed. Even with all of the physical changes, the cleft lip persisted. "Hell again and again."

The mechanized human raised one arm, its hand replaced with a wicked set of metal claws. Jenner watched the finger-blades snap back and forth with pneumatic speed. "Thought I wash one of them," he slurred, "sho much in me after the shecond time I could hear them, shee them in my mind."

He looked up. "They could shee me too." The right half of Jenner's split lip curled and his voice quavered. "That came for me. Took me... home." At the last word his voice broke into sobs.

Suddenly Jenner's face curled into a knot as the eyes fixed on Taz. The distorted hybrid clanked forward as the bladed hand pointed. "You did thish to me." "I'm not the one who stole all the bloody food, you stupid git. You hauled your stupid ass up on that table all on your bloody own."

"Fuck you!" Jenner scowled. Both arms flew up as he charged.

With a sudden nonchalance that bordered on disregard, Taz turned to Monster and grabbed the curved object from his right hand. "D'ya mind?"

Taz spun back towards Jenner, putting the full might of his armor into the pitch. The dark blur rifled across the space at a murderous speed and slammed into Jenner's torso.

Jenner rocked from the impact and stumbled several paces back before he regained his balance. The misshapen head shook several times as if to clear his thoughts, ignoring the object imbedded in his ribcage. Jenner swallowed hard and slowly exhaled a cloud of fog. "You still don't get it do you?" The man-machine sneered, "You don't have your damn guns, you can't hurt me bad enough to kill me."

"Wrong again, shithead. Have a look."

Jenner's gloat faded as his eyes swung down to the curved brick in his chest. Fiery pinpoints already glittered around the dark shape, casting an ember-hued light that highlighted the words embossed in the casing.

FRONT TOWARDS ENEMY.

"oh shi--"

Before the thing that had been David Jenner could utter its final curse, Taz watched his TAC register the change from INACTIVE to DETONATE.

A moment later the two Marines stood quietly as the last bits of Jenner splashed down across the surface of the lake.

"All right," Monster admitted grudgingly, "that was a good plan."

"Yeah, thanks."

They turned back towards Papa-Six and Monster draped himself across Taz' shoulder as they edged their way into the glowing pool.

"We probably should have just shot him at the start," Monster muttered as he went below the surface.

"Hey, I tried to tell ya, but did anybody listen..."

The voices were lost as they slipped through Papa-Six.

EPILOG

Dan Ridgeway stood quietly as he watched the final entry of the Ascension logbook. The odd perspective and organic camera motion reminded him of a telepresence.

"Gunderson is dead." The narrator uttered the words with a note of detachment, as if Gunderson's fate was somehow less than tragic. "We tried everything, but the burns were too severe. There was just nothing alive left to build on."

An arm reached forward from beneath the camera and grasped a marker. The hand scrawled a thick, black line across a grim face on the faded group photo, the second figure to be obscured in such a manner. Only ten members remained. Mechanical fingers snapped open with a soft clatter as the narrator tossed the picture on the table.

"Seven hundred and eighty years," The voice muttered, thin and weak. "So long, so damn long."

His view fell to crumpled papers scattered across a desk. Stained drawings lay everywhere, diagrams covered with scientific notation.

"Consolidation is now complete. Colonists and crew were extracted from cryogenic stasis. His voice broke, the hoarse noise barely understandable. "They didn't recognize us anymore. Some died--" he sobbed once "from fright."

The camera bobbed slowly to the sound of a mournful sigh, and the voice resumed. "Unable to sustain the bodies intact, we have preserved samples of each genetic. What is left," he stumbled as though trying to avoid the phrase, "will sustain us as we carry on our vigil. We've been so hungry for so long that even this has lost its abhorrence. We have our duty, we must go on.

The view shifted momentarily, odd scraping sounds audible in the background. The camera looked down at the floor
for several moments and trembled. A thick, wet sniff preceded another deep sigh before the monologue resumed. "Where candidates had viable EEGs, we downloaded cerebral engrams in hopes of salvaging memories, personalities, the things that make us--" he stalled, unable for a long moment to choke out the word, "human."

The camera perspective rose oddly, then rotated in a lurching fashion to a rectangular framework of dark metal on the floor. The complex cube shimmered with a pale emerald light. "It's come down to this."

The camera view leaned forward over the cube and fixed on one of thousands of glass cylinders. "A handful of cells," he muttered, "a few strands of DNA. The tiniest spark of life frozen away against the ravages of time. But hope burns in a spark, hope that one day someone will find us. We will stand our guard until then."

A blurred shape moved across the bottom of the rack. The image shifted further out of focus for a moment before resolving into clarity. The face that stared up from the polished metal plate was barely recognizable as human. The few remaining patches of hair were little more than stubble on islands of jawline. A lone eye peered down from the cadaverous face. "They told us we might live forever," he mumbled absently. A mechanical hand rose and gently touched the mottled expanse of pale skin, wrinkled and spotted by the centuries. "Oh God," he sobbed, "please not forever."

The image broke into static and Dan Ridgeway removed the headset, gently placing it on the polished granite table. Although seven months had passed since the RAT Squad had been hauled from the depth of the Balrathan cave, he had carefully avoided the final entry until now.

Ridgeway looked at the five Marines who stood at the far end of the table. Clad not in armor but razor-creased dress blues, the RATs stood quietly, sharing the poignant mix of emotions that the event represented. Ridgeway picked up his hat and walked to the wide balcony that overlooked the courtyard. The first glimmer of sunrise broke over the far mountains, bringing a magical stillness to the lush valley.

The Eridani Governor stood at the podium below, addressing the crowd in reverent tones. Stretched out in rows before the stage, nearly six thousand people sat in matching shirts, their very existence a marvel of genetic resurrection. They were surrounded by a crowd easily four times the size. Banners fluttered in the growing sunlight. "They did it." Monster said softly as he stared at the ranks.

"They did it." Monster said softly as he stared at the ranks. Dradovered the assembled host in their star-spangled shirts. He spoke of the faces portrayed on huge banners across the front of the stage, black bands on the corner of each frame. The Twelve, the guardians who saw them through. No mention was made of the depths of suffering they endured in centuries of service. They were remembered instead as smiling faces filled with hope and promise, as pillars of duty and strength. They were remembered as heroes, and their story would be the stuff of legends.

The six Marines snapped to a formal salute as a lone bugler played taps while twelve U.S. Flags were raised behind the stage. Just as the truth behind the Twelve had been contained, so had any hint of the Marine's involvement. The RAT Squad remained as it had begun, a carefully guarded secret.

As the national anthem filled the dawn air, Ridgeway quietly savored that secrecy, having no desire to become the focus of the media frenzy that followed the Ascension's discovery and the return of her long lost crew. Ridgeway lowered his right hand as the anthem's last notes faded away, flexing the once shattered appendage with painless ease. Balratha had changed him in so many ways.

The RATs were only beginning to understand the odd awareness they now had of one another. Their tendency to give answers to questions yet unasked had passed from unnerving to commonplace. They healed at an incredible rate, their endurance multiplied. Under an exhaustive battery of tests they had proven stronger by almost every physical metric.

And yet, Ridgeway knew that his own most profound change could not be timed or measured. The weight lifted from his soul had not been moved by physical might, but by acceptance. He looked across the throng of cheering civilians who hugged and cried below. Acceptance, yes, he thought, and perhaps at last a measure of forgiveness. Fireworks erupted across the sky and Ridgeway caught his own reflection in the window. Amid the ranks and rows of color that covered his chest, a platinum star glimmered for the first time in the rising sunlight.
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