

## HERD IMMUNITY

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## Chapter One:

The mission briefing room was hot, again. Like, swamp ass hot. Stanton shifted uncomfortably in her chair. Vacuum-rated flight-suits were many things, but “breathable” was not one of them. She wasn’t alone in her sweltering.

“Seventy billion Nudollars on this heap and they couldn’t spring for decent AC,” Sorento said as he threw his legs over the empty chair next to his seat. “Bet the Officer’s mess is cold enough to double as a meat locker.”

“Yeah, and they have hot and cold running Champaign taps but they just won’t share with us grunts.” Liska took a pull from her vape and blew it in Sorento’s face.

“Ugh. Is that spearmint, you soft bitch?”

“Hard enough to crush your little private like a toothpaste tube, Sorento.”

“Sounds like a fun Saturday night.”

“Gotta live that long first, cowboy.”

“Officer on deck!” Stanton announced at the sight of their lieutenant entering the briefing space.

“At ease,” Lt Corinthian said, then pointed at Sorento and Liska. “Except you two. Get any room but this one.” The whole squad laughed. Except Liska and Sorento, who preferred to sulk and continue pretending they shouldn’t just fuck and get it over with. “I know it’s hot. We’ll cross the planet’s terminus into full shadow in a few minutes. It’ll give the heat exchangers some time to catch up.”

It was one of the many paradoxes of living and fighting in space. Like how you had to slow down to catch up to a target in a lower orbit. Space is colder than a well-digger’s ass, but in the absence of atmosphere, the biggest life-support problem on any starship, especially those operating inside a system’s frost line, was always getting rid of the waste heat spit out by every individual woman, man, and piece of equipment onboard.

The Planetary Assault Carrier CCDF *Musk* was no exception, as the sweaty delegation of the mission briefing room would attest.

Corinthian stood resolute as a pillar of their namesake at the room’s lectern. The rabble settled down without a word. “Good morning,” they said. “Today’s drop is, thankfully, a by-the-numbers affair. History buffs might even call it a ‘Milk-run.’”

“Like...” Porter started. “When you get the runs because you ate real ice cream on accident?”

Corinthian pinched the bridge of their nose. “This is our last mission briefing on this deployment. Maybe our last, ever. Can we have one, just one, where we don’t overshare, please?” A quick survey of their assembled team’s faces was not encouraging, but they pushed forward. “No, not a milk-run of the lactose-intolerance variety. As in run down to the shops to snag some milk. Jesus Christ, read a book on military history. Anyway, we’re all expecting a skip drone announcing a new peace treaty any minute, but Admiral Chernoff isn’t counting her chickens. She still wants a landing and a beachhead on this rock in case the diplomats didn’t deliver after all.”

“Hard ass,” Liska muttered.

“Secure that shit, Liska. The wasps on the ground haven’t *formally* surrendered, but they’ve put their orbital assets into hibernation so we don’t splash them before starting our drops.

That makes our insertion much easier and I swear to god if one of you giggles about ‘insertion’ again...”

There were smirks, but the squad of misfits and rejects kept their composure for once.

“Amazing, they can be trained. Even with their orbitals cold, the old lady wants this done by the book, so we’re still strapping into the sarcophagi and dropping.” The room collectively groaned. “Quit whining. You get a free combat drop towards your contract.”

Behind them, a holomap of their Area of Responsibility on the planet’s surface materialized in the air, with all known AAA assets, sensor stations, and coms centers marked in red, and suspected assets in orange. Each member of the team could highlight an avatar in their own augmented-reality environ and get a detailed breakdown of the emplacement by type, crew compliment, effective range, magazine capacity, and sensor reach/resolution.

These were the assets that had been spotted with ship-born telescopes on the *Musk* and her escorts or their constellation of recon drones. The squad’s job was to find the rest and eliminate any unpleasant surprises before the rest of Sixth Battalion started trying to land dropships in a hot LZ.

“The Drone Integration Officer assures us they’ve tagged eighty percent of the ground emplacements and at least two thirds of the mobile units. So naturally cut those estimates in half and we’re probably right on the money. The most likely hiding spots are in this valley.”

The holomap zoomed down and reoriented for a surface level view of the valley. It was more of a canyon, once cut by water but now eroded by wind into steep columns and narrow channels with sheer cliff faces and deep overhangs. A mountaineer’s dream and a marine’s nightmare. The six-limbed wasps with their clawed hands and feet were scary-good natural climbers and always had a spare arm to hold a weapon. Stanton was very glad this was all a formality, because if it had been a real fight, it would turn an absolute quagmire.

Corinthian continued. “Your exos are being fitted with climbing anchors and expanded tanks for the jump assist jets.”

“We’ll be running awful heavy,” Sorento said.

“You’re being issued an extra capacitor for the servos.”

“Heavier still unless we start leaving ammo behind.”

“Wouldn’t be a problem if you could shoot straight.” Liska sniped.

“Can it. Our LZ is going to be on this plateau here, grid marker one seven zero one.”

“Decoys?” Porter asked.

“XO doesn’t want to waste the canisters. We’re already in the red for this expedition.”

“Easy to say from a grav couch in the CIC.”

“You said we were doing this by-the-book,” Stanton said.

“I was overruled. Look folks, this is all just a formality. Tag your targets, upload the coordinates, then lay back and soak up the sun waiting for pick-up. We’re not looking at a repeat of Procyon D here.”

A chill ran through the briefing room at the mention of the squad’s worst day. No matter what happened here, it would be quite the long haul to be worse than that cursed, FUBARed mission. Stanton had a flash of a nest of the big, bruiser, labor caste hornets pouring out onto the surface of the airless moon from hidden tunnels wearing nothing but rebreathers and carrying those cursed rapid stingers of theirs.

It hadn’t taken the wasps long to realize they didn’t need to kill grunts in vacuum, just pierce their combat armor from distance enough times to overwhelm the self-repair systems and let decompression and asphyxiation do the job for them. Real hard fighting an enemy that grew

its own armor and was apparently immune to space. No one had come out unscathed, and four of them hadn't come out at all.

"So, if there's no more borderline insubordination?" There was not. "Wonderful. Our sarcophagi are prepped and waiting. Your exos will have final crypto links and telemetry loaded into the AR. Suit up and I'll meet you in the crypt. We drop in twenty."

Stanton zipped up her skin suit and gazed at her Mk-XIII CCDF Marine General-Purpose Power-Assist Full-Encapsulation Battle Armor. Everyone just called them an exo. Hers was named Cynthia. Cynthia's torso, upper arms, and thighs laid spread open like a crab shell after a buffet.

It was actually two generations behind the state-of-the-art, but Stanton had come up through Indoc using this platform and preferred its simple, direct, user-friendly utility to whatever new bells and whistles the soft-hands back in WeapDev came up with this season. 'If it ain't broke, don't fix it' had kept many a soldier, sailor, marine, and airman alive over the centuries. And her position among one of the fleet's most elite squads of 'meteor madmen' bought Stanton more than the average latitude in selecting her unconventional equipment loadouts.

Stanton had seen too much poverty, blood, unanswered prayers, and death in her short life to wrap herself in the luxury of religion. Superstition, on the other hand, now *that* was a hard habit to break any baseball fan or ground-pounder of. Which was why in place of prayer, Stanton snapped her fingers and spat on the deck before climbing into Cynthia. Her legs struggled a bit as they always did, like forcing her feet into knee high boots. The armored forearms were simpler, just had to cup her palms past the resistance of the wrist joints.

As soon as her ten fingers and nine toes were seated and registered by Cynthia's haptic feedback sensor pads, the outer shell snapped shut and sealed against Stanton's battle-sculpted body like a bespoke suit. She took a deep breath, and felt the exo's ablative plates expand and contract with the heaving of her rib cage like a second skin. Except this skin could deflect or absorb a volume of fire that would bring down the most advanced armored personnel carrier of pre-stellar Earth.

Wearing Cynthia, Stanton could've dropped alone onto any battle humanity had ever fought against itself and she would've dictated the terms of both side's surrender before dinner. But here, now, against the wasps, they were again fighting to a mutual ceasefire.

Thank goodness this would just be a 'Milk run.'

She could feel the cooling lines built into her skinsuit start circulating refrigerated liquid to wick away her excess body heat. Cynthia's HUD cam online inside her AR environment, feeding sensor data, mission parameters and objectives, and telemetry into her field of vision. The rest of the squad finished buttoning themselves up and started moving towards 'the crypt,' the bay where their sarcophagi were loaded and launched. Porter's shiny new Mk-XV with hot rod red armor and gold faceplate came off the last rack and joined the group. Stanton just shook her head.

"What?" Porter asked.

"Dork."

"You're just jealous of my swag."

"Yeah, kid. That must be it."

Porter was the youngest of the squad, and had the least seniority. They'd ran a woman short for months after the Procyon debacle until Porter transferred in and brought the squad back

up to full strength, but the kid had done a dozen hot drops since then without complaint or major fuck-up. He earned respect and his spot even as everyone kept ribbing ‘the green horn.’

The hatch to the crypt slid open, revealing the rest of the squad and eight identical Mk-VI Reentry Insertion Pods, RIPs. The acronym people back at WeapDev thought they were so damn funny. Meteor madmen like Stanton’s squad decided to sex it up and call them sarcophagi. If they were going to die, may as well go out like pharaohs. Unlike their battle rattle, the sarcophagi were single-use items. In theory, one could refurbish them if the landing wasn’t too hard. But in practice, the costs of recovery, returning them to orbit, transport back to a fleet depot, and rebuilding exceeded their per unit price by a factor of two.

It also meant the metal and composite shell Stanton was about to strap herself into, and plunge through an alien world’s atmosphere inside of, was built as cheaply as possible by the lowest-bid contractor, which was never a comforting thought. Little more than a chisel-shaped ablative heat shield, thruster packs, braking/maneuvering fins, parachute, and retro-rockets, they weren’t built with luxury in mind. Which was just as well, because best-case scenario you’d only spend seven minutes in the elevator car to hell. Worst-case, the parachutes failed to open and the trip went by even faster.

Stanton loaded herself into the crash webbing and double checked that the frame had fully-locked with Cynthia’s hardpoints. Green. Her exo tapped into the RIP’s capacitors to save onboard energy during the trip down. Every amp saved extended her combat time once she had dirt on her boots. The squad’s encrypted local network came to life, giving Stanton access to the med-data and exo-status of the rest of her mates. She could call up the available inventory of everyone in the squad down to the bullet and bandage.

Once she was settled, deck apes closed the outer panels and bolted them shut. These bolts were explosive and would blow the whole front off the sarcophagus the moment it touched down, freeing Stanton for the coming fight. Steel clamps grabbed both sides of the sarcophagus and moved it into the queue.

Stanton felt and heard the series of pings and clinks that meant her sarcophagus had been locked into the tube. Corinthian’s voice filled the squad chat. “Hammer’s cocked. Talk to you on the other side of the blackout. Click, click...”

“Boom!” the entire squad clapped back the very moment the Weapons Officer a hundred meters away in the CIC tapped an avatar on their virtual console, setting the whole parade in motion. RIPs launched from standard counter-missile tubes, their electromagnetic launch rails dialed back from their normal two-hundred seventy gees of acceleration to merely ten out of respect for the frail human bodies nestled within. Stanton’s skinsuit clenched down hard on her neck, arms, and chest in a bid to keep all the blood in her body from pooling in her brain as she went from sixty-two kilos to six-hundred twenty while standing on her head.

This pulse, gratefully, lasted less than a second before her RIP was shot clear of its mothership and sent on its rapidly decaying orbit towards the surface. Her skinsuit relaxed and Stanton enjoyed a precious few minutes floating in the zero gee like a baby in the womb.

It didn’t last. It never did. The first sign of the coming maelstrom was a slow uptick in the RIP’s outer hull temperature as it interacted with the upper whisps of the planet’s mesosphere. That slow climb increased rapidly as the tungsten edge of the chisel started to split atmosphere into an enveloping sheet of plasma, heating it to thousands of degrees and blacking out all communications to the rest of her squad. It was the most alone any of them would be during the mission. More than one first-timer had cracked under the silence locked away in their coffin as they streaked through the sky at thirty-thousand kph. The job definitely wasn’t for everyone.

The only positive was the plasma enveloping her sarcophagus made radar-tracking from ground or air threats all but impossible while she was locked on a predictable ballistic course. The coms, sensor, and camera readouts were all static. The only data still available was the inertial navigation and telemetry feed coming from the RIPs internal gyroscopes and accelerometers, which all read smooth sailing.

The aerodynamic braking ramped up as the air thickened in the stratosphere and soon the RIP cleared the blackout. Their quantum encrypted com links reconnected and authenticated automatically, populating Stanton's AR with all the familiar avatars of her squad. Except...

"Where's Meteor Five?" she spoke into the feed, bringing attention to Porter's callsign. "His telemetry's still blacked out."

"Meteor Five, check in," Lt Corinthian ordered. "Meteor Five?"

"C'mon, Porter. Sound off," Liska said, breaking coms protocol.

"Call signs only," Corinthian snapped. The numeric call signs were randomly selected before each drop to hide their identities and rank in the improbable event their encryption was ever broken. "Meteor Five, check in."

Static.

An alert sounded through Stanton's RIP. It took a fraction of a second for it to register that it wasn't coming from her AR environment, but from the sarcophagus's speakers and through her own ears. Somewhere on the hull, a handful of the thousands of miniscule cameras tied into the adaptive camo system were getting hit with low-powered laser energy.

"Holy shit, I'm being *painted!*" she called into the com.

"Fuck," Corinthian said. "Everyone spread out and go evasive."

At their command, the RIPs which had been tightly clustered to ensure everyone made the LZ as close to each other as possible, suddenly shot apart like an exploding firework, putting distance between the individual sarcophagi so no single AAA munition could take out multiple squad members. One sufficiently spread out, the pods deployed the cross-shaped airfoils at their aft and each began a randomized series of hard turns and spirals to confuse missile tracking and break any directed energy weapon locks.

Stanton was pressed around hard inside her suit, which remained steadfast and immobile inside its frame. The RIP itself was doing the flying, she had no control over its erratic movement by design. Human pilots, no matter how well trained or experienced, weren't capable of truly random inputs. On some level, they always reverted to habits and patterns which could be exploited by sufficiently-advanced tracking AI.

After three punishing turns, the ground-based rangefinder laser painting her hull zigged when it should've zagged and the targeting lock was broken. Stanton was safe, for the moment. Meteor Seven wasn't so lucky, as their avatar went over to static.

"Dammit," Corinthian said.

"Some *milk run*, Lt," Sorento added.

"Stow it, Meteor Three. I'm authorizing HALO. Hold chute deployment until five zero zero meters. Maintain evasive until—"

Corinthian's avatar went to static, then the dreaded Red X of a confirmed KIA.

"Shit!" Liska shouted into her helmet mic. "LT's RIP is slag. What do we do?"

"Our jobs," Stanton said. "Meteor Three, you're next in line. What are your—" Without warning, Stanton was thrown into a spiraling roll unlike anything she'd ever experienced in simulation or combat, like someone had tied her to the blades of a blender and hit frappe. The vertigo was almost instantaneous as her inner ears were overwhelmed by hundreds of RPMs.

Unbeknownst to her, a lucky flak shell fired in the blind had detonated fewer than thirty meters from her sarcophagus and shredded two of its four deployed airfoils. The two remaining control surfaces fought valiantly against the onrushing air, but the inherent instability sent the RIP into a death spiral it couldn't recover from.

Her body being pulled apart in every direction, Stanton's vision narrowed to a gray corridor. The auto-diagnostics inside Cynthia registered her worsening condition and pumped her bloodstream full of anti-nausea meds, but it was too late as her stomach revolted under the spin and threw up the contents of her morning meal into her helmet, clogging the filter tubes feeding her fresh air and threatening to suffocate her before she even had the chance to auger into the ground at a thousand kph.

She had seconds to find a way to come out of the other end of the shrinking tunnel alive, when all she wanted to do was pass out the rest of the way. But the weakness bounced hard off a small, white hot kernel of rage a lifetime of fighting to survive had kept well stoked.

"No, not like this. Gun in hand, or not at all," Stanton whispered to herself through teeth clenched so hard they threatened to chip and shatter. Through her AR interface, Stanton killed the RIP's AI and took manual control of her sarcophagus. She'd lose the randomized evasives, but by this point the enemy on the ground had probably already written her off as a kill anyway.

"Eject airfoils!" At the command, the two remaining control surfaces at the top of the RIP blew away, probably looking like more debris to anyone watching from the ground. Her roll stopped increasing, but Stanton was still spinning like a bullet from a barrel. She wasn't getting enough air. "Fire attitude thrusters opposite the roll. Now!"

Outside the tiny pod, jets of superheated hydrazine gas shot from thruster nozzles built flush against the hull like smoke from the nostrils of awakened dragons. The momentum of the RIP's spin resisted at first, but began to slow, lethargically, then with increasing surrender to the physics. By the time the reactant mass was exhausted, the pod's roll had reduced to a 'leisurely' twenty rpms.

Panting, Stanton commanded her face shield open and tried to read the sarcophagus's instrumentation, but the vertigo was still so intense her eyes wouldn't focus or track properly. So she closed them tight and relied entirely on her AR environ. Without the airfoils to provide braking, her RIP was coming in *very* hot. Altitude bled away along with any chance of survival at a shocking rate. But the rip was still spinning. If she deployed chutes early, the spin would tangle their lines and she'd spend the last few hundred meters of the trip in freefall.

There was still one card to play, however. The sarcophagi were general purpose and designed for use in any insertion profile on any planet or moon CCDF marines were likely to be asked to land on, including those without an atmosphere. Which was why the nose had a complement of solid-fuel retro-rockets.

Airless moons were less massive than the planets they orbited, so the retros wouldn't be enough to stop her by themselves. But...

She was still coming in too fast. A HALO opening as Corinthian ordered just before they were killed would ensure Stanton joined them in Valhalla. She'd have to pop chutes at a thousand meters, wait for them to tangle from the roll, then use them as a stabilizing streamer and hope to whoever was watching that her nose was still pointed at the ground when she burned the retros. Every enemy AAA battery within fifty clicks would see her do it, but it was that or self-burial.

The altimeter counted down inexorably to her deadline. Stanton's math scores had been better than most, but she was hardly a savant. There were too many shifting variables to

calculate, airspeed, deceleration rate, spin, air density, retro rocket thrust, the planet's gravity... a thousand meters was just a desperate best guess.

Stanton breathed out, trying to calm herself. "Deploy chutes."

At the command, three panels blew clear from the top of the RIP, followed immediately by a trio of small drogue chutes. In turn, they yanked free three much larger parachutes. Or they would've if Chute Number Two hadn't immediately confettied itself the moment it hit the subsonic airstream.

The other two chutes deployed as normal, but the streaming lines from the ruined chute tangled between them even as the sarcophagus continued to spin. Overspeed and terrain proximity alarms filled the tiny coffin Stanton occupied as if they'd become choking liquid in their own rights.

And to top off the shit sandwich, she was being painted with enemy range-finding lasers again.

"Countermeasures!"

Canisters of flares and retroreflectors erupted from ridges on the outside of the hull and spread out in an enormous 'V' hoping to distract or dazzle anything coming her way. They were passive and either worked or they didn't, it was out of her hands. Stanton returned her fractured focus to the altimeter. With a third of her chutes shredded, airspeed wasn't bleeding off fast enough. She ran the new numbers through her head in the handful of seconds she had left and came to the new redline altitude.

She'd already passed it.

"Fire retrorockets full!" she shouted in panic.

The nose of the RIP blew away as three nozzles behind it exploded to life, shooting thirty-meter-long jets of flame as the ground rose up to meet her. The burn shoved Stanton down into the soles of her feet at twelve gees. Her skinsuit clamped down hard, this time on her arms and legs trying to keep the blood in her head and core. It wasn't enough and her world grayed out again.

The retrorockets were still burning when the RIP hit the deck at fifty kph. The unburnt solid fuel blew apart leaving a crater two meters deep and tossing the sarcophagus ten meters to the side. Built-in crumple zones in the nose absorbed most of the impact energy, but Stanton felt one of her teeth crack from the jolt of the crash. Her head still spun badly.

The panels that were supposed to blow clear upon landing to let her out were jarred loose, but not open. Stanton hit the frame release and immediately fell to the wall, not the floor. The RIP rested on its side. The panels had fired directly into the ground with nowhere to go. She knew at that very moment, the wasps were busy pinning down the exact coordinates of her crash site so they could lob a few artillery shells and finish the job. She had seconds to get clear of the wreck.

Fighting mightily against the vertigo, she oriented in a squat and squeezed her gauntleted fingers through the narrow gap between the jarred panels and the hull, then lifted with all her suit-enhanced strength. The panel underfoot creaked and bent, then gave way entirely with two loud *SNAPS* as the unexploded bolts broke in half. The rest of the RIP rolled with relative ease until Stanton had a large enough opening to escape.

She snaked through the jagged hole, stood up, and took two steps before falling flat on her face. The fluid of her inner ears was still running laps, destroying her sense of balance. Fortunately, her suit's gyros weren't so impacted.

“Cynthia, get us to cover. Two-hundred-meter radius minimum. Go!”

Her suit’s parameters flipped instantly from combat to extraction mode. All available power flowed to the leg servos and Cynthia took off like a hare set upon by greyhounds. Stanton’s legs and arms pumped limply inside the suit, she was just along for the ride. Cynthia burned up nearly fifteen-percent of its energy reserves running a two-hundred-meter dash in seven seconds flat to reach the nearest rocky outcropping on the LZ’s desolate plateau. A diving roll and a three-point skid later and both Cynthia and Stanton within were pressed up against the underside of a shallow limestone overhang with several thousand metric tons of rock between them and the shattered sarcophagus they’d just escaped.

And not a moment too soon.

Three shells from three different hundred-seventy-six-millimeter artillery batteries expertly stagger-fired to have a precisely matched Time on Target all landed within two meters of Stanton’s abandoned RIP in the same instant, reducing it to a gray cloud of splinters and shards.

Breathing heavily and with the coppery taste of blood on her tongue, Stanton flipped her suit back to combat status, despite the fact her entire cache of offensive weapons had just been destroyed inside the sarcophagus’s arms locker. She took a moment to take stock of what equipment she’d made it out with. All she had was a pissant sidearm in a hip holster and reserve mag, two frag grenades, two colored smoke markers, an entrenchment tool, and a K-Bar survival knife. It was barely enough to take on a determined mugger, much less a Xre battalion.

Telemetry links from the rest of her squad reconnected, what of it remained. The bottom fell out of her stomach as avatar after avatar came back with either the static of a lost connection or the red ‘X’.

Of the ten RIPs that had launched, only four of her squad’s vitals still registered, including her own. Small favor the wasps weren’t able to jam their quantum coms. They’d obviously shot down Porter while he was still in blackout, which should’ve been next to impossible.

Even hiding behind this outcropping, Stanton was too exposed so close to where she crashed. She needed to get moving, try to meet up with the others then hole up and wait for the search and rescue bird. Stanton engaged Cynthia’s adaptive camo skin and started moving away from the crash site along the line of the outcropping, staying under cover as long as she could before she had to make another full-on sprint over the open plateau.

She risked a quick burst transmission. “Meteor Eight to remaining units. I’ve survived the loss of my sarcophagus. Down to my secondary weapon. On the move.” The end of the rock outcrop loomed. Stanton paused at the corner to consider her next move and wait for a response from one of the others, but her mind drifted back to poor Porter being incinerated even before he’d known he was under attack. How the hell had the wasps managed it?

The answer hit her like a drink thrown in her face. The orbitals the *Musk* had declined to destroy out of courtesy. Their active radar/lidar were set to dark, but their telescopes and IR, all their passive sensor systems, those were still active, tracking the RIPs through their entire reentry and feeding that data to the ground stations.

It was all a feint, and without the normal compliment of decoys accompanying their descent, every hit meant another dead marine. Corinthian had already paid for the mistake with their life and five others. It was up to the survivors not to add to the total now.

“Meteor Three, Meteor Eight,” the answering burst from Sorento sounded inside her helmet. “We’re almost four clicks out from your position, bearing two-seven-niner. Meteor Six

is injured and immobile. Meteor One is green and taking watch. Everyone else is MIA/KIA. Make your way best speed to our position.”

*So formal*, Stanton thought. *He's scared. Good, maybe it'll knock some caution into him.* Then she realized what had shocked Sorento straight. Meteor Nine, Liska, hadn't checked in. MIA, presumed dead. They weren't getting that moment of carnal catharsis after all.

She slid the neck ring on her helmet to its open position while fighting back sudden moisture in her eyes. The filters were still clogged with vomit and needed a quick purge before she could button all the way up again. Fortunately, the O2 here was only a few points below Earth norm and was breathable for short stretches without supplemental oxygen or rebreathers.

Small favors.

Stanton popped off a gauntlet and grimaced as her naked pinky finger dug the larger chunks of reconstituted scrambled eggs she'd wolfed down before the briefing out of her helmet filter screens. “See the galaxy,” the CCDF recruiter's pitch had gone. They forgot to mention getting shot at constantly didn't leave much time for sight-seeing. A press of the helmet's flush button and tiny whirring fans spat out everything she'd thrown up. She wiped a bit of undigested soy sausage off her cheek. “The nonstop glamor of interplanetary travel,” she mused.

With her helmet buttoned back up, Stanton crouched down and steeled herself for the run to the next outcrop just over half a klick to the east. Just as her servos were spinning up, something gripped her shoulder pauldron and spun her around. Stanton's hand reflexively dropped to her sidearm, pulled it free, thumbed off the safety, and pointed its center mass at her attacker all in one smooth motion.

Only the slimmest fraction of a second of recognition of what she was seeing interrupted the muscle memory that would've pulled the trigger. Not that it mattered; the ten-mil bullet would've bounced right off the suit of Mk XV powered armor crouching in front of her.

“Jesus Tap-dancing Christ, Liska,” Stanton shouted at the familiar green and gold patterned suit. “I almost shot you!”

Liska pointed to an ear and shook her head. So, her coms had been damaged. That explained much. Stanton popped her faceplate so she could speak directly to her squad-mate. “Thought you were slag, puta. We're straight buggered here and the wasps are going to saturate my crash site in a second so if you can just stick to my ass until we're clear?”

Liska gave a thumbs up. Liska, it should be noted, had escaped with her battle rifle.

“Outstanding.” Stanton snapped her faceplate shut and reactivated Cynthia's adaptive camo. A deep breath and they took off like scalded cats across the grit and limestone, a ‘V’ of dust swirling in their wake. More shells followed the first trio, hitting every grid square within three hundred meters of the crash with enough overlapping coverage that anything trapped inside the kill zone would've been hit at least twice. The outcropping Stanton and Liska had taken cover behind was reduced to pea gravel.

But in the day's first bit of good luck, the pair of them were already hiding on the far side of the *next* outcrop. Stanton glanced back at the cloud plume of debris rolling many stories into the air behind them.

She smirked. “Missed us.” The elation was short-lived. Liska grabbed her at the elbow, then pointed to the horizon to the south west. Six black dots spread across the orange and red of the coming sunset. Cynthia's optical sensors zoomed out to their maximum resolution and matched silhouettes to known vehicle profiles. Four wasp flex-wing troop carriers each hauling a dozen wasp soldiers loaded for bear, with two drone stingers flying CAS.

The stingers would be gratuitous overkill by themselves against five marines unless the calculus changed drastically before those troops arrived.

“Meteor Eight to Meteor Three. Meteor Nine is here with me, their coms are damaged and they’re off the squad net, but they’re combat effective.”

“Understood,” Sorento said, the unspoken relief obvious in the tone of their voice. “Get to cover and hunker down. We’ll rendezvous once the heat is off.”

“Negative, Eight,” Stanton said. “I’ve got eyes on four flex-wings and two stingers incoming from the southwest.”

“I can read the tactical map, Stanton! Fuck,” he admonished his slip. “Meteor Eight. Shelter in place.”

“That’s a death sentence and you know it. They have our positions dialed in. We need to call the *Musk* for an orbital strike to even the odds.”

“Negative, Eight. Our orders are to—” Static.

“Meteor Three, repeat your last,” Stanton said just as the shockwave hit her, first through the soles of her feet, then as a slap to the chest a sliver of a moment later. Both her and Liska’s heads snapped up in the direction of their second unit some four clicks away. A rolling cloud clawed its way into the sky from where the artillery strike had landed. Her HUD updated with all absent avatars and she knew the strike had been decisive. She braced herself against Liska’s shoulder. “It’s just us.”

Liska nodded and aimed her rifle downrange at the approaching bandits. Preparing for their valiant last stand.

“Oh fuck this right in the ear.” Stanton went through her AR interfaces and unlocked a series of permissions that confirmed her as unit commander and unlocked her suit’s built-in surface-to-orbit communications function. In the blink of an eye, Cynthia’s entire chassis became a broadcast antenna.

“Meteor Eight to CCDF *Musk*. Our squad has been rendered combat ineffective. Mission abort. Repeat, mission abort. Enemy air units on final approach and already within weapons range. Request immediate orbital strike against encroaching air assets followed by an S&R mission launch. Strike will be danger close. Please confirm.”

An interminably long pause later, “Meteor Eight, this is *Musk* Actual. Confirm... receipt of message.”

“Receipt of... due respect, Actual, but what the hell does that mean?”

“It means the diplomatic skip arrived a few minutes ago. As I told Meteor Three, the treaty’s been signed by both parties, Meteor Eight. We’re to stand down and immediately cease all offensive operations across all theaters of combat.”

Stanton’s face twisted up in naked fury. “Tell that to the fucking wasps lobbing shells at us, sir! Meteor Three’s dead. We’re getting cut to pieces down here.”

“I’m sorry, Meteor Eight. My hands are tied. Your orders are to shelter in place and—”

“I don’t need you. Sir.” Stanton cut the secure link and changed a crucial setting. “This is Meteor Eight, one of only two survivors of the surface insertion, broadcasting in the clear to all CCDF units in orbit. We’re about to be overrun and slaughtered by enemy air assets. We need immediate aid. Anything you can put down on...”

-CONNECTION INTERRUPTED. STAND BY-

Stanton collapsed against the outcrop. Her mayday, jammed by her own superiors.

Liska popped her facemask for the first time without breaking her rifle's sightline on their incoming. "I can't transmit, but I heard. Why the hell are they sending transports if they're just going to hit us with artillery?"

"Isn't it obvious? They want hostages."

"So, we're not surrendering, then?"

Stanton pulled her sidearm from its holster and checked that a round was chambered.

"Inclined to?"

"Not particularly."

They shared an angry smirk. It wasn't just the prospect of an extended stay in a wasp prison camp, which was bad enough. It was the thought of all their friends dying without so much as a shot fired in return.

"Don't bother shooting up the birds. Hold fire until you've got a wasp under your reticule."

Liska handed over her own sidearm. "You remember how to use iron sights, right?"

Stanton took up the second handgun in her off hand and weighed it. It ran against all the training years of service had drilled into her. Felt more like one of the AR emersion games she'd played before signing her contract.

"We'll know soon." Stanton thumbed off the safeties of her pistols. "It's been nice sharing the ride with you."

"Same, Erin. Buy you a drink on the other side."

"They serve alcohol there?"

"They do where we're going." They both laughed. Liska closed her faceplate and braced for a fight. Stanton did the same. Cynthia's sensors gave only passive information about the approaching aircraft, range, airspeed, IR signatures and the like. They were slowing now, wings sweeping wide and increasing their angle of attack to maximize lift and avoid stalling as they glided in. Predators on the wing. Something about the scene tripped a very old racial terror within Stanton's brain stem leftover from the time humanity's ancestors were much smaller and spent most of their days high up in trees.

"Should we take cover behind the rock?" Liska half-shouted through her sealed helmet, betraying her own scared inner tiny mammal.

"And foul our sightlines?"

"Roger that."

The fear grew until it mixed with adrenaline and battle lust. Just as the whole violent medley neared a crescendo, something funny happened. The lead troop transport went from ambient temperature to ten thousand degrees Celsius in Cynthia's infrared filter faster than Stanton could blink. The transport's low-observable composite armor skin boiled away in an instant, exposing structural frames and embedded fuel cells to the torrent of thermal energy.

The carrier detonated like a midair bomb, taking all hands with it. The rest of the flight bucked and weaved in a desperate scramble to escape the expanding cloud of debris while at the same time avoiding midair collisions with the other surviving units.

In the scrum, a second transport found itself locked into a narrow corridor of calm air as the rest of the formation broke up and climbed and dove around it. Those two seconds of level flight was enough to doom it to the same fate as the first and it too exploded in a fireball.

Stanton's heart soared at the sight. One of the CCDF ships in the taskforce far above had hear her SOS and was systematically picking off their attackers with megawatt-range offensive lasers from their broadsides.

She'd called in such strikes against fixed ground targets dozens of times. But to see them used against fast-maneuvering air assets. from low orbit, through the flickering of sixty kilometers of atmosphere... it was a supreme demonstration of naval gunnery. Liska pumped her free arm and shook her rifle at the panicked scrum in celebration.

The two-surviving flex-wings tucked in and went supersonic back the way they came. The smaller, slipperier stingers, ominously, broke off at ninety degrees from their previous bearing, then began a wide arch back towards Stanton and Liska's position.

"Oh, fuck," Stanton grabbed Liska by the elbow and shouted at her closed helmet. "They're lining up for a missile run!"

"Now do we hide?"

"Yeah!" Stanton cleared to the top of the outcrop in two clawfoot, power-assisted steps, then leaned in and ran straight for the far side. She made it almost ten steps before the explosion threw her tumbling through space like a child callously discarding a ragdoll in favor of a new toy.

## Chapter Two:

Stanton's memories of the next several days were... fragmented. When the missile hit, her suit's helmet blocked out the blinding flash and deafening bang, and mitigated most of the deadly overpressure. But there was only so much you can do about hypersonic shrapnel and concussion waves.

She awoke briefly, still inside Cynthia, but the helmet's HUD kept blinking in and out, and all it showed were error codes and damage alerts anyway. She had a vague sense of being dragged haltingly over rough terrain and an intense burning in her right arm and leg before passing out again.

Her next flash of awareness found Stanton staring up at the mint-colored ceiling of the *Musk's* infirmary. Harsh white surgery lights on either side of her field of vision bleached out the rest of the scene. Something had been shoved down her throat. No one was pulling her hair, so whatever was happening she wasn't having any fun at all. She tried to reach for whatever was in her mouth, but her arm wouldn't obey. She tried to sit up, but her body felt like it was floating in a warm pool a mile away.

"She's coming around," someone said from the vicinity of her feet.

"Tough bitch. Up the flow rate another twenty-five percent."

"That's outside recommendations for her adjusted weight."

"You want her awake for this?"

"Point."

Before Stanton could find a way to communicate her objections, a sharp taste crossed her tongue and brought the fog rolling in again.

When she finally, fully awoke, she was in a claustrophobic, sterile recovery room. She was still in space, and onboard the *Musk*. There was something just slightly off about artificial gravity, its pull was more diffused somehow. And every ship in the fleet had its unique background hum. It was a small comfort, knowing she was home, but the familiar surroundings calmed her just the same.

Her nose itched. She couldn't quite see what, but something was taped to the side of it. She reached up to scratch it and stared unblinking into a wholly unexpected new nightmare. Where her hand should be, there was only open air. Her wrist, forearm, elbow, all inexplicably absent until her fuzzy-focusing eyes reached a rounded stump halfway down her upper right arm, capped with a beige condom secured to twitching muscles with a metal ring.

Stanton screamed louder than she ever had in her life and shoved clear of the bed with her intact left arm, expecting to land on her feet. Instead, where she anticipated her right foot coming to rest on the deck plates, the empty space sent her sprawling across the floor.

A door on the far wall slid open to disgorge a nurse. With no small effort, they dragged Stanton back onto her feet... foot.

"There you go. Don't try to do too much too fas—"

In a blur, Stanton's remaining hand shot out like a spear and took the nurse by their throat. Pushing off hard with her left leg, she pinned the nurse against the bulkhead and squeezed.

"What. Did. You. Do. To. Me?"

"Hard for him to answer with your hand clamped around his voice-box," came a feminine voice from behind her. "Stand down, Lance Corporal. Let go of my nurse. You're not in danger."

Stanton looked over her shoulder to see a woman graying at the temples with hard, tired eyes and several deep creases in her forehead. Everyone on the ship recognized the XO instantly.

“Commander,” Stanton released the nurse’s throat and tried to turn to salute her superior, but raised only the stump of her upper arm. Quickly, she shifted the salute to her left arm, but without her other arm to counter the change in her center of gravity, or her other leg to brace against the floor, the salute threw her balance into an unrecoverable spill across the floor.

“At ease,” the XO said with a smirk.

“Hilarious.” The nurse stepped up and crouched to grab her off the floor. “Keep your hands to yourself,” Stanton snapped.

“You’ll let him help you back into bed, Sgt. That’s an order. I’ll not have this conversation with you flopping around on the floor like a freshly-landed fish.”

Stanton acquiesced. Despite the red handprint spreading across his neck, the nurse smiled warmly as he lifted her with little apparent effort. For a moment Stanton thought he was stronger than he looked. Then with a shiver, she realized what the anesthesiologist had meant by “her adjusted weight.”

“You really have to be careful of these scaffold medium caps.” The nurse nodded at the lid strapped down to the stump of her leg. “You really don’t want to disrupt the regeneration process at this stage. We’d have to cut back another couple centimeters and start over from scratch.”

“How long will that take?”

“I’m really not the right person to—”

“You’ll have a chance to talk about your options with the ship’s surgeon later,” the XO said. “We have more pressing matters right now.”

“Easy for you to say, mum.”

The older woman ignored the barb and instead produced two small velvet-covered cases. “Congratulations, LC. The final combat drop of your contract earned you some new jewelry and a fat bonus.”

“Thank you, mum, but what about the rest of my squad?”

The XO’s hand hovered over the cases. “PFC Liska survived the attack. She carried you to the extraction point, actually. The rest... will be awarded their medals posthumously.”

Stanton already knew, of course. No one could’ve survived the precision artillery barrage that had hit Sorento’s element. She and Liska had been incredibly lucky to survive a single ‘small’ missile strike. But to have the facts confirmed and the door slammed shut on hope.

“I don’t want the commendations. We never even got a round off.”

“Not your call, Sgt. The Old Man has already signed the paperwork awarding them, and giving you an honorable severance from your service contract.”

“Why? I told him to pound sand. Over an open com.”

“Yes, you did at that. Completely insubordinate that little stunt was.”

“Then why did you save us?”

“We didn’t. The CO of the escort destroyer *Breckenridge* did. Against orders. He’s already been relieved of command for insubordination and endangering the peace treaty.”

“Then why award me medals? I don’t understand.”

“It’s all so very political. Officers are expendable, no one cares what happens to the brass. We’re cashiered out of the service for much smaller infractions every other week, but you never hear about it. The nametag on the commander’s quarters changes, no one below decks notices, ships keep sailing, cost of doing business. But, hypothetically, get yourself a grunt under

fire standing up to the enemy and her own superiors to save her squad against their ‘stupid’ orders, well, now you have to tread carefully. That’s the sort of thing the crew sits up and notices. That’s the sort of thing that’ll kill morale if not handled properly. Breaks down respect and discipline. Maybe even opens doors to mutiny.”

The XO cracked open the two cases to reveal a Purple Heart and a Bronze Star.

“So, in the *official* version of this little story, you get to play the hero, LC Stanton. You retire from service with honors and a nice cash cushion to land on back in civilian life, and we don’t speak about what happened here again. Oh, and even once you’re healed up, don’t bother trying to sign a reenlistment contract. It won’t be accepted.”

“I don’t deserve a Bronze Star for getting half my ass shot off.”

“On the contrary, in the official opinion of the Captain, landing a crippled RIP the way you did was an incredible bit of spacemanship.”

“Give it to Porter. Or Corinthian. Or—”

“As I already told you, they’re all getting commendations, Lance Corporal. And I daresay deserved them.”

“And I don’t?”

“You just admitted you didn’t. But you’re going to accept them anyway because you’ve embarrassed the service enough for one career and it’s the least you can do on your way out.”

Stanton’s eyes narrowed. “I think I’d rather staple those medals to your forehead... mum.”

The XO sighed. “When your FS-718 letter is processed and you’re no longer the CCDF’s problem, the next time I see you, you’re welcome to try.”

The XO loomed over her bed and placed the two velvet cases on the sheet where Stanton’s right hand should have been, then looked at the nurse. “Make sure she’s wearing those when she’s discharged.” Without another word or glance, the XO spun around on a heel and exited the compartment.

Sensing her mood, the nurse gave a small bow. “You should get some rest. I’ll be nearby. Just push the call button if you need anything. Anything at all.” He closed the door behind him.

For the first time since Indoc, Stanton allowed herself the space to cry.

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Liska came to visit Stanton in recovery twice before she was cleared for travel. She’d been bruised up pretty bad in the missile strike, but she was another fifteen meters further away from the impact site. Far enough away that her exo kept out the worst of the damage.

The physical damage, anyway.

“The wasps finally released the bodies today,” she’d said on the second visit. “Fuckers just throw their dead into the compost heap. Took the negotiators a week to explain why the remains matter to us at all.”

“Well, they *are* aliens.”

Liska ignored this. “They’re being flown up at 1500 for viewing, presentation of honors, and burial in space. I’ll wheel you down to the ceremony.”

“Thanks, but I’ve got the last memories of them I want to carry with me.”

“You won’t see our friends off?”

“They won’t mind if I take a mental health day.”

“I think we owe it to them to—”

“I’ve already lost enough of myself in that sand-trap, Cheri. We both have. We don’t owe anyone anything. Least of all attendance in a ceremony to our friends thrown by the people who got them killed.”

“The wasps killed them.”

“NO!” Stanton thrust out an accusing finger so hard she nearly rolled out of bed for want of a right arm to arrest her sudden momentum. “The brass who didn’t splash the enemy’s orbitals, wouldn’t authorize our decoys on the drop, and hesitated when we had incoming flex-wings killed them. The wasps did their jobs. Our bosses didn’t.”

“Please let go of me,” Liska said with a gentle firmness one used with children. Stanton looked down and saw her own hand clenching Liska’s forearm hard enough even her trimmed nails were drawing blood.

She released at once. Liska walked over to the nearest table and calmly squirted some disinfectant into her palm, then rubbed it into the four crescent-shaped punctures in the skin of her other arm. “You’re not wrong, Erin. But you’ll need to get that shit under seal if you’re going to re-up.”

“You haven’t heard?” Stanton said. “I’m not welcome back. I’m being very generously cashiered out of the service on a wave of medals and settlement money. I gave up my arm and leg, and they gave me the boot.”

Liska stood silent as a statue for a long spell. “I... hadn’t heard that,” she said at last.

“Wait, you’re not actually thinking about signing another contract, are you? After all of that?”

“We’re at peace, now.”

“We were ‘at peace’ when we signed up the first time! How long before some idiot breaks the treaty and we’re at war again?”

“Some would say you were already that ‘idiot.’”

“Don’t.” It was an order. “You were there. They broke the treaty. I never even got to fire a shot. All I did was beg for someone to defend us.”

“The wasp ambassador says their dirtside forces didn’t get the ceasefire order in time, because of our task force’s jamming.”

“That’s a lie and we both know it.”

“That’s the official story. That’s what the skip drones took back to the colonies. That’s what the media is blaring all the way back to Earth. They’re calling it the ‘Second Battle of New Orleans.’”

New Orleans. A bloody misunderstanding fought days after the war was already over.

“How appropriate.”

“I should go.” Liska fidgeted with her fingers. “I have to stand watch in twenty.”

“Don’t re-up. Don’t give them any more of yourself.”

Liska looked back from the door frame. “Where would I go?”

Stanton swept a hand over her missing right side. “Where will *I* go? We’ll figure it out. Anywhere has to be better than here.”

“I’m still thinking about it.” She moved to leave the compartment.

“Cheri!” Stanton yelled, immediately embarrassed for the desperation in her tone.

“Yes?”

“Thank you, for saving me.”

Liska lingered at the threshold to consider her friend. “Well, most of you at any rate.”

“Oh fuck you, puta.”

They both smiled with the warmth of shared experience and comradery before Liska turned her head down the hallway and disappeared.

## Chapter Three:

Two weeks later, Stanton was discharged from the *Musk's* infirmary. Miraculously, this event coincided precisely with the arrival of the CCDF hospital ship *Consolation* in the system. Her nurse didn't forget his instructions, either. He very dutifully helped her into a marine dress uniform, the right-side sleeve and pantleg appropriately rolled and pinned to make sure the media cameras took note of her missing limbs, and the XO's two bullshit trinkets appropriately pinned to her breast so they took note of her missing dignity.

To everyone's surprise, most of all Stanton's, she played her decorated war hero role perfectly as she was wheeled past the vids. It had been another ten days in the claustrophobic recovery room and more than anything she just wanted to get off this ship and get on with... whatever the rest of her life looked like.

Instead, she waved pretty and saluted and shook hands with her left and smiled through clenched teeth. The interior of transfer shuttle was downright palatial compared to her recent accommodations. She didn't have much time to stretch out, however. The flight to the *Consolation* was a short one.

It was rare for capital ships to dock with each other directly except in emergencies. The collision risk was too great, especially with modern warships. Not that they weren't robust enough to take the impact, but even a glancing blow would tear up the delicate layers of adaptive camouflage and radar absorbent material that kept the great ships off the enemy's tactical displays and take days to replace, test, and reintegrate at a cost of millions of nudollars. Comparatively, shuttle fuel was cheap.

The shuttle settled into its capture cradle in the *Consolation's* boat bay without drama. Apart from the flight crew and the nurse, Stanton was the only 'passenger' to make the trip. Seemed an awful lot of fuss to make over a lowly Lance Corporal. Then again, there just weren't that many fresh casualties to fill a flight since hostilities ceased.

Stanton refused the nurse's help and made her own way to the collapsible transfer tube once the seal turned green, a trip made much easier in her current state thanks to zero gravity. But once she pushed off down the transparent flexible cylinder connecting shuttle to ship, her unbalanced body immediately pulled hard left and sent her spinning into the plastic wall most undignified. Not wanting to repeat the spectacle for anyone in the viewing gallery, she meekly completed the transfer using hand holds built into the ring segments.

There was another wheelchair waiting for her when her body transferred back to gravity on the boat bay's deck.

She saluted the deck officer with stiff formality. "Lance Corporal Stanton requesting permission to come aboard."

He smiled warmly. "You'll find we're a bit more relaxed here, Lance Corporal." He motioned to the wheelchair. "Please, let me show you to your quarters."

Stanton arched an eyebrow. "Individual quarters?"

"Of course. We're a dedicated hospital ship. We don't have to make space for missiles and lasers and all that. Frees up a lot of cubic meters for more restful accommodations."

As she was leisurely pushed down the hallways, Stanton saw the truth in it. While the bones of this ship were still CCDF, everything else was just... softer.

"Wide hallways," she remarked. "Down in grunt country on the *Musk*, two people can't walk past each other without rubbing tits."

“There needs to be enough space for two full-dressed gurneys racing in opposite directions not to crash into each other. You’re just ahead, close to the commissary. You’ll be pretty hungry during the transit. Regrowing limbs is a nutrient-intensive activity. Even worse than pregnancy, although the cravings aren’t as random. Less ice cream with pickles, more rare steak with potatoes.”

“How long will it take?”

“I’m not really—”

“Oh for fuck’s sake, stop passing the buck and just tell me.”

The nurse grimaced. “Eighteen months, maybe twenty.”

“To hell with that, I’m not hopping around with a dangly baby leg for a year and a half. How long to fit cybernetics?”

“You should really talk to your attendant doctor about your options...” Stanton scowled at him. “...however, in my experience fitment takes a day and full neural integration takes another couple weeks. It’s actually easier the sooner the cybernetics are present, because it takes advantage of the ‘phantom limb’ phenomenon. Your brain believes the missing arm or leg is still there, so it’s a pretty simple matter to identify and link up all the severed synapses. You don’t have to relearn anything because there hasn’t been enough time to forget.”

Stanton flexed her missing right hand and could swear it answered. “Yeah.”

Before she knew it, Stanton was tucked into the softest, most comfortable bed her ass had been in since before Basic. She was alone in a room with its own private head. The entire far wall was a holo preloaded with three centuries of content. But even more incredible than any of that, nestled in the far wall was a single round window. A view! In five years of CCDF spaceborn service, the only window Stanton had ever seen was the cockpit windshield of an assault shuttle. Windows were structural weak-points and holes in a warship’s armor, not to mention a thermal leak that increases the chance of IR detection. You would never find a window on any warship.

But from her bed, Stanton found herself staring out of it as the planet’s terrain and shifting clouds sped by below, repeating every forty-six minutes as the grand ship lapped another orbit. She’d seen plenty of planets on true-def holo displays, but there was some indelible quality of the actual reflected photons hitting her eyes that no display could ever quite capture. It was mesmerizing. A few orbits later, Stanton was deep in the first drug-free sleep she’d had since the attack.

Naturally, that’s when the nightmares started.

She was spinning through the air again. The ground was only a meter below, but she couldn’t get a foot down to reach it and arrest her roll. She finally landed in a tangled heap at the feet of a monstrously huge Xre warrior, its four arms held out with blood-stained scythes in place of claws. All around her, the burned and dismembered corpses of her teammates stared back at her through clouded, lifeless eyes.

Before she could scream, the Xre warrior lashed out in a blur of blades, severing both her arms and legs in a flash, leaving her nothing but a torso. In desperation, Stanton tried to roll after her right arm, but it began to crawl away from her, digging fingers into the dirt to pull away by inches. Her legs kicked up and hopped away.

Stanton’s eyes snapped open with a start. She was still alone in the now-darkened room, her skin clammy with sweat against the cool fabric of the white sheets.

“Real fuckin’ subtle, brain,” she said to the empty room. “Gonna need an expert to interpret that one.”

A monitor next to her head flashed red just as a woman’s voice came from the wall behind her head.

“Are you alright, Lance Corporal?” the duty nurse asked gently. “Your monitors show a rather dramatic spike in your vitals.”

“Yes, I’m fine. Just a bad dream.”

“Would you like me to administer a sedative to help you sleep? I can do a remote release into your IV.”

“No, thank you. But a midnight snack probably wouldn’t hurt.”

“I’ll have something sent right over.”

“Thank you,” Stanton said, but the line was already dead.

The *Consolation* featured its own dedicated cybernetic limb manufacturing lab. In a war against an enemy that loved to close to melee range and use their natural rending claws, replacing ground pounder’s limbs was a booming business.

“Step One is we put you in the millimeter-wave scanner right behind us.” The tech thumbed another tiny silver sticker onto the thin latex skin protecting her stump of a right arm while it healed. “These little reflectors just give the scanners precise anchoring points for the digital model of your arm and leg. The final synthetics will be a lot more comfortable, believe me.” She lifted a pantleg to show a turn of ankle made of titanium and composite.

“Combat?” Stanton asked.

“Not exactly. Fell off a ski lift when I was eight. Compound fracture just above the boot. Screwed up the growth plates and regen was in its infancy so it didn’t work great with kids who were still growing into their bodies. So, I went cybernetic, got a new leg, and found my dream job all in one fell swoop. Pretty good trade, in my opinion.” She moved on to start placing stickers on Stanton’s missing leg. “How about you? Did you always want to be a marine?”

“I always wanted to not be poor.”

“That’s how they getcha.” She placed a silver dot with some extra flare and authority. “There, all done. Let’s get you into the scanner. Think of it as getting fitted for a really nice dress.”

“That I’ll wear, every day. For the rest of my life.”

The tech helped her up and into the rig. “It’s a *very* nice dress. Just take the handholds... hold. Keep as steady as you can. The scanner can compensate for some drift but not a ton.”

“I’ll resist the urge to do jumping jacks.”

“Smart. You may feel a little bit of heat, but don’t worry. The radiation can’t penetrate your epidermis. It’s just really important we get an accurate map.”

“Flip the switch. I’m hangry.”

The tech nodded and flipped through a couple of screens on the wearable around her wrist, then toggled an icon. The rig whirred and spun around Stanton like an old paint-spraying robot, except instead of clearcoat it was hitting every square centimeter of her with millimeter-wave X-Rays. She didn’t feel anything at first, but after a few seconds a sensation of heat did indeed begin to build up on her exposed skin.

“Feeling a bit like a microwave burrito in here.” Stanton’s leg wavered. Three weeks in bed hadn’t done her conditioning any favors and her sense of balance was still completely screwed.

“Just a few more seconds. Hold fast... and there. Clean scan. At ease, Lance Corporal.”

Stanton allowed herself the small luxury of slumping against the frame of the rig. The tech came along a moment later to help her back into the waiting wheelchair. There had been a time her pride would've objected to accepting help, but that time had now and truly passed.

“There, job done. Let's get you something to eat.”

“Salisbury steak, please. With mashed potatoes.” Stanton rubbed her arm stump. “And a peach cobbler.”

Later that night as she tossed violently in her bed, the steak came back to visit her dreams as the pulverized body of Porter staring back from her plate with one accusing hazel eye. This time, she hit the button to deliver sedatives. Thrice.

The limb farm worked through the night to print her new customized arm and leg. By the time she woke the next morning in a cold sweat, they were printed. Twelve hours after that, they were patterned and ready for final fitting and adjustments. An hour later, she literally walked back to her room.

“Mirror,” she said to the wall display. It flipped over from the tropical landscape it had been showing to a full-length image of Stanton herself. In the privacy of her room, she removed her hospital gown, folded it onto the bed, then turned to take in her new body in the nude.

Prosthetics could be skinned with artificial flesh that would pass as real to all but the most intimate inspections, but Stanton had opted against it. She wanted people to see the costs of war. She hoped they felt a fraction of the shock and unease she felt now. The hard, almost skeletal metal and carbon weave prosthetics stood in stark contrast to her smooth, olive skin. She looked unbalanced. The artificial parts looked like an infection slowly spreading and consuming her body.

Stanton clenched her new hand into a fist, then flexed and splayed her fingers, listening to the whirring whispers of the compact servo motors. In anything but an empty, quiet room, she wouldn't be able to hear them at all. The techs mapped out all her motor neurons with incredible speed, but the neurons responsible for touch, temperature, and pain would take longer to integrate. Both her new arm and leg felt tingly and detached, like they were asleep.

One thing was certain; she was little point trying to sleep tonight. After seeing enough of her new self, Stanton disabled the wall display's mirror function and grabbed her PT shirt and shorts from the drawer she'd seen the orderly carefully fold them into when she'd arrived. A run, she'd go for a nice, easy 10k run. Nothing helped learning like doing, and it would wear her out enough to maybe get forty winks when she was done. That, and she'd get an idea of these new toys' battery life and endurance.

The techs told her the new leg didn't need a shoe and that it'd automatically adjust to compensate for any heel she wore on her other foot, up to ten centimeters. She laced up a sneaker for it anyway.

Like all starships, the *Consolation* moved “up” through space, with the fusion rockets pointed out the bottom of the ship so when it was under positive thrust, the force pushed the crew into the deck-plates and saved energy on the artificial-grav systems.

But the *Consolation* was not a warship. That was obvious from both its mission profile, but also its construction. Instead of the long, thin, cigar-shape of a CCDF hull, designed to maximize maneuverability and minimize sensor cross-section and frontal aspect targeting profile, *Consolation's* habitable hull was built like a mushroom. Wide and flat, with no consideration given to oncoming missiles or offensive lasers, the cap-shaped habitat module had

only four decks, but each was individually massive. So big that C Deck had an honest-to-goodness 1k running track ringing its outer circumference.

Stanton hadn't run on anything but a treadmill or a simulation hamster ball in two standard years, with the occasional and brief exceptions of when she was running for her life inside Cynthia under fire from wasps on alien planets she'd rather forget. She followed the signs and found the track at the end of a long radial spoke hallways. The double pressure doors slid open at her approach, another little luxury you'd never see on a warship. All their hatches were manual and swung inward in case of power loss and decompression.

The track was cool compared to the rest of the ship, due in no small part to the floor-to-ceiling windows lining the outside wall. Compared to the small portal in her room two decks up, the view of the stars beyond was breathtaking. Stanton pressed her hands against the cool glass. A thin fog of condensation radiated out from the fingertips of her left hand, while her right left no trace at all. With no atmosphere to diffuse them, the pinpricks of light outside were—

“Make way!”

Stanton's attention snapped back to her surroundings as she pressed herself up against the window to make room for a sweat-soaked woman in PT gear and cybernetic legs below the knees blow past her at what must have been a three-minute kilometer pace.

“It's a running track, princess,” she yelled over her shoulder as she sped away. “Sightsee on the observation deck.”

“Sorry,” Stanton called back, still surprised to see anyone else up and working out at this hour. The track floor was high traction and slightly springy. Perfect. She leaned into it and started to run. The cool air was biting at first, but it quickly became a blessing as her blood started to flow and her muscles heated up. Her replacement leg worked almost seamlessly, except for equilibrium. The imbalance threw her gait off ever so slightly. It didn't bother her at first, but after three kms it started to annoy. Still, she adjusted as best she could and pushed through.

By the time she finished forty minutes later, the mystery woman had lapped her, twice, and disappeared. Stanton leaned hard against the hallway just on the other side of the running track doors, sweating like a pig, panting like a dog, and chastising herself for not thinking to bring a towel and water bottle from her room. Her “good” leg cramped painfully from compensating for the unnatural gait. It took a couple of minutes to rub out the knot in her calf.

She consulted a ship map and made her way to the nearest mess hall. This late the mess crew was probably busy doing meal prep for the following day so it would be PB&Js, but it was better than nothing and she could get some water to top off and cool down.

The doors opened onto a familiar face sitting alone at a far table.

“Well, if it isn't the tourist,” the mystery woman said.

“I said sorry. Let's not make it a ‘thing,’ okay?”

The woman shrugged and took a drink of juice. “Haven't stopped to look at the stars in a while, huh?”

“Been busy.”

The woman held her glass out and motioned at Stanton's new limbs. “Somebody's been busy with you, too. How long?”

“About an hour now.”

“Amazing, huh?” She kicked out one of the empty seats at her table. “Grab some chow and have a seat.” Her voice carried the air of someone used to her requests being treated like commands, and Stanton found her long-drilled-self obeying mechanically. She'd need to spend

some time back in civilian life purging that bit of military coding. Sure enough, the menu choices were limited to a small selection of self-assembled sandwich options. Stanton slapped together a peanut-butter and soy bologna on wheat, a peculiar combination held over from childhood, filled a liter cup of water, then sat down in the offered chair.

“First time running on it, if you called that running?”

“Ha ha. But yes.”

“How’d it go?”

“Fine.”

“Don’t bullshit.”

“It worked amazingly well, the arm too.”

“But?”

“But... I was unbalanced. It added up after a while.”

“Oh that’s easy, everyone goes through that. Believe it or not the cybers actually weigh a bit less than meat and bone. Tell the techs tomorrow and they’ll bolt on some ballast to even you out. You’ll have to spend some time in a hamster ball so they can figure out exactly how much and where, but it’s cake.”

Stanton took a long drink from her water cup. “Thanks. Are you a tech?”

“No, not exactly. I’m a... let’s call it an integration partner.”

“The fuck does that mean?”

“It means I’m the ship’s emotional support dog for grunts like you who got themselves blown up.”

“Bang up job you’re doing.”

“You’re talking to another human being, ain’tcha? Haven’t said more than three words to anyone since you floated over.”

“You’ve been watching me?”

“You have a file.”

“Fucking CCDF,” Stanton said bitterly.

“Oh no, it’s not like that. *Consolation* isn’t CCDF, even if most of our customers are. Right now we’re under contract to the military, but it’s not our only gig.”

Stanton looked around the empty mess. “Not sure how you’re keeping the tanks full without customers.”

“The war’s wound down, honey. Should’ve seen this place six months ago. We were ferrying two thousand, three thousand jar heads at a time on this boat. Slept them two to a bed, for anyone willing.”

“While they’re in recovery?” Stanton asked incredulously.

“Humans wanna fuck. Can’t stop it. May as well incorporate it into their recovery plan.”

“So what’s your story? How’d you get the new jewelry?”

Emotional support dog gestured to her own replacement legs. The skin around the merge point just below her knees was a smooth, uniform hue. A stark contrast to the angry red of still-healing tissue around Stanton’s joinings. “What, these old things? Flushing out a wasp nest about five levels underground. Fuckers were dug in but good and weren’t surrendering the mound. One of their anti-personnel cutter mines went off while I was dropping down through the hole from the next level up. I was lucky, the laser just cut me off at the knees. The three members of my squad already through the hole were cut off at the sternum.”

Stanton swallowed hard. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. I read your file already. That was messed up, thinking everyone was about to sing kumbaya only to get your ass shot out from under you. Let me guess why you’re running this late. The dreams have started already, right?”

Stanton shifted uncomfortably in the plastic chair. “I just wanted to do a test drive, that’s all.”

“Uh huh.”

“You were really hauling on the track. Were you always that fast, before the new legs I mean?”

“Not even close. They took almost a full minute off my kilometer time. We’re all really lucky the Taipei Accords ban elective transhuman enhancements in the military or we’d all be getting chopped up as a requirement in the enlistment contract.”

“How’s the battery life?”

“It’s kinda counterintuitive, actually. Your leg will last longer than your arm, especially if you’re really running around. The servos are regenerative, so some of the impact energy is recaptured and goes back into the batteries. Same batteries as your old exo, so they recharge in like, five minutes flat.”

“That’s welcome news. Really don’t want to be sitting around all day waiting for half my body to charge.”

The woman drank more of her juice. “So, why’d you go with the cybernetics? Navy would’ve paid you through your down time if you’d regrown.”

“Just impatient, I guess. Didn’t want to wait around a year and a half to get back to my life.”

“And what’s that look like? Your life, I mean?”

Stanton’s mouth opened, but emitted no sounds. Since she’d signed up with the CCDF, the only choices she’d made for herself had revolved around food. Everything else had been decided for her. She’d gotten on by moving along to the next task predetermined by her superiors.

“You don’t have the first idea, do you?”

Stanton shut her mouth, sighed, and gave her head a little shake.

“You were in, what, three years?”

“Three and a half, and two full drop tours.”

“And you’re twenty-two now? Almost twenty-three? Most people your age are graduating university about now.”

“I was busy with the whole defending humanity from extinction thing.”

“Oh please. This was a territorial skirmish. We were fighting to preserve a few corporate footholds near the line of scrimmage. The civvies were all evacuated before the first shots were even fired.”

“Sorry, is this supposed to be some kind of pep talk?”

“It’s deprogramming. The marines needed you to rally ‘round the flag, mom, and apple pie while you were fighting the wasps and maybe that was a kindness in the moment. But now you’re going back to the rest of the world and that propaganda will just make you sound crazy to anyone who wasn’t out here. And that’s almost everybody, by the way.” She let the words sink in a moment while she twirled her juice. “Where’s home?”

“61 Cygni A, Thanatos colony.”

“Ah, a red eyes girl. Yeah, that scans.”

Stanton bristled a bit at ‘red eyes.’ It wasn’t quite a slur among her native land, but it wasn’t considered polite, either. 61 Cygni was a binary star system, Cygni A and B both being low mass red dwarf stars. Thanatos colony sat squarely on Cygni C, the only habitable planet, indeed the only planet of any consequence in the tandem system. Viewed from afar, 61 Cygni looked like a pair of red eyes. But from Thanatos, Only Cygni A was even visible unless you went hundreds of kilometers into the night zone. ‘Red eyes’ just as often referred to Thanatos citizens themselves, who were notorious for abusing a locally-grown opioid analogue that dilated the capillaries in the whites of their eyes. It had killed almost as many of her friends as the wasps had.

“Scans how?”

“Well the CCDF spends heavily to recruit in... underprivileged colonies and stations. Not a lot of cadets come out of Lazarus or New Sevastopol.”

“Are you calling my planet a shithole?”

“Ease back there, turbo,” the woman said. “No profit in getting angry when you hear the plain truth spoken. You’re doing someone else’s work when you do, and they don’t have your best interests at heart. Red Eyes is on the giving end of the extraction economy and we both know it. But it’s not just rare earths and platinum they’re mining and shipping out. It’s people, too. People like you, unless you were conscripted away from a happy family life and cornucopia of lucrative job prospects?”

“Who *are* you, lady?”

“You in a couple years if you’re clever enough.” She reached out to offer her right hand. Stanton hesitated, but took it. She had a firm grip. After three shakes, she turned her wrist and inspected the back of Stanton’s new hand. “My name’s Eccleston, First Lieutenant back when that mattered. How’s the haptic feedback?”

“Tingly and numb, like I sat on it for too long.”

“Let the techs know if that doesn’t pass after a few days. In the meantime, take advantage of it and flick the old bean. We call it ‘The Stranger.’”

“Thanks, and gross.”

Eccleston released her grip. “So where are you headed after we reach Fleet HQ? Not back to Cygni?”

“Maybe I am.”

“It never works, kid. It won’t be the same. Actually, that’s not true. Places like Cygni never really change. You, on the other hand, you’re different now. And no, I don’t just mean the optional upgrades. You can never go home again.”

Stanton rolled her eyes. Cygni might be a shithole, but the schools still had English classes. She stood up from the table and snagged the plate with her sandwich.

“Thanks for the emotional support, LT, but I think I’m good for one night.”

“Veraxatonin.”

“Excuse me?”

“Sleep aid. Ask the nurses for it. Keeps you from dreaming. But they’ll only give it to you for a couple days, so be ready for that.”

“It’s that addictive?”

“Not at all. But eventually, you have to start dreaming again, or you’ll go mad.”

## Chapter Four:

It was a three-day journey by Alcubierre bubble from the front to Fleet HQ in a proper warship. But *Consolation* took a little longer. Stanton ran on the track every evening just before bed, but with the ship pinched off inside its own localized universe, there were no stars to gaze at through the windows. Only funhouse mirror distorted reflections of the light coming from the windows themselves, twisting and contorting on the inside shell of their pocket dimension as they careened through the space ‘outside’ at many hundreds of times the speed of light. It was a good thing she wasn’t prone to motion sickness or she’d be puking on the running lanes.

The bubble burst just before lunchtime her fifth day aboard as the great ship returned to the proper universe. Stanton always knew in her bones when a ship entered or exited Alcubierre. It was a... fuzzy sensation. Like every nerve and neuron in her body was just the tiniest bit confused about exactly where it was for a split second. But this exit revealed a new wrinkle as the joining between her flesh and new cybernetics burned for the barest moment. She jolted upright in her chair at the pain, but it passed quickly and fully.

“Not excited about that.” She checked the charge on her new arm. Ninety-eight percent, close enough. Eccleston had been right about the leg; it lasted days between charges. She lifted her arm from the contact charging panel built into the armrest stood up, and walked her room’s small portal. She wanted to see this for herself.

Fleet Headquarters, better known as The Yards by ground grunts and space surfers alike, spread itself out on the other side of the glass like a child’s haphazardly assembled train set. It was the sort of ‘structure’ that could only exist in zero-gee, thrown together ad hoc without any plan or vision beyond the immediate demands of the moment.

Such had been the nature of the first war with the wasps. No advanced warning, no chance to prepare, just a furious race to catch up and avoid oblivion. The Yards were born in that desperate moment from a small, neglected outpost that had been trading in unremarkable bulk ores until an alien invasion fleet showed up out of the black and sucker-punched humanity to the tune of a one point six million dead a few systems over.

The Yards were as close to the front as war planners of that generation thought they could get away with and still maintain some degree of operational security. Earth was another ten days deeper into human-controlled space, making the transit delays and communications bottlenecks untenable to fight a rapidly-evolving war effectively. Plus, UN politicians never saw the war as more than a frontier issue to be settled by the transtellars who actually held the deeds to the planets falling like coconuts in a hurricane.

It was only the third time Stanton had seen the senseless hodge-podge of slapdash construction since she’d enlisted. Indoc and A school had been done at a satellite base in Cygni itself, run by the same set of officers who’d recruited her in the first place. Her class had been shipped off for six months of C School on Tao Ceti where she qualed in her specialty.

By the time anyone in CCDF service saw The Yards the first time, they’d already been broken down and rebuilt into whatever tool had been deemed necessary for the war. For Stanton, that had been two and a half years ago. The ships sitting in their berths back then had looked so enormous. Bristling with weapons like quills on a porcupine and layered in armor like an armadillo, radiating raw power and invincibility.

Some of those same ships lay outside her window now. Their weapons blunted and armor dented. The yard dogs would be busy for months returning those battered hulks the bean-

counters deemed salvageable back to service. Many berths lay entirely empty, their occupants' invincibility tested by the enemy past their breaking point, never to return to port again. For a 'territorial skirmish,' it had come with a high price tag in both iron and blood.

Within the hour, Stanton's space bag hung over her shoulder containing all of her worldly possessions, with room to spare for duty-free purchases in the PX. Aside from saluting the deck officer, she made no goodbyes before floating down the transfer tube that took her away from *Consolation*.

Navigating the Yards by foot was less than intuitive at the best of times. But here, now, Stanton had never seen it so chaotic. CCDF members marched in their regimented way down the fractal corridors to their next set of orders, interrupted constantly by maintenance contractors rushing to the next job, punctuated by out-system speculators, transtellar envoys, and media trying to set up impromptu interviews with any and all of the above.

Stanton hated it immediately. There were exactly two things she needed to do here before shipping out and leaving the military in her rearview display forever. Her stomach growled in protest and as reminder she'd skipped lunch in the rush to escape the hospital ship. She still had to find the Registrar of Personnel satellite office on the station to complete her formal discharge paperwork, but that could wait because she was absolutely starving.

Money wasn't a problem, yet. Her final month's pay had hit her account while she was transiting on the *Consolation*, and she'd been in nearly constant combat rotations for the last two years with nowhere to go and nothing to spend her pay on. Her nest egg wouldn't last forever, though. A big part of the reason Thanatos was such a poor colony was just how expensive it was to ship in damned-near everything it needed to survive.

If you wanted anything to eat other than locally-grow red algae paste, it either had to be grown in energy and water-intensive aeroponics towers, or bubbled in from neighboring systems with stars bright enough to sustain surface agriculture. The same was true of manufactured goods. Eccleston had been right about Cygni's position in the extraction economy. Minerals flowed out, then the more developed worlds and colonies sold finished products back to them at full retail mark-up plus interstellar shipping charges.

But that was a tomorrow problem. A growling stomach was a right now problem. One lesson military life ingrained in recruits hard and fast was never pass up an opportunity to eat or sleep. The Yards were big enough, and mixed with enough military and civilian employees and visitors, that it had more than the usual chow hall or food court stuffed with fast food franchises one saw at a typical military installation. There were actual sit-down restaurants, and even a few that passed for fine-dining.

She consulted the Yards' local net for recs and after a short search found a mid-priced place with an interesting menu and more importantly no reservations or dress code. Just her kind of place. A quick tram ride and two elevators later and Stanton walked through a pair of antique wooden saloon doors like the ones you saw in the old westerns. Appropriately, the joint was called "The Swingin' Door Exchange."

A kind-looking woman with laugh-lines on her cheeks and crow's-feet at the corners of her eyes nodded in Stanton's direction. "Have a seat anywhere, honey. I'll be right over."

The walls were clad in wood paneling, probably fake but convincing. The bar was well-worn and surrounded with a brass rail polished by untold thousands of forearms. Antique-looking stained-glass lampshades hung from the ceiling, casting subtle color in every direction in the dim space. Tawdry art and black and white pictures lined the wood walls. A small sign over the bar read 'Alcohol: Makes you see double and feel single!'

It was, in a word, perfect.

Stanton saddled up to the bar and sat down with a slight groan and a creak from the spin-top stool. A glass of ice water appeared in front of her a second later.

“Get you something else to drink besides water?”

“Beer please, something light.”

“Got a real crisp local pils.”

“That sounds wonderful.”

The bartender smiled and pulled out a chilled glass from a small cooler and pulled the tap handle. “Menu, sweetie?”

“Got a special today?”

“Chicken cordon bleu with fried brussel sprouts. Vat-grown chicken breast but the cheese is real.”

“This far out? That couldn’t have come cheap.”

“Case fell off the back of a transport,” she said with a wink. “Want one?”

“Absolutely.”

She tossed down a plastic coaster and set the frosted pilsner down in front of Stanton.

“Comin’ right up.”

She lifted the glass with her right hand, careful not to break it. She was still acclimatizing to the pressure feedback. The stein was cool to the touch, and a little slick with condensation. Stanton held it in her grip and turned it gently, watching the little trails of bubbles rise through the clear amber liquid while she marveled at the detail of the new hand’s ‘nerves.’ She took an exploratory sniff from the beer’s thin, foamy head before it dissipated entirely.

She put the rim to her lips and sipped. It was light and crisp, as promised. Clean, but with enough body you knew you were drinking a beer. Her first proper brew in more than a standard year. She’d had various brands of torpedo juice while deployed, of course. *Renatured* alcohol siphoned from ships’ cleaning or disinfectant supplies and mixed with whatever the grunts could find to take the sting out of it. Not a pleasant way to get drunk, and the hangovers could land one in sickbay if it was a bad batch, but it got the job done. Didn’t have anything to do with torpedoes as far as anyone could tell, so the name remained a bit of a mystery.

The taste of slightly bitter beer dragged up a memory from her late teens. School mates sneaking out of their flats in the middle of the ‘night’ to drink whatever spore beer they’d managed to score from their parents in between the red algae pools. Stanton was in the middle of a proper gulp when someone sat down heavily next to her and slapped her on the shoulder. Hard. The glass bumped against her front teeth and sent a surge of beer into her mouth and down her cheeks and chin. She coughed to keep the surge out of her windpipe, then turned to engage the threat.

“Oh,” she set the glass down. “It’s you.”

“Hey LC!” Eccleston said jovially. “What a coincidence, running into you here.”

“Yeah...” she wiped beer from her chin with a forearm. “...a ‘coincidence.’ Thought I left you behind on the *Consolation*.”

“Shore leave. *Connie*’s docked for the next week for resupply and routine maintenance.”

“Just my luck.”

“It might be, at that.”

Stanton sighed. “Talk fast because my ears are shutting off as soon as my food gets here.”

“Fair enough. How long are you staying in the Yards?”

“I’m leaving tomorrow.”

“To go unleash yourself on Thanatos? What did your neighbors do to deserve that?”

“And I suppose you’ve come up with a better idea since the last time you tried to talk me out of going back to the only other life I’ve ever known?”

“I may have, actually.”

The bartender reappeared from the back, a plate of chicken cordon bleu in hand. “Oh hi, honey. Sorry, I didn’t hear your friend come in.”

“She was just leaving.”

“Not now that I’ve seen the plate special, I’m not. Hey, barkeep, got any tequila in this whiskey joint?”

“I can probably scrounge up a bottle.”

“Excellent. Two shots, please.”

“Training wheels?”

“Not since grade school.”

“Hardcore.” The bartender nodded at Stanton. “How about you?”

“I’ll have a lime, please.”

“I can do a lime juice chaser. Nearest citrus tree is a way off.”

“Good enough.”

The bartender set Stanton’s plate down in front of her, then retreated to a small alcove near the kitchen. She returned a moment later with a dusty bottle of brown liquid. Eccleston’s nose wrinkled. “Is it supposed to be that color?”

“It is when it’s been properly aged in an oak barrel.” The bartender grabbed three shot glasses, uncorked the bottle, and poured. “Name’s Shelly, by the way. Picked this bottle up in Guadalajara itself. Hubs and I took a year off to see the old planet a while back and hit all the booze capitols. Filled our suitcases with bottles and bought new clothes when we got back.” She flipped a fourth shot glass over and squeezed a few drops of lime juice into the concave base from a green plastic fruit, then lifted her own shot. “Now, what are we drinking this rare nectar to?”

Eccleston grabbed her shot and hoisted it towards an antique copper fan lazily spinning from the ceiling. “To new horizons.”

Before Stanton could object, Shelly clinked her two guest’s glasses. “I’ll drink to that.” Then, she dipped her glass, tapped the bar, and drank. Eccleston and Stanton followed suit. The tequila wasn’t at all what she’d expected. It was smooth, with a mix of caramel and pepper flavors nearly canceling each other out as it washed over her tongue and down her throat. She didn’t reach for the lime juice. It wasn’t necessary.

Eccleston turned her shot glass over and slammed it on the bar. “So, LC. What do you know about hexephants?”

## Chapter Five:

The ‘cabin’ she’d been assigned onboard Praxis passenger transport #472846 was no bigger than a broom closet. The first-class cabins four levels above stood almost empty because nobody with money picked Cygni as a vacation spot.

Joke was on them, though, because even a broom closet was a penthouse compared to the fold-down bunk and footlocker she’d lived out of on the *Musk* for the last eighteen months. There was a communal bathroom down the hall, but that wasn’t foreign to Stanton’s lived experience either, and the population of this deck wasn’t even a third of Grunt Country. One girl did insist on taking absurdly long sonic showers, however. Stanton had made it five whole days before gently correcting her on it. There was probably some cultural disparity between CCDF and civilians over what constituted ‘gently,’ but the infraction had not been repeated, so she threw it in the win column.

There was only so much to do in her cabin, and only so many vids she could binge before her eyes went cross. She did get the chance to catch up on her Venezuelan soaps, but she needed to lean pretty heavily on the subtitles. Spanish class had been a few years ago now. Amazing how quickly those skills atrophied without practice.

On a whim, Stanton pulled out a pad and opened a message draft to pass some time. She hadn’t heard from Liska since transferring to the *Consolation*. But neither had she tried to reach out. There wasn’t anyone else in the universe who could truly relate to what she’d been through, literally. Would be a real shame to lose touch with that well of support. So, she started recording.

“Hey, puta. It’s Erin, obviously. Sorry I didn’t write earlier, but I’ve been un poco ocupada getting upgraded.” She flexed her new hand a couple times in frame and fluttered the fingers. “No cool new tricks like laser fingertips or anything like that, but they’re integrating nicely and I’m not falling over anymore.

“I hope you’re sleeping better than I am. I keep having nightmares, and I keep waking up so I’m tired and jumpy all day. Not that I have anywhere to go but this ‘cabin’ for the rest of the week.” She spun the pad around to get a full view of her quarters. “Barely bigger than our sarcophagi, but at least I’m not sweating my tits off inside an exo. You know it’s weird not having anyone tell me where to go or what to be doing eighteen hours a day. I hated it when I was in, but now... I kinda miss the structure, you know? Kept my mind from wandering like it is now. Instead of looking ahead to the next thing, my head keeps circling back to dark places I’d rather not be.” She sighed heavily.

“Sorry, I’m ranting. I just don’t know what to do with myself until I get home. At least my folks will be there. They’ don’t even know I’m coming yet! There hasn’t been a skip drone to Cygni from The Yards since I pulled in. It’ll be a surprise. I can’t wait to see their faces when the hatch spins open. After that, I don’t know. I’ll find something to do with myself.

“One thing I’m not doing, girl you’re not going to believe this one. I met a woman on the *Consolation* who fancied herself some kind of career counselor. She tried to talk me out of going home altogether and instead go twenty lightyears into Disputed Space to act as a bodyguard for a herd of hexiphants, like those six-legged alien elephant things you see on exobiology documentaries? Apparently, the wasps consider them a sacred animal and hunt them as part of some ascension ceremony for new member of their Symphony or whatever, but trophy hunters and poachers have been coming from Earth and it’s a whole shit show. Money was good but I’d literally be working for the wasps. As if there’s a universe where that would ever happen.”

Stanton reached out with her flesh and blood left hand to drag fingertips over the camera lens. "I miss our squad. Anyway, that's the news on my end. Hope you're doing well. Keep in touch, yeah?"

Stanton terminated the recording, then watched it three times wondering if she should record it again. No, fuck that. It was raw and authentic and she wasn't broadcasting to millions. She was spinning real talk to a friend who knew her flaws in a way that only came from more than a year spent sharing recycled air and terror.

She double-checked the CCDF routing address before hitting SEND. The message didn't go anywhere, of course. With the transport walled off inside its own pocket universe to break Einstein's absolute speed limit, there was literally nowhere for the message to go. Instead, it entered the ship's queue with hundreds of other messages. All of which would wait until Praxis transport #472846 popped its bubble and transmitted them to Cygni Central, downloaded them to a skip drone or more likely the next transport to leave the system, where they would rejoin the interplanetary net on the other side of several days' travel time and eventually make its way to Liska's inbox.

It was like being back in the age of the Pony Express, except the horses traveled several hundred times the speed of light. The communication bottlenecks also meant the rediscovery of pen-pals. Liska's response would be read by at least two people to scrub it of any sensitive information on mission assignments or fleet movements, but operational censorship was just another aspect of military life you got used to in a hurry if you wanted to stay sane.

The transition warning sounded from the ceiling. She'd lost track of time, they were about to pop their bubble and rejoin the real world. Easy for a starship, maybe not so easy for a person. But what was the alternative? The only way forward was through.

Stanton left the claustrophobic cabin behind and fought her way through the narrow corridors, working her way to the ship's small observatory. All the seats were already taken, but standing didn't bother her. Especially now that she could lock one knee indefinitely without tiring. So she grabbed some bulkhead and looked up through the laminated transparent aluminum dome and saw her home world from space for the first time.

She'd signed up for CCDF on impulse service thirty months ago, after a particularly bad blow-out with her father. She'd promised herself she was leaving this place behind to never look back, and on the outbound flight, she hadn't. It had been her first time in orbit. Her first time more than ten thousand meters above the ground, actually. While everyone else tried to crowd the transport's observation deck, she sat virtually alone in the mess eating a hydroponic salad.

Stanton had traveled far since then. Usually to not-very-pleasant places, but there were bright spots. She'd gotten a week's shore leave on Lazarus early in her first deployment and became enamored with a 'Genuine New York City Delicatessen' called Portly's. They served up steaming-hot, shaved, vat-meat sandwiches as tall as your forearm. Simply irresponsible amounts of meat you couldn't possibly fit all in your mouth in one bite. She bought a single corned-beef Reuben, a loaf of marbled rye, and had enough ingredients to make lunch for the rest of the week.

They had something else that brought her back, day after day. Coffee, yes, obviously. But there was a particular cookie, shortbread, glazed half chocolate, half vanilla. They called them 'black and white cookies' and they were moist, crumbly, and delicious.

Looking down on Thanatos, she was reminded of those cookies. Her world was tidally locked in its orbit to Cygni A. No spin, no day/night cycle. Just a bright pink day side, a pitch-black night side, and the thin ribbon of dark crimson right down the middle.

Before humanity started sending interstellar probes to nearby exoplanets, it was widely assumed that tidally locked planets like Thanatos would be completely inhospitable across the vast majority of their surfaces except a razor thin zone around the terminator where the perpetual twilight would be neither too hot nor too cold. But those models drastically underestimated atmospheric and ocean convection. The planet's actual habitable band reached out nearly two thousand kilometers from the terminator in either direction, warmed or cooled by the ever-shifting winds. There were no seasons, but the weather could change in a whiplash if the wind or pressure front moved on. The further from the terminator you were, the more extreme and unreliable the temperatures became. A 3<sup>rd</sup> Gen weather-net did its best to keep the cyclones from growing too powerful and leveling the settlements, but it could only do so much.

Which was why the majority of the population lived a few hundred kilometers into the light side of the planet. Scattered pinpricks of light punctuated the inky blackness on the other side of the terminator. These were active mining sites rich enough to justify the added expense of working in the frozen dark. Workers in these 'firefly' camps did strict sixty-day rotations. Spend longer than that in the dark and people started getting... weird.

Without axial rotation, Thanatos couldn't support a space elevator. So old #472846 had to match velocities and dock with a skyhook station before disembarking its passengers. A tether more than a thousand kilometers long reached out from the spinning station to periodically dip into Thanatos's upper atmosphere where it would either catch or release a waiting shuttle. From there, a transfer car crawled its way up the cable back to the station to exchange one set of passengers for the next.

Stanton watched as the outbound crowd poured out of the car. They were a mix of business persons, expats returning to their lives after a visit home, locals heading off-world on vacation, and... there they were. A young man, boy, really, fresh buzz cut, space bag slung over his shoulder, brand new CCDF regulation uniform, crisp and clean, eyes full of wonder and worry.

It could've been a picture of Stanton herself almost three years ago.

"Hey, recruit," she called out to him.

He saw her, took in her worn fatigues, spotted the chevron that denoted an E-3 rank on her shoulder, and nearly dropped his bag in the race to salute. "Ma'am!"

Stanton smiled. "We don't do that here, son. Where are you headed?"

"C School, ma'am. Six months."

"Navy or marines?"

"Marines, ma'am. Oorah!"

"Good for you." She pushed up her right sleeve, exposing her cybernetic arm, and lightly gripped his shoulder. "And good luck."

"Did you..." he swallowed. "Did you lose that in combat?"

"A gentleman never asks." She squeezed his shoulder, then rubbed his top cover. "And a lady never tells. Go get 'em, tiger."

The new recruit sufficiently hazed and terrified, as was good and proper under millennia of military tradition, Stanton left him behind without another word and made her way into the now empty transfer car to claim a seat before it made its way a thousand clicks back down the tether. She picked one next to a window, stowed and secured her gear, then strapped herself in and waited as the car filled to about a third capacity. Not a ton of people scrambling for a spot to the surface.

A weary, over-worked attendant made an inspection round of the occupants of the cabin, ensuring their belts were fastened, reminded them most of the ride down would be in zero gee, and checked the tiedown straps on their luggage to guarantee it wouldn't go floating off only to brain someone once the brakes clamped down.

"Our valued passengers," the pre-drop announcements began, "We are about to begin our decent to the transfer station. For the next ninety minutes, please remain secured in your seats for your safety, and the safety of others. In case of a cabin emergency... think happy thoughts." The morbid bit of gallows humor was met with laughs from all assembled who, by virtue of already being in space, weren't participating in their first rodeo.

A chime began a ten second countdown. On zero, the brakes holding the transfer car to the hub station released, and the spin gravity disappeared. Stanton's stomach floated up into her throat. The only baby on the car started to cry from the sudden fall, but settled down after a short spell. The car 'fell' freely down the tether for the next twenty minutes until a set of friction wheels engaged to gently slow it back down again as it approached the terminal at the far end.

An atmospheric shuttle waited there to take them the final hundred kilometers down to the surface. It was always a trick getting everyone moved from the car and strapped down in the shuttle before the launch window closed, but with so few people on this car, they were herded and buckled in with time to spare.

This was, by any measure, the scariest part of the trip. At least it had been before Stanton started making her reentries from out of a counter missile tube. But she could see the stress lines form on the faces of some of the other passengers. Outside her window, the space abruptly turned from a deep black to a rich, glowing lavender as the end of the tether dipped down into Thanatos's upper atmosphere at five thousand kilometers an hour.

On the windward side of the tether, slatted hydraulic flaps deployed into the onrushing air to create a small turbulence-free pocket before cutting the shuttle loose. The moment of hand-off was the most dangerous. If either the tether or shuttle whipped back into contact in the jet stream, the midair collision would disintegrate both before anyone onboard had the chance to void themselves. Stanton was philosophical the moment the clamps released, comforted by the knowledge that whatever unfolded in the next few seconds was outside of her sphere of control. Also, she was already drunk.

There was a mighty jolt as the shuttle left the patch of calm air behind and transitioned into the hypersonic slipstream, but it quickly settled down again. The AI piloting it was a fifth-generation program and knew its way around. This wasn't the sort of job you could trust to a human pilot. No one, not even augmented, had those kinds of reflexes.

"Attention passengers," came a recorded announcement from the 'cockpit.' "We are about to execute a series of high-gee turns to shed velocity before we can begin our final decent to the surface. Please ensure that your harnesses remain tight and remember to clench your legs to keep your brains supplied with oxygen-rich blood. And thank you for visiting Thanatos."

The first turn came fast. Probably three gees from the feel of it in Stanton's seat. Not nearly enough to affect her highly trained and conditioned body, but then she was the exception onboard. Judging by their pained expressions, most of the softer passengers were being pushed up against their tolerance. Stanton was almost enjoying herself until midway through the third turn a latch on an overhead storage bin snapped and the bin flew open with a *Clang*.

Instantly, Stanton was buttoned up inside Cynthia and strapped into her spiraling, dying sarcophagus. The vertigo and nausea hit her like a hammer while the screams of failure alarms filled her ears as the harsh crimson and amber strobes of warning lights blinded her. Her hands

scrambled over the controls while she strained to remember what she'd done to save herself the last time as stinging, acrid smoke filled the claustrophobic space and blocked her view of the displays.

Stanton screamed as the RIP corkscrewed towards the ground until something gripped her forearm and squeezed.

"Miss!" someone shouted loud enough to penetrate her helmet. "MISS!"

"I'm trying to miss!" Stanton snapped back, but the scene had changed in an instant. She was back on the shuttle, out of Cynthia and strapped tightly into her chair. A white-knuckled hand clenched her flesh and blood arm. Stanton looked up into the face of the flight attendant who'd made the announcements earlier. She drew in a deep, halting breath. "What happened?"

"You were shouting, miss. It was disturbing the other passengers. I need you to try to relax."

"Of course. I thought I was..." Stanton was suddenly very aware of the stares and whispers emanating from the rest of the cabin. "...somewhere else."

The attendant smiled professionally. "It's okay. We've finished our braking turns and have gone subsonic. The worst is behind you. It's all smooth sailing from here."

"I very much want to believe that." The attendant released her arm and walked back to the front of the shuttle to resume their descent checklist. Stanton looked down at her hands and unclenched them both from the armrests through a force of will. The left armrest recovered after a few seconds. The right, looked like someone put it through a garbage disposal.

Ten minutes later and they were wheels down rolling up to the spaceport terminal. Ten minutes after that and Stanton was in a public vac-tube ten meters underground headed for the city center with a smattering of other passengers from the flight. Two were obviously reps from one of the transtellars visiting on business. Against their wills, based on their dower looks. The rest were locals, still sporting that post-vacation glow.

The vac-tube dropped her off right in the bustling heart of the colony. It was late, but second shifters were just coming out of the mines and fields to fuel a nightly bloom of activity in the downtown bars and restaurants, but she'd already had enough on the descent and didn't want to be a complete mess when she knocked on her parents' door. Seeing their daughter... as she was now, would already be enough of a shock.

Stanton dropped a few nudollars on a red algae and fungus wrap from a street vendor out of a combination of hunger and nostalgia. The most fundamental Cygni comfort food.

"Keep it," she said, swiping the food cart chef a fiver before biting into the familiar, delicious staple. The tart algae was grown in enormous vats on the light side of the terminator. The smokey fungus filling, processed in fields on the night side. Both fertilized with the colony's organic waste. All of it. Out on the frontier, there was value to be found in everything, even piss and shit. Nothing was thrown away. Nothing except people.

"Script for scraps?" a dirty hand reached out as she passed. "Two dia since mi como, scan?"

Stanton pushed the outstretched hand aside and looked at the red-eyed face at the other end of it. "Spend more script at the stalls and less on your dealer."

"No, no. Just enough for medicina. Rest goes to food."

"I said no."

"Fuck you then."

"You can't afford it." A few other beggars started in at her during the walk, but they all came up empty. They were addicts, trying to score their next round of 'medicina' to keep the

shakes and nausea at bay. They still had energy and focus, single-minded as it was. The truly desperate didn't ask for anything. They just collected in alleys, staring off into space or talking to themselves until they just sort of, faded away.

Not that any part of Thanatos was great by off-world standards, but the further away from city center one traveled, the worse things got. Her parents' place was on the eighth ring road of ten. The neighborhood hadn't experienced a renaissance during her absence.

There weren't any beggars on the streets here, not enough foot traffic to sustain them. The footpaths were cracked and buckling from years of use and neglect. Narrow, two story row houses filled the blocks right up to the sidewalk with no space between them and only tiny, rock garden yards behind them. Everything was stained by red-tinted algae and the grime of mining dust.

Everything except the solar panels, that is. By statute, they were kept immaculately clean by each homeowner to maximize electricity generation. Thanatos's residential power grid was decentralized for robustness and redundancy. There was no single point of failure in the system. Each roof-mounted panel was permanently fixed at ninety degrees to face the unmoving sun hanging just above the horizon.

It was getting late in the 'day.' Most of the houses she passed had already closed their shutters to prepare for sleep. But her parents were night owls and wouldn't be ready to turn in for several hours more. Speaking of, her old home was just three doors down.

Stanton walked the last few meters to her door quietly so as not to ruin the surprise. The address, #80561, was decorated vertical in brass digits down the righthand side of the door. The '6' still canted to one side as it had been for ten years at least. Dad was sure to get around to it any day now. She set down the space bag digging into her shoulder and, after a hitch, knocked on the composite and aluminum door three times, hard.

Something large stirred inside the home and began to creak and lumber towards the door. "Seriously, Koryak? Don't you have a clock in your house?" came a familiar baritone from through the crack at the bottom of the living room window. The handle turned and the door flew open to reveal a very tall, very cross-looking face that immediately turned from annoyance to confusion.

"Erin?"

"Hi, dad."

His brow furrowed as he took in the sight of her. "But, how? You have another year on your contract."

"I got out early for good behavior."

"Honey!" her mother called from the living room. "You tell Koryak I'm still waiting for him to return our panel resurfacers. It's been a month and output's down almost eight percent."

"It's not Koryak, love," her father said over his shoulder without breaking eye contact.

"Well who is it, then?" Stanton's mother came out of the living room into the hallway. "It's getting late and..." Face framed by curlers, she froze in place. Recognition dawned in her eyes, and the tablet dropped from her hand.

"My baby!" Stanton braced against the onrushing charge of middle-aged woman just in time to avoid being tackled back onto the sidewalk. Instead, she took her mother up and spun half a revolution to kill the momentum. "Erin! We're so glad to—" Her mother grasped Stanton's new forearm and her face went from joy to ice. She rolled up her daughter's sleeve and set her jaw. "What did they do to my baby girl?"

“They didn’t do anything, mom.” Stanton pulled her sleeve back down. “It was my choice.”

“I’m marching right down to that recruiter’s office tomorrow morning and so help me—”

“Mom, it’s fine. Really. Can you just be glad I’m home?”

“Of course we are. We’re relieved, aren’t we Thomas?”

“Absolutely.”

“Are you hungry? We already ate but there’s some leftovers I could heat up.”

“Honestly, mom? I’m exhausted. I’ve had an eventful couple of months, I’ve been traveling for almost three weeks, and I just had some kind of hallucination on the trip down from the spin station and all I want to do is crash in my bed.”

Her parents shared a brief, but unmistakably awkward glance.

“Well, honey, the thing about that is…”

“We rented out your room,” her father said.

“You did *what*?”

“We didn’t think you’d be back for another year, and we needed the script.”

“To who?”

“The Bixby boy, from just down the street,” her mother said helpfully. “You remember him, he was in your class.”

“Sven Bixby?” Stanton said in blanched-face horror. “You rented out my childhood bedroom to the boy I caught sniffing my gym socks during my birthday party?”

“That was a long time ago, dear.”

“It was senior year!”

“Shhh, he’s sleeping. Poor thing works second shift in the deep pits. He’s almost off his probationary period.”

“That’s wonderful,” Stanton said through clenched teeth.

“We’ll get you set up on the couch,” her dad said.

“That’s okay,” She grabbed up her space bag. “I’ll find a hotel room for the night.”

“You’re leaving?” Her mother protested. “But you just got here.”

“I need sleep, mom. I’ll be back tomorrow… when Sven is gone.” Stanton closed the door behind her before there were any more objections and struck out onto the littered streets once more. The city’s hotels were all well inside the third ring road, growing in extravagance and expense the closer you got to city center. It was a long walk, but neither did she want to pack into the metro at this time of night, so back through the gauntlet of beggars and addicts she went.

The thought of Sven Fucking Bixby sleeping in her old room was simply enraging. Who knew what the little pervert had been sniffing. Stanton had half a mind to march right back to her house and drag him out from under the covers and down the stairs by his thumbs before chucking his carcass onto the street for the reclamation crews to sort out in the morning.

The anger collapsed her focus down into a white-hot singularity. How could her own parents betray their only child in such a personal, invasive way? It felt like being violated all over again, but this time by the people who were supposed to care about her the most. It was intolerable. Stanton remained so fixated on this, she lost track of how far her feet had carried her. She’d angrily walked right past skid row all the way to the second ring road without drawing a single outstretched hand. Apparently, doubling down on an already resting bitch face had some situational advantages. The new hardware probably didn’t hurt, either. Stalking angrily down the sidewalk, she probably looked like half a Terminator to the average civilian.

The accommodations here were right about what she was looking for; past the hostels and pay-by-the-hour motels, but before the lavish five-stars catering to off-world executive at the city's heart. However, Stanton was still buzzing with anger and not in a proper state to put head to pillow.

A nightcap. Yes. An expertly-mixed cocktail was in order. And while she didn't want to splurge on one of the city center hotels for the evening, a truly high-class highball experience was a much smaller financial commitment. By then the space bag strap was really cutting into her shoulder. Just another block to go and she could set it down for a spell. Or maybe she should pop into one of the hotels and make room arrangements first, in case one turned into many and they filled up before—

From out of nowhere, a quad drone dropped down half a meter from her face and focused the black camera eye at the center of its body. A tiny red light below the aperture flicked on, like a range-finding laser.

The hairs on her neck stood at parade ground attention. Time slowed. The next few seconds of Stanton's awareness passed like an eternity and yet all at once. She was unarmed, but far from defenseless. The Marine Corp Martial Arts Program had drilled the belief every marine's body was itself a weapon. And hers had some upgrades.

Her left hand came up and grabbed the space bag's nylon strap, dropped it to her hip, and spun it around her center of mass like an Olympic throwing hammer until it was lined up with the drone. Then she just, let go, and allowed the forty-kilo bag to smash into the drone and carry it several meters down the busy street. But the danger wasn't over, wasp drones carried small but powerful anti-personnel charges that turned them into kamikaze weapons.

"Grenade! Everybody down!" Stanton shouted in her best imitation of her old drill sergeant's Voice. Something grabbed her by the left shoulder as the evening's crowd started to scream and scatter. Someone shouted behind her, but Stanton's focus was entirely dedicated to the claws digging into her exo's ablative armor shoulder pauldron. At close range, wasps delighted in matching themselves up against the CCDF's best equipment in melee combat. She'd read many of the After Action reports where those encounters went badly, and poor Cynthia was two generations out of date.

All that danced through her mind's eye in a tenth of a second. Further violence was required. Stanton snaked her right arm up and clamped it down on the bundle of claws like an industrial press. Her haptic feedback sensors registered several very satisfying snaps and pops as she dropped her shoulder and rolled the enemy over her back and sent it crashing face-down onto the street.

"What the hell are you doing?!" a bystander shouted, drawing her attention for a split second. Stanton was yanked out of Cynthia in an instant. She looked down at her attacker and realized with sinking horror that it wasn't a wasp at all, or an attacker. Instead, she was holding the *very* broken hand of George Spencer, Thanatos's beloved veteran local news anchor.

"Oh..."

"Marine! Release Mr. Spencer, back away three meters, and get on your knees."

Stanton looked over her shoulder straight into the business end of an electrolaser, firmly and steadily held by a man in a constable's uniform.

"...shit."

## Chapter Six:

Contrary to her intentions of spending the evening in a mid-flight hotel bed, Stanton's overnight accommodations as a guest of the TPD were quite a bit more spartan. The cell was long enough to lay down in, just, and the sink was located in the top of the toilet. That was the extent of the amenities.

The officers had confiscated her cybernetics during processing all the while saying things like "Standard procedure," and "For everyone's safety," so the one time she did need to use the facilities, she had to hop. The slab she was expected to sleep on sported the thinnest excuse for a mattress she'd ever seen it may as well have been a blanket, which was conspicuously missing from the cell. All she was given was a sheet just as thin as the toilet paper. It would all weigh heavily on the star rating at the end of her stay.

"Detainee," a firm male voice woke her from a terrible night of sleep. "Stand up, place your hands on your head, and walk backwards towards the cell door."

"That's a tough ask, chief," Stanton said groggily.

"Yeah, and why's that?"

As an answer, Stanton tore the sheet off her body and wiggled the two stumps on her righthand side. "Because you've got the rest of me in a locker somewhere."

"Damnit, Peralta."

"Who's Peralta?"

"Nevermind. Wait right there."

"As opposed to where?"

"Haha," he said, deadpan.

"Yeah, that joke's on me, really."

The guard disappeared to let her stew on the series of events and decisions that had led to her being locked up in a room that managed to be even worse than her berth on the *Musk*, which simply had to have been a deliberate choice to build punishment into the design because no one could be more neglectful of human needs and comfort than the engineers and bean-counters in the CCDF.

She had been there. Inside Cynthia again with a wasp clawing at her back. It felt so, so real and immediate. Like on the shuttle, but this time she wasn't strapped down and could affect the outcome. And boy howdy had she affected her outcome.

The guard reappeared and parked a wheelchair on the other side of her cage. "For what it's worth, I'm sorry about this. I wasn't informed of your needs at shift rotation. Do you need assistance getting into the chair?"

"I'll manage," she said curtly before awkwardly pulling herself out of bed and drawing up against the frame of the cell door. The guard swiped two fingers and the bars pulled down into the floor. Stanton wasn't ready for it and nearly collapsed to the floor in a pile, but the guard intercepted her with the chair before she put cheeks to tile.

"Thanks."

"You're welcome." Without missing a beat, he slapped a cuff on her left wrist, then secured the other to the wheelchair's armrest.

Stanton gave the cuffs an exploratory tug, then looked up at the face of her jailer. "You're fucking kidding me with this, right?"

"It's procedure, for everyone's safety."

“Your safety?” Stanton didn’t bother to stunt her laugh. “I’ve got half my limbs. My math’s not great but if I’m dangerous that makes me twice the man you are.”

“Don’t push your luck. There’s a gag in our kit. I’d prefer not to use it.”

“Not until you get home, right big boy?”

“Jesus Christ.” The guard turned the chair and wheeled her out of the cell block. “Good luck, lady.”

After a short walk and a long elevator ride, the guard deposited Stanton in a room with appointments that had no business being inside a jail. Deep, rich hardwood veneers imported from off-world covered the walls. A seamless window stretched floor to ceiling almost ten meters across the entire back wall of the office. An opulent, onyx desk nearly as wide hovered legless between her and the view outside.

On Thanatos, there was really only one office it could be.

“Oh, shit.”

“Indeed.” The voice came from a small alcove behind her. Stanton resisted the urge to crane her neck to see who had spoken. They’d come around to face her in their own time, and she didn’t have any other pressing business at the moment.

“You seem, unbothered by your circumstances,” the voice echoed slightly. How big was this office?

“Just waiting for the other shoe to drop.”

Footsteps from her left approached the far end of the desk. A woman, late middle-age, shoulder-length brown hair giving way to the silver of trumpets at the temples, rich olive skin, and eyes like pools, stepped into view. “Thump.”

Stanton knew that face, if not the voice accompanying it. Few had heard it. “Governor Harris.”

“Lance Corporal.” Harris tapped the desk twice. It rose to meet her elbows so she could lean over it as she spoke. There was, Stanton noted, no chair. “Or should I say Retired Lance Corporal. Wish I could’ve ‘retired’ at twenty-three.”

“It was a mutual decision.”

“I’m sure that’s true. Your CCDF records are sealed even to me, annoyingly. As are your juvenile court records. But I can read between the lines. You were a problem student, smart, but refused to apply yourself. Found, shall we say, extracurricular activities to occupy yourself until graduation near the bottom of your class as the youngest member of said class because you skipped sophomore year back when your teachers still believed in you. Got caught doing bad things with bad people a few months before turning eighteen and the recruiter who’d been pushing to meet his quota that month put in a few good words with the juvie judge and please let me know if I’ve deviated from the script at any point here... no?”

Stanton scowled her answer.

“As I said, I can read between the lines. You kind of have to in my position. Strangely, the more power you have, the less people want to tell you. It’s very annoying.”

“My heart bleeds for thee.”

“They need to put your picture next to the entry for Oppositional Defiance Disorder in the DSM: XXXII, has anyone ever told you that? Anyway, you’ve put me between the proverbial rock and a hard place. I trust you realize who you assaulted last night? A nod of contrition here would be welcome.”

“George Spencer,” Stanton said at last.

“Yes. Beloved local celebrity and philanthropist George Spencer. You know he coaches our youth basketball league on a volunteer basis? Just the pure love of the game and giving back to his community. Of course, his free throw percentage will probably suffer after some lunatic broke three of his metacarpals, wrist, ulna, and dislocated the elbow of his shooting arm last night.”

Stanton’s eyes welled with moisture. Not out of sympathy for Spencer’s injuries, although she did feel badly about them. But for the loss of control. The loss of her sense of purpose and direction.

“I’m sorry,” she said as the first tear ran down her cheek.

Harris touched the desk again and leaned back as it drew itself up to the ceiling, high enough to walk underneath it and approach her wheelchair. Harris put her hands on both armrests and came right down to Stanton’s eye line.

“What. Happened?”

Stanton’s lip quivered. “It was the fucking drone, ma’am. The wasps, sorry, that’s what grunts call them. When we were good and dug in, they’d send out a swarm of these little drones to flush us out. They had self-destruct charges if they managed to get close enough and one beady little black camera eye.”

“Like his filming camera.”

“Yeah. I saw it and I just, was somewhere else. Sort of. I was still here, in the downtown, but it was a battlefield. I was back in my exo and there was a wasp drone centimeters from my face. So, I swatted it and then a wasp was grabbing my armor. He was behind me. I didn’t see him until he was already on the ground.”

“He was looking for a story, Lance Corporal. I doubt he wanted to become a story, however.”

“Well maybe he can tell the story of how the CCDF spends years honing us into hair-trigger killers and then just dumps us back into civy life without so much as coupon for a free spa day to take the edge off.”

Harris pulled back from the wheelchair and paced for a few moments, absently rubbing her lower lip with a thumb as she did so.

“You had an episode during the shuttle ride down here, didn’t you? Don’t bother lying, I’ve already seen the cabin footage.”

“Then why ask the question?”

She paced a little more. “You’re not the first service member to come home and deal with this condition, Lance Corporal. But you are the first to choose such a publicly spectacular arena to showcase it. Most just have a private little freak out in the pits far away from the limelight.”

“Sorry I brought attention to your inconvenient little secret, ma’am,” Stanton said with frozen venom.

“It’s an open secret, and we’ve adapted to it. Nobody here asked for a renewed war with the Xre, but colonies like ours bear the brunt of all the costs that don’t factor on a balance sheet. But Spencer is a hero around here. Which makes you the. The...”

“Villain.”

“There we go. Word association. I don’t think you’re a villain, Stanton. I think you’re a different kind of victim. But I also know what comes next. Spencer gets healthy enough to go interview all your old schoolmates and ex boyfriends, or girlfriends, I don’t give a shit, and he’ll know every test you cheated on, every time you snuck a drink by the vats, every little secret

locked up in those juvie records I can't access because that's what a reporter does and every story needs a bad guy."

"Seems a little one-sided."

"Every story is one-sided; the side telling the story. Which brings me back to what the hell to do with you." The desktop withdrew from the ceiling and settled near the Governor's hips. She leaned heavily over it, perched on her forearms like a gargoyle. "Suggestions?"

"Let me go?"

"You were here fewer than twelve hours before violently assaulting a highly respected member of the community. You can't just walk."

"Not without my other leg I sure can't."

"Sorry, figure of speech. Next."

"Put me on trial for assault and battery and let a jury of my peers decide my fate."

"Do you have peers here? I'm asking honestly. Can you find twelve people who can pass the screening process to serve on a jury who can understand what you just explained to me?"

"I guess not."

"Or?"

"Or what?"

Harris rolled her eyes and spun her hands at the same time. "Oooooor?"

"Or... you... sweep it all under the rug and give me until sundown to get out of town like some frontier mayor in a Western?"

"What a wonderful compromise."

"Great..."

"Can I banish you somewhere nice? I mean, do you have somewhere you can go? Connections offworld and a soft landing?"

Stanton remembered the insane conversation she'd had at random a hole-in-the-wall in the Yards a couple weeks ago and reached up to pinch the bridge of her nose, only to be reminded of the handcuff binding her to the wheelchair.

"Yeah, but I'll need a few weeks to set it up. Coms delay is a real cunt."

"You'll need to spend those weeks as our guest downstairs, I'm afraid. I can't risk putting you out on bail and having another episode."

Stanton clenched her jaw. "Can you at least give me back the rest of my body?"

"I think we can make that accommodation."

"And a port to charge them."

"A power port is out of the question. I'll agree to have your cybers removed and charged while you sleep. That's far more than any other detainee gets. A few simple mods to those things and you're half a superhero. I'm trusting you to behave until you leave. I wouldn't, except your parents came down here immediately after your arrest to make an impassioned and I must say persuasive plea on your behalf."

"Really now. Surprised they cared enough to make the walk."

"They care a great deal. Cut them some slack." Harris keyed an icon on the desk. "Guard, the detainee is ready to return to her cell."

"Understood ma'am," the guard's voice responded through the desk.

"And give her the rest of her limbs back."

"That's... against protocol, ma'am. She's a physical risk with those cybers."

"I've been assured the detainee will behave herself while in our care. Isn't that right?"

Stanton sighed. "Yes, Governor."

“There you have it, then. Return her limbs once she’s back in her... room. And provide her with a pad, she has a few offworld arrangements to make.”

“Very good, ma’am.”

As Stanton rode back down the lift to her home for the next couple weeks, she begrudgingly went into her AR’s contact list to retrieve Eccleston’s ‘business card’ and her routing address. She’d been right after all.

You really couldn’t go back home again.

## Chapter Seven:

The early morning ride down to the surface of Nashar II was a bumpy one. Part of that was due to the near-total lack of orbital infrastructure above the planet. No space elevator, no sky hook, barely even a proper waypoint station. The only space station in low orbit wasn't even purpose built for the job. Instead, it was cobbled together from three bulk cargo carriers that had only escaped the breaking yards by taking one last bubble here, having their Alcubierre rings and fusion engines stripped for parts, and patched up just enough to hold and process air.

All that had happened in just the last two months. This was mankind's 'newest' outpost in the galaxy. The resulting three-armed, spin-gravity station didn't have facilities for large civilian atmospheric shuttles, not that there was enough traffic to fill one even if it did. Instead, the only way up or down was sitting in the jump seats of a refurbished CCDF Dromedary Class infantry drop ship. The type hadn't seen frontline duty in two decades after being pushed into reserve status with the introduction of the Gryphons. The old "Camelbacks" had been disarmed and relegated to training billets, rearguard logistical duty, put into mothballs, or sold off on the civilian market as had been the case for the one Stanton's butt currently bounced around in.

The paint on the deck had worn through five colors right down to aluminum polished by lord only knew how many pairs of boots. All the seat frames and edges were worn, and the red crash webs had faded to pink with just the barest fuzz of fraying at the very edges. Enough to know they'd seen years of constant use, but not enough to worry about fraying leading to imminent failure. Still, there was something familiar about the worn, utilitarian, skeletal, no-frills machine she found oddly comforting.

Judging by the look of the other passengers in the small hold, they didn't share her contentment. Two of them were slowly turning green enough to begin photosynthesizing light, while the third was busy filling an air sick bag with fertilizer for the others. Stanton shook her head. Civilians. But even she had to admit the turbulence on this flight was pretty rough. Part of that was owed to the small size of the Dromedary compared to a passenger shuttle. Even her backwater home Thanatos had a weather-net to tame the planet's more extreme weather events.

But not Nashar II. There was no weather mitigation. No orbital solar power beaming. There wasn't even a proper global wireless internet constellation. If there was a bright center to the universe, this might just be the planet it was farthest from. For not the last time, Stanton asked herself exactly what she'd gotten into.

There were no windows in the hold for the passengers to look out into whatever maelstrom the dropship fought through, but after a few minutes the camelback broke through a cloud layer into much calmer air even as the rain continued to ping off the craft's outer skin.

"Should be smooth sailing to the LZ now," the co-pilot said from the cockpit's open door. "We're six minutes out from terminal approach, just hold tight."

"I always wished they'd called it anything but 'terminal approach,'" one of the green-tinted passengers quipped, cutting the tension a bit. Air sick bag had no comment.

"This is nothing," Stanton said. "Try doing this same trip in a RIP pod. We call them 'sarcophagi,' because if you're in one, you might as well already be dead."

Air sick bag looked up from their retching. "Who the fuck are you, lady?"

"Muscle while you're out doing sciencey shit, from what I gather."

"Muscle for who?"

"Didn't ask, don't care."

The rest of the cabin exchanged alarmed looks between themselves, but Stanton filtered it out. There was a bright dividing line between the lived experiences of veterans like her and the civies they volunteered to pull back from the darkness. At some point, she'd stopped caring about their opinions about the hows and whys of what she did. They didn't have the software to comprehend the data. Not their fault, but also not her problem.

The high-pitch whine of jackscrews and the sudden sideways throw of her body in its chair told Stanton the camelback had deployed airbrakes to bleed off velocity. As aerodynamic lift over the wings fell to naught, the air-breathing turbines spooled back up to full volume as the exhaust nozzles pitched towards the ground and completed the final twenty meters of the trip on three pillars of exhaust gas.

The skids took the full weight of the camelback, and Stanton felt the full weight of the planet's gravity for the first time. Eighty-nine percent Earth standard, according to a very helpful little app built into the servos of her artificial leg. Good, she thought. A little lighter than what her body had evolved for and her new parts had been designed for, which meant longer endurance for both her muscles and batteries. But not so much lighter she had to worry about her meats and bones atrophying over a long deployment.

As for the rest of the cabin's occupancy, they just looked relieved to be back on firm ground.

Stanton hit the release from her crash harness and stood. "Who wants a shot? I'll buy the first round."

In answer, Airsick Bag threw up one last time.

The trip from the severely improvised "airfield" to the "research station" was significantly less exciting than the journey from orbit. A trio of wheeled, four seat, electric mules awaited the passengers and their luggage, not that any of them had travelled much heavier than Stanton and her spacebag. The bulk of their cargo was pretty clearly not personal items, but equipment secured in the sort of bulky, square containers you hid fragile things inside so the dock apes couldn't break it no matter how roughly it was thrown around. The passengers took up one mule, while all their equipment filled the other two.

They started off down the rough, pitted trail. Stanton watched with interest as a crew of workers in full NBC gear despite the heat employed military-surplus flame-throwers against the four-meter-tall grasses encroaching on the road they barreled down. Something about the way the grass moved when put to the fire was... unsettling.

"It's Urumi grass." Stanton looked around for the source of the voice. One of the scientists, short, dark tan skin heavy with freckles, tightly curled reddish brown hair, looked back at her. "I saw you looking at it," she said sheepishly.

"It... moves," Stanton replied.

"It does indeed. It's named after a sort of sword from old India, a whip sword with a flexible metal blade you can roll up like a belt."

"It's sharp?"

"*Very* sharp. The edges of the blades are made of an excreted silica compound that's serrated at the microscopic level, like tiny shark's teeth. Think of a paper cut that can open an artery. And it's responsive. When one plant is damaged getting eaten, trampled, whatever, it releases a sort of pheromone that tells all the surrounding plants they're in danger and the whole patch starts flailing. That's why we have to burn it back instead of cut."

"The grass has muscles?" Stanton asked incredulously.

“Not muscles, exactly. It’s more like hydraulics?”

“Death from a thousand cuts,” Airsick Bag said. “Literally.”

“Keep your feet off the grass, huh?” Stanton said.

“That’s nothing. Everything here can and wants to kill you. This whole rock is basically Space Australia.”

Stanton leaned back deeper into her seat and wondered for not the last time exactly what she’d gotten herself into. “What’s your name?” she asked Curls.

“Dr. Nadeen Okudo.”

“What kind of doctor?”

“Exolinguistics. We study—”

“Alien languages, yeah, I get it. Not really a stretch. So, you speak Xre.”

“Not exactly.”

“Not exactly? It’s the only alien language anyone knows.”

“Nobody really speaks Xre except Xre, and we’re not even sure they’re all speaking the same thing. We still don’t, after all.”

“Fair.”

The mules rolled on down the rutted, bumpy road while silence fell back over the passengers. Stanton looked back up to the sky that had been her home since enlistment. Every sky was a little different from any other planet. Star type, atmospheric composition, density, it all factored into the hue and the shape and behavior of the clouds.

Where her birth planet’s sky was trapped in the reds and oranges of a perpetual sunset, this one was lavender, with thin, ethereal sheets of cloud high up in the stratosphere. It was... peaceful.

“There,” Airsick Bag announced. “Camp’s coming into view.”

Stanton turned her attentions from the sky above to the road ahead, figuratively and literally. ‘Base Camp’ on this planet looked even more spartan and ramshackle than some of the Forward Operating Bases she’d deployed from during what everyone still refused to call a war. There was no defensive wall made of ballistic bags of packed soil. No reinforced gate. No sentry points. No vehicle-arresting barricades. Not even a proper fence. Just a narrow perimeter of scorched earth where the killer grass was burned down to the roots.

It looked so... naked.

The mules whirred to a stop in a square in the middle of camp. The buildings, all ten or so of them, were a cobbled-together mess of refurbished and salvaged prefab modules from several generations of humanity’s grand experiment among the stars.

Curls hopped off and grabbed an equipment crate. “Well. Guess this is home for the next year and a half. What do you think?”

“I think it needs a saloon and a friendly undertaker to fit us all for coffins.”

“That’s the spirit.” Airsick bag shoulder checked her with his luggage as he passed.

Stanton tamped down the sudden impulse to yank the little nerd off his feet by the back of his shirt collar. “What’s his problem?” she muttered to Curls instead.

“With you? Fleet washout, but you didn’t hear that from me.”

That tracked. The CCDF was ruthless about conserving every calorie of food, molecule of oxygen, and drop of water, while on deployment. Warships were closed systems with finite resources, after all, and each male member of a crew devoured an average of fifty-eight percent more of those resources per day, straining the life-support systems and shortening endurance.

Men had to really prove exceptional to get a billet based on that simple math alone. Most warship crews were two-thirds women or more.

It wasn't surprising someone who couldn't handle a shuttle ride without expelling even more calories into an airsick bag didn't make the cut. And even less surprising he didn't see it that way. They were going to have a problem, sooner or later.

Curls and the rest of the passengers hopped off the mules and started unloading their bags and crates. Several other sciency-looking people emerged from surrounding buildings to help. One of them, an older woman with silver-streaked hair contrasting her dark complexion walked up to Curls and wrapped her up in a pair of sturdy arms.

"Junior, sweetie. I've missed you so much!"

"I'm a Doctor now, mom. Not in front of my coworkers, please?"

The woman relented. "Sorry. How was your trip?"

"Bumpy." She motioned to Stanton. "This is our new muscle."

Curls' mother gave Stanton an appraising look. "Well, she certainly looks the part. Good morning. I'm Dr. Okudo, Senior. I'm as close to being in charge as anyone gets around here."

She took the woman's offered hand. "Lance Corporal Stanton CCSF, retired."

"They ever issue you a first name, Lance Corporal?"

"Stanton' will do, ma'am."

"Fair enough. As you can see we're still getting organized down here. We have to get all our new equipment unpacked and entered into inventory. Why don't you go get some chow?"

"If it's all the same, I'd rather visit the armory and inspect my new kit."

"Suit yourself." Curly Senior unrolled her wrist display and flicked through a couple of menus before finding what she was looking for. Stanton's own bracelet chimed softly. "I've just sent you a map of the compound. The armory is highlighted in red. Once you're finished there won't be much time left before the intro briefing. Make sure to get something to eat, you look thin."

"Thanks, mom." Stanton nodded to Curls. "Catch you later."

Stanton hefted her space bag and left the heartwarming family reunion in her wake. She transferred the map Curly Senior had sent from her bracelet to her AR environment and a slowly pulsing red walking path appeared at her feet. There were also a number of notices alerting her of new permissions that had been added to her file, including access to the armory through her biometrics.

The armory sat on the far northern edge of the compound, set a good twenty meters away from any of the other structures and ringed by a waist-high earthen berm. A precaution just in case the munitions stored inside suddenly went kablewie.

Stanton reached the door and without thinking held her right hand up to the scan pad. It hit the glass with a metallic *TINK*, promptly followed by a red light and an electronic screech. She rolled her eyes at herself, then put her meaty left hand on the pad. It turned green as the lock whirred open.

Stanton entered the crowded space to a whole world of familiar sights, and especially smells. The semi-sweet aroma of lubricant, the coppery tang of brass particles on her tongue, the ashy scent of unburnt propellants. Several rows of assault rifles scaled for unpowered infantry sat locked up in racks, along with shoguns, sidearms, several varieties of grenades, a pair of anti-material caliber sniper rifles, and a generous helping of both armed and unarmed scout/sentry drones.

Those would come in handy. But what really put a smile on Stanton's face sat off in a forgotten corner, its quad legs folded up against its torso in a minimum-volume storage position. A Mk XIV quad mule. Designed for use in theaters from cramped, overdeveloped urban environments all the way to the open desert, quad mules were artificial pack animals. They could carry two-hundred and fifty kilos of kit up a forty-five-degree incline of naked mountain rock for kilometers. Their endurance was legendary, powered as they were by an onboard, miniaturized fusion reactor cranking out enough juice to power a whole encampment and recharge ever bit of equipment and battery pack inside it during the night watch.

"Oh, we're going to be good friends... Donkey."

Stanton gave the quad mule a cursory inspection. Like her old power armor Cynthia, the camelback she'd ridden down, and everything else in the armory, it was a refurbished unit a few iterations behind state of the art. In frontline combat, that would be worrying. But on this backwater, against wild animals and irregular forces, it was probably overkill. The mule's feet were still the standard tip-points most often used in urban settings, so those needed swapping out for the four-toed splayed feet designed for use on uneven, natural terrain. But it was a twenty-minute job, eight pins and four power couplings for the servos. Easy peasy.

She moved on from the quad mule to the small arms. Unlike the heavy, chain-fed, 10mm rifle she carried while inside Cynthia, these were meant to be used by marines without the power assist of an exo. They were therefore lighter in weight and a smaller 6.5mm caliber. They would bounce off exos, and be of limited use against the natural shells of the Xre except at very close ranges or very precisely targeted against their soft joints.

But against lightly-armored meat sacks, they'd do just fine. She ran her good fingers over a few of them, looking for one that wasn't too 'lived in.' The CCDF was a cost-conscious organization and didn't part with equipment gladly. She found one that still had some factory anodizing on the bolt-carrier assembly and grips that hadn't been worn smooth of their texturing. Probably served in some rearguard post, confined to traverse between a weapons locker and firing range, lovingly tended by an otherwise bored armorer until its shot count climbed too high and it was time for retirement.

It would do nicely. Stanton didn't check it out, but she did flag the serial number to designate it as her personal weapon. She briefly glanced over at the shotguns and sniper rifles, but the tall, thick grass would quickly bleed off the kinetic energy and lethality of shot shells, while she wasn't trained up on the sniper rifle and making three-kilometer shots seemed an unlikely scenario in any event. She ignored them. Didn't bother tagging a sidearm, either. If things were so FUBARed you were down to your secondary, it was probably going to be short fight anyway, as she knew all too well.

The rest of her kit, tent, sleeping bag, water purifier, field rations, coms equipment, first aid, they would all be in a different building. She'd have to find their quartermaster, or whatever passed for one in a civie research camp. But that could wait. Her stomach demanded chow.

## Chapter Eight:

After a short walk, Stanton found the commissary near the town square. Stomach grumbling its complaints, she opened the door and stepped inside. As opposed to the mess halls she'd known aboard ship and dirtside with their communal rows of tables and chairs for all the grunts and wrench monkeys, this was a more make-and-take affair. Apparently, most people took their meals back to their quarters here.

She grabbed a stamped metal plate with its separate little compartments, like a map of a tiny food country with its five proud provinces. She loaded them each up with scrambled eggs, sausage that had probably never seen a pig, passable-looking pancakes, some pear slices in heavy syrup, and a coffee cake.

"Hey, cookie," she tried to get the chef's attention. "Got any square dog?"

"Never heard of it."

"Coffee, any coffee?"

"Why do you call it 'square dog?'"

"In the Corp it comes in a box and tastes like dog shit."

"Oh, yeah. We *definitely* have some of that."

Stanton took a steadying breath. "Please don't tell me it's military surplus."

The cook smiled and pointed to a station on a small round table off to the side. "Life hack: You want honey."

"You have real honey?"

"The only truly nonperishable food. They pulled honey out of jars in Egyptian tombs that was still edible after five thousand years."

Stanton's eyebrows rose and she nodded along. "That's... a nice trivia fact. Thanks." She left the lunch lady behind and dared herself to pour a cup. She took an exploratory sniff of the coffee and sure enough, it smelled like burned dung. But there was caffeine hiding in there and it had already been a long day, so she squeezed some honey out of a little plastic bear and prayed.

As the earthy liquid swirled in the cup, she noticed Curls sitting alone at one of the two small tables bracketing the door.

"Mind if I join you?"

"Oh." Curls hurriedly moved pads and her plate to make room on the small table.

"Please, be my guest."

"Thanks." She pulled out the free chair and set her tray and cup down. "So, what's good here?"

"Nothing I've found so far."

Stanton stifled a laugh. "Oh, come on. It can't be worse than fleet chow." She unrolled her cloth napkin, took up a battered metal fork, and confidently lifted some scrambled eggs into her mouth. She'd had worse.

Her tongue, however, had not. It took a fair effort not to regurgitate the abomination back onto her plate. The discomfort must have been apparent across her face.

"Told you," Curls said.

"They're revolting! The texture—"

The cook leaned over their counter. "We mostly mix the egg powder to make glue for weather-proofing sheets around here."

Stanton gave them a thumbs up. “Thank, cookie. Good talk.” She turned back to her conversation with Curls. “What’s grown locally? What’s fresh?”

“You didn’t read the prep packet, did you?”

Stanton crossed her arms. “I didn’t *get* a prep packet.”

“Well, the short answer is nothing, treaty prevents it. Anything we bring down here has the potential to become an invasive species, so everything has to be shipped in from off world. After it’s irradiated.”

“No hydroponics? Aeroponics?”

Curls shook her head. “Nope.”

“Surely we can cultivate some of the local plants.”

“If we want to starve. The chemistry of this entire planet is incompatible with any form of life from Earth. Or Xre, for that matter. The chirality is wrong.”

“What the hell does that mean?”

Curls smirked a little on the right side of her mouth, giving away just a hint of a dimple on her cheek. “Sorry, I’ve gotten too used to speaking to other scientists. Chirality is a property of chemistry you can think of as right or left handedness. A lot of organic molecules can have the exact same composition of atoms...” She held up her hands, palms out. “...but they can be arranged in either a left, or right-handed configurations. Exact same molecules, but mirror images of each other. Biological systems that develop using one hand can’t use the other hand, even though chemically it’s the same molecule. They just pass right by each other.”

“So I could eat a whole loaf of ‘left-handed’ bread and butter and not gain a gram?”

“You actually lose weight, because of all the energy your confused digestive system wastes trying to process it. Eating anything on this planet is like drinking salt water while stranded on the ocean. You’ll only die faster.”

“I didn’t know that, either.”

“What do you mean you didn’t know that either? Where the hell are you from?”

“Thanatos. We’re a bit short on oceans. What about you?”

“Mom and I are from Nassau, but we moved away when I was five.”

“I didn’t know NASA was its own country.”

“No, not NASA, Nassau.”

“Where’s that?”

“The Bahamas.”

Stanton nodded along. “Ah, okay... where’s that?”

Curls looked at her incredulously. “The Atlantic? Earth? How do you not know where the Bahamas are?”

“Where’s Methuselah?”

“Easy, Lazarus. Capitol of Ageless Corp’s headquarter planet.”

“Shautani?”

“Um...”

“Escobar?”

Curls started to falter. “Look, I...”

“Don’t know as much about the rest of the galaxy as you know about Earth. Well, same. I’ve never even been in the Sol system. Most of us born out here haven’t, way too expensive. The only reason I’ve traveled as much as I have is because the CCDF paid to send us across lightyears to kill Xre, and they never got close to Earth. Why would you even *want* to leave?”

“Because there comes a time children have to leave the cradle.”

Stanton choked down another mouthful of the war crime eggs. “You know that journey ends in a grave, right?”

“Fatalism much?”

Stanton held up her prosthetic hand and wiggled the fingers. “Comes with the job.”

“Intro briefing starts in five.” Curly collected her napkin and utensils, then stood up with her empty tray and did an almost imperceptible bow. “Thanks for breakfast.”

Stanton looked down at her plate and its tiny, rectangular, warring states of inedibles. She settled on the pancakes, angrily hacked them into wedges with her fork, slathered them in pear syrup, and down the hatch fast as she dared without choking.

They were... gritty.

The briefing room was scarcely bigger than so many of the ones Stanton had sat through in the fleet, but at least the ceiling was higher. Natural light filtered down through translucent plastic panels in the roof. Little motes of dust swirled in the beams, tossed about upon air currents leaking through prefab wall joints and perturbations of human breath.

Thirteen people filled the room almost to capacity. The mess cook was absent, but everyone else Stanton had either ridden down with or already seen here was present, plus a few more. Probably the whole team, then. Stanton fingered two of the people she hadn't seen yet for former CCDF, like her. Male and female. There was a certain something about the way veterans carried themselves, even while slouched bored in a briefing chair, that put them in contrast to the people around them if one knew what to look for.

The structure's side door opened and confirmed her instincts immediately. Curly Senior stepped into the cramped space, and the two Stanton had picked out of the crowd rose to attention out of pure spinal reflex. Senior's eyes darted between them, perplexed.

“Uh... at ease? This isn't a military operation. You'll find we're quite a bit more informal here.”

The two over-eager young vets exchanged rose-cheeked glances, then bashfully returned to their seats. Stanton stifled a giggle, but took a moment to screengrab both of their faces in her AR interface for later inspection. She'd been that eager in the months after Indoc, too. But the rigid formality faded quick, especially once the rounds started flying. The latest non-war with the Xre was a couple months in the rearview, but that didn't mean enlistment contracts had all been canceled early. These two were too green to have cycled through a standard service agreement already.

Which begged the question; how did they get here? Dishonorable discharge? Desertion? Stanton made a note to look into the issue.

“That's better,” Curly Senior said. “For our new arrivals, welcome to Nashar II. As you can see, we're still getting camp set up, and any help you can offer will be greatly appreciated. We've only been boots down for a little over two weeks, the ink was still drying on the revised Xre treaty when we launched.” Behind her, a display film hung on the wall glowed to life, the simulated holographic effect giving it the illusion of depth. Nashar II hung in the pitch black before the image zoomed in on a relatively small continent in the northern ocean. A much smaller dogleg-shaped island just off its south western coast flashed red. “Please, pay close attention and hold any questions until the end. I'll be going through most of the prep packet you all received before arrival—” Stanton rolled her eyes. “—but stick with me anyway because it bears repeating. We are here, on an island whose name I absolutely can't pronounce in Xre so we

call it Sicily. Our Xre hosts have graciously leased it to us for a century to use as our base of operations on the mainland.”

The image shifted again to the east and the small continent. It was largely flat plains with only occasional rolling hills. There were few lakes, and only a handful of narrow, winding rivers traversing the land. It was from all appearances a giant, uninterrupted grassland savannah.

“This is Alkebulan, again, our name, and unlike the rest of the planet which is being, ah, cooperatively developed by human and Xre, this continent is one hundred percent verboten. The entire continent is a sacred wildlife preserve for these absolute beauties.”

The continent disappeared, replaced with overhead drone footage of a herd of the biggest terrestrial animals Stanton had ever seen by half. The display focused in on the largest individual, strutting proudly through the tall grass at the head of the column on six thick legs that wouldn’t look out of place holding up a Roman era ruin, then froze and transposed an outline of the enormous beast against a white background with a generic human silhouette for scale. The human barely reached a knee joint. The massive animal lifted its bulbous head to bellow out a challenge at the camera drone four tentacle-like mouthparts stretching out like compass points. But the most impressive part of the whole animal were the pair of long, spiraling, obsidian horns jutting forward from either side of their mouths.

“We call them Hexephants, for reasons that should be obvious. Centuries before we even spotted this rock through a telescope, the Xre have been coming here to hunt these animals as part of their ‘ascension’ ceremonies, think coming-of-age rituals for their elite.”

“I thought the Xre didn’t have elites, or leaders,” Stanton blurted out, less question than accusation.

“Their communal society represents itself as led from the bottom up,” Curly Senior said diplomatically. “How they make immediate decisions without a traditional leadership hierarchy is still opaque to us. But please, hold your questions.”

“Sorry,” Stanton said sheepishly. She’d blurted it out without thinking. Apparently, she had reflexes of her own that needed work.

“As I was saying,” Senior continued. “These hexephants are a sacred creature to the Xre, and this entire continent has been set aside for the preservation of the species in its natural environment into perpetuity. Which, naturally, is where we humans are fucking things up.”

The image changed again to drone footage slowly circling a few meters above a felled hexephant, lying motionless on its side. The surrounding grasses had been crushed flat and stained purple with blood streaming out of multiple entry and exit wounds in the beast’s chest cavity and legs. Three of its ankle joints had been bound with thin, braided cables that dug and sliced cruelly into the thick, leathery flesh.

But as bad as all that carnage was, it paled in comparison to the violence that had been done to the creature’s mutilated head. Unlike the random, haphazard placement of the gunshot wounds, the cuts and slices to the face had focus, even if it were more butcher than surgeon. The horns so prominent on the living creature had been hacked and sawed away with savagery, leaving two torn, gaping holes in the animal’s cheeks. The footage ended, then moved onto still images of another site of butchery, then another. Another. By the seventh scene of senseless carnage, Stanton had started to wince.

“The trade in hexephant ivory started during the war almost as soon as the fleet occupied the planet. Apparently, some enterprising service members felt their salaries insufficient and started a black-market side hustle poaching ivory and sending it back to Earth and the Transtellar hub worlds for simply eyewatering profits.”

The display mercifully moved on from the slide show of carcasses, replaced by pictures of what Stanton assumed were objects carved from the poached ivory.

“There weren’t any human-sphere-wide laws or regulations around hexephant ivory until the revised treaty was signed. But now that it has been, customs and other law enforcement has already started cracking down with confiscations and fines. These are just a few of the pieces that have been found. There’s already an underground industry of poachers, smugglers, sculptors, and collectors.

“Which brings us to our little project here. Nashar II is, by treaty, a demilitarized world. No soldiers or marines allowed. Our mission here is scientific in nature. We’re here to study the hexephants, their biology, their society if they have one. Other than the Xre themselves, this world hosts one of the very few examples of large, complex indigenous life on a non-terrestrial planet we’ve yet found. There is so much we can learn here about the development of life and evolution as a universal principle.

Curly Senior held up a finger. “But, to do that, the hexephants have to still be alive. And because of the specific terms of our treaty with the Xre, they cannot police humans under Xre law, just as we cannot police Xre under human law. So it falls to us to protect the herds from our own. Both so we can study them, and so the Xre can continue with their traditional hunts.”

*So we’re saving them from one set of aliens so they can be killed by a different set of aliens.* Stanton thought. *How pragmatic.*