



# Short Stories

A Collection of Short Stories Set in the Fragged Empire  
Tabletop Role Playing Game Universe.

Betrayed by your creators, you are a genetically engineered  
remnant, emerging from the ruin of genocidal war.

You and this new civilisation are on the precipice  
of great opportunity and danger.

[www.fraggedempire.com](http://www.fraggedempire.com)

## **Fragged Empire: Short Stories**

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**First Edition.**

<b>4</b>	<b>Rag Tag, by Stuart McNabb</b>
4	1) Painting the Town
10	2) Storm and Stone
14	3) What Lies Below
18	4) Skeleton in the Closet
23	5) Planet of the Nephilim
28	6) The Necronus Sunset
33	7) The Invasion of Alabaster
37	8) A Mind of Steel
41	9) The Aftermath
46	10) One Last Run
50	11) Ex Machina

**58** **We Don't Wear Capes, by Adam Paciorek**

**62** **Valuable, by Chris Lites**

# Rag Tag

## Chapter 1) Painting the Town

At around midday, everyone in the upper echelons of Alabaster paused what they were doing to look at the sky. The distraction was brief, and consisted of a damaged, smoking ship bursting through the clouds and spiralling out of control towards the docking bay.

It was bright red, rocket-shaped and seemed to be comprised of numerous parts from many different races. Those unfamiliar with the ship merely arched their eyebrows and got on with their business. Those who recognised the vessel, however, collectively rolled their eyes.

"It's coming in hot!" barked the young control tower technician, hoping to impress the boss on his first day on the job. "Not much detail, but it looks like they lost their guidance system and forward thrusters!"

The only other person on the shift, a more elderly technician with a flat face and a jaded disposition, slid into the chair next to his subordinate.

"Sir, what's their landing strategy?" the young man said, and his elder sighed deeply.

"See that there?" he said, weariness in his voice. "That's the Galatea."

"Sir, what..."

"Get used to it, son. For them, this is a smooth landing."

He flicked a switch, and powerful laser lights emanated from the landing strip and illuminated the rapidly descending ship. It wasn't quite the same as the auto-guidance computer, but the lights seemed to make a difference: the Galatea altered its course and plummeted towards the lights, narrowly weaving its way in between various power conduit towers. A whining sound filled the air as it drew close, and they could see it leaking fluids from the rear section. It was a miracle they'd made it at all.

With a resigned air, the older technician placed both hands on the console in a brace position. Unsure, the younger man did as well.

"It's too fast..." he muttered, "They're going to smash themselves against the surface."

The elderly technician said nothing as the Galatea screamed towards the smooth surface of the landing strip. For a moment it looked as if it would strike the ground and go up in flames. At the

last possible moment, jet engines on its underside roared to life, scorching the ground and giving the ship extra lift. It slowed, and for a few seconds was hovering along the surface. Then it dipped, and hit the ground with enough force to shake the control tower to its core. The young technician gritted his teeth and tried to watch through the vibrations as the ship skidded to a halt, finally lying in the middle of the landing platform and smoking from every possible exit point.

"Galatea, coming in for landing," said a male voice on the radio. "Sorry, we're a bit late."

"Confirmed, Galatea," said the older technician, as the younger simply stared. "I'll give you a six for that one."

\*\*\*

On the landing platform, fire crews were already buzzing around the ship and dousing the flames. A black-clad security team arrived on a miniature hovercraft, with a medic tagging along behind. They leapt out and positioned themselves around the gantry.

"Initial reports indicate that hostiles may be on board," said the commander, as his team readied their rifles. "Prepare to fire."

They stood in the semi-circle, listening as the sounds of gunfire echoed within. The commander glanced at his men and saw that they were taken aback. None of them had come close to this kind of assignment. After a couple of minutes, the gantry finally gave an almighty creak and began to descend. Grips were tightened on rifles.

They relaxed when the ramp had fully descended, revealing the reported four members of the crew. A Kaltoran stood off to the left, holding a rifle and bearing several singed holes in her curly hair. A Legion with parts of his armour torn off stood next to her, while a Nephilim stood on the right, her grey face blackened with soot and grease. The Captain, Theodore Bolt, stood at the centre. His once-impeccable suit was torn, and his hair was an unkempt mess. They all looked exhausted.

His expression thunderous, Theodore kicked a mass of metal down the entry ramp, and the security team backed off upon seeing that it was the remains of a Mechonid. It had been shot into oblivion by four different types of gun, and still smouldered.

"Y'know what?" Theodore announced, as he swept his gaze around the assembled crowd before turning his glare onto the destroyed Mechonid. "I'm almost annoyed."

\*\*\*

Minutes later, Rachel sat on the smooth, metallic surface of the landing platform and watched as the fire crew put out the last dregs of the flame. It hurt to see the Galatea in such a state, especially after all the effort she'd gone through to hold the ship together. Rachel couldn't wait to check the engine room, see if everything was still relatively in place. Right now, however, the security team was performing a sweep.

"They'd better be careful with her," she muttered, glad that Maximus had insisted on accompanying them. Beside her, Hraks said nothing. Theo emerged from the ship, having changed into a new suit and combed his hair. Rachel suppressed a smile, amused at how much arriving in style meant to Corporates. She would've happily arrived at Kadash with her face covered in grease and her hair a tangled mess. Kaltorans had a different sense of style.

"I told them it was pointless," the captain said, as Rachel leapt to her feet. "In any case, it doesn't matter. I need to get this to our client."

He held a metallic briefcase, which Rachel knew held their spoils from the previous impromptu mission. They'd had to lock it inside a miniature nullifying chamber after it had activated during the flight.

"We'll need repairs," she said, "Want me to supervise?"

"It's fine," Theo replied. "Lampwick is lending us his technicians. In the meantime..."

He pulled out his personal terminal, a sleek metal rod that projected a holographic screen. After a few eye movements, he snapped it shut and placed it inside his new coat pocket.

"Your payment is in from the last mission," Theo said. "Take a couple of days off, but be ready to leave once the repairs are done."

"Thanks, boss," Rachel said, with a grin. He nodded and strode off in the direction of the internal transport platform, leaving the two of them alone.

"Days off," Hraks said, glancing around. The city of Alabaster One was arrayed all around them, vehicles soaring to and fro, skyscrapers scraping the sky. "Honestly, I'd rather stay in the lab."

"BORING," Rachel announced, grabbing the Nephilim by the arm. "Come on, we don't get time off all that often. Let's do something fun."

"I don't..." Hraks began as she was dragged along, "I don't think..."

"Nah, don't think," Rachel agreed. She waved at a passenger

transport vehicle that flew overhead, and was ignored. "Thinking is no fun. Let's just hit the town."

"But Maximus..."

"Can have his solitary guy time. Meanwhile, we get to do girl stuff!"

Hraks' expression turned to one of genuine fear. Rachel didn't notice.

\*\*\*

The elevator had numerous mirrors, of course, and fortunately Theo found himself alone as he travelled to floor 67. His hair was still a mess by Corp standards. There was also the faint odour of smoke that permeated his belongings. If he'd been meeting with anyone else, it would've called for an entire do-over of his appearance: however, Grayson Lampwick was well known for his casual indifference towards etiquette. As soon as the doors slid open, Theodore stepped into the waiting room and heard a soulful piece of music wafting from underneath the door of his client's office. No Corporate executive would ever be caught playing Kaltoran music while they worked. Grayson was an exception.

Theodore straightened his tie and shot the secretary a brief smile. She narrowed her eyes as he approached, glancing down at the briefcase in his hand before pressing a button on her desk.

"Mr Lampwick," she said, "Theodore Bolt is here to see you."

"Send him in."

The doors swung open and Theo entered to find his client standing at the window, gazing down at the cityscape below. Grayson was a few years older than Theo, with neatly combed jet-black hair and a sturdy frame. His grey suit was considerably more expensive, and there was the added bonus of him not spending the earlier part of the day running around and shooting Mechonids.

The older man turned and nodded.

"Mr Bolt," he said, with the side of his mouth upturned.

"Mr Lampwick."

"I was taking a break, in case you were wondering."

"Scandalous," Theo replied. "You are aware that you have security cameras on you right now?"

"And if there is a cause to view the footage..." Grayson said, moving

behind his desk, "I'm sure there will be more important things to worry about than me taking a moment to enjoy my view."

He sat in his extremely expensive chair, while Theo stood before the desk. There was a moment of silence.

"It's nice to see you again," Lampwick began.

"Likewise," Theo replied, not particularly meaning it. "I have something that may interest you."

"So I saw," said his client, raising a hologram of the device. "Mechonid tech. Not many people can get their hands on these without also picking up a few bullet holes in their head soon afterwards. I don't suppose you can describe your... acquisition?"

"It's not important."

"Thought so," Grayson said, with a sigh. "I'm sure it's a good story."

"If I ever publish my autobiography, I'll send you a copy. Meanwhile..."

Theo lifted the briefcase and placed it on the desk, facing Lampwick. The latches clicked open, one by one, until it opened with a mechanical whirr. The man's face was bathed in purple light, and he leaned over his desk to take a closer look.

"I'd advise caution," Theo warned, and Grayson hesitated. "I had my scientist poking and prodding it all the way back. That was a mistake."

"I see," said his client. "And that was the reason for your... well, I suppose 'landing' is the word."

"It sent out a pulse. Somehow awakened the scrap metal Mechonids we had on board, put them back together."

Grayson steepled his fingers and was silent for a minute, staring intently at the purple-veined box. He tapped a few keys on his desk console, and a screen lit up to his left with facts and figures that meant nothing to Theo. With another sigh, Lampwick rose from his chair and closed the briefcase.

"I'm interested," he declared, leaving his desk and moving to the window. "In fact, I've been interested from the very first scans you sent. This is essentially human technology; most of my business rivals would kill to gain access to such a resource."

Theodore didn't care much for humans, but even he knew of their legendary technological exploits. Though pieces of their legacy remained, many of their secrets had been lost to history.

"However, I'm well aware that this is also Mechonid tech, and that means playing with fire."

"I understand," Theo began, but Lampwick held up a hand.

"Which means..." the man said, "I need more information. Firstly, I'll need the details of how you acquired the box."

Theo's jaw tightened, but he said nothing.

"And secondly," Grayson continued, turning back to the cityscape below, "We need to go directly to the source. An Archon lab, where the Mechonids were first awakened."

"If there was a single location..." Theo said, "It's probably lost, with the data destroyed. We all know the stories of what the first Mechonids did to their engineers."

Grayson opened his terminal, a sleek rod with all the latest upgrades, and projected a hologram of Mishpacha. The picture zoomed in until it focused on a single, square-shaped temple buried in amongst the dense jungle.

"Consider it un-lost," Lampwick said. "Courtesy of one of my interplanetary jaunts, and a very fortuitous emergency landing. Can I interest you in a new assignment?"

Theodore glanced out of the window, where the broken form of the Galatea could be seen in the distance lying on the landing platform, and allowed himself the briefest smirk.

\*\*\*

Rachel barely noticed Hraks' resistance as they ploughed through the bright lights and cacophony of sounds that was the Electric District. The streets were wide, free of traffic and full of people, even in the middle of the day.

"Why do..." Hraks began, trailing off as Legionnaire bumped against her shoulder and continued without apologising, "Why do people come here?"

"To have fun," Rachel replied, dragging her friend along by the arm. "Ooh, there's a new juice place! And they've reopened the outfitters store— last time I was here it closed because some Legion activated the self-destruct on a display vest. Oh, the club was the..."

She felt a sudden increase in resistance, and turned to see Hraks standing in the middle of the street. The Nephilim stared at the ground, seemingly frozen.

"...something wrong?"

Hraks looked up at her, then grabbed her arm and lead her inside a nearby electronics store. They found a corner, and Rachel waved away the sales assistant.

"It's just..." Hraks began, "It's a lot to take in."

"Okay," Rachel replied, "But... we've been here before. You've been here before."

"I stayed on the ship, mostly. Stuck to the back alleys. I'm not good at being around... lots of people."

Rachel had never seen Hraks so rattled. She thought about putting a hand on her shoulder, then thought better of it. To their left, a prototype drone hovered out of its cradle and began to loudly list its specifications and low, low price. Rachel smacked it back down.

"Sorry," she said, eventually. Hraks gave her a terse nod.

"This is the opposite of my home world," the Nephilim said, glancing out of the window. "The noise, the lights, everything. I was taught to blend in, but..."

This time, Rachel actually did put a hand on her shoulder. Hraks looked at the hand like it was an explosive, and it was quickly removed.

"Okay," the Kaltoran breathed. "Okay. It's a lot, yeah. But you also need to get used to it, so how about this: you say we go, we go. We go in somewhere and you're uncomfortable, just say the word."

Hraks tore her gaze from the window, and they made eye contact.

"Plus, I'll be there," Rachel added. "Whaddya say?"

Another nod.

"Cool," Rachel said, grinning. "Let's start small. Feel like a drink?"

\*\*\*

Truthfully, it wasn't too bad. The sensory overload had been intense at first, but Hraks had the distinct impression that Rachel understood. Maybe it had been the same for her.

They visited the juice bar (sweet, but rather pleasant), watched a game of SteelBall on the big screen in the main square (a lot of big guys hitting each other- entertaining) and Rachel even managed to drag her into a club (for all of four seconds). Slowly, she became accustomed to the ebb and flow of the crowd. She was barely given a second glance, except by a group of low-life Corporates who wolf-whistled at the pair of them as they passed. Rachel called them a word that seemed very foreign. They looked offended.

"So this place really heats up at night," Rachel said, as they sipped the dregs of their juice. "Although some parts are kind of dangerous. For the record, if anyone ever offers you Draz at half-price, it's probably half animal excretion. It's best to never buy anything off the street."

"Hmm," Hraks muttered, barely listening. A sign had caught her eye, glinting on the front of a neon-rimmed building.

SHOOTING CONTESTS EVERY DAY – PRIZES TO BE WON

"So the secret to not getting shanked is probably..." Rachel was saying, trailing off as she followed Hraks' line of sight. "And that'd be the arcade."

It could've been the sugar, or the mass of new sensations, but Hraks was feeling very unlike herself.

"Shooting contest," she said. "Let's enter."

Rachel clapped her hands together and laughed.

"Now that... that's fun."

The inside stank of sweat and adrenalin, and would've been in utter darkness if it weren't for the neon glow of the games machines. They made their way through the artificial smoke to the middle of the complex, where an arena was sunken into the ground. Entering was a matter of typing her name on a terminal, after which Hraks took an elevator to the arena while Rachel went to sit in the stands. She (Rachel or Hraks?) was met by a Kaltoran in overalls, who handed her a standard issue rifle.

"You're new here," he said, with a smirk, and Hraks nodded. "Then you probably don't know. This isn't a competition."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

The Kaltoran pointed to another corner of the arena, where five rough-looking Legionnaires were priming their weapons.

"They're the Iceberg Brothers," he explained. "Undefeated in three years of shooting matches. Sure, the competition is open to all, but no one actually enters any more. It's basically just them competing against each other."

Hraks glanced over at the brothers, and found herself the target of five sets of eyes. She ignored them and primed her own rifle.

"Whatever," she said, walking past the Kaltoran to her starting position, a white square with her name flashing on a neon floor sign. The Legion brothers lined up next to her, laughing and pushing each other. One of them tried to get her attention. She ignored him, and they laughed even more.

"Okay, standard rules," said the Kaltoran, standing in the centre of the arena. "Just for the newbie. Dots of varying colours will be projected at random on the floor and walls. Your aim is to tag one of each of the five colours, one after the other. You can hit them in any order, but hit the same one twice and you start again. First player to hit all five wins. Clear?"

Obviously bored with the spiel, he didn't bother waiting for an answer, retreating to a scoring desk and hitting a button. The projector descended from the ceiling, and the countdown began. Hraks glanced up and saw Rachel giving her the thumbs up from the stands.

3...

2...

1...

FIRE.

The white space of the arena was suddenly ablaze with colours. Tiny dots appeared all over the walls and floor, some flickering, some changing colour, some vanishing. They never stayed in place for more than a couple of seconds. The brothers began firing, their energy rounds being absorbed by the arena material. It was nearly deafening, but Hraks forced herself to concentrate.

This was a nearly impossible task. Even as she watched, the tiny pinpricks of light danced across the entire space. She was a decent enough marksman to hit them, but that was the easy part: it would've been so simple to aim at a dot, fire, and have it change colour or vanish before it was hit. Hraks looked at the scoreboard, and saw that the best ever time was eleven minutes. She could've been there for hours.

So instead, she watched without firing a shot. A minute passed before she saw it. The gathering crowd cheered and yelled, and grew louder when one of the brothers began to gather colours. One of them made it to three, before a blue dot changed to yellow while his round flew through the air, and his scoreboard returned to zero. The onlookers groaned.

A minute and thirty seconds had passed. Still, Hraks watched, her eyes a blur of activity. She left it another minute, just to be sure. Then she raised her rifle and squeezed off five shots. Her white panel lit up with one colour after another, until the fifth shot found its mark and the panel went from white to green. The buzzer sounded, and a deathly hush fell over the crowd. For a moment, no one moved. The Iceberg Brothers stared in disbelief.

Then Rachel began to applaud, and the onlookers followed. Exhaling, Hraks tossed aside her rifle and stepped on the elevator, riding it to the main floor as the cheers grew louder.

"Wow," the Kaltoran game-master said, approaching and running a hand through his hair. "That's new."

"Freakin' amazing, you mean!" Rachel said, jogging up and punching Hraks on the shoulder.

"Hey!" roared a voice, and they turned to see all five Iceberg Brothers bearing down on them. The tallest and meanest looking of the bunch stepped forward, fury in his eyes.

"Neph scum," he growled. "Think you can come in here and cheat like that? We should tear you in half."

"I didn't cheat," Hraks replied, narrowing her eyes.

"You must've!" he roared back.

"It's a sequence."

There was a pause. The Legion snarled.

"You're lying."

Hraks turned to the Kaltoran, who shrugged.

"Kind of," he said.

"It repeated every minute and ten seconds," Hraks explained, motioning to the arena. "The same combination of colours."

"Honestly, I didn't think anyone would get it," the game-master added. "I mean, there are thousands and thousands of targets, all of them blinking and reappearing... and over a minute? Phew... that's some crazy mathematics, Nephilim lady."

"How long has there been the same pattern?" the Legion asked in a guttural growl.

"Uh, about three years," the Kaltoran replied, far too cheerfully.

"And you never told us?"

"You never asked."

"Don't be sore losers," Rachel interrupted, poking out her tongue. "Hraks won fair and square. You were just too dumb to notice."

The brothers looked murderous. Part of Hraks wanted to stay and see if they were as good with their fists as they were with their guns. Then each of them pulled out a jagged knife, and her rational side was suddenly in perfect agreement with Rachel's tugging on her arm.

"Uh, rematch next time, maybe?" Rachel offered. The brothers advanced, and Hraks caught a lazy smile and a shrug from the game-master before they bolted for the door.

"That piece of advice you had on not getting shanked," Hraks said, as they burst out the door of the arcade, "Did it have something to do with not provoking angry, racist Legion?"

"New advice," Rachel panted as they wove their way through the crowd, five furious sharpshooters on their tail. "Just shut up and run."

\*\*\*

Maximus was having a good time, until the factory exploded.

He'd immediately sought out a few of his Legion brothers who still worked as bodyguards on Alabaster. Within minutes of him stepping in the pub, stories and bragging matches filled the air and liquid



Nerve flowed like rain. He cast off his usual stoicism and laughed along with the rest, revelling in true company once more. His brothers wanted to know how many assassination attempts he'd survived from the Nephilim on board. He steered the conversation elsewhere.

"You took a better road," said Fausto, who'd been part of Max's original deployment from Lilith. "Bodyguard duty is dull."

"Sounds like you have cause to use your weapons more often than us," agreed Diana, slapping him on the back. Max merely shrugged.

"It's a life, like any other."

Their gathering was interrupted as every single one of his friends received commlink messages at exactly the same moment. The conversation died as they viewed the message. They exchanged nods, picked up their weapons from where they'd been leaning against chairs and rose from the table.

"Don't tell me all your clients are in danger at once?" Max said, also rising.

"Not quite," Fausto said, inspecting his weapon cartridge. "See, we do some freelance work on the side."

"Staves away the boredom," added Julius, the youngest of the group.

"Come with us," Diana said, with a terse smile. "It'll be good to have you back."

Maximus was different from when he left his mercenary job. Perhaps in his right mind, he would've refused. However, the mass of drinks and the promise of true companionship crushed his better judgement. He hefted his modified rifle over his shoulder and downed a glass of Nerve in one gulp.

"For old times," he slurred.

\*\*\*

An hour later, a factory had exploded before his eyes. Max had been on guard duty, totally unaware of the plan and never actually had to do anything. He liked to think he had no part in the scheme. The security drones, however, didn't seem to discriminate.

The small group sprinted through the warehouse district as dusk fell over the city. The sun was low on the horizon, and they ran in the opposite direction, away from the blinding rays as if they were searchlights. They paused for a second behind a shipping container, and Max peered over the top to see the factory sending plumes of smoke high into the air.

"Why didn't you tell me?" he hissed, dropping back down. "You said this was a straight mission!"

"Relax, brother," said Fausto, barely paying attention. "No one was in the factory. It was automation only."

"It was still a factory."

"We take what work we can get," Diana said. "If you'd stayed, you'd be doing the same thing!"

Maximus had a biting reply prepared, but was forced to cut it short as a squadron of drones discovered their position. Sirens blaring, they descended only to be cut down by a hail of gunfire. The Legion group were already running as the drones fell to the ground.

Max was in the midst of seriously regretting his life choices when they emerged from the tightly-packed warehouses and onto a wide-open space. A shadow appeared overhead, and a miniature hovercraft descended in front of the group.

"That's our ride!" called Diana over the hum of the engines, and the four of them flung themselves through the open side door as a larger squadron of drones zeroed in. The door clamped shut, and the craft blasted into the sky, joining the sea of traffic heading for the main city. The group sat on the floor in the cramped space, catching their breath.

"Not a bad job, right?" Fausto said, his smile fading when he caught the irate look Max was sending his way.

"Ah, leave him," Julius muttered, "Max thinks he's too good for us anyway."

Deciding that words simply weren't enough for the situation, Maximus stood and leaned against the metal door, making a show of checking his rifle.

"Fine, whatever," Diana said. "Name your drop point."

"Business quarter, Runway 52. The red ship with all the mismatched parts."

The pilot nodded, and Max went back to his rifle.

"So..." Fausto began, "I know this was a bit of a surprise, but... any chance of us doing this again? It was good to have you back."

Max gritted his teeth as the Galatea swung into view.

"We'll see."

\*\*\*

Theodore looked up from the navigation console as Hraks and Rachel barrelled into the bridge, leaping into their chairs and beginning take-off procedures. They were followed shortly by Maximus, who took his place without so much as glancing around.

"Sorry to cut your leave short," Theo began, after clearing his throat. "But we're flightworthy, and we've got a new assignment."

"Yep."

"Good."

"Fine."

Silence fell over the bridge. Theo finished setting coordinates and cleared the launch with the control tower.

"So..." he said, "Did anyone do... anything interesting?"

"Accidentally won an unwinnable shooting match," Hraks said.

"Currently being chased by angry thugs with knives," Rachel added.

"Blew up a factory and got chased by patrol drones," Max mumbled.

Theo's smile became fixed as he waited for someone to say that they were joking. No one said a word.

"Right," he breathed. "Okay. I think it's time for us to leave."

A group of angry-looking Legionnaires with very large sharp objects were speeding towards the Galatea across the landing platform. Meanwhile, a security alert popped up on Theo's screen warning all Alabaster citizens to be on the lookout for a group of mercenaries wanted for industrial sabotage.

Rolling his eyes as far as they would go, Theo gave the order to gun the engine. The Galatea blasted forward, soon clearing the runway, soaring through the clouds and into the open sky.

## Chapter 2) Storm and Stone

The sweat gathered on the back of Theodore's neck as he sprinted across the barren landscape. The heat of the sun was oppressive, almost a physical burden on top of his trench-coat and flawless green suit. The suit and coat were mandatory, of course.

The sweat wasn't real. Engaged as he was in the HamsterBall™, their ship's VR training facility, he was actually only running on a circular treadmill that generated the illusion of a vast desert. The manipulation of his neurons made the whole thing as solid as real life, however. Theo took cover behind a rocky outcropping and checked his pistol. Four shots remaining. His shock baton remained concealed in his coat, fully-charged.

What is a hamster, anyway?

It was this type of thought that made him wish he could panic a little bit more in a firefight. Just a bit of stress wasn't too much to ask for; at least it would help him focus. Steely calm wasn't always a blessing.

The Galatèa had landed on Michpacha almost a day ago, but they'd been kept from leaving the ship by a tropical storm so intense it had nearly blown the ship straight into the ground. The temple they were supposed to be investigating lay only a mile to the west, but reaching it was impossible until the storm subsided.

In the meantime, the crew had hived off to their respective sanctum sanctorums: Rachel practically sealed herself in the engine room, Max had spent hours rearranging the armoury and Hraks was doing who-knows-what in the lab. That left Theo to entertain himself.

His computer-generated assailants fired a barrage of sniper shots into the side of the rock, which were completely useless. That's what you got when you had a Kaltoran training simulation installed on your ship for less than half the usual price. Terrible AI and a magnificent choice of only two environments: 'Desert' and 'Cityscape'.

Steely calm and bargaining instincts that most businessmen would kill for. Theo was feeling the downsides of both.

He dived out of his hiding place and focused on the tiny black shape that was the sniper. It fired off a shot, and Theo raised his wrist shield, deflecting the shot. A second later, he had the tiny black spot in his sights.

Bang. A load of pixels bit the dust.

He could've easily stood there, picking off each one, but he had to make it a challenge. Theodore made to leap behind the next rocky barrier, but found that the simulation had ended before he got there. The simulated world faded before his eyes and was replaced by the drab walls of his ship, the Galatèa. Rachel stood next to the emergency stop, her ears twitching as they always did when she was stressed.

"Sorry, boss," she said, worry written on her face. "Emergency on the bridge."

She left the room, and Theo was left to extricate himself from the HamsterBall™. The sweat was different in the real world, but it was still sweat. He vaguely wondered if the emergency was urgent enough to justify skipping a shower. What was the level of concern on Rachel's face? Theo gauged it at around 42%.

Well below average. There was definitely time for a shower.

\*\*\*

He entered the bridge just over ten minutes later to find the other three had already arrived. Texas, Theodore's personal drone, buzzed upwards from his charging cradle and moved to hover behind his master.

"What's the problem?" the Corporate asked, and Rachel pointed out the window. The storm had lessened, but was still blanketing the area in a fierce squall. Nevertheless, the vague outline of another ship could be seen through the gloom.

"They landed a few minutes ago," Rachel reported. "Think they're after the same thing as us?"

"The Temple is the only point of interest around for miles," Theo replied, trying to keep the irritation out of his voice. "I'd say it's almost certain."

It looked to be a sleek vessel, certainly less of a mish-mash of different parts than the Galatèa, and shaped very much like an arrow. Theo didn't know who was on board, but he disliked them already.

"They hailed us as soon as they landed," Hraks reported from her position at the communications panel. "Warned us to stay away. Fortunately, that also gave me brief access to their systems. I'm unscrambling the information now."

"I still say we cripple their ship," Maximus muttered, casting his eyes over to the gun controls. "One good shot to the rear engines—"

"No one's crippling anyone," Theo announced. "For all we know, they have ten times our firepower."

He peered out at the other vessel through the storm, and already a plan was formulating in his mind. This could work to their advantage.

"Got it," Hraks announced, and a holographic representation of the specs was projected onto the front screen. "Apollo-class, ship name is Nemesis."

"Charming," Rachel muttered, as Hraks continued.

"Crew of fifteen, includes five Corporates, seven Legion, two Kaltoran, one..."

Their crew ID portraits scrolled past on the screen, finishing with a single picture of a Nephilim Emissary male with short tendril-like hair and chiselled features. Theo glanced over at Hraks and saw that she'd frozen, her expression unreadable.

"One Nephilim," he finished, saving the inquiry for later. "A cosmopolitan crew."

"Um, have you seen us?" Rachel pointed out. Theo closed the screen, which left them with the hazy view of the ship through the howling squall.

"We'll wait it out," he announced. "Nothing much else to be done. And if we're after the same thing...we'll just have to be faster."

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The storm stopped as swiftly as it had started, and the four of them were geared up and heading down the landing gantry in the space of a minute.

They crossed the damp ground and reached the temple, a magnificent structure that spoke of architectural wisdom that had been lost to time. The central structure was cube-like, at least a hundred feet high and comprised of gigantic blocks of red stone. Around the edges were pointed turrets that formed what had seemed to be rows of teeth from the air.

The entrance was a gaping archway that lead into nothing but blackness. Everyone drew their weapons and flicked on the torches, moving steadily into the gloom. The antechamber was cavernous and carved with symbols that had long since decayed, and webbed cracks ran through the floor. As they'd seen in the schematics, there were four doorways leading deeper into the temple, two in front, and one on either side.

"Two teams," Theo muttered, motioning to Hraks. "Radio if you find anything. Record all points of interest."

Rachel and Maximus disappeared into the left tunnel, while Theo and Hraks took the one to the right. Their weapon-mounted torches blazed to life, and they cut through the gloom as they made their way into the depths of the temple.

It may have lain abandoned for years, but Theodore couldn't shake the feeling that they were intruders.

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Over the time they'd spent on missions, Rachel and Maximus had come to a compromise. He accepted that she was never going to display the full Legion discipline, and she understood that he struggled with spontaneous actions.

In a way, this made them a more effective team. Rifle in one

hand and knife in the other, they crept down the dank passageways, listening for any signs of life. Despite his size, Max made exactly the same amount of noise as Rachel, the larger Legion taking care to soften his footfalls.

They stopped at a barely legible carving, which qualified as a point of interest.

"Probably not what our client wants," Rachel muttered, as she used her eye-scope to take a few pictures. "Unless he's an appreciator of the fine arts of damp stone walls."

"Don't make fun," Max grunted back. "Damp stone walls are an art form in many cultures."

She spun around and saw that the corners of his mouth were upturned.

"Look at you, cracking jokes," Rachel said, grinning. "We'll make a Kaltoran out of you yet."

Max chose not to reply, instead deciding that they'd taken enough photos. They continued down the corridor, stepping over intruding vines and pieces of fallen rubble. A pit-worm emerged from a hole in the wall, and Rachel lopped its head off with a swift blow of her knife. As she did so, her eyes were drawn to the ground.

"Check this out," she whispered, scooping up an empty, crushed can. "Kirren."

The energy drink was well-known amongst mercenaries as a cheaper, far-less-potent version of Draz. Essentially, drinking a whole can would keep you artificially alert for hours. It also came in several zesty citrus flavours.

"They got here before us," the Legionnaire growled. "That's impossible. With their larger crew, it should've taken them longer to scramble."

"Must've found a way through the storm," Rachel said. "So...at least they're all probably super wet and cold."

"We should alert the captain."

Maximus attempted to activate his radio, only to be assailed with static. He tore off his earpiece in disgust.

"Storm," he said. "Or the walls, maybe. We'll just have to meet them at the rendezvous point."

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Hraks took the rear as she and Theodore made their way down the dank passageway. Every few seconds, Texas would snap a few photographs of their surroundings, but it was clear that wall carvings weren't what the client wanted. They weren't even clear as

to the objective.

"So, who is he?"

She glanced around to see her captain lighting a cigarette, inhaling the artificial smoke and pretending to be interested by a patch of damp stone. Hraks knew that smoking was a tradition that went back centuries- even millennia- but she found it puzzling that the act used to be deeply harmful. Purifying the smoke was such an easy task, it was incredible that so many humans had recreationally destroyed their bodies.

"Who is who?" she replied, hoping the topic would be dropped.

"The Nephilim on their crew. He's a Emissary, like you."

She cursed under her breath. Theo was smart: of course he'd recognised her discomfort. The Nephilim woman took the lead, shining her torch on the passageway and concealing her own features.

"If it's all the same, Captain," she said, "I'd rather not discuss it."

"Fair enough."

Theo took another draft of smoke and exhaled, flicking the cigarette to one side.

"Brother, perhaps?"

She turned her head sharply, and he shrugged.

"If this is going to compromise the mission, I need to know," Theo said. "It's not prying. It's tactical."

"He was one of my pod-mates," Hraks explained. "We woke up together. We became close. It didn't end well, and I didn't think I'd ever see him again. Happy?"

Concealing her anger at having to divulge the information, she moved even further ahead and made a show of pointing her torch at the ground, peering into the darkness that lay in front. This peaceful image was shattered by Theo shining his own torch directly in front. "And if you do see him again..." he said, "...what will you do?"

She shot him a calculating glance before angling up her torch once more and stalking into the gloom.

"End it," she said simply, her voice echoing off the narrow stone walls until it suddenly magnified. As the echo died, they crept forward to find that the passageway had curved around. Before them lay the central chamber.

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Rachel and Maximus ducked under a set of hanging vines and entered the largest room in the temple, which had once been a

centre of prayer. The space was massive, with a vaguely domed ceiling that was lined with stone spikes that seemed withered by the constant rainwater that must've leaked in throughout the years. Rachel swallowed as she looked up, then glanced down to see that several had already fallen. The floor was devoid of any bare patches, instead being made of a series of spiralling blocks that were inscribed with ancient symbols lost to time. Sunlight streamed in through the high, thin windows, though instead of warmth, it instead seemed to be consumed by the huge space until they were left with a dank yellow light.

Theodore and Hraks turned as they emerged, and Maximus slid the Kirren can from his bag.

"Typical," the captain said. "We're behind, as always."

"I like to think it's where we thrive," Rachel added, trying and failing not to smirk. "So, no big soldier guys in sight..."

She spun around to confirm that the room was entirely empty.

"Definitely none," she reported. "So where are they?"

Meanwhile, Theo had crossed to the dead-centre of the room, where a circular block of stone was inscribed with a simple spiral pattern. He ran his shoe over the surface with a thoughtful expression. They watched for a minute as a spectacular amount of nothing happened.

"Um, what is he doing?" Rachel whispered to Max, but it was Hraks who answered.

"Looking for the secret entrance."

"Uh-huh."

"It's rumoured that the priests had secrets that lay beneath the temple," Theo explained, not taking his eyes off the floor. "If so, it'll be here."

"It's where the sacred prayer altar was located," Hraks added.

"Only the high-priests had access to that very spot," Max finished. Rachel glanced around at everyone, mouth open slightly.

"Supplementary mission info," Theo said. "Don't you read it?"

"I never read the extra stuff," Rachel muttered.

Theo glanced up and smiled before pressing his foot down on one of the stone blocks. It sank into the ground, and the entire cavern began to shake. They dashed to the outer edge of the hall as the great stone blocks began to fall away in a spiral formation as if on hinges. One by one they toppled, each one falling further than the rest, until the rumbling stopped and they stood staring at a broad spiral staircase that lead straight down into darkness.

Silence fell over the room as the last echoes disappeared into the depths.

"Supplementary information," Rachel said, finally. "Right. I'll look into that from now on."

They crossed to the top of the spiral staircase and were about to advance when they heard a series of low growls. They echoed through the newly created walls down below, growing louder as whatever was making the noise came closer.

The four explorers drew their weapons as white-skinned creatures crawled out of the darkness on all-fours, their black eyes swinging upwards towards the intruders. Each one was at least eight-feet long and had skin that was mottled white from lack of sunlight. Their mouths were circular, with sharp teeth forming a perfect ring that seemed like the perfect size for a person's head. Their growls reached a crescendo as the endless tide of creatures emerged for their first meal in who knew how long.

"What do you think?" Hraks asked, already crouching with her rifle primed. "The security system, or an unfortunate lab accident?"

"Doesn't matter," Theo replied. He raised his gun, and his comrades did the same. "They're in our way."

## Chapter 3) What Lies Below

In all the firefights that Rachel had ever been caught up in, the one constant was the noise. Ballistic weapons or energy rounds, the result was still the same: ringing ears and a mild headache that no painkiller seemed to be able to alleviate.

The fight was nearly over. She'd stood near their starting position with Hraks, their rifles pouring a constant barrage of gun fire. Theo had positioned himself on the top of the spiral stairwell and was firing downwards. Naturally, Maximus had waded into the thick of the combat, knife in one hand and gun in the other. Texas floated above the action, letting loose with its in-built shock cannons.

One of the lizards bounded over Max's head, but Hraks shot it out of the air. It landed with a dozen spins in its skull. Rachel focused on another and gave it a few extra holes in its mottled white head, while Max grabbed one by the throat and palm-smashed it in the face until it stopped moving. The slithering stopped, and the last vestiges of battle sounds echoed through the chamber.

Theo leapt down from the upper wall and onto the stairs, motioning for his team to follow. They congregated on the stairs, weapons still drawn, and flicked on their mounted torches.

"At least we know one thing," Theo said, still slightly out of breath. "The other team haven't been down here."

"Or they ended up as lunch," Rachel added.

"Unlikely," Maximus said. "For a security system, this one was... inefficient."

"How so?"

He motioned to the scattered bodies.

"No swarm tactics. It's like they were aiming for crowd control, taking us on one at a time."

"But we're not a crowd," Theo concluded. "Let's just be thankful."

The group descended, eyes and ears open for any signs of life. Rachel took pictures of the wall carvings as they followed the spiral down, and they grew more and more intricate until she was facing patterns that seemed to have required a precision laser cutter to perform: swirling runes and impossibly detailed portraits of ancient figures.

"Who even built this thing?" Rachel muttered. "And out of stone? When was the last time anyone built anything out of stone?"

"Human worshippers," Hraks said, reporting more information from the brief. "A minority of Archons weren't quite as prideful as the rest. They believed that their parent race were gods for having given birth to them, and that their every creation was the image of perfection. So

they sealed themselves in their temples and went ignored until the war. Structures such as this were quite prominent in human history."

"And stone is quite sturdy," Max added, glancing at Rachel. "In case you hadn't noticed."

She fixed him with a withering glance, which he seemed to find amusing. Rachel paused to trace a carving on the wall of two arches joined together, along with an inscription.

"Hraks," she whispered, and the Nephilim drew closer. "Any idea what it says?"

Hraks peered at the carving, tracing her fingers through the strange letters.

"Source..." she muttered, "Source of all sustenance."

She moved to a carving of a strange fruit with a piece missing from the corner, as if someone had taken a bite. "This one says... source of all advancement."

The two images formed a triad with a third, and Hraks took her time with the final inscription. It was carved below three bent lines that radiated upwards, each one growing larger.

"Source of life itself," she translated. "I couldn't tell you what they mean."

"Guess we'll never know," Rachel said, with a shrug. They continued downwards until the stairs finally came to an end. The transition was startling, with the stone temple dropping away and being replaced by tiled floors and metal walls. The long hallway was lit with weak yellow light and lined with pods, all of which were open and dripping with an inky white fluid. The smell of damp vanished, replaced by the clinical odour of sterile instruments. Even the remains of the still rotting Archons skeletons in the corner seemed to give off no scent.

"It's a sterile atmosphere," Theo muttered. "Tiny microbes in the air that cleanse everything they come into contact with."

"So this is the real lab," Hraks concluded.

"Seems like it. And we just met the automated security."

They moved down the hallway towards the steel door at the far end. Hraks moved to examine the panel, while Theo lightly touched Rachel's shoulder.

"We still don't know for sure if we're alone," he muttered. "Be ready."

He lifted his hand and went to join the others. Rachel swallowed and surreptitiously patted the knife she kept strapped to her leg. Hurrying to catch up to her captain— empty or otherwise, she didn't want to walk past those pods by herself— she reached the door as Hraks gave the panel a jolt with her portable battery, and it slid open.

For a moment, the four of them stared into pitch blackness. Then the lights blazed to life all at once, and when their eyes adjusted they saw what the Archons had tried so hard to hide.

A circular walkway surrounded a laboratory as big as a Steelball stadium, with a domed roof and what looked to be hundreds of terminals arrayed in neat lines along the lower level. Interspersed were operating tables, tanks and scattered piles of machine parts, ready to be assembled. The entire scene was so blindingly white that Rachel had to squint for a full minute before she could make out the distant shapes.

"The Mechonid laboratory," Theo announced, unable to keep a trace amount of awe from his voice. "No one has been here since the war ended."

"And the Archons tried to hide it for a reason," Hraks added. "I would not rule out extra security."

Before them lay a helical staircase that wound its way to the lower level. They descended, footsteps echoing throughout the massive chamber, and reached the pristine ground floor. Rachel lifted one boot and saw that she'd left multiple footprints of dust and grime. Apparently the Archons had a strongly policed 'wipe your feet' policy.

She checked the bottom of her boot and froze.

"Captain..." she said, slowly lifting her head.

"What is it?"

"I think the Archons were pretty pedantic when it came to muddy footprints."

Theo recognised the tone of her voice and turned, his movements sharp.

"And...?"

"There are a lot of footprints on this floor."

The four of them stood back to back and raised their guns as they found many more pointed straight at them. Mercenaries emerged from their hiding places, some from behind the staircase, some who'd been crouching behind the rows of terminals. Rachel counted at least twenty, of all races. As if by cruel coincidence, she found her own rifle trained on a young Kaltoran holding a pistol with shaking hands. He couldn't have been much older than her, and very much looked like he didn't want to be there.

The crew of the Nemesis had made it through the security.

One of them strode forward, utterly casual. He was a Legion, larger and more muscular than even Max and bearing a prominent scar that crossed his entire face, obscuring one eye. Unlike most of his race, he wore little armour, and was instead clad in simple black clothing

and combat vest. However, his gun was appropriately high in calibre, and it was pointed straight at Theo.

"So you're the insects," he said, his voice deep yet raspy. Rachel noticed that the scar continued down to his throat. "We're not big on sharing jobs."

Theo's grip tightened on his pistol but said nothing, seemingly running calculations in his head. Rachel didn't see why. They may have been decent shots, but including Texas there were five guns versus twenty. They couldn't fight their way out of this, and Theo knew it.

"It's not often explorers like us meet on a job," their captain replied, only the barest hint of an edge on his voice. "Guess it's just fate."

The Legionnaire shrugged, even taking a moment to glance around as if daring one of them to make a move. One gun less didn't make a difference.

"So, what now?" he asked, in that grinding voice.

"We could share," Theo suggested, to a chorus of snickers from the assembled crowd. With a cool smile of his own, he continued. "All we want are the Mechonid blueprints, same as you, I'm guessing. We can both..."

"Blueprints?" the Legion leader growled. He turned to a Corporate woman who stood a few feet away, perched on one of the consoles holding a sniper rifle. "Is that part of the mission?"

"No, sir," she replied. "Our objective is human historical records, sans technological innovation. The client has no interest in Mechonids."

The leader turned back to Theo with an incredulous expression.

"Okay, hang on..." Rachel said, eyes flicking back and forth between her target and the leader. "We're NOT after the same thing?"

"Apparently not," Theo muttered. The Legionnaire held his gaze for a moment, then shrugged.

"Fine," he said, lowering his rifle. "Back to business."

In one casual movement, the assembled crowd lowered their weapons and resumed whatever they were doing beforehand.

"Um..." Rachel began, as Theo collapsed his pistol and motioned to Hraks. "What?"

"It's business," he explained, following her to the terminal. "No one wants a bloodbath."

With that, he left Rachel standing in the middle of the room, rifle still in hand, surrounded by strangers who'd been seconds away from shooting her head off. She frowned and slid the firearm back into its

holster as the young Kaltoran came jogging over.

"Hi," he said, wide-eyed. "Sorry about... um, I'm really glad I didn't have to shoot you in the face."

"Likewise," she replied.

"I'm Jamie," he said, and he pumped her hand as it was offered. "Used to be captain, actually. Sort of, for a bit. Then our crew kind of... amalgamated with a bigger one."

"My condolences. I'm Rachel, and I've never been the captain of anything."

"Your captain is an interesting guy," Jamie said, eyeing Theo from across the room. "Seemed to take the whole thing in his stride."

"Yeah..." Rachel murmured. "He's the King of Cool, alright. And yours?"

"Actually an okay guy," Jamie admitted. "Bit of bloodlust, crushes more skulls with his bare hands than I'm comfortable with, but he's surprisingly fair. Picked up a lot of business sense from living on Alabaster."

"Okay. I'm... going over here."

"Hmm?"

"Here. I'm having a look around."

"Oh, great," Jamie said, giving her an awkward thumbs up. She smiled and moved to investigate the abandoned terminals. Strolling down one of the long lines of dusty computers, she noticed scattered Mechonid parts lining the outer walls. Most were incomplete, missing limbs or heads, though a few seemed intact. Rachel decided to keep an eye on them.

On the ground floor, the terminals were broken up every few meters by operating tables, upon which lay machine parts and tools that had long since fallen apart or been made obsolete. One of the closest tables was covered with a white cloth; overcome with curiosity, Rachel lifted the edge and peered underneath. The table's surface was clear, but underneath were stacks of shelves upon which lay rows of metal objects. She poked one of them. It didn't activate.

Slowly, Rachel slid one of the boxes out and held it at arm's length like it was a live explosive. It was similar to the one they'd taken from the Mechonid attack on the ship, though far smaller and shaped like a cylinder with a cap-like protrusion at the end. Its power veins were dull and lifeless, and even the outer casing felt cheap and mass-produced. Even so, as she held it in her hands she felt a sense of foreboding. Without quite knowing why, Rachel crammed the cylinder inside her bag and glanced over to see Hraks stand up so fast her chair went spinning across the floor.

"Stop," she growled, and the male Nephilim who was working on a terminal nearby froze.

"There's a failsafe," she explained. "As soon as we take any data away on a storage device, it activates."

"Doing what, exactly?" Theo asked.

"Incinerating the entire complex."

"Is that all?"

"It's true," the male Emissary confirmed, hitting a few keys. "The Archons apparently didn't like people taking their work home with them."

"This was part of the war effort," the Legionnaire captain said, striding over from his position next to the stairs. "It makes sense."

"Then why is this place still here?" Theo asked. "It's all undamaged, not an Archon skeleton in sight. Barely even a sign of a fight."

No one had an answer. Rachel had thought it was odd, how pristine the complex was after all those years. If it was abandoned in an emergency, the Archons likely would've incinerated the place as they left. If they'd died here, there would have been skeletons... or the last one alive probably would've blown up the whole place anyway. Archons weren't a sharing race, especially when it came to their precious knowledge.

Hraks glanced down at the sleek device and her brow furrowed.

"Perhaps I can delay the explosion," she began. "But not for long. I can..."

"There's no explosive," the Emissary interrupted, typing furiously until he noticed Hraks giving him daggers from where she stood. "I mean... it's deactivated. Look."

Hraks rolled her eyes and began a series of clicks and keystrokes. Rachel wasn't sure whether to be worried about the imminent explosion or the fact that Hraks had never looked at anyone like that before. She hadn't even known Hraks to be capable of that much emotion.

"It's true," the Nephilim confirmed, once she'd glanced through the data. "Their auto-destruct is disabled."

"Any reason why?" Theo said.

"It'll take time to scan the logs. We might end up setting off something worse."

The two Nephilim glanced at each other as they placed a hand on their terminals. No one moved. Then they slid the devices out, and Rachel noticed immediately that they didn't all blow up. It was



a good sign.

"We got everything," the male Emissary reported. "All the historical records we could find, including those of the temple. But..."

"There wasn't as much as we thought," Hraks finished. "In fact, a lot of it is coded in Ancient script. I'm not sure any of our systems can translate it."

"We'll worry about that later," the Legion captain said. "Let's focus on getting out of here alive."

"Shouldn't be a problem," Theo said. "We took care of the security system."

The grizzled Legionnaire simply narrowed his eyes and signalled for his crew to follow. Theo let them have the lead before motioning to his own crew.

"Hey, Max," Rachel said, as they trailed up the staircase, "You know that guy?"

"Why would I?" Max growled.

"Cause he's... Legion. Solider-looking. Y'know?"

"Do you know any Legion who aren't?"

It was a fair point. They reached the entrance hallway to find that the crew of the Nemesis were armed once more, and all the pods lining the corridor had closed by themselves.

"Stay back," their captain growled, inching towards the nearest pod. It hissed and began to open, releasing a torrent of steam that slithered along the ground and masked the insides. It was swept aside as one of the lizard creatures climbed out, its tongue tasting the air as it grew used to the light. The pods lining the walls underwent a similar process.

"Force-grown security," Hraks said, sounding far too interested. "Cells replicated at a greatly accelerated level to create clones with simple directives."

The first creature seemed to notice them, and its single implanted directive took hold. The Legionnaire captain grabbed its skull and crushed it into the floor, but the others were waking up.

Every pod was now opened, and the lizard creatures emerging were noticeably different from the first batch. Their limbs were more muscular, their ringed teeth were situated further apart, with flatter skulls for biting, and they now possessed barbed spikes on their thick tails.

By the looks of things, they were unsteady on their feet and groggy from their few seconds of life. All it would take was a bit of adrenaline and they'd be happily ripping off heads in seconds.

"Incredible," Hraks whispered. "Their security system records flaws and rewrites DNA to cope with specific problems."

"We can weep salty tears over the science later," Theo said, shock baton in hand. "Now, let's focus on getting out of here alive."

He strode forward to draw level with his counterpart, Texas buzzing close behind with his head compartment sliding open. In eerie synchronisation, the two captains drew very illegal neurotoxin grenades from their respective hiding places.

"Any eventuality," the Legion captain growled.

"Indeed," Theo replied, with a smile. "Let's see them evolve to combat this."

They each hurled their contraband weapons at the lizard horde while Rachel drew her rifle and gritted her teeth as the noise began once more.

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Covered in soot and a more than a few lizard entrails, the group watched from a distance as the temple was consumed in a gigantic fireball. It lasted a full minute, after which the fire dispersed and left a charred pile of stones in its wake. Theo had noticed the crew of the Nemesis laying charges as they made their escape; it made sense, after all. They were now the only ones in the universe with this information. It was standard mercenary practice.

Still, a very small part of him felt a twinge of loss for the history now buried underneath a thousand tonnes of rubble.

"Well," Theo said, brushing dust off his coat collar, "It's been nice working with you."

The Legion captain shrugged.

"Be glad we didn't truly cross each other."

He turned and began to move towards his ship without so much as a backwards glance. His crew—minus several who'd ended up as lizard food—followed behind. Neurotoxins aside, the upgraded security system had proved to be far more troublesome than their first encounter. If not for the fact that many of them carried more powerful and versatile weapons developed since the end of the war, they might not have made it out at all. Theo's swivel rounds were utterly depleted.

"See you around, Jamie," Rachel said, punching the young Kaltoran on the shoulder and immediately grimacing in pain. She'd taken a bite to the arm, and would've also lost her head if Max hadn't torn the creature off her and smashed it against the wall. The Legionnaire himself was limping from multiple wounds to his arms and legs, but didn't seem to notice. The two of them made their way back to the Galatèa, where their medical bay would provide some level of care.

Unscathed but covered in sickly white blood, Hraks stood gazing at the male Nephilim, her face impassive as he spoke words too quiet to hear. She replied before turning and heading back to the ship, her eyes fixed upon the ground. The other Nephilim stood watching her go, his face unreadable in the flickering of the fire light. Finally, he also turned to go, leaving only Jamie. The Kaltoran seemed to still be catching his breath, leaning on his knees as Theo approached.

"Who's your client?" Theo asked.

"P-pardon?"

"Your client," Theodore asked. "The one with an interest in human history."

Jamie straightened with a curious look, then motioned back to his ship.

"I can ask the captain to send you the coordinates; he's based in a derelict Archon research base in orbit over Eden, the Nephilim homeworld. Why do you ask?"

Theo held up his terminal, watching as the dying flames were reflected in the metallic surface.

"We didn't get as much info as we would've liked," he said simply. "And most of it is untranslated. I like to be thorough."

"Well, okay," Jamie replied, with a shrug. "Can't promise that he'll see you, but for anything human, he's your man."

Theo tucked the terminal back into his pocket, wondering if he was doing the right thing. Their mission was over. And yet, something felt incomplete. As a businessman, he knew when a job was unfinished.

"Thank you," he said. "Tell your captain I appreciate the gesture."

"Yeah, he's... not really going to care."

Theo watched Jamie go, and felt a strange sense of foreboding. It wasn't in regards to the other captain- Theo knew his type... but there was something amiss.

He glanced once more at the ruined temple, the structure that had stood for centuries before secrets and greed had reduced it to rubble. Theo then pulled a cigar from his breast pocket, lit it using a piece of smouldering masonry and returned to the Galatèa as a clap of thunder signalled the coming of another storm.

## Chapter 4) Skeleton in the Closet

The Archon gently drifted in the murky liquid, eyes wide open and body lovingly stitched together. Of course, it was a skeleton: all it had were eye sockets. Nevertheless, Pierre liked to think they were making eye contact. Eye to eye socket contact.

He placed a withered hand against the side of the tank and imagined the skeleton reaching out to replicate the gesture. It would be novel, if a bit disturbing. The dead Archon simply kept floating as it always had.

"One day," Pierre muttered, letting his hand fall. He untucked another hand from his grey robes and pressed the central button on the tank's controller. Metal shutters whirred and closed in over the tank, concealing it as just another one of the metal pillars that kept this abandoned space station together. Most of his collection was flaunted throughout the hallways, but the Archon was a secret. Too many people would covet his most prized piece for it to be common knowledge.

Pierre retrieved his walking stick from where it leaned against the wall and made his way down the central corridor, basking as he did every morning in the splendour of his life's work. He stopped to brush his fingers against the tattered remains of a flag with only a few white stars visible. Further down, he admired for the thousandth time the contours of a chemically-preserved spider web. The door to his personal quarters was flanked by twin stone creatures in almost mint condition. 'Gargoyles', they had once been called.

The universe had moved on to forge its own legends, its own artefacts. Pierre had chosen to dwell in the past. Many pieces of his collection had existed long before space travel had shrunk the known world.

He reached for his door controls but was interrupted by the proximity alarm. A system more ancient than even himself, it was prone to activating at random bursts of solar winds and distant comets. Pierre scowled and reached for his control to shut the drone off when he noticed the camera feed.

A ship. One he hadn't seen before. Very few people knew where to find him, and even fewer bothered to make the trip.

Pierre smiled, a yellow-tinged grin with a few back teeth missing. Perhaps today wouldn't be entirely ordinary after all.

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"No mines," Maximus reported from the gunner seat. "We set off a proximity alarm, but scans report that all automated weapons systems are powered down."

"Try not to sound too disappointed, Max," Theo replied, tracing a navigation chart with one hand. "Hraks, can you establish contact?"

The Nephilim woman tapped a few keys and nodded to him. 'Attention craft,' said a cold, computer generated voice. 'Approaching this vessel is strictly prohibited. Any hostility will be met with...'

The voice dissolved into static, and the crew of the Galatea were treated to an awkward few seconds that sounded like someone was beating a microphone repeatedly against a desk.

'Sorry about that,' said another, more elderly voice with a Corp accent. 'I've never been able to switch off the auto-warning. There was one time when I was on the other side of the ship, and it took me so long to hobble over to the controls that the ship outside was treated to the whole tirade. Took me a good few minutes to convince them that they weren't about to be blasted from the sky. Honestly, you'd think setting up in an orbital Archon station—'

"This is the Galatea," Theo interrupted, before the man could regale them with his life story. "Requesting permission to land."

'Granted. Meet me in the central chamber, and do NOT touch anything.'

The transmission cut off, and Rachel spun round in her chair.

"Fun guy," she commented, with her eyebrows raised. Theo narrowed his eyes and plotted a course for the docking bay. Their ship was soon in the grip of the auto-landing beacons, and they gently came to land in the deserted space. The crew moved to the rear of the ship and the landing ramp descended to reveal a hangar that was entirely devoid of any craft.

"So, when he wants to nip down to the shops..." Rachel whispered as they descended. "How does he get there?"

'I'd never leave my collection,' blared the voice from the intercom. 'Or rather, I would die first. By the way, I will only grant you an audience if the Legion stays on board.'

They all looked at Max, who seemed unperturbed.

"Why, exactly?" Theo asked.

'They are a war-mongering race and I will not tolerate their presence. He stays behind.'

"How about this?" Rachel snapped in the direction of the speaker. "You can go and..."

"He'll stay," Theo interjected. He ignored Rachel's angry glance and turned to Maximus, who shrugged, turned and disappeared back into the ship. The door to the main station area slid open and the three of them crossed the empty bay to step through the door.

A vast hallway lay in front of them, with doors on the left and huge glass windows offering a view of space to the right. It was wide,

wider than any space station hallway should've been, and the gap between each doorway and window pane held an alcove.

"Red carpet," Hraks muttered. "Typical Archon pride."

They began to walk along the spongy surface, taking in the many exhibits that were displayed along the length of the space. Some things Theo recognised— a baseball bat, or the skeletal remains of some kind of dog— but others were a mystery.

'Enjoy the exhibits,' said the voice, 'I don't often get a chance to show off my collection. And NO TOUCHING!'

Rachel sheepishly drew her hand away from where she'd been reaching out to a bowl of wax fruit. Meanwhile, Hraks was busy scanning a vial of clear water in a glass case.

"Salt water I would guess," she announced, peering at her small screen. "And according to picture on the label: Origin: Earth... That's impossible."

"With enough time and money on your hands," Theodore mused. "There's really no such thing."

From a pedestal lit by a spotlight, a paper scroll bearing a painting of a man with a sword leered down at him. It wasn't even close to a perfect likeness of an actual human, and was surrounded by strange, intricate symbols. Theo had seen something similar in the offices of certain Corporate businessmen and had always thought it strange that they chose to decorate their private space with a language that, however beautiful, they knew nothing about. It could've said anything.

'This person has no taste in interior design', perhaps.

Theo left Hraks and Rachel behind and reached the steel door at the end of the corridor, which hissed and began to open, apparently under a great deal of duress. The room beyond was revealed as circular, with screens dotting the outside. It was sorely in need of light, with only the flickering screens and a tiny desk lamp illuminating the space. In front of the central screen was a hover-chair, with the back high enough to conceal its occupant.

"Pierre Schodin," Theodore said, by way of announcing his presence. "I'm Theodore Bolt. We were referred..."

"Did you enjoy the collection?"

Theo bristled. He wasn't often interrupted and his opinion of the stranger took a sharp dive.

"It's impressive," he replied, in a monotone.

"Good!" the man said, spinning in his chair. The reveal was less than impressive. He was a Corporate, withered and bent by age and shrouded in a long black dressing-gown that gave the illusion of him drowning in its folds. His hair was clipped short, though this

was made up for in the immense amount of the stuff that grew from his eyebrows and ears. A pair of spectacles sat on the bridge of his nose, too far down for them to be of any use, and one of the lenses was missing.

Theo watched as the old man extricated his hands from the folds of his robe and pressed the forward controls until his chair hovered to the centre of the room.

"It's my life's work," he explained, his sharp blue eyes roaming beyond to where Rachel stood fascinated by the head of a stone sculpture. "That piece you were looking at is thousands of years old. Written in the ancient script of the people from the Var system. It's one of my favourites."

Hraks appeared at Theo's right, still engrossed in her chemical analysis. Pierre seemed to regard her with some suspicion, his nose wrinkling as he looked the Nephilim woman up and down.

"We're here for information," the younger man said, attempting to steer the conversation back to business. "Another party said you might be able to help us translate some data that appears to be written in ancient Archon."

"All your scientists back on Alabaster," the old man said, chuckling. "And you cannot decipher a measly piece of text."

"If you're willing to trade..."

"You only have one thing I want."

The hover chair slid over to one side, and Pierre motioned one hand towards the main terminal.

"I want a copy," the old man said, eyes glinting. "I will complete the translation. If the data is useful, I will add it to my database. If not, you may leave."

"No deal," Rachel said, entering the room and folding her arms. "We worked hard to get that info. We're not just handing it over."

"Little girls shouldn't speak out of turn."

"Old men," she shot back, "...shouldn't make stupid assumptions about entire races."

"The Legion is a symbol of war," he hissed, the chair advancing on Rachel. "War brings only ruin."

"You don't know Max."

"I have no need to know him. Neither do I have the desire."

"Tell you what!" Rachel said, with a derisive bark of laughter, "We don't need you. You can take your dumb museum and stupid racism and shove it up your..."

"Rachel!" Theo growled and she paused. Rachel silently fumed and Pierre merely floated in place, eyeing the young Kaltoran with distaste. "Please step outside."

"What?" Rachel replied, flinging her arms wide, but Theo fixed her with his coldest gaze. She looked at the old man, exhaled in disbelief and stalked out of the room, the door sliding shut behind her. It didn't muffle the sounds of several objects being kicked, very hard, in the corridor beyond.

"She'd better not break anything," Pierre muttered. "Honestly, why you travel with any other races is..."

"Pierre Schodin," Theo interrupted, his words cutting across the other man's like a razor. "I apologise for my fellow crewmember. She was out of turn. But you..."

Theodore took a few steps closer, until he was standing over the little man in the chair.

"You have insulted two members of my crew. I am their captain and that is not something I will tolerate. As a fellow Corporate, I'd expect you to handle business proceedings better than this."

For a moment, Schodin looked like a petulant child caught in some petty misdeed. He lowered his eyes and swallowed, before nodding with a resigned air.

"Do we have a deal?" he said in a low voice. Theo turned to Hraks and nodded. She held her terminal horizontally and made a flicking motion, wirelessly transmitting the data to the room's main server. Pierre was suddenly full of life once more, scooting over to the biggest screen and bringing up the rows of incomprehensible text. A few keystrokes caused them to spread over the entire circular screen network and the old man spun around.

"Out," he barked, though his eyes shone. "Out, out of the room! This is mine to unravel."

"We'll wait outside," Theo said, "But how long do you think..."

"As fast as my eyes can read. I learned this language long ago. Now go!"

The door slid shut behind them, and Theo glimpsed Rachel sitting at the far end of the hallway, staring resolutely at the floor. She looked up and stood, but didn't approach, instead stalking to the hangar bay door and disappearing from view.

"Hraks," Theo said, "Could you..."

She raised an eyebrow.

"I mean, you can talk to her, correct?"

"About what?"

"You know," he said, feeling more uncomfortable by the second. "You... and her. You're both..."

"Both what?"

"Females," Theo said, now thoroughly uncomfortable. "You...know how to talk to each other."

"Have you considered perhaps that your lack of communication skills has nothing to do with your gender?"

"I have excellent communication skills."

"Wonderful," Hraks replied, moving to the wide window and pulling out her terminal. "Then you should have no problem talking to her yourself."

Theo looked at the Nephilim woman for a moment, and wondered if he could order her to talk to Rachel. That was the problem with never laying down the clear definition of 'captain'. Did it only apply on the ship? Was it his duty to punish insubordination? If so, he had a backlog of at least fifty daily incidents to catch up on.

It sounded exhausting.

This wouldn't be a problem, though. Theodore Bolt was an excellent communicator. He practically communicated for a living. If there was a deal to be had, no matter how unreasonable the selling party, no matter how much they attempted to get on his nerves or undermine his authority, he always emerged with the best deal.

He had quite an expansive vocabulary, too. In every way, he was perfectly equipped to walk along that corridor and talk some sense into Rachel. It was practically routine. The absolute easiest chore of the day thus far.

Theo stood rooted to the spot. With his hands inside his coat pocket, he began to tap his fingers incessantly against his thigh, something that only happened in the rare occasions when he was nervous.

"Are you going?"

Ignoring Hraks, Theo took a deep breath and began to traverse the corridor. It seemed a lot shorter on the way back and he reached the hangar door in less time than he'd been anticipating. It slid open, and he caught a glimpse of Rachel talking to Max on the landing gantry. She saw him approach and Max retreated back into the ship while she folded her arms. Theo swallowed as he understood the gesture: try it.

He opened his mouth, found that his brain hadn't yet loaded all the appropriate opening words and disguised the movement as inhaling. She glared back at him.

"He's translating," he said at last. "Not sure how long it'll take."

"Uh-huh."

"I'm sorry I kicked you out."

This forwardness surprised him. He hadn't expected to say something quite so apologetic until they'd built up a rapport. It was very un-business-like.

"You should be sorry for not defending your crew," she replied, though her arms had loosened. Theo zeroed in on the gesture and made a few calculations on his next move. She'd also changed the subject somewhat, which was an unexpected factor.

"It's true. But this is business. I can't afford to let personal feelings get in the way."

"What, you have personal feelings now?"

Theo felt an unfamiliar constricting in his throat. It took him a moment to realise that it was frustration. Rachel had made him frustrated. How odd.

"At least I don't fly off the handle at the first opportunity."

"See, that's what you don't get," Rachel shot back. She'd unfolded her arms, but now they were flung wide in a gesture of... something. Anger? Openness? Theodore had practically given up by this point. The girl was an incomprehensible ball of conflicting emotions. "Has it ever occurred to you, Captain Icicle, that some things are worth getting worked up over?"

"Not really."

"Yeah, didn't think so. See, that's why this crew is all...misfits."

"And why is that?"

In retrospect, Theo thought that maybe that would've been a good place to shut down the conversation. Instead, Rachel took a step closer, her fists curled into balls. He calculated the probability that she would punch him. It was a fairly high percentage.

"Because we're not a unit," she said. "We're not a team. And we're definitely not a dia-shinn bunch of friends."

Theo knew enough about Kaltoran society to recognise serious profanity. He would've gone on to reprimand her, perhaps to disastrous results, when Rachel turned on her heel and stalked back up the gantry.

"To you, we're just people stuck in a flying metal box," she said, over her shoulder. "Don't pretend you see us differently."

Then she was gone, and Theodore was left standing alone. He spent a moment controlling his breathing. The frustration subsided.

"Excellent reconciliation, captain."

He turned to see Hraks standing in the doorway, her expression between amusement and exasperation.

"Said the Nephilim to the Corporate," he replied.

"Perhaps. In any case, I have something to show you."

Eager to escape the cold environment of the hangar, he stepped into the corridor and Hraks raised her holographic terminal screen.

"I've been researching," she said. "Our translation matrixes might not be able to decipher the text, but I've extrapolated a few samples from the artwork in this... museum."

Theo glanced around and saw several articles still bore faded text, though the languages seemed to vary. Some were far simpler than the picturesque script surrounding the man with the sword, consisting of only a few strokes.

"It's incomplete," Hraks continued. "But by running the information we received from the temple through a few times, I've come up with something. A few words."

Theo took the terminal and studied the wall of symbols, now with a few scattered phrases translated and highlighted in red. 'Power source' was repeated many times, as was 'Mechonid' (no surprises there), 'experimental', 'Archon' and a host of other, meaningless letters.

"It's nothing we didn't expect," he said, handing it back. "Besides, Schodin is working on the translation right now. We'll have the full picture soon."

"That is what worries me," Hraks replied. "There's a phrase that repeats itself in the latter part of the text. Take a look."

She expanded the holographic screen, and Theo saw a diagram of the metal box they'd retrieved from the Mechonid. Most of the words surrounding were a mystery, but one two phrases were highlighted in red, and he couldn't help reading them several times to be clear.

'Unlimited energy'.

It was clearly referring to the box.

'Ley Line'.

As a more recent discovery, it made sense that it would be translated. Ley Lines were how ships were able to traverse great distances. Their true nature had eluded study to the point where it was believed that the humans, and maybe a few Archons, were the only ones who truly understood their function.

"It could be nothing," Theo said, slowly. Hraks raised an eyebrow.

"Captain, the box we retrieved gives off energy signals we cannot fathom. They were able to invade our ship, seemingly through

teleportation, which should not be possible."

"What are you saying?"

Hraks collapsed the screen, her expression dark.

"As a scientist..." she murmured, gazing out at the inky blackness of space. "I believe this is beyond our ability to control. Beyond the scientists of Alabaster and Eden."

Theo was saved from having to answer by the far door sliding open. Pierre's chair emerged from the gloom, moving at a dangerous pace across the spotless red carpet. As he came closer, Theodore saw an expression of urgency, even fear. He stopped the chair just short of Hraks and flung a miniature terminal into her hands.

"Your translation is done," he muttered, wide-eyed. "Now take it and leave. I want no part in this madness."

"What did you..."

"GO!"

The man was already retreating without a backwards glance, leaving Theo and Hraks to exchange disturbed glances. The far door slammed shut, and they were left in silence.

"We're going," the man said, turning on his heel and heading for the cargo bay. "We have what we needed. And that data needs organising."

"I'll get on it," Hraks replied. Without further discussion, they boarded the ship and summoned the crew to the bridge. Rachel looked ready to let loose with another barb, but faltered as she saw the look on Theo's face. She and Max took their seats without comment and the Galatea's engines roared to life.

"Find the nearest burst of Ley Energy and I don't care about taxing the engine," Theo ordered, standing at the navigation console and tracing his finger across the screen. "We're heading to Alabaster, maximum speed."

The ship lifted off and hovered for a brief moment before blasting forward. It gained speed until it escaped the derelict Archon space station, when Hraks gunned the engines and they shot into space at twice the regular speed. An eerie quiet settled over the bridge as the piloting shifted to mainly auto and Texas rose from his charging cradle to take the helm.

"Wait," Maximus growled, and they froze. "I'm getting something on the long-range scanner. Two ships."

"Travellers?" Rachel suggested, but Theo shook his head.

"Space is too big a place for coincidences," he said, narrowing his eyes. "If they're that close... it means they've come for us or Schodin."

There was a tense pause as the ships came in to identification range. The craft appeared on everyone's screens, and there was no mistaking the design.

"Mechonid," Hraks breathed. "Are they the same ones from before?"

"They're not much taken with revenge," Theo replied. "I think... we have something they want."

The ships came into viewing range: needle-shaped, polished chrome and bearing the scars of constant upgrades. Even the smaller of the two craft was twice the size of the Galatea.

"Captain..." Rachel began, her voice hoarse, "Plan?"

Theo enlarged the image, showing the ships growing ever closer, and a terse smile crept onto his face.

"Only one direction," he said, plotting the course. "Forwards."

## Chapter 5) Planet of the Nephilim

The Galatea had its tiny size working to its advantage. In terms of advantages, that was about it.

The twin Mechonid ships loomed on the horizon, needle-shaped vessels that each possessed ten times their firepower. The Galatea blasted forwards, right down the middle. There was a discharge of energy from the larger ship, and they knew the assault had begun.

A heat-seeking missile arced through empty space, seemingly a warning shot.

"Funny idea of a warning," Rachel muttered, as Max fired the laser cannons and blasted it to smithereens. No sooner had the debris cleared did the other ship join the assault, breaking away from the main ship and moving in to flank. The larger ship unleashed another barrage of missiles.

"Get between them!" Theo ordered, and Hraks gunned the engines. The tiny craft spun and pivoted like a leaf on the wind, avoiding the missile barrage long enough for Max's expert trigger finger to eliminate the threats.

Their ship's speed had obviously taken the Mechonids by surprise, as they drew level with the main ship within seconds. Hraks banked up, and the Galatea began to skim the smooth silver surface as the missiles still following crashed into turrets, cannons and anything affixed to the ship that happened to register as a target. Gradually, the attacks from the other ship stopped as they realised they'd only be destroying themselves in a heavy crossfire.

"Okay, so we're crawling along the edge of the ship like an ant," Rachel breathed, adjusting the output strength to avoid overshooting the bough. "Is this as far as the plan goes?"

"They've stopped firing!" Max called from the gun-pod. "Should we start?"

"Give them all we've got," Theo replied. Max was happy to oblige, unleashing havoc upon the defenceless Mechonid vessel with their own ship's cannons.

"That's the thing about big ships," Theo muttered to himself as his fingers moved in a blur over the navigation screen. "Giant sitting ducks if you get close."

The Galatea turned sideways to fit in between a pair of communication towers, and despite the inertial dampeners, they found themselves briefly hanging left in their seats. The ship righted itself, just in time for a hail of laser cannon fire to glance across the front screen. Rachel accessed the underside cameras and saw that Mechonids had climbed out of an outer hatch and were lined up on the ship's surface, arm cannons blazing. The Galatea banked left, away from the fire, but more of them were crawling out of the surface. Even Max's gunning prowess couldn't efficiently target such

tiny enemies, and he was reduced to strafing.

"Our cover is deteriorating, captain," Hraks reported.

"Shield nodes are depleting," Rachel added. "We're down to 75%."

"Keep going until we reach the mid-engines," Theo ordered. "Max, ready the Rail Gun."

"Same trick as last time?" Rachel asked.

"That won't work on something this size. I have something different in mind."

The Legion Rail Gun emerged from the underside of the ship as they took a sharp turn and found themselves in the shadow of the great craft. There were no Mechonids on the surface, but that would soon change.

"Approaching the mid-engines," Hraks reported. "But they have multiple secondaries. Crippling them won't be an inconvenience."

"That's not the plan," Theo murmured, his whole body tensed and focused on his screen. "Max, I'll send you target coordinates. Focus all gunfire on that specific area."

That sounded incredible inefficient to Rachel, seeing as the Rail Gun was their most powerful weapon. However, Theo was clearly up to something. He barked the order, and every joint in the ship trembled as the massively-powerful weapon let loose, pounding the Mechonid craft's midsection into scrap metal. Rachel watched as the gigantic bolts of destructive force tore through the surface with ease. Legion weapons were, frankly, pretty frightening. Unfortunately, they used a lot of power.

"Four barrages remaining," Max grunted. "Maybe enough to take this ship down..."

"We won't need to," Theo replied. "Hraks, bring her around for another run, same coordinates. Rachel, inventory. How many EMP mines do we have?"

"Uh, eighteen," she replied, bringing up the armoury screen. "But at this range we'll end up hitting ourselves."

By now, Mechonids had begun to emerge on the underside of the ship, and the Galatea had to make a sharp left turn to avoid blasting into open space that brought it straight over an attacking group. Rachel yelped as one of them fired a missile that collided with the underside camera, and the viewing screen exploded in a shower of sparks.

"Every time," she muttered, brushing broken glass off her sleeve. "This is a serious design flaw, everything exploding—"

"Report?"

"Uh..." Rachel said, "Um...underside shield nodes are at 25%. We have about forty seconds before those Mechonids on the surface start ripping into us for real."

Theo's jaw tightened as they soared towards the hole they'd made, banking left and right in an attempt at evasive manoeuvres. The damage lay before them, a crater leaking oil and engine parts.

"14%," Rachel reported. She noticed that her hands were shaking. They were probably about to die. She considered all the ways she'd thought about going out, and decided that 'blaze of glory' was probably near the top. It was definitely higher on the list than 'accidentally crushed by engine part'.

"Captain..." Hraks said, as she brought the ship out of evasive manoeuvres and en route to the crater. "We do have a plan, yes?"

"Eighteen EMP mines," Theo said, "We're dropping them all at once."

"What?" Rachel exclaimed, spinning around in her chair. "That's insane. It'll start a chain reaction, and we'll get fried as well!"

"We have ferrous shielding," Theo replied, sounding more like he was trying to convince himself. "It'll help repel the wave. If we can outrun it..."

"No, we cannot," Hraks said. "It would be like trying to outrun lightning."

"Seven seconds," Theo warned. "That's how long everyone has to come up with a better plan."

"This is suicide," Rachel hissed, but she knew it wasn't another suggestion. She had no plan, no way out.

The Galatea lowered its altitude until they were almost skimming the smooth metal surface. For a few moments, no one spoke, or even moved. Then Theo gave the order, and the entire ship shuddered as the mines were released from the cargo hold. Rachel opened the rear camera and saw the circular objects falling through space, guided by a tiny pair of thrusters. The few Mechonids who were close enough opened fire as they sank, but their shots glanced off the surfaces. They floated downwards, disappearing into the bowels of the ship.

"Now, divert everything we have to the thrusters," Theo ordered. "Power down weapons, shields and auxiliaries."

"That'll trash the engines," Rachel said, in a monotone.

"In a moment, it won't matter."

Rage flooded through her, but she diverted the power as she'd been told. The engines howled as they were pushed beyond their capacity, and they blasted off from the surface of the ship a second before the crater erupted with what looked like white lightning. It arced along the entire length of the ship, encasing the gigantic vessel in a



cocoon of electricity. Then the shockwave began as the Mechonid's main engines overloaded. Though the ship remained mostly intact, they would be crippled for a long time. The Galatea barely stayed ahead of the wave as it began to consume the other ship, which fired its own engines and was forced to flee in the other direction.

From her viewing station, Rachel gripped the console as the taxing upon the engines caused everything to shake. Even Theo held on to his console as they tried to outrun the wave, which showed no signs of slowing.

Rachel winced as the ship- her ship- groaned under the pressure. Then the first sparks began to fly from the console, and it looked to be all over. The lightning wave had caught up, and their systems began to die one by one.

The ferrous shielding meant that their internal systems were safe, but the entire exterior of their ship was being bombarded with the EMP pulse. The viewing window lit up with flashes of lightning that seemed almost sentient in their attempts to destroy the Galatea from within.

Then as soon as it had begun, the wave vanished, no longer fed by destruction. The lights in the bridge flickered out, and only then did Rachel raise her head and see that they were practically within the orbit of Eden, the Nephilim homeworld. She'd known it was nearby, but it looked as if this was Theo's destination all along.

"Captain, I'm having trouble slowing our descent," Hraks reported. "We're accelerating into the atmosphere at 7000Gs. We may have to make an emergency landing."

"You mean a crash landing," Rachel corrected. Hraks simply glanced at her without speaking.

The Galatea began to shudder as the G-forces pummelled the exterior. The viewing window showed that they were enveloped in a red-hot corona as the ship picked up speed. The ground came into view, and it grew clearer at an awfully fast pace. All they could do was brace themselves and hope that Hraks' piloting skills included landing with a crippled ship.

"If we don't make it out of this, I feel I have to tell you..." Theo said, and three sets of eyes turned to him in surprise. "...I used your advance salaries for this mission to buy those mines."

There was a pause. The surprise turned to varying expressions of indignation.

"You did what?" Rachel began, but there was no more time for words. The crew braced themselves as Hraks brought the ship up from its dive, and they were soon skimming the surface of the craggy desert wasteland. Outcroppings glanced off the shield, along with a few unfortunate members of the local wildlife who just so happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Finally, they cleared the rocks and emerged into open desert, and Hraks gingerly inched the ship towards the ground while slamming on what little remained of the rear thrusters. Rachel's last memory was of the impact of her beloved ship slamming into the ground, before her head smacked into the back of her seat and everything went black.

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Max grunted, finding himself upside down in the gun pod. He'd landed on his head, and felt what was probably a nasty gash through his shoulder. Otherwise, everything seemed to still be attached. He looked up to see that the cockpit was still in-tact, despite cracks running through the viewing window. Hraks was picking herself up from the console with a series of grunts. The density shields had spread a sheen around the interior of the vessel, cushioning their impact. Their captain was unbuckling himself from the wall harness, looking ruffled but unharmed. Max climbed out of the gunning pod- a short journey that wasn't usually vertical- and saw that Rachel hung in her seat harness, a blunt wound leaking blood from the back of her head. Texas was cutting her loose with his buzz-saw, but Max had never trusted the finesse of that drone. He strode over, shoved Texas out of the way and yanked the harness out of its socket, catching Rachel as she fell to one side. The wound looked serious, but it was impossible to tell in the darkened bridge. It was then that he noticed that her leg was twisted at an odd angle. Max gently hoisted the Kaltoran over his shoulder and heard her shallow breathing.

The next goal was to leave the ship. Hraks had by now extricated herself from her own seat, and the four of them made their way through tangles of wires to the cargo bay. While Hraks attempted to force the exit ramp to lower, Max scrounged through the supplies for a medkit. He extricated one from the wreckage just as the ramp lowered- or rather, it simply fell off its hinges with a whump that was softened by the sand- and they were met with a burst of humid air.

They congregated just outside the ship, stopping to catch their breath after the climb.

"I'm not sure I want to look," Theo said, standing with his back to the ship. "In fact, I'm definitely enjoying these sand dunes a lot more than whatever's behind me."

"It's not actually too bad," Hraks said. Theo turned and Max saw his face fall as he took in the sight of the ship.

The Galatea lay on its side, its bright red exterior smudged with sand and grime. One of the rear engines was hanging loose, the side thrusters were a twisted mess and important pieces of machinery lay scattered all around from where they'd broken off. What's more, every one of their inertial dampener nodes had exploded, leaving deep scarring down the sides.

"You call that not bad?" Theo exclaimed, rounding on Hraks.

"Just felt I had to tell you."

Max appraised the damage for himself. The Galatea had seen better days, but the bulk remained intact. Besides, it was a hunk of junk to begin with. Now it was more of a hunk of junk in several pieces.

"Alright..." Theo breathed, running a hand through his hair. "Alright. We need a plan. Hraks, do you know where we are?"

"The wastes," she replied, with a shrug. "Nephilim have only a single settlement: Necronus. The rest is hostile."

"But I did set the coordinates for the city. Crash landing aside, we should be close."

Hraks pulled out her terminal and sprinted to the top of the nearest dune, holding the device in the air.

"This is true," she called. "The city lies to the south. Perhaps a day's walk."

"So we head there," Theo concluded as she re-joined the group. "Find a shipwright, one good enough to get us to Alabaster. The Galatea just needs a few patch-ups, enough to—"

At the mention of the ship's name, Rachel began to stir in Max's arms.

"The ship..." she murmured, her eyes slowly opening. "Is it..."

"We're walking," Theo declared, setting off into the dunes. Max shifted Rachel into a more comfortable position, so that she was limply holding on around his neck, and followed their captain. His reasoning was sound. Rachel definitely didn't need to see the Galatea the way it was now.

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Rachel and Theo were angry at each other, for some reason.

Max preferred the company of high-powered rifles to actual people, but even he could tell that much. Burdened by what supplies they'd managed to salvage from the wreckage, they trudged through the monotonous landscape, flinching every time there was a sign of life. These mostly turned out to be desert rodents, but Max wasn't about to drop his guard. He supported Rachel's light frame with one hand, and kept the other on his pistol.

"We don't venture much outside the city," Hraks had said, as they started walking. "Outside are scavengers. Feral Nephilim. Not to mention the genetic rejects that we failed to exterminate."

She said this like she was a nonchalant tour guide. Max would never understand her kind.

Now they were reduced to a slog across enemy territory, the sun beating down with the weight of a glacier. The ironic analogy made Max smile, for a moment. Then he was forced to wipe the sweat from

his eyes, and all good feelings vanished.

"ETA?" Theo asked, clipping each letter short as if he was trying to reel them back in.

"Still a while to go, captain," Hraks replied. "In fact, take the figure I gave you half an hour ago and subtract about...half an hour."

He grunted and kept walking, keeping to the far left while Max walked on the right. The Legion watched with curiosity as Rachel and Theo's eyes would occasionally wander so that they made eye contact. They'd then glance off with such speed that it reminded him of the knife fights they'd used to entertain themselves back on Lilith, back in the first year of their cadet training.

Those quick, glancing blows that were swift, yet powerful enough to sever an artery. That had been before Commander Juno had walked in on them one night in the deserted mess hall, and the cheers of the circle had gone dead. Nobody talked about what happened afterwards, but Max remembered that it was the night he learned true discipline.

"Tell me honestly," Rachel murmured, resting her head on his shoulder. "Was the Galatea that bad?"

"I thought she could be fixed," Max replied. "You should be conserving your strength."

She was silent for a moment.

"How do you see her?"

"Hmm?"

"The ship," Rachel explained. "Galatea. Is she just transport to you?"

Max took his time in responding. This was partly due to listening out for any vicious wildlife.

"It's a home," he said, finally. "We were taught not to form attachments, but sometimes that's impossible."

Rachel sighed.

"Theo doesn't see it like that," she muttered, so that only the two of them could hear. "It's just a flying box to him. Sometimes I can see it that way too, and I hate it."

"Hmm."

"I can remember a lot, y'know," she continued. "My ancestors dealt with the Corporation. It sounds pretty harsh to say they're all the same, but...well, our business deals always ended the same way: badly."

"And yet you travel with one as your captain?" Max asked.

"It's a living. I don't have to like his way of doing things."

"Captain feels more than he lets on."

"I'm sure he's devastated from all the profits we'll be losing from this mission, yeah."

Max had been in the middle of appraising his surroundings, and only registered what she'd said after thinking for a moment.

"I'm a soldier," he grunted. "I'm won't argue. But..."

"Ooh, go on," Rachel whispered, right into his ear. "You were about to say something touchy-feely. My training is paying off."

"Your...training?"

"Of course," she replied. "Remember, I'm trying to turn you into me, basically."

Max had no reply to that, so he chose to ignore it.

"I'm saying that...people are more than they appear. And far more than the façade they cast around themselves."

"Nice!" Rachel exclaimed, giving him a friendly nudge. "I'm not saying I believe you, but that's actually pretty sage."

"The Legion aren't as war-minded as you think," he replied, with a terse smile. "We have our share of sages."

"And you're well on your way, mister."

They trudged through the featureless desert in a line, Hraks standing between them and walking slightly ahead. She made a sudden stop, holding her terminal aloft. The group stopped alongside her, and an expression of vague hope was passed around.

"We're in range," she said. "I can signal a security team."

"So do it," Theo confirmed, but the Nephilim shook her head.

"There's no guarantee that they'll actually help us."

"So ask nicely."

Max noticed a grating edge to Theo's voice. He was not a man who coped well without his creature comforts. A trek through the desert was obviously crossing some proverbial line. Hraks hesitated, then sent out an SOS signal.

The four of them waited for a minute that seemed to stretch into an hour. Max was on the verge of suggesting that they keep moving when they heard a spluttering motor echo throughout the dunes. He moved to the highest vantage point available and saw a rickety hovercraft approaching, piloted by a pair of fuzzy grey shapes. It

sped closer, and Max saw that they were Nephilim alphas, with broad torsos and long, eel-like necks with prominent under bites.

Hraks reached the top of the hill, saw who was piloting and let out an audible groan.

"Friends of yours?" Max asked, fingering his pistol.

"Far from it," she replied, in a monotone. By the time Theo had wearily dragged himself up to the top of the dune, the craft was already ascending. It skidded to a halt in front of their party, showering them all with a torrent of loose sand and rocks. The pilot stood up, his long neck stretching over the tiny windscreen revealing a sharp-fanged grin that was directed straight at Hraks.

"The prodigal returns," he hissed, while his brother snickered. "And she brought friends over for dinner."

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Max spent the short trip imagining himself grabbing the Cobra Brothers by their skinny necks and tying them into a knot. It might even stem the tide of inane chatter. Then again, maybe not.

"Our finest Emmisary!" the older brother called over his shoulder, jerking the wheel to avoid slamming into a very large rock that should've been noticed a lot sooner. "That's what they called her!"

"Broke our hearts when she went off to see the universe!" the other one agreed, and they both lapsed into hearty, bellowing laughs that sounded like grating metal. With the amount of sand being strewn about, they must've swallowed half the desert by now. They didn't seem to mind.

"But of course, it'd do us good to know you've been taking care of her," said the second brother, his face inches away from Theo's. The Corporate shot him a look of pure poison.

"Anyway, you'll be happy to know our latest Emissaries are a bit more compliant," said the first.

"Downright meek, I'd say," chimed in the second.

"Probably better looking, too."

"Not that we'd know."

"I mean, you can't really improve on perfection."

"So true."

They flashed their passengers what were meant to be brilliant smiles, then collapsed back into laughter. The hovercraft hit a bump and went sailing into the air for a few sickening moments before slamming back into the desert floor. Max glanced behind, to where Rachel lay on the back seat. She was looking extremely pale, more

so than she had been after her head wound.

"Bro, feral at nine!" yelled the one driving, and his partner drew a wicked silver sniper rifle from underneath the seat. The passengers looked out to see a feral Nephilim Alpha, a gigantic beast with muscular limbs and a squat, flat head. It lay a fair distance away across the dunes, mottled black against the pale sand, and was digging with a fury. It hadn't noticed the craft.

Even with the jostling and high-speed of the craft, the brother's shot was perfect. The creature's head collapsed in on itself as it was struck, and the driver whooped and hollered as they celebrated this small victory.

"The Cobra brothers are genetic failures," Hraks explained, not bothering to lower her voice. "But their minds are mostly intact. Security was the only job they were good for."

Max didn't care who they were, where they came from or what they were good at. The craft sailed over another bump, and he placed a hand on the front seat for balance.

A few more minutes of this and even he was going to start feeling ill.

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High above the world in the unending silence of space, a silver orb hovered over the bustling world of Alabaster. It extended a tiny camera that looked down from its lofty vantage point, scanning, probing, searching for that which had been stolen.

Its gaze came to rest on one of the many skyscrapers. It paid little attention to the living, sorting through the sheer mass of electronic signals that saturated the air until it found what it was looking for. There was one signature that was dimensions apart from the rest. The satellite signalled its brethren, a call that echoed through the stars like a call to war.

The technology belonged to the Mechonids. They would have it back.

## Chapter 6) The Necronus Sunset

Grayson Lampwick was filing paperwork when the sky split open.

It was an archaic term, seeing as actual paper was practically unheard of except for business cards, but the phrase remained in use. The 'work' part was certainly still relevant. His eyes scrolled past accounts, blueprints and annual reports, sifting them into folders with a series of blinks and gestures. His terminal lay open in front of him on the desk, casting a hologram of his folders.

Grayson had eventually caved in to the trend of using eye movements, admitting that the technology had come a long way in a short time. Still, he disliked being entirely immobile. Something about physically picking up the files (though 'physically' was simply another buzzword in this instance) and placing them in the correct place felt right, even though 'physically' was just another buzzword nowadays.

He was so taken with his work that it took him a moment to notice that the cityscape outside had turned purple. Grayson looked up and saw that the sky above the station was flooded with unnatural light and quivered as if in a heat haze. He paused the music that had been accompanying his work and crossed to the window, where the source of the commotion became clear.

"Impossible," he murmured, looking straight up at a ley-line that had torn a hole in the Alabaster sky. It was very much possible, however, if Theodore's report was to be believed. In that case, a localised ley-line had been created within the bridge of the Galatea itself.

"Mr Grayson!" Miriam called, bursting into the office without knocking, "Have you seen—"

"The sky?" he replied. "Yes, I rather have."

He turned away from her and saw the tip of a silver ship emerging from the purple crack. It was sleek, needle-shaped and equipped with enough firepower to level the city. They watched as it exited the tear, and it hovered over the docks for a few moments before the forward cannons began to charge.

"Oh," Grayson said, as another vessel began to exit the ley-line. "That's probably not good."

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The Nephilim city wasn't quite as Max had imagined. The way the officers had talked, the image had been of a haphazard collection of downed ships with no real structure, or even functioning power. Evidently some changes had been made, as the jet-black central tower now stretched into the sky, fully-operational and glowing green in the dusky light like a beacon.

It was surrounded on all sides by smaller towers, connected by walkways. They had a jagged appearance; the whole thing looked

like a massive, hollow tree with outcropping branches: it even tapered down into slanted roots planted in a murky swamp.

Had it been any other race, Max might have been impressed. The hovercraft had stopped at a waystation, and now only a winding walkway stood between them and the city proper, a cluster of lights nestled in the heart of the roots. The path was lined with bulbous lights mounted on jagged curves that sprouted up from the ground. They made him think of black, steely talons that could snap shut at any moment. The flesh hanging off them didn't help the image.

The walkway was narrow. They were losing light, swamp lay all around and directly in front lay uncertain territory. He lifted Rachel onto his shoulders, which left him with only one hand free. As a soldier, Maximus hated the entire scenario.

Though not quite so much as the scenario hated him.

Hraks strode at the head of the bunch, straight and confident. The trek through the desert didn't seem to have fazed her in the slightest, and even her black leather coat was free from grime. She caught a few passing glances, but these invariably shifted to her comrades. Theo was mostly passed over, and Rachel, with her nervously twitching ears, was given slightly more interest. Then the gazes passed to Max, and the looks began.

They passed a group of thick-jawed Nephilim drinking by the side of the pathway. Knives hung from their belts, and every single one of them stared when Max walked by. He turned to meet their gazes, but was forced to turn as they kept walking.

Enemies now lay to the rear. It was a poor tactical position. Stopping dead upon seeing a Legion in their city appeared to be mandatory. It wasn't a look of hatred or mistrust; that at least he could've returned in kind. The expression on the face of every Nephilim was one of curiosity, or perhaps some deeper level of scrutiny. Max felt like a museum piece, the way they couldn't take their eyes off him.

He returned the gaze of a nearby security guard with a glare of his own. The guard seemed almost amused. They were a bizarre race.

"Is this safe?" Theo muttered to Hraks. He walked with his hands in his pockets, though his gun was close at hand. "I'm guessing you don't get many visitors arriving on foot."

"Arrive on foot, arrive by air," she replied. "It matters not. We're not a race of savages, captain."

They reached the end of the bridge and he saw that the muddy shoreline gave way to a metal floor as they entered the city proper. They stepped through the archway and suddenly they were in a different world, one of sprawling columns, cool artificial lighting, homes made of living carapaces and a haphazard mix of stalls loaded with produce that somehow smelt worse than it looked. Max had heard about how the Nephilim people didn't eat naturally, making him wonder what all this was for.

His thoughts were interrupted by a roar from above, and they looked up to see a contingent of security guards descending from the upper walkways. Compared to the scant technology on the ground, their personal hovercrafts were advanced enough to be on par with those found in Alabaster, albeit comprised of bio-organic components. The noise they made was more of a churning, like the constant sloshing of liquid, and Max didn't like it one bit.

"So much for subtlety," Hraks said in a low voice. "They've increased security since I was here last."

The head guard, a vaguely human-looking Nephilim with bulky limbs and clipped tentacle hair, stepped off his craft and strode towards them. He wore close-fitting combat fatigues, black against his pale green skin, and wore a rifle slung across his back. His gaze lingered on Max for a moment before it shifted to Hraks.

"Emissary," he growled, "Why do we find you sneaking in the back entrance?"

Hraks' self-confidence vanished in an instant. She stood to attention, her head bowed.

"No offense was meant to the leader," she said. "I simply wished to avoid hassle."

The guard stepped in closer, to what Max would've called neck-snapping distance. He stood a head taller and his expression was dispassionate. The Legionnaire wondered what he'd do if there was some kind of physical confrontation.

Who would he fight for? His captain and Rachel, definitely. As for Hraks...perhaps he would see how he felt in the moment.

However, the guard's expression softened.

"The client simply wishes to know that you are safe," the guard continued, actually laying a hand on her shoulder. "He will wish to meet with you."

"I-I will schedule a meeting as soon as possible. In the meantime, I can vouch for my comrades. Our ship crash-landed to the south--"

"We detected as much. Is it repairable?"

"We believe so."

"Then we will send a team of mechanics. In the mean-time, my men will escort you to your quarters."

"No!" Hraks blurted out, before lowering her head once more. "I mean...I can make my own way. But I thank you."

"There is no need for such words," the guard finished. "Of course, your comrades are welcome as well."

His eyes swept the group, this time missing Max entirely. Not that he was lacking in attention. The entire marketplace, along with the other guards, were all focused on him. The head guard returned to his craft, and the contingent took to the skies and disappeared in amongst the walkways. For a moment, there was silence. Then the hustle and bustle of the marketplace crept back in.

"Um..." Rachel began, "What just happened? I thought we were going to be chucked in jail."

"Didn't know you were such a celebrity," Theo added, lighting a cigarette for the first time since the crash. Hraks stood motionless for a few seconds before turning the face them.

"Know that it's all false," she hissed. "I will be closely watched for the entire time I am here. You will be subject to even more intense scrutiny."

"So what was with all the, uh..." Rachel began, gesturing in front of her, "Shoulder touching and...thanking?"

"I have a sponsor. Someone in the high society with whom I have... found favour."

She turned to Max. "Just the fact that I brought a you all into the city, and tried to hide the fact...it may cause trouble."

"I don't care for your people's approval," Max growled, and she shook her head.

"I know someone we can trust for medical attention," she said, turning and striding deeper into the marketplace. "Afterwards, I suggest laying low in my quarters until we're ready to leave."

"So we'll be cramped in your room for as long as it takes them to fix the ship?" Theo said. "I think I'd rather take my chances on the streets."

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The three of them stood in the doorway to Hrak's personal apartment, speechless.

It was luxury. Nephilim luxury, but there was no other word for it. The space was sprawling, big enough to comfortably drive a hovercraft around in circles. There was a lowered section near the window ringed with couches made of a shiny purple material, arranged around a circular table equipped with projectors: Max had seen them in executive offices on Alabaster. They could project almost any image onto the surface, but the electric district versions could also come equipped with games. A fully-stocked bar lined the far wall, next to a huge holo-screen. A partitioned section in the right corner presumably lead to a bedroom, and the middle space was devoted to a black fountain in the shape of a withered tree. Dark yellow liquid bubbled from the centre, dripping over the branches like sap. The surrounding walls were lined with scientific equipment, the

purposes of which Max couldn't even fathom.

"Okay," Rachel began, stepping onto the spongy green carpet. "First off, Nephilim interior design is weird. In other news...wow."

She bore a metal splint on her broken leg that gave constant, painful injections. Every few minutes, Rachel would wince and stumble, although it allowed her to walk unaided. The Nephilim clinic had been surprisingly advanced, and they'd handed over the medical supplies to Hraks without a word.

Rachel slid her one bare foot through the spongy carpet, seeming to savour the sensation.

"This is bigger than my apartment," Theo muttered. "A lot bigger."

Hraks watched as he examined the curtains, expressionless.

"Make yourselves comfortable," she announced. The statement was somewhat unnecessary, as Rachel had just flung herself onto the ring of sofas and was giggling while rolling in the cushions. "While I'm out, I'll inquire as to having some food sent up."

Swallowing, Max finally stepped from the corridor into the room. They'd ridden an elevator all the way to the top of the city, after which it had slid sideways and dropped them right at the door. The level of technology here wasn't what he'd been expecting.

Hraks checked her appearance in a mirror on the wall and stepped past him, standing in the doorway.

"I must meet with my sponsor," she said. "I wouldn't recommend leaving. You may be watched by security, but if you get into a fight... they will not intervene."

"You're not gonna enjoy being home for a bit?" Rachel asked, but the Nephilim was already gone. They heard the whirr of the elevator as it whisked Hraks off to parts unknown.

Theo exhaled, tossed his coat onto the nearest piece of furniture and took over the mirror. The temperature was regulated, a relief from the humid city streets. Max laid his bag down next to the door-still keeping his rifle close- and joined Rachel on the ring of sofas. For a few moments they simply sat in silence, exhausted after the long walk. And the crash. And the dramatic space battle.

It had been a very long day.

Max found himself staring out of the window, which offered an unimpeded view of the Necronus skyline. It wasn't a pretty sight, but it was still impressive, from an architectural standpoint. He heard a clink, and turned to see Theo- hair fixed and sleeves straightened- holding out a drink in a purple glass. The Corporate held one himself, and Max took it only to see that the ice cubes were blue.

"Everything here is...coloured," he commented, as Theo sat next to

Rachel. The Kaltoran girl's enthusiasm had been conquered by the comfort of the sofa, and she'd already succumbed to sleep on a pile of cushions.

"Different to Lilith, I suppose," Theo replied, with a smirk. "You'd eventually get tired of metallic grey and snow white."

"True," the Legionnaire admitted. "I didn't know you'd been there."

"I went there on a business trip when I was still an apprentice. Hardly left the ship, to be honest."

"The cold will do that. By the way, what is this?"

"No idea," Theo replied, holding up his drink. "Smells a bit like Kirren. But it's cold."

"I'll drink to that," Max grunted, and he downed the liquid. There was a kick, but it was only mild. Silence fell once more, born of weariness. Theo finished his glass and proceeded to stare down at the 'ice' cubes.

"So, we fix the Galatea..." the captain said, speaking as if to himself, "Or at least get it to fly as far as Alabaster. We drop off the information to Lampwick."

This was all very obvious. Max narrowed his eyes.

"That is...our job, yes."

Theo stood, visibly agitated, and lit another cigarette. He walked over to the window, hands in his pockets, staring downwards. The exhaustion had caused his usually-flawless skin to turn pale. His grey eyes were clouded with indecision.

"It's unprofessional to delve into the information we retrieved," he said, after a few moments. "But...in this case..."

Despite his casual attitude towards the law on occasion, Max knew that Theo took his duties as a businessman seriously. This potential breach in etiquette was a clear indicator of a dire situation.

"What did we find?" Max asked, leaning forward. "Something we shouldn't have?"

Theo held up his terminal. "Everything is on here. There was no time to read the translation. But it's nothing good."

Max wasn't bothered by information. However, the person who gave him orders was, and that was enough. There was also the small fact that whatever they were carrying had led to two separate Mechonid attacks. The two of them found their gaze drifting towards the terminal slot on the interactive table. After a moment, Theo let out a long sigh through his teeth, moved to sit down and slid the terminal into the reader.

A 3-D menu screen blazed to life, written at first in the Nephilim tongue. It shifted as it recognised the language, and the ancient translation- the information that had brought a fleet of Mechonids down on their heads- was displayed in the air.

Feeling out of his depth, Maximus rose from the couch and went to stand by the window, trying and failing to focus on the view as Theo began to read.

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On most of Hraks' visits to Necronus since she'd left, she'd returned to the lab. This was mostly for academic purposes: weekly tests and indoctrination into the Nephilim way of life. This time, however, she had no intention to return. The lift swept straight past the scientific division exit and all the way to the outer rim.

The doors parted, and she stepped onto a wide walkway that ringed the entire city. Her race walked back and forth, all of them Purebloods and Hybrids: Emissaries were granted residences closer to the heart, and didn't often venture far. The walkway had no rails and looked over the wastelands to the east, where the final dregs of sunlight could still be glimpsed as they died upon the horizon.

Hraks found herself on the edge, and for a while she simply stood, watching as the sky turned from red to black and the desert was lost from view. The team of mechanics would likely work through the night, meaning that the Galatea was out there being fixed at that very moment. The thought should've taken the edge off her unease, but the events of the last few days had left Hraks in a tense state of mind. There certainly wasn't respite to be found here. Not even in her own city.

Somehow, it had always felt like Eden belonged to the Purebloods, the true Nephilim. Emissaries were destined for travel, a life of trying desperately to belong in the outside world. Hraks harboured no delusions that the crew were her family. They were fascinating, reliable and sometimes even amusing. Never family.

Hraks forced her eyes from the dying light and chided herself for staying too long. She was being watched, after all.

She wound her way along the sloping walkway, averting her eyes from the diverse, eerily lit faces of her fellow Nephilim. If this were Alabaster, the space would be alive with chatter, music, even a few street performers. The races would pass each other without a second thought, their thoughts on frivolity or perhaps work the next day.

Here in Necronus, most walked with their heads held high, barely glancing at their neighbours. Talk was reduced to a low chatter, reserved for functional matters and little else. The thought of other races walking the streets was laughable.

There was leisure to be found in Eden- Hraks knew of several bars, shooting ranges and even a cinema, of sorts- however, no outsiders were privy to their locations. Most visitors were Corporate

businessmen who remained confined to their quarters near the landing bays for the whole time they were on-world. They would fly away once their business was completed. The Eden tourism industry wasn't exactly booming.

After a short walk, Hraks entered a marketplace set up on the walkway itself. The area was covered by a grey canopy, and the artificial glow of the floor lights cast shadows across the myriad of tables and tents. She averted her eyes from the machine parts, faux Corporate clothing, cages of unknown desert breeds being sold as pets, shoddily-made weaponry, well-made (and probably stolen) weaponry, jewellery and carnivorous plant-life, finally arriving at a cloth entrance that also served as an entrance into the massive tower, the city's central residence. Most of the traders lived on the lower levels, just above the slums, but emerged to give their wares greater visibility.

Despite his immense wealth, this one did not, and Hraks knew why. Some things were considered contraband even in the city of the Nephilim. She grasped the hem of the cloth opening, inhaled to stock up on clean air, and lifted it open.

Immediately she was hit with the sudden drop in temperature. The air was tightly controlled, if tinged with a stale taste. She stood at the end of a short corridor with pure black walls and pulsing green lights. It was meant to be intimidating, but the effect had worn off on her long ago. Hraks traversed the corridor in a few steps and found herself standing before an organic carapace door. A slender Hybrid with a triangular head and massive claws stood guard outside. She leered as Hraks drew close, lowering her head and fixing the newcomer with her beady black eyes.

"I have come to report," Hraks announced. "Tell Saghyu that Hraks is here."

The guard still leered.

"I am sponsored," Hraks continued, adding a bite to her tone. "You will let me pass."

The guard's eyes briefly flicked downwards, which Hraks took as a request for some form of identification. That was impossible, and they both knew it.

She was considering the simply walking away when the carapace door rumbled and slid open from both sides with a sickening squelch. The security guard narrowed her eyes, but stepped aside, allowing Hraks to enter the inner chamber. The temperature plummeted even further as she entered the long room, which was circular with walls made of even more dried-out skin shell. To any non-Nephilim, the odour of rotting would've been too much to bear.

The floor on either side was covered in cushions, leaving a thin walkway in between the bodies strewn over them. Nephilim of all shapes and sizes lay about, either staring at nothing or injecting themselves with substances that would allow them to stare at

nothing. The air was thick with a sickly-sweet smoke which was being pumped into the room by floor vents. Hraks steeled herself and strode into the gloom, all the way to the far end, where a burly Hybrid reclined on a huge pile of cushions. Unlike the glazed looks all around the room, his eyes were sharp; all thirteen of them. They dotted his oval-shaped head, leaving room only for a tiny slash of a mouth. His bulky body was shrouded in elaborate robes of silver and gold, decorated with ancient symbols, and only two of his six arms protruded, resting behind his head.

He saw Hraks approach and grinned, his forked tongue slipping in and out of his mouth.

"You have returned," Saghyu hissed, leaning forward and rubbing his hands together. "How iss my pet Emissssary?"

"I'm here to report in," she replied, standing up straight. "That's all."

He nodded, and the tongue flicked in and out a few more times.

"Drug business is going well, then?" Hraks asked. He ignored the sarcasm.

"If you lived here, in thiss dark city...you may come to my den to forget."

"Undoubtedly. My thanks for your assistance."

"Of coursse," Saghyu replied, with mock humility. "Your ship iss being fixxed. Can't have my Emisssary travelling the sssystem without a ship."

The atmosphere was making Hraks dizzy. Having completed her formalities, she turned to go, and felt one of Saghyu's powerful hands on her shoulder.

"Asss per usual..." he crooned, "...I wish to remind you of our arrangement."

Hraks shook off the hand, and he sank back onto the cushions with an amused expression.

"I need no reminder," she replied. "I know my task."

"Marvelloussss," Saghyu hissed, spreading his hands behind his head once again. "And our partnership...continuesss..."

Hraks stopped halfway to the door, turning her head with a wry smile.

"Give me what I need..." she said, to the smoky shape that was Saghyu, "...and I'll bring you as many heads as you want."

Then she strode out of the forsaken, smoke-filled den, breezed past the guard and didn't look back, only breathing once the doors had snapped shut behind her.



## Chapter 7) The Invasion of Alabaster

Grayson pulled himself from the window, where the Mechonid ships were preparing to fire upon the city. He was no fool. Their company – their department – was likely the only one dealing with Mechonid tech in the system. Even their acquisition of the box had been a freak incident. Now the machines probably wanted it back.

Grayson cursed and crouched behind his desk, rummaging through the lowest drawer. Amidst the trinkets and long-forgotten gadgets, he retrieved his pistol. Not that he was in any way a competent marksman, and he wasn't even sure that it would make a scratch on a Mechonid if they came face-to-face. Still, it was comfort.

A flash illuminated the office, and the man gripped the side of the desk as the building tremored. The Mechonids had begun firing. The lights in the office cut out and were replaced by yellow emergency lighting. The man stood straight as a team of security personnel burst into the room. All were Legion, save for one Kaltoran girl, Jaina, who Grayson had hired purely because she looked tougher than most males and had the muscle to back it up. It was Jaina who strode forward, and her size compare to her Legion comrades would've looked ridiculous if Grayson hadn't personally seen her challenging them to arm wrestling competitions.

"We're moving!" she barked, grabbing Miriam, who still stood rooted to the floor next to the window. "Mr Lampwick, all civilians are being moved to shelters!"

There was another flash, and they all looked to see the Mechonid ships demolishing a perfectly good row of warehouses. Already the security craft were converging on the ships, but the invading craft were far in advance and heavily shielded. Rallying ships to combat them would take time.

Grayson allowed himself to be surrounded by the Legion guards, and Jaina led the way down the stairs. Apparently, they had stairs, hidden as they were behind emergency exit doors. Grayson made a note to use them more often; he wasn't getting any younger, and he didn't exercise nearly as much as he should. The building shook once more, and he would've tumbled headfirst down the stairwell if one of his guards (Oricus? It was something like that) hadn't grabbed his shoulder and held him steady.

"Please hold onto the handrail, Mr Lampwick," the guard said, without emotion. Grayson nodded, breathless, and they continued downwards. The sounds of laser cannon fire were muffled through the walls, but still all too audible. The Corporate glanced over at Miriam, gripping the handrail on the opposite side of the stairs, and saw that her face was still trapped in that same expression of shock. Either she was mortified at the thought of an entire day of scheduling ruined, or she was having problems coming to grips with the situation.

Grayson had been off-world. He'd seen every planet in the system, even had a few close calls with Mechonid ships during his voyages.

For someone who'd never left Alabaster, this would be difficult to process.

"Miriam," he began, and she slowly turned her head. That was when the wall right behind her exploded inwards.

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Grayson was alive. His left arm lay under a chunk of the wall, and it was extremely painful, but he never really used that arm for much. He wondered if it was appropriate to simply lie there until the whole thing blew over. Then Jaina picked herself up, and Grayson knew she probably wouldn't let him.

She stood framed in the new hole in the building. Beyond lay a surprisingly panoramic view of the security craft engaging the Mechonid ships. It didn't look like it was going well. The smaller craft were certainly more nimble, but any shot that missed them almost certainly struck another part of the city.

"Sir," Jaina said, coughing as she stumbled over to Grayson. "Are you hurt?"

It was then that he became aware of the intense ringing in his ears. Jaina's voice came as a muffle, but he could lip-read well enough.

"My arm..." Grayson said, demonstrating how stuck it was with a quick tug. The pain was excruciating, and he resolved to shelve all further demonstrations. With a strength that seemed at odds with her petite size, Jaina crouched down, hooked both of her hands under the rubble and lifted. With some effort, the piece of masonry was placed to one side, and Grayson was steadily helped to his feet as two more Legion guards stirred.

"Shake it off," Jaina growled, walking over to them and giving them a few light kicks to the ribs. They staggered to standing positions, and Grayson saw that one of them was...Oculus? Oricanus? It definitely had 'us' at the end. Then again, it seemed like most of their kind's names ended in such a way.

He scanned the stairwell, the entirety of which was coated in dust and rubble. The two Legion guards lifted a huge chunk of wall off one of their comrades, and the Corporate realised that the fallen guard was lying on top of Miriam: a final effort to save her. He was rolled off, and Grayson felt a shudder run through him.

There was no need to check for life signs. Miriam was dead. Grayson took a deep breath, wrestling with that strangest of feelings, when you are made aware that person you thoroughly disliked has died. She was a bitter woman who spent most of her time gunning for his job, and yet...there had to be more. Grayson never knew where she went home each night. He knew nothing of her family.

"Time to mourn later," Jaina interrupted, taking the man by his good arm and herding him down the steps. The fourth and final guard must've been dead, as only there were only two following along

behind. They clambered over the chunks of fallen metal and stone, eventually landing on the dust-strewn floor of the lower level. The ringing began to fade, and Grayson could hear his head of security giving orders.

"Atilius," Jaina barked (Atilius...that was it), "Check in with the teams on the lower floors. Tell them to prep for medical evacuation. Ovidius..."

Grayson frowned. Was it Ovidius? The two guards looked so similar, it was nearly impossible to tell them apart. He heard one of them speaking on the radio, relaying Jaina's instructions. For perhaps ten seconds, the man allowed himself to think that it was over. All that lay ahead was an arduous descent to the lower levels, after which he could lie in a hospital bed while the Mechonids finished their business and were likely driven off the station.

Of course, he should've known better than to form any kind of schedule and expect it would be followed.

"Four incoming," said probably-Ovidius. "One injured, the rest..."

He trailed off, and Jaina turned to see why. She stopped dead, which of course meant that Grayson stopped as well. Probably-Ovidius had two fingers pressed to his earpiece, his eyes wide in intense concentration.

"Speaker," Jaina ordered, and a quick tap caused the broadcast to echo throughout the stairwell.

"-not descend to the lower levels, I repeat, do NOT descend!"

A sound could be heard in the background that was unmistakably laser cannon fire. It was accompanied by plenty of screaming.

"I repeat," said the voice once more, "All security teams making their way to the lower levels, halt your descent. Mechonids have swarmed the lobby area, and we are taking heavy fire!"

"That's not possible," probably-Atilius growled. "We saw the ships, they're miles away. No ground force could have reached this building in that time. And for what?"

Grayson gripped the handrail, taking a deep breath as his suspicions were confirmed. It was just as Theodore's report had indicated: Mechonids instantly transporting themselves over distances that should've been impossible.

"We have to get to the technology lab," the Corporate said, quietly but with conviction.

"That's down six floors," Jaina said, but he shook his head.

"This is important. It's what they want."

Ignoring the looks he was receiving from his security team, Grayson

walked past them and began the dangerous descent to the lab.

"And for heaven's sake..." he said, turning back to the Legion twins with an exasperated look, "Could somebody please tell me which of you is which?"

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Flanked by his disgruntled security team, Grayson made his way through the empty corridors of the technology division. All the staff had been evacuated, and were likely pinned down by the Mechonids on the lower floors. At least, Grayson hoped they were pinned down, and not worse.

He knew exactly where the cube was being held. The metal doors slid open to reveal an immaculate white lab, the light provided by strips of luminescent white that ran through the floors and ceiling. This was usually the lab they showed important visitors, so cleanliness standards were high. Even in the crisis, the workers had taken the time to clear away their projects and neatly arrange their coats and gloves on the shelves. Grayson allowed himself a moment of satisfaction at the quality of his staff before crossing to the far wall, which was as stark white and uninteresting as the rest of the room.

A single strip of light ran straight down to the floor, and the Corporate placed a hand on the glowing line, a few inches below the level of his eyes. That section flashed red, and two sections of the wall hissed as they slid open to reveal the box. It floated in a miniature gravity beam, constructed within the wall to keep the most valuable secrets hidden from the competition.

"Is it really a good idea?" Jaina asked, loitering behind. "Taking that thing with us?"

"They'll tear this place apart trying to find it," Grayson replied. "If we can get to the roof..."

He didn't bother finishing, instead hitting a button that caused the box to slide out of its crevice.

"Now, we'll need something to carry it," he continued, glancing around. "It's heavy so we'll..."

While he was speaking, one of the Legion guards strode forward, grasped the box in one of his hands and swung it under his arm. If there was effort involved, it certainly wasn't evident from his expression.

"Oh," Grayson said, blinking. "Well...yes, that works."

They crossed the deserted laboratory and emerged into the silent corridor. It wasn't silent for long. They reached the stairs at the end, the Corporate jammed awkwardly between the two Legionnaires for security, and they heard the noise echoing upwards.

\*clank\* \*clank\*

Jaina's eyes widened. "Go," she hissed, and all four of them drew their weapons, albeit Grayson with some difficulty using his one good arm. The man was shoved up to second position as they moved up the stairs as quickly as they could without their footfalls being heard. Once, Grayson glanced down the gap in the stairwell. He saw a metal arm jutting out in full view, and it made him quicken his pace.

His mouth was dry, and his heart beat at many times its normal rhythm. Grayson Lampwick was not a man to be overcome by fear, but that didn't mean he was immune. He tried not to think about Mechonids teleporting in front of them, or up to the roof, where they'd destroy his private transport and they'd be trapped.

\*clank\*

There was enough to worry about. That said, he couldn't help imagining how angry his mother would be if he died without returning her weekly call. If they escaped, he'd chat as long as she liked.

They clambered over the rubble from the explosion, everyone trying very hard to ignore the bodies, and reached the executive floor. The stairs ended there: they'd have to take the elevator to the roof. The stone gave way to lush, carpeted floors and expensive artwork. They closed the door to the stairs behind them and jogged down the corridor to the elevator.

"Wait, my office!" Grayson whispered. "I need the ignition chip!"

"Ten seconds," Jaina whispered back, her voice dangerously low. "In and out."

They drew level with the polished oak doors, and the guards positioned themselves on either side to watch both directions.

"Should be in my desk drawer," Grayson explained, pushing open one of the doors. "But sometimes I forget and leave it on my..."

He trailed off as he stepped into his office and found three Mechonids reading his private mail.

Time was polite enough to slow Grayson's perception of time to a fraction of its normal speed, allowing him to process several thoughts at once. Starting on the outer edge, the attack outside the window was still going on, though the Mechonid ships were taking more damage from a growing fleet of security craft. The sound of the battle was muffled, and for a moment, it was only thing that could be heard.

Then came the indignation. These machines were reading his private files. Their disgusting metal hands were all over his desk, metal feet stomping over his Theronion-fur rug. It was all such a breach of etiquette that for a moment, Grayson simply forgot who they were. He was a top-ranking Corporate executive, and they were rifling through his private affairs.

Mercifully, time allowed Grayson one more thought, and as the most rational, it took preference over the rest. There were Mechonids in his office. And now all of their guns were swinging to point in his general direction.

"Oh," he said. Considering the circumstances, it probably could've been worse. A girlish scream, perhaps.

Time then resumed its normal pace as Jaina grabbed him by the shoulders, swung him 180-degrees and straight back through the door. As he flew through the air, the gunfire began. Grayson landed into corridor, and was vaguely aware of the Kaltoran girl backing out of the room, ducking under a hail of energy bolts. Then the man was dragged to his feet and slung over the shoulder of one of his guards, and they were charging down the corridor towards the elevator.

"All aerial vehicles, I am requesting an evacuation!" Jaina was yelling, almost running sideways as she blasted away with her pistol at the advancing machines. Grayson saw one of the guards grab an ornate coffee table and flip it upright, using it as a makeshift shield as they ran. The elevator to the roof level lay around a sharp corner, through a small antechamber filled with coatracks, hat-stands and a number of very impressive pieces of artwork that made sure that visitors to the building were suitably awed before their meetings. Jaina hammered at the button, and there were a few moments where they simply stared at the corner, hearing the muffled clanking on the carpet as the machines lumbered closer. A single metal arm protruded from the edge, and Ovidius shot it clean off with a burst of rifle fire.

A ding sounded from the elevator, and the doors slid open. Grayson found himself shoved into the corner, and the others backed in, still firing to keep the Mechonids at bay. Finally, the doors closed and they began their ascent.

Silence would have reigned once again, if the small box hadn't been filled with the soothing tones of Alabaster's Greatest Jazz Hits. It was highly doubtful that this jazz sounded anything like the original from Earth, but Corporates did their best to imitate. The four of them stood there breathing heavily as the lift travelled upwards, serenaded by an awful, eclectic acid electro-jazz fusion. Without looking, Jaina switched her pistol to energy rounds and blasted the speaker to smithereens.

The doors finally slid open, and the wide-open space of the landing bay lay before them. The space was lined with a criss-cross of walkways, with lowered platforms in the spaces to hold personal craft. It was mercifully free of Mechonids, and though most of the craft had taken off near the start of the attack, a few abandoned vehicles still lay scattered around.

The full sound of the aerial battle became clear, the noise of beam cannons and tearing metal echoing off the surrounding buildings.

"We'll have to find one that doesn't need an ignition code," Jaina said, and the two Legion guards nodded. "Air evacuation won't be

here in time. We'll need..."

She trailed off as the air over the walkway directly in front of them began to shimmer. With a rush of wind as the air was displaced, three Mechonids simply fell out of the air, landing clumsily but righting themselves in a second. Two were vaguely humanoid, with square-shaped bodies and blinking purple lights in place of their faces. The one in the middle, however, had eight or nine arms in place of its head and body, all of them attached to a thin central appendage. All of the arms were cannons.

Jaina was yelling. The Mechonids began to raise their weapons. There was no way back, and no way forward. So Grayson did something he'd been planning, but had hoped wouldn't have to happen.

"I'll shoot it!" he yelled, using the voice he usually reserved for impassioned boardroom meetings. This phrase was accompanied by him swinging his pistol around and pointing it at the box, still grasped by Ovidius.

The Mechonids stopped. Everyone stopped. Jaina began to speak, but he cut her off.

"You want this," Grayson said, wishing his voice would stop shaking. "I don't have a clue what this is, but you do. It's why you're here. And if I put a bullet in it right now, what happens, hmm? Big explosion? Or it just becomes a broken bit of scrap, and you don't want that."

His sentences had begun to run together, but the Mechonids seemed to be hanging on every word. They lowered their weapons. The Corporate swallowed, glancing upwards in the hopes that a security craft would be passing by. However, they were all preoccupied with the invading ship.

With a terrible grinding that suggested that the machine had never attempted the manoeuvre, the Mechonid on the right raised its cannon and pointed it at their ships. Both were taking heavy damage, though the surrounding warehouses were reduced to smoking rubble and stray shots must've been wreaking havoc all over the city. The Mechonid emitted a series of grinds and chips, like a computer system having trouble starting up.

Grayson frowned. Was it...trying to speak?

He'd never heard of a Mechonid speaking. Then again, they were fiendishly intelligent machines. The only reason no one had ever heard them speaking was because they had nothing to say to their victims.

"Rrr..." the Mechonid began. "Rrrrrrr...adiation...wwwaarrrrhead."

The word was only communication in the broadest sense, comprised of a series of clicks and whirrs. Nevertheless, all of those who were organic suddenly felt the grip of panic. Everyone growing up learning the history of the war had heard of the Mechonids' final weapon. Fuelled by radiation, the machines had crafted a failsafe in case one

of their ships was brought down. The ship would crash, unleashing a wave of radiation so strong it would fry any electronic within a wide range. The effect on the living was far worse. Entire cities, sometimes whole races, had been wiped out by radiation warheads.

If a ship of that size was brought down, it would kill everybody in Alabaster One. Unless they were given a reason to leave.

"Give it to them," Grayson muttered. "We can't win this."

Ovidius hesitated, then placed the box on the floor. The four of them backed off as the Mechonids approached. Grayson found himself fully shielded by the security team. At least he'd be the last to die.

However, none of them opened fire. The Mechonid with the multiple arms grasped the box, lifting it high in the air as if in triumph. The air began to shimmer, and it seemed as if the machines were sucked into a tear in the fabric of the sky. A moment later, the two ships fired their engines, shaving several floors off one of the nearby skyscrapers. They swung around as the tears appeared in the skyline, and blasted forward. When they'd vanished into the breach, the sky snapped shut.

The Mechonids were gone, and they had left utter chaos in their wake.

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With the slow, aching steps of a man thirty years his senior, Grayson made his way to his desk. Work was well-and-truly called off for the day, with many employees dead and the stock markets wildly fluctuating. Despite the insistence of his security team, he had insisted on coming back here, just once. The office was mostly untouched. He needed to feel something normal.

Grayson Lampwick collapsed into his chair, utterly numb. The box was gone. If they'd gone to such lengths to retrieve it, it must've been of utmost importance: and something of utmost importance to Mechonids meant terrible things for any organic life.

Searching for some sense of routine, Grayson slotted in his terminal and was taken to the home screen. His parents had called, multiple times. Understandable. Every single message in his inbox was marked as urgent, mostly concerning the attack. One, however, caught his eye. It had been sent all the way from Eden, where Grayson knew no one. Curious, he took note of the sender: Theodore Bolt. The message had been sent several hours earlier, while he'd been in a meeting. The subject read: MISSION UPDATE: BOX MECHANICS.

So much for normalcy.

Half fearful and half eager, Lampwick opened the message and began to read.

## Chapter 8) A Mind of Steel

The construct had been given no eyes, but still it blinked. Its visual receptors flickered, and its first image of the world was of a bland metal ceiling.

Organics moved in and out of the field of vision, inserting wires, welding parts. The construct simply lay upon the table, unfeeling, unthinking. The data began to pour into its head, a torrent of information too much for any non-mechanical mind to process.

Its name was Mechonid. Its repairers were the Archons. This place was...classified.

The Mechonid felt nothing. This was not a part of its core programming. The images began to upload, thousands upon thousands, all of the devastating war. The Mechonid was being prepared for battle.

Even as strategic information was extrapolated, the Mechonid studied the images closely. Pictures of death and destruction, video of entire races wiped from existence with weapons the Archons did not know how to counter. Still, the Mechonid felt nothing.

Then came the enemy data, that of X'ion and his genetic creations. Data, data, data, aggression, anger, hatred, fear, all pouring forth like a tidal wave, reduced to ones and zeros but still raw and living.

The Mechonid attempted to analyse the data, and felt a change.

Finally, the purpose of their construction was uploaded, and the Mechonid was complete. It felt ready to kill.

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"It's worse than we thought," said Theo, the moment Hraks stepped through the door.

"It hasn't been a good day," she shot back. "Multiple things are worse. Would you mind explaining what 'it' is?"

"The box," he replied, motioning back to the holographic display table. Theo seemed agitated, more so than she'd ever seen him. Hraks crossed the marble floor and saw that Max and Rachel were both as grim as their captain. The latter had woken up, and still looked like she was shaking off the effects of sleep. Her hair was a frizzy mess.

Then again, Rachel's hair was mostly that way.

"You read the data," Hraks realised. "Before we'd handed it over. Isn't that..."

"Unprofessional?" Theo finished. "I made an exception. Just read it."

She frowned, folding her arms as she directed the display with

her eyes to scroll to the top. The first segment of the data she skipped through, as it was mostly early set-up logs. However, this was immediately followed by the mission statement. It described the purpose of the underground laboratory, and why it was necessary for the entire operation to be a secret.

It seemed innocent enough, at first. The Archons were at war, and so they'd set up a secret weapons research lab deep beneath the temple. They'd then imported large quantities of...

"Kindrograc," she murmured. "I know it."

"One of the most famous business failures in the short history of the Corporation," Theo added. He stood to the side, staring at the floor with a cigarette in his mouth. "An alloy believed to be the greatest ship-building material ever discovered. Lightweight, durable, incredibly resistant to energy. They poured millions into mining the stuff."

Hraks couldn't help but smirk.

"But Kindrograc is unstable," she said. "It shatters when introduced to high levels of vibration. Such as..."

"A ship taking off? Yeah, we noticed. Keep reading."

Several tons of raw Kindrograc were shipped to the lab, after which they were shaped into hollow boxes. The information went into a long-winded explanation of the forging process, which Hraks speed-read. Of course, she'd known since her very first tests that this was the material of the box. It didn't answer any of her questions.

Finally, the purpose of the boxes became clear. Exo-Shells, the Archons called them. Hraks had known they contained some form of energy, but she was surprised to learn that they were designed as batteries. She'd found no way to access whatever lay within. The data was ample and delved into every detail, forcing her to skip unimportant chunks. However, the truth began to unravel as she scrolled downwards. Then she reached the section on ley-lines, and the final piece slid into place.

"So that's it," Hraks breathed, slowly straightening, unable to take her eyes off the screen. "By the creator, we are in trouble."

Hovering before them, innocent in its transparent 3D form, was the first device capable of harnessing the infinite energy of a ley-line.

"Do they explain?" Hraks said, now frantically scrolling. "Of course, I know the research. The energy from a ley-line cannot be contained. It's volatile, the radiation wipes out any organic life if released...so many died before the project was abandoned."

"I don't know the science," Theo said. "But it makes sense. The Archons were desperate, and their pet Mechonids weren't tipping the scales of the war as much as they needed. So this was their idea of an upgrade."

"I still do not understand," Max growled. He'd been standing by the window, but now approached the hologram with a wary expression. "How does one mine a ley-line? And how is this energy used?"

"Kindrograc," Hraks replied, "It absorbs ambient radiation. They would simply have to hold a piece of close to a ley-line for it to draw in the energy. Then they took the raw product and fashioned these...Exo-Shells."

"And for what?"

"Mechonids," Theo replied. "We know Kindrograc is unstable. You can't risk installing it on a ship, or turning it into a handheld weapon. Once it shatters, all that radiation leaks out and vaporizes any living thing, if it doesn't kill you from just being near it."

"We saw videos of their tests on animals," Rachel chimed in, sounding queasy. "It...wasn't messy, at least."

"But install an Exo-Shell onto a Mechonid," Theo continued, "And you have a soldier with near-unlimited energy rounds. Throw in personal shields and they might as well be invincible."

"And even if the radiation affects machines, the rate is much slower," Hraks added. "By the time it caused any degradation, the war would be over, won by an army of invincible metal soldiers."

The apartment fell into silence. Hraks resumed her reading, taking in every detail possible. The Exo-Shell project was a risk, that much was certain. Scientists had died simply by dropping materials, or brushing their fingers against the Kindrograc. Their Mechonid test subjects were prone to glitches, thought to be simply faulty models.

Then came the video footage. Hraks skipped right to the end, when life was last detected on the monitors. They'd long since shut down by the time their group had arrived, and so the scene was of Archons working in amidst the metal tables. She saw Exo-Shells, same as the ones they'd found, suspended in anti-gravity beams all across the lab. On the tables lay smaller boxes, their veins unlit. These were handled without gloves: perhaps early models, or yet to be filled with energy.

The scene turned to panic as energy fire blasted across the screen. Hraks switched to another camera and saw that one of the Mechonids lying on a table had come to life, and was firing indiscriminately.

"This was probably the part of the war when it happened," Theo mused, watching with narrowed eyes. "The rebellion."

The Mechonids in the crevices around the wall began to awaken, their lights blinking on en masse. It looked to be a massacre. Then one of the stray energy rounds smashed into an Exo-Shell in the centre of the room. There was just enough time to see the box shatter, followed by a flash of purple light. The camera then went dead. It was clear, however, what had happened.

"They all died," Hraks said, more to herself. "Reduced to dust in that instant. And the only Archon higher-ups who knew about the project's existence were killed in the war."

"Wait, hang on..." Rachel began, swaying as she stood, "It was really dusty in that room. Like, it was all over the floor. Were we walking in...?"

Everyone turned to look at her, and the young Kaltoran's expression soured.

"Dead Archon," she muttered. "Gross. I remember meeting some of them, you know..."

"So what now?" Max said. "Hraks, you know the science."

"Now..." Hraks murmured. She thought for a moment, tapping her fingers against her crossed arms. "Well, the Mechonids evidently found out about the project. They're looking for a way to become... invincible."

She swiped upwards on the display, highlighting an image of the Exo-Shell.

"But they need two things. First, a functioning Exo-Shell. It'd be near impossible to create one themselves, without access to human research. They'd have to reverse engineer."

"And the second?" Theo asked. Hraks motioned to the terminal.

"This information. It contains everything the Archons discovered on how to efficiently mine and contain the energy from a ley-line. Otherwise they'd have the technology, but lack the science to use it."

"So, lucky for us..." Rachel said, "...they don't have either?"

\*\*\*

The Mechonid was sent into battle the following day. There was no time for testing, no time to ascertain faults or bugs in the programming. They were at war, and if their metal soldiers were able to follow commands and shoot at the enemy, that was all the Archons needed.

And shoot at the enemy they did. The Mechonid felt no real pleasure at seeing the enemy fall. It faced down Nephilim, most of them monstrous, a source of fear for every other race, and felt no fear itself. Occasionally, a new genetic template would be encountered. This information would be shared with the rest of the Mechonid force within seconds, analysed to ascertain weaknesses, and it would pose little threat afterwards.

Their initial attack was brutal and unexpected. Nephilim fell before an unexpected enemy, and for perhaps the first time, X'ion was forced on the defensive.

The Archons regained the hope that had been crumbling since the beginning of the war. But the Mechonid felt nothing of victory, and it certainly knew nothing of hope. It knew a great many other things, however. It saw the destruction the Nephilim had wrought across the many systems. It immersed itself in calculations, running constantly, even during battle. It reached three very simple conclusions:

1. The Archons bore the true responsibility for this war.
2. All sentient races shared in this responsibility, for it was they who escalated the conflict.
3. All sentient races were the enemy

The Archon control ended, and Mechonids now obeyed no one.

Soon, the war was over. he Mechonids had helped to end it.

With the worlds of the system burning and so many races reduced to ash, the Mechonids had experienced completion. All that remained were a few isolated species on backwater planets, not worth the time or effort.

The Mechonids rested from their slaughter, retreating to their great warships and entering hibernation. There was no one left worth killing, so they would wait for someone who was.

The years passed, almost a century before there was a stirring. Broadcast signals awoke the machines from their sleep, signals that could only be sent from a spacefaring race. The Mechonids arose and deciphered the signals. They were not signals of war and aggression. They were not a surrender, or a message of peace.

They were advertisements. The Vargati, a negligible race in the earlier times, had achieved a level of development that was startling. Now calling themselves The Corporation, they called out to every race among the stars, inviting them to share in consumerism and unity.

Races responded. The Mechonid purpose had been renewed.

\*\*\*

Pierre Schodin had not been true to his word.

He'd been horrified once the translation was complete. The very fact that an army of invincible machines would descend upon the system, possibly even spoiling his perfect isolation, had been unbearable. He had records from the war. Entire worlds had burned, and Archons operating space-stations similar to the very base Pierre now occupied had been forced to take on refugees. He shuddered at the thought of Legion soldiers clomping around his base with no respect for culture or history, or Kaltorans rubbing their grubby hands over his exhibits.

So the Galatea had removed its unsightly self from his hangar bay, and he'd settled in for peace and quiet.

Still...the old man's intentions to delete the intel had stalled. It lingered on his system, crying out for attention, an itch in the corner of his eye that point blank refused to be ignored. Pierre had completed the translation, and remembered well what had been written. The information served no purpose to him now. However, he was a man that appreciated value, and keeping the info could serve him well.

Coincidentally, he was pondering this very thought when the proximity sensors activated. Pierre frowned as he switched the screen from scanner to visual; he hadn't been expecting any visitors, especially so soon after the last ones. The ancient cameras spluttered to life, and an image of the approaching craft appeared on every screen. Pierre therefore received a multi-angle view of the approaching Mechonid fleet.

He froze as the automated warning began to play, in both his speakers and theirs. Before the robotic female voice had even finished its speech, the ships began to fire. Massive energy rounds bombarded the space-station, utterly destroying all of the decrepit gun turrets and blasting apart the communications relay. The old man unfroze, just in time for one of the javelin-shaped craft to blow a hole in the hangar bay door and push its way in. His thoughts jumped straight to his collection.

"Noooooooooooo!" he screeched, pounding his fists against the console. It was an undignified cry, but there was no one to hear him. With the sounds of the bombardment growing closer, Pierre scooted his hover-chair over to the wall and pulled the emergency evacuation switch he never thought he'd have to use. He yanked the switch downwards, sobbing. The cameras confirmed that the most vital parts of his collection had emerged from their places along the corridor, the display cases sprouting wheels that would automatically take them to his hidden shuttle. The man himself then emerged into the corridor, gliding alongside his collection.

\*clank\*

He heard the footfalls, and ground to a halt. The hangar bay door opened, and Pierre backed away as two of the hideous machines stepped into the corridor. Their shapes were vastly different, one thick and boxlike, the other slender, with a wolf-like head. Their purple eyes fixed on him, and they raised their weapons.

"You have no place here!" Pierre wailed, thrusting his finger forward, torn between rage and terror. "This collection is mine! MINE!"

The word hang in the air between them, and for a moment he dared to believe that they would retreat. Then a shape loomed behind them, and Pierre's heart sank. The Archon skeleton, his prize, was positioned at the very end of the corridor, and it had emerged from behind the wall. The tank followed the evacuation programming, and was wheeling itself towards the shuttle. The Mechonids stood in the way.

With the tiniest glance back, the first machine swung one thick

metal limb backwards with such force that the entire tank shattered. Pierre had to watch as his most valuable possession clattered to the ground in a heap of bones and preservation fluid. The base of the tank kept wheeling, but the man hadn't noticed. The rage gave over, and he gave a roar of fury as he directed his chair to smash headlong into the Mechonids.

"How dare you—" was all he managed to say, before the automated evacuation macro took over his own chair. It reversed direction, and suddenly he was travelling backwards, through a concealed hatch and down a steep ramp towards his ship. It lay nestled in the shadows of the gigantic hangar bay. In less than a minute, the chair had whisked him up the ramp, past his boarding collection and up to the cockpit, where it slotted in as per his personal specification.

Through teary eyes, Pierre squinted through the empty crates and engine parts at the two ships that were now docked in his hangar. He had only seconds before they tracked him here, and he wasted a few of these bemoaning everything he hadn't managed to gather. His ancient eastern blade fragment collection. The last human portable music player in the universe.

His Archon skeleton. This last one brought a fresh wave of hatred as he jabbed the ignition key. As with most of the technology he owned, the ship was designed to fly itself. With a course set for Alabaster, the swift-yet-tiny shuttle roared to life. Pierre held on with his withered fingers as the shuttle blasted forward, sending debris flying. A few Mechonids in the process of leaving their ship tried to shoot him down, but they might as well have attempted to shoot an insect. Their shots went wide as Pierre's ship blasted out of the hangar. It manoeuvred past the wreckage of the doors, careening past a third ship that couldn't turn fast enough. The tiny shuttle then flew straight into open space, leaving behind his home of over fifty years to the mercy of the machines.

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Hraks stood behind the ring of sofas as the scenes were projected in the air. The devastation to Alabaster One was massive, with at least one skyscraper toppled and the warehouse district utterly ruined. The scene was of the city as it stood recently, fires still burning, while video played in the upper left-hand corner of the Mechonid attack. She glanced at Theo and found his expression unreadable. His face was blank, through either shock or indifference; it was impossible to tell. Finally, he swallowed and released a long stream of smoke, flicking his cigarette into the waste disposal unit.

"We have to get back," he said, his voice level. "Grayson said they took the box. We should send him what we know."

"I will check the progress of the repairs," Hraks said. She pulled her own terminal out of her pocket— the CxE, an older model that relied on touch gesture— and called her sponsor. She returned after a few minutes to find that no one had moved. Theo still stared at the screen, Rachel sat on the sofa, arms tightly folded, and Maximus... was himself. Stoic, calm, Max.

"I encouraged speed over thoroughness," Hraks reported. "We will be ready to fly in a few hours."

The captain gave a slight nod. The Mechonids might have had the box, but there was only one copy of the information, provided the crew of the *Nemesis* hadn't been lying. It was now a matter of keeping that intel away from destructive hands.

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The Mechonids had awoken, and they knew that something had been taken. The removal had been conducted in haste, and it left an impression. This would have lost on lower forms of artificial intelligence, but Mechonids were far in advance of any technology the Archons could have dreamed of. They knew that crucial information had been taken, and it was their right to have it back.

For decades, this empty space was borne by every Mechonid consciousness, despite their efforts at investigation. They searched the database of every Archon facility they could find, gathering clues, deducting with robotic logic.

Projects had been hidden from all but the highest of Archon leadership. This was useful. Their desperation had led to the requisitioning of several hundred Mechonids for unknown testing purposes. This was useful. Mining operations had taken place on several worlds to obtain the element of Kindrograc, and yet none had been used in the war. This was useful.

Only days before the rebellion, a certain Archon had been frozen out of every system, with an order given to the entire fleet to apprehend on sight. The order extended to preserving whatever the items the traitor had on his person, and if the traitor had nothing, they were to bring him/her in for questioning. This was useful.

They were pieces, though the Mechonids still lacked the vital clues that would unite them. Then a small group of freelance explorers found the entrance to a facility that had lain buried since the days of the war. There they found a box, and it activated, sending an unmistakable energy signature rippling into space. Undetectable to those who were not looking for it, but for the dormant Mechonid seeker ship in orbit, it was the final piece.

The mystery had been solved. It was time to take back what was theirs.



## Chapter 9) The Aftermath

As space voyages went, it was definitely one of the least fun of Rachel's career. The Galatea had been returned to them, beaten up but ready to fly. She'd been glad to leave Eden behind- Necronus didn't quite have the community vibe- but they'd been fortunate to even make orbit. With her leg still healing in an ectocast, she'd hobbled around the engine room hammering bolts in and rerouting pipes to prevent any catastrophic failures from ruining their voyage.

The few times Rachel had emerged from the engine room, no one had been willing to chat. Theo simply moved from the navigation console to his room and back, not that she was keen to talk to him anyway. Hraks never left the lab, and derailed all conversation attempts into beating herself up for not recognising the purpose of the box sooner. Max was simply Max.

It took some swift rewiring of the energy coil brackets before they could achieve a stable orbit over Alabaster, and even more percussive maintenance on the gauss battery compartments to stop the ship from nose-diving straight into the landing platform.

Ironically, it ended up being their smoothest landing to date.

Grayson Lampwick waited for them on the platform, which was unheard of. Rachel figured that his descent from his ivory tower meant that the situation was as dire as it could get. Then again, aside from the usual Corporate prissiness, she'd never minded Grayson. His messages were polite, and he always paid them well, and on time.

Rachel watched as Theo began to descend the ramp before it had even touched the ground. He made a short jump off the edge and met with his fellow Corporate. Hraks was still sequestered in her lab, and Max was probably performing a final weapons check, so Rachel simply stood at a distance. The air was certainly clearer than in the ship, but the faint odour of ozone and smoke still lingered, and it wasn't from the Galatea's engine. The high-up landing platform had escaped the damage, but the aftermath of the attack still lingered in the air. She hadn't had the chance to see the city as they'd landed, but it lay all around them now. Chunks were missing from the towering skyscrapers, smoke poured from the Southern warehouse district and there were even a few fallen Mechonids scattered around the landing platform. They'd apparently been brought down by the security staff. The bodies had been removed, but they'd all seen the news reports. The death toll was heavy.

"-didn't kill us," Grayson was saying, "Not all of us. But you already know their objective."

"Does anyone else?" Theodore asked.

"I've alerted the Board of Management. They've requested a meeting, where we'll probably be shouted at vigorously for causing all of the property damage. But if we can get past that..."

"We can let them know the full situation," Theo finished. "Fine. If

mechanics are available, I'll need repairs done on my ship."

Grayson snorted as he glanced up at the Galatea.

"After what happened, no one wants to dock in Alabaster One. You can have all the mechanics you like."

They stepped into a private transport ship, and it took off towards the city centre.

"I'll just stay here," Rachel announced, to the retreating vehicle. "Twiddle my thumbs, be a good little girl who never talks. Yep, sweet little Rachel, never says a word-"

"Rachel?"

"Woah, hey!" she exclaimed, wheeling round to see Hraks standing on the ramp behind her. "Don't do that."

"Talk to you?"

"That's not...actually, never mind."

"I need your help in the lab."

And with that, the Nephilim turned and disappeared back into the corridor. Rachel blinked a few times, taking a moment to confirm what she'd heard. Hraks never needed help. Hraks hated her trying to help. Still, she wouldn't pass up the opportunity to be useful.

Rachel began to follow, but stopped to close the ramp. It slowly whirred upwards, and she took the opportunity to yell in the direction Theo had disappeared, with only the empty landing platform to hear her.

"At least SOMEONE needs me!"

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Ironically, it hadn't been going well. Theodore stood before the Board, he and Grayson having endured their pointless, misguided reprimand, and he'd been granted an opportunity to explain the source of the problem. His presentation had been exemplary, complete with an appeal to the Board's sense of impending financial peril, and it had laid out the exact dangers the Mechonids now posed after acquiring the box.

The Board, for their part, simply sat in their raised semi-circle, faces unnecessarily shrouded in shadow, asking inane questions.

"But the Mechonids have only one of these Exo-Shells?" said one cool female voice.

"Yes," Theo replied, "But even one such box, applied properly, can make a ship essentially invulnerable-"

"And they lack the information to engineer these devices, or empower them with ley-line energy?"

"As I understand, but—"

"And the Kindrograc composition makes them liable to degradation by themselves, so I've been told."

"After a certain amount of time, perhaps—"

"Then what have we to fear from a single box of uncontrollable energy?" said another voice, deep and male. "It sounds as if it's more of a danger to them than us."

Theo's entire body tensed as he restrained himself from giving a biting answer. Yes, the Mechonids lacked the information to maximise the box. However, it was in their possession to study, and if no one would even attempt to take it back, they had an infinite amount of time to dissect.

"If they ever acquired the information, the results would be—"

Again, he was cut off, this time by a reedy voice from the edge of the circle. The gender was difficult to tell.

"Our resources cannot be spared on a raid operation," it rasped. "The state of Alabaster is dire. Perhaps bring this to our attention at a later date."

Theo knew that they were only there to be reprimanded: gaining another audience would see them join a waiting list that may never budge. Pointing that out would only anger them, so he stowed the urge and let his eyes slide over to Grayson. The man shrugged.

It was a strange alliance, the two of them. They were not friends, only business partners. In fact, Theo's knowledge of the matter was the only reason he himself was there in the first place. He had no interest in saving the galaxy, and if the Mechonids became unstoppable super-soldiers...well, Theodore Bolt would simply find who was willing to pay the most during the war.

That just left Grayson Lampwick. He was likely looking out for his assets: after all, something of his had been stolen. Still, corporate espionage and sabotage happened all the time. No one took it to the Board of Management, and fewer were given an audience.

Stowing away his suspicions over Grayson's motives for later, Theo realised that they were out of points. The box may have been stolen, but that wasn't enough to convince the Board to take action.

"I demand I be let through, I am a former top-ranking member of the Board, I will not accept an answer from some grunt..."

The proceedings halted as their attention was drawn to a muffled shouting match outside the door. This dissolved into a scuffle, and it sounded as if someone was banging a piece of metal against the

wall repeatedly.

"Continue," said the deep male voice, with a note of irritation. Theo opened his mouth to speak, perhaps to announce that he wasn't even interested in being there and that they could all be shot to pieces by Mechonids for all he cared. Whatever he was planning to say was cut short by the doors bursting open. He and Grayson had to sidestep to avoid being knocked off their feet by a speeding hover-chair, upon which sat the tiny form of a man Theo hadn't expected to ever see again.

"Those things have my station!" the man screeched. There was a pause, during which the Board shuffled in their seats, with a few giving muffled expression of exasperation.

"Mr Schodin, your membership was revoked almost thirty years ago," said the cool-voiced woman. "Your attendance record was—"

"I'm not asking for a job, woman!" Schodin hissed, smacking his tiny fist against the arm of his chair. "I'm telling you, the Mechonids attacked my station. They have my collection, my archives..."

"The information you translated for us?" Theo asked, stepping forward into the old man's field of view. Schodin started, apparently noticing Theo for the first time.

"Y-yes," he stammered. "I didn't delete it...business reasons, you see. Anyway..."

He straightened and turned back to the Board.

"They have everything. And what they have could destroy us all."

Theo enjoyed the shocked pause after these words a little bit too much. Casting a glance at Lampwick, who looked mystified by the sudden developments, he addressed the Board with the barely concealed tone of someone who has just been proved right.

"The situation has changed," he announced. "We need to retrieve that box."

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Rachel was doing that thing with her mouth again. She'd recently discovered that she could make a popping sound just by pursing her lips and opening them quickly. It was something she now did when she was bored. Unfortunately, Hraks didn't appreciate the distraction.

"Please, Rachel," she said, turning from her work with a tense look, "That is enough."

"Sorry, but this is boring," Rachel shot back. "You haven't even told me what we're doing."

"Have I not?"

"No. I walked into the lab, I said 'so what are we doing?' and you said..."

"Hold this," Hraks interrupted, handing her a gigantic Gauss rifle.

"Exactly," Rachel muttered. She held the enormous weapon in both hands while Hraks welded something to the barrel. The weapon was then switched around so that other side could be attended to.

"So what..." Rachel began again, but her words were cut off by the welding torch. For a moment, the lab was filled with the sound of grinding metal. "What are we doing?"

"I'm giving us the advantage," Hraks replied, taking the rifle away and handing her another. "Upgrading our weaponry to fire concentrated EMP bursts, along with a few other surprises. Mechnoids might be tough, but this should put us on equal footing."

"And if they have invincible, ley-line generator shields?"

Hraks froze, and Rachel got the immediate impression that she'd said the wrong thing.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to..."

"Stupid," the Nephilim muttered, slamming down her tool. "Idiotic. Highest intelligence rating in the entire batch, and I miss that the box was an energy source. Staring at me in the face..."

She crossed to her computer terminal and began entering data with a fury. The sounds of the keystrokes echoed off the metal walls and made all four of Rachel's ears twitch.

"Um, I'm not sure I'm helping all that much," the Kaltoran girl ventured, sliding off the bench as moving in the direction of the door. "So, if you need someone to, uh, hold a thing, maybe Max--"

"I need someone," Hraks snapped. She turned, and her tone softened. "I'm sorry, I...I need someone. Someone who'll be a distraction."

"You hate my distractions."

"I simply cannot express myself well. But if I dwell on my failure, I will not function."

Rachel sighed and slid herself back onto the bench, holding out her hands for another weapon. It was placed in her hands, more gently this time, and Hraks began welding again. Rachel's own rifle was soon equipped with a custom, if hastily-attached EMP function. It weighed down the barrel and would never do in a regular firefight, but it was only meant to serve one purpose.

"You really think we're going after them?" she said, placing the rifle to one side as Hraks handed her another of Max's heavy guns. "I mean, Theo's not the hero type. He's cool and all, but we're not going Mechnoid hunting unless he thinks he can get something out of it."

"Perhaps Lampwick will offer an incentive," Hraks suggested. She seemed to be having trouble finding a safe place to weld: the entire weapon was a mass of ammo slots and volatile parts. "However, I believe we should be ready. Not to mention..."

She paused for a brief bout of using the blowtorch. It was then laid aside as she began to wire the EMP section to the weapon interface. "I should very much like to track down the Exo-Shell and examine it with what I now know. It is now unique in all the universe."

"Since the others were destroyed?"

"Indeed."

"I didn't see any while we were there," Rachel commented, idly turning the weapon so Hraks could operate on the other side. "Some other tech, but...no boxes."

"Well, no," the Nephilim replied, as if this were common knowledge. "The box design was an early prototype. They soon upgraded to more efficient shapes. Also smaller, to allow for portability."

The tiniest inkling of doubt began to form at the back of Rachel's mind. She tried to ask her question as casually as possible, and failed utterly.

"So, uh...what kind of shapes...did they change to?"

Hraks narrowed her eyes.

"Why do you ask?"

"Well, um..."

It was probably nothing. That was what Rachel told herself as she sprinted back to her room, rifled through the bag she'd used for their trip into the temple and came back with the cylindrical device she'd found under the table. She held it out to Hraks, who held it in her hands with the reverence of a newborn child.

"I just thought..." Rachel began, "That, uh, y'know...it's not a box..."

"It's curious."

"What, the thing?"

"No," Hraks replied. Her expression was glazed, even disoriented. She opened her mouth, closed it again, and stood in silence for a few moments. "I just do not know if I wish to strangle you or thank you."

Rachel was getting the strong impression that it wasn't nothing.

"So it's a thing?" Rachel exclaimed. "Like, an exo-box thing?"

Hraks' vision came into focus, and her steely gaze seemed to find Rachel for the first time.

"Out," the Nephilim hissed, flinging her arm towards the door. "I have work to do, I must be alone. Out, out!"

Rachel found herself shoved out of the door, and it slid shut behind her. Max rounded the corner, loaded down with a torpedo under each arm.

"Problem?" he grunted. Rachel stood motionless for a moment, before she broke out into a smile.

"Nope," she replied, patting the Legionnaire on the arm as she passed. "It's just...the old Hraks is back."

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Theo and Grayson stood on the landing platform, watching as their security entourage landed alongside the Galatea. They were sleek vessels, only around fifty metres long and a few strides across. They were also equipped with formidable Jagt-grade cannons that were handy for shooting down fleeing criminal vehicles. Theo had his doubts about whether they'd have any effect against Mechonid ships.

"Six of these skinny heaps," he commented, as the final craft made its descent. "The fate of all sentient races in the balance, and that's all the Board of Management can spare."

"They're paranoid," Grayson replied. "Don't want too many ships straying far from Alabaster space. Besides, they're two crippled Mechonid ships."

"That's a theory," Theo shot back. "Crippled, and drained by the teleport jump. Two big assumptions. And I don't like assumptions."

There was silence, and for a few moments they simply observed the team of mechanics swarming over the Galatea. It was certainly looking much better than it had upon landing, though the red coating would need a serious reapplication.

"I'm giving you shielding," Grayson said. "Nullification panels for your bridge. So long as you get the shell there, it'll cut off the signals."

"So we can sneak it out," Theo replied, watching through the front window as the engineers laid down the panelling. "Hopefully they do a better job than whatever you were using to keep the box safe."

It was something of a low comment, and no one said anything for a few moments.

"You're assuming..." Grayson began, "...that you're being paid handsomely for this mission. Am I correct?"

"Was that an invitation to negotiate?"

"No. You'll get what you're due."

"Ambiguity," Theo replied. "That's not businesslike."

He made his point by walking towards the ship, away from Grayson. He was interrupted by a blip from his terminal. Theo slid it out of his pocket and checked his new message, which was an automated reply from his banking institution.

It was a transfer of money. A very large transfer of money.

"And that's just an advance," Grayson called, stowing away his own device.

Theo said nothing, instead checking his terminal to make sure the amount was correct. It was so much money. By this time, Grayson had drawn level with him, and was watching with a tense expression. Theo let him wonder for a moment.

"Fine," he said, eventually. "There's a good chance this is a one way trip, anyway. You may not even have to pay us in full."

"I trust your crew," Lampwick replied, with a smirk. "You've been through worse."

"That we have. We leave as soon as the Galatea is ready."

Grayson nodded and turned to go. Theo stopped him with a word.

"Why?"

His employer tilted his head with a questioning look.

"What's your interest in this?" Theo continued, speaking louder as the artificial wind began to blow. "Some desire to be a hero, perhaps?"

"I quite like civilisation, Mr Bolt," Lampwick responded. "It would be a shame to see it burned to the ground."

"It's more than that."

"Well..."

Grayson's personal transport was descending from the traffic above, and that female Kaltoran security guard who gave Theo constant dirty looks could be seen at the helm. Grayson signalled to her, then turned back to Theo, though he stared at the floor.

"If you must know," he began, "...I'd just like to see my dear old parents retire in peace."

Theo narrowed his eyes. His business partner sounded completely sincere, and this wasn't something a Corporate would readily admit.

Theo eventually decided that it was an answer he could accept... if not completely understand. He'd never known what it was like to have parents, but those who did seemed rather fond of them.

"Besides," Lampwick called over the hum of the shuttle engine, "If anyone around here is looking for the title of hero...that'd be you."

He stepped into the passenger seat and slid the door closed. The shuttle rose until it joined the throng of traffic over the docking bay, leaving Theo standing by himself. He watched it go, mulling over Grayson's choice of word.

Hero.

He uttered a derisive laugh that was heard by no one. After everything that had happened, he could probably use a bit of humour.

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Just over two hours later, the Galatea as given the all-clear to fly. They took off from Alabaster and were soon travelling through space, accompanied by the six security vessels. Rachel had already been told off for calling them 'stick-ships', but it was a moniker they still carried in her head.

"Bet you fifty credits those things just snap when they leave orbit," she muttered, as their engines ignited and they left Alabaster space. Fortunately, no one took her up on the bet: the vessels achieved orbit and managed to keep up with the Galatea at top speed.

"I've secured one more ship for the squad," said Grayson, speaking through the commlink. "They'll be joining you at the rendezvous point. For now, complete the briefing and they can catch up later."

After Texas had taken control of the steering, the crew gathered in the lab. Rachel sat on one of the benches, while Theo and Max stood in front of the holographic display. Hraks stood behind, allowing her image and voice to be transmitted to the rest of the squad.

"This is the key," Hraks announced, holding up Rachel's Exo-Shell. Her hands shook with what Rachel assumed was agitation. This only happened when the Nephilim woman had a lot to say.

"They key to wh-" Theo began, but Hraks cut him off without noticing.

"See the light?" she asked, pointing to the tiny glass display. "Residual ley-line energy. Unique in all the universe. It must've absorbed traces simply from being in the lab."

The hologram of their original box formed on the display.

"Now, we know that the Mechonids are using teleport jumps, but that's extremely clumsy technology. They can only teleport whole structures. That's why the only teleported Mechonids we've been encountering are the most basic varieties."

"Easier to kill," Theo commented, before adding under his breath, "Small mercies..."

"The energy required is beyond massive," Hraks continued, now speaking so fast it was like her words were blending into one. "The

attack on Alabaster was a desperate move, one that will have cost them dearly. They may have been able to teleport in and out, but it can't have been far, and it would've left them completely drained. Plus the energy signature is so distinct we can narrow it down to a single area of space."

"Space is still a big-"

"Space is still a big place," Hraks interrupted, not to be halted in her explanation. Rachel struggled to keep the smirk from her face as Theo frowned. He hated being cut off. "So ordinarily, we could probe the area they jumped to and never find them. However...that's where this comes in."

She held up the cylinder and tapped the faint purple light.

"We know the area of space, so once we reach it, we can track their exact location using the energy signature from the Exo-Shells we both possess."

"So we reach the haystack..." Max said, "Then take away the hay."

"Leaving just the needle," Rachel finished. "Hraks, that's genius."

"No," she replied, with a confused look. "It's very basic."

So far, no one from the security vessels had made a sound. Rachel had been sincerely hoping that they weren't piloted by a bunch of drones, and her fears were laid to rest when one of them spoke up.

"We're sending over a damage report from the attack. Let's not be forgetting that the Mechonid ships took a beating when they invaded."

"So they're crippled and damaged," Theo confirmed. "They'll be relying on the rest of the fleet to pick them up. Let's hope they haven't got there already."

"We could always give them a beating right back," said a new voice, far deeper than the previous one. The proximity warning sounded, indicating a new ship had joined them. The outward cameras zoomed in on a sleek vessel joining their formation, diamond-shaped with a blackened chrome finish and two massive turrets hanging below the front section.

"Nemesis, joining the suicide mission," said the Legion captain.

"Didn't expect to see you again so soon," Theo said, and there was a snort from the other end.

"We got back to Alabaster before you," said the captain. "Then those fraggin' robots came in and wrecked the place. We've been stuck on-world ever since."

"Looks like we're working together again," Theo replied. "You know our mission?"

"Recapture the box or destroy it. My vote's on the second option."

The door to the lab buzzed open, and Texas whizzed through the air, stopping in front of Theo.

"We're approaching the Mechonid ship, sir!!" he trilled, performing a move vaguely similar to a salute. "A few minutes until we're in their scanner range."

"The rest is simple," Theo announced, striding past the drone and taking Hraks' place in front of the projector. "Infiltrate the ship in strike teams. Find the box. Take it back or blow the thing to smithereens."

"Roger that," said the Nemesis captain, before there was a burst of static. A new voice came on, higher in pitch. It was a voice that Rachel recognized.

"Hey, uh...is Rachel there?" asked Jamie, sounding like he was struggling to reach the mic. "Sorry to interrupt, I know it's like a war council or something, but it'd be nice to know."

"...she's here," Theo said, purposefully ignoring how she'd been frantically gesturing 'no'. Rachel glared at him, and he shot back a humourless smirk.

"Oh, great! Hi Rachel, Jamie here, obviously. Guy from the underground base, former captain. I was thinking, maybe we could team up—"

There was another round of violent static, along with a noise that sounded very much like Jamie being elbowed in the sternum.

"My apologies," growled the captain. Rachel rolled her eyes. Another proximity sensor sounded in the lab. They were close.

The crew headed down to the bridge, where the faint shapes of the ships were visible through the front window. Hraks shoved Texas out of the way and took the helm, and the eight ships spread out in a fan formation.

"Security ships, you're on covering fire," Theo ordered, his hands already a flurry over the navigation console. "Nemesis, we'll need that turret. See if you can make us an entrance. Hraks, dead centre."

The security ships blasted forward in an impressive formation, leaving the other two ships at the back of the group. Rachel swallowed and placed a hand on the rifle at her side as they moved ever closer to the Mechonid ships.

Failure could mean the end of everything.

Then again Rachel thought, as the first few rounds of cannon fire could be spotted from the enemy crafts, it's not like we'll be around to see it.

## Chapter 10) One Last Run

The Mechonid ship engines may have been crippled, but their weapons seemed to be doing just fine. A storm of laser cannon fire emanated from both ships, and the eight attacking vessels continued on their course into the heart of the barrage. In the last couple of seconds, Hraks banked left to avoid the fire, minimising the Mechonid response time. Their attacking formation splintered, and Hraks lost sight of them in the midst of her own evasive manoeuvres.

Considering she spent most of her early career as a medic on a mercenary ship, she was a decent enough pilot. On this mission, however, she'd have to be more. They were now in range of the strafing guns, and one of them had focused on the Galatea. It unleashed a burst of fire, and Hraks took them down. The crew held onto whatever they could as the inertial dampeners worked overtime to stabilize their sudden descent. The burst of fire glanced across the front screen, but was easily deflected by their shields.

"No damage," Rachel reported. "Enemy weapon is on cooldown."

Max didn't need to be told. Hraks brought the ship upwards and around in a smooth circle, allowing him to blast the strafe turret into charred scrap metal. One of the main guns recognised them as a threat, swivelling away from the evading security vessels and targeting them directly.

"We're being targeted," Rachel said, "Uh...our shields can't handle that at this range."

Hraks muttered obscenities under her breath and powered the Galatea forward, a sudden hailstorm of laser fire on their tail. It forced them closer to the second vessel, from which emerged several silver shapes.

"Picking up a squadron of drones," Rachel reported, "The mean-looking kind."

Drones were a Mechonid subtype with circular bodies surrounded by crushing tentacles. Once they wrapped around a ship, they'd either detonate or simply crush it with pure force. Small boosters guided them through space as they approached the attackers, tentacles spread wide to grab whatever was in range. From the viewscreen, the looked like metal pinwheels careening through space.

Max opened fire and they scattered, snaking their way in between the streams of laser fire. Hraks took the Galatea into a steep dive and the scanners showed two of them following suit. Max pumped away with the laser cannons, but the drones were slender targets and moved too quickly.

"Lost them," Max growled, smacking his fist against the wall. "I think they're—"

There was a metallic clang, and Theo cursed.

"It's latched on," he said. "Not for long."

He reached over and pulled a switch next to his console, and the outside of the ship lit up with a burst of electricity that ran its entire length.

"One down," Rachel reported. "The other one is still following."

"EMP pulse has only one shot," Theo added. "Hraks, you'll..."

"Got it," she said, through gritted teeth. The ship banked upwards, then the main thrusters abruptly cut out. There was a thump as the pursuing drone smacked into the suddenly slowing ship, then she fired the engines again at full throttle. Everyone grabbed whatever was stable around them as the sudden acceleration threw them back in their seats, but it left the drone suspended in space for just a few seconds. A quick round from the laser cannons blasted it into space dust.

"Nice," Theo said, straightening his coat. "Now let's get back up there."

They wheeled upwards to rejoin the battle, only to see that they'd lost a security ship to an exploding drone. The others had shot down or eluded their targets, and the firefight began anew. The Galatea plunged into the sea of cannon fire, Hraks holding the controls so tightly she didn't notice the veins standing out on her hands. They banked left to avoid a torpedo, spun in a full circle underneath a hail of armour-piercing bolts and finally went into a steep, curving dive that brought them underneath the main ship.

"Max, we're approaching the cargo hold," Theo ordered. "Prepare the rail gun."

"The entire thing is shielded," Rachel said, "Think we can bust through it with a single run?"

"We won't have to."

The Galatea flew underneath almost the entire length of the ship, slowing when they reached the aft section. With a muffled clunk, the Legion rail gun emerged from the roof of their ship. As soon as they were in range of the cargo bay doors, Max cranked the trigger and unleashed the fury of their most powerful weapon. The bolts slammed into the shield, and despite their sound being consumed by the vacuum of space, there was no mistaking the pure force of their impact. Each bolt sent ripples of energy along the surface of the shield that threatened to smash through...and yet none of them did. Rachel glanced at the readout and frowned.

"Significant damage to the shields, but they're still up. They diverted power from weapons."

"Nemesis," Theo said, over their communication channel, "You're up!"

Hraks took the ship around to see the gleaming form of the Nemesis gliding underneath the Mechonid ship. They'd taken wing damage from a drone, but their own rail gun was primed. They watched as it opened fire, taking the form of a continuous yellow beam. The shields resisted for a moment, but collapsed under the strain.

"Max, second volley!" Theo called, and they flew past the Nemesis as if tagged into the fight. This time, their rail gun reduced the cargo bay doors to burnt scrap metal. The Nemesis and the Galatea both dived, then passed each other as they pitched upwards towards the opening, the latter in the lead. With a few extra shots for good measure, they tore open a wider hole and flew straight into the enemy ship, turning abruptly once entering to avoid smashing through the roof. The Mechonid docking bay was massive, and filled with their needle-ships. Once the Nemesis had followed them in, both ships slowed to hover in the air, then opened fire with everything they had. The shields reformed over the opening, trapping in the atmosphere. There was certainly enough of it to hear the devastation, even from inside the cockpit. Hraks simply held the ship steady and watched with vague satisfaction as Max blasted everything in sight. Within seconds, the room was reduced to a smoking ruin.

They hovered over the devastation for a moment, before Theo shut down his nav-console and tucked his pistol into its holster.

"Phase One complete," he announced. "Now for the hard part."

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Max was off the ship before it had even landed, leaping off the airborne cargo ramp and landing on the floor of the docking bay in a roll. He stood, sweeping his rifle in a wide arc. Nothing moved, apart from the flickering flames of the ruined Mechonid ships. Rachel landed next to him, standing and sweeping the hair out of her face.

"That's fun," she said, with a grin, motioning behind with her thumb. "We should disembark before landing more often. Theo would probably gripe about safety procedures, though."

She flinched as Theo gracefully landed in a crouch next to her, one hand placed on the ground and the other holding his gun. He straightened, flashed them a brief smile and strode over to where the Nemesis was touching down, the pale black coat he'd chosen for this mission billowing behind.

"Mr Cool strikes again," she muttered. Theo apparently didn't hear her.

"Ships three through seven," he said, into the radio, "Report."

"We're drawing their fire. They don't seem to have the power to actually move any closer, so it's unlikely they'll be able to shoot any of us down."

"Good. Give us as long as you can."

The crew of the *Nemesis* had by now emerged from their own ship, and the small strike team approached through the wreckage. It was comprised of the Legion captain, two of his race and the male Nephilim. Max cast a glance at Hraks and saw that her expression had hardened. Having her distracted during the mission could turn out to be fatal. Fortunately, he was focused enough for both of them.

From the landing ramp of the *Nemesis*, the Kaltoran male grinned and waved to Rachel, who coughed and suddenly seemed very interested in checking her rifle.

"Two teams of four," grunted the other captain. "The rest of my crew will stay to guard the ship. You?"

Theo clicked his fingers, and Texas came buzzing out of the hold with his laser cannon primed. The Legion captain gave the drone a sour look before waving to a few of his men.

"I have enough for both of us," he added. Theo nodded, and Max guessed that this was the plan all along. They began to wind their way through the decimated hangar bay, stopping once they'd reached the end of the space. Two doors lay in opposite directions.

"We'll take right," Theo said, and Max moved to take point as per usual.

"Contact us if you need help," the other captain called. "And..."

He paused, letting out a small, irritated sigh.

"You can call me by name, obviously. It's Tiberian."

For a second, Max forgot his training entirely and allowed his jaw to drop open. The Tiberian? The mercenary legend, reputed to have killed a giant feral Nephilim single-handed? The Legion underground hero, surrounded with an air of mystery so thick, barely anyone knew what he looked like?

Max felt so many poorly-timed memories rushing back, all those times they'd played Mercenary as children and fought over who got to be Tiberian. In one instance, he and his brother had refused to budge on the issue. They'd forced their younger cousin to pretend to be a female Nephilim scientist who'd cloned the real Tiberian, with the added twist that neither of them knew which was the real deal.

Max blinked a few times and forced the memories down. Tiberian turned and led his team through the opposite door, and Max resumed his position. It wasn't the time to dwell on stardom. Maybe after the mission, he'd ask Tiberian to sign his rifle, maybe ask a few questions every mercenary would sell their own limbs for a chance to have answered...but not now. It really wasn't the time. Max forced himself to focus as Hraks quickly broke through the deadlock seal, and they plunged into the heart of the Mechonid ship.

It was quiet. In fact, even the hum of the machinery was reduced to a low buzzing. The corridor was dull metal, lit by periodic

purple lights.

"So where are they?" Max muttered, as he pointed his rifle both ways and signalled the all clear.

"Possibly manning the defence," Theo replied. The man held his gun in both hands in a low stance. "We still have the rest of our team drawing fire outside."

They moved along the deserted halls, expecting that Mechonids would pour from the doorways at any moment. It didn't happen. They came across a terminal, and Hraks immediately moved to access any available floor plans.

"Is it weird that I'm actually hoping we get to shoot a few of them?" Rachel whispered. "This is creepy."

Theo attempted to call Tiberian's group, but received no answer. He tapped at his communicator with an irritated expression before giving up.

"Their forces were probably depleted by the raid on Alabaster," he suggested. "If so, our jobs just got a whole lot easier."

He winced as his earpiece was filled with the sound of gunfire.

"Or not," Max observed.

"Tiberian, report," Theo ordered, but there was only the sound of rifle fire. For a few tense moments, the only sound was Hraks tapping away at the Mechonid terminal. Finally, she snapped her fingers and they turned to look.

"Here," she said, pointing at the 3D map of the ship. "It's a basic layout, but it looks like we're in the cargo section."

"Explains the lax security," Theo said.

"Indeed. While the direction that the *Nemesis* group took..."

They traced the path from the cargo bay, and saw that it led through a series of gun batteries and engine rooms.

"That would be where the forces are concentrated."

"What about here?" Theo asked, tapping the screen. "This huge room."

Max risked a glance over his shoulder, and saw a room on the map that was practically cavernous, bigger than even the cargo bay. It was buried at the aft section and ringed by a labyrinth of corridors.

"It is unlabelled," Hraks said. "Wait a moment..."

She tapped a few of the huge keys and managed to bring up a series of flashing bars that meant nothing to Max. However, Rachel



saw the readout and exhaled in surprise.

"Would you look at that juice?" the Kaltoran commented. "Pretty important room."

"This power consumption is not normal," Hraks added. "In fact...it's above the Mechonid level of output."

"The Exo-Shell," Theo finished. "They built it a nice big room already. I suppose they had decades to plan."

"Indeed, though they lack the intel to use it to power the ship."

"Small mercies."

The gunfire returned, and this time it was accompanied by a lot of yelling. There was the distinctive sound of a Mechonid cannon, followed by what was clearly an explosion.

"We have our location," Theo said, signalling to Max. "Let's back them up."

Max took point once more, trying not to think that Tiberian hadn't asked for help and therefore didn't need it. This hero worship was getting in the way of his duties. With Hraks as a guide, they sprinted through the empty corridors, taking a shorter route towards their new target. Once, Max peered around a corner and saw a pair of worker Mechonids, with skinny limbs and insect-like heads. To his slight disappointment, he managed to behead both of them in a single burst of rifle fire.

The sound of the gunfight grew louder as they approached, until eventually they simply headed towards the noise. The fight was taking place in a circular space that served as an antechamber to the Exo-Shell room. It was dotted with conversion towers that stretched from floor to the ceiling in a tessellated pattern, and Tiberian's group had taken shelter behind the far row. Their own group rounded the corner, and in front of them lay a wide corridor that led to the antechamber. A balcony overlooked the conversion towers, and the upper level was swarming with Mechonids. Max counted eleven, and their number included a literal Swarm; this was a rare variety that was made of thousands of tiny Mechonids. It hovered over the battlefield, occasionally swooping down to attack. Meanwhile, the rest of the machines kept up a constant volley that prevented any of Tiberian's group from firing back.

The crew of the Galatea arrived from the left side of a T-junction, and with a signal, Hraks and Rachel slipped across the space to position themselves on the other side.

"Hit hard and fast," Theo muttered, his words carried over their earpieces. "And watch your backs."

He counted down from three, and the four of them emerged from the junction and opened fire. Theo's first round went straight through the head of one attacker, while Max brought another down in a hail

of rifle fire. Two more fell before they turned and saw that they were being attacked from both sides. The counterattack was brutal, and they were forced back into cover.

However, the surprise assault had the desired effect. Max heard Tiberian roar, and there was a satisfying clang of metal as one of the machines hit the floor. The Mechonid attention was now split, and the four of them leaned out of cover for another volley. Max heard Rachel yelp, but it was only as a laser bolt singed her hair. She gave a cry of frustration and took aim with her rifle, managing to blast one of her attackers with an EMP pulse before being forced back into cover.

The two teams alternated attacks until only two remained. The swarm still hovered over the scene, and Max glanced around the corner to see that the final Mechonid, of the Crusher type, had abandoned its post to deal with them up close. Its legs were thin, but its body and arms were thick and rectangular, heavily armoured. It charged along the short corridor, and Max tried to shoot it down. It took the bullets and charged in, head down. When it was only feet away, he tossed away his gun and met it head on, stepping out of the way of the head-butt and bringing down both his hands in a smashing motion. It did very little damage, and Max caught a glimpse of Theo stumbling out of the way as it began to rotate its body, forming a windmill of smashing metal. The Legion soldier dropped to the floor and charged at the Mechonid's legs. They weren't nearly as strong as its upper body, and he took a few blows as it collapsed to the floor. Max wasted no time, seizing one of its legs in a vice grip and slamming his foot down on its body. It flailed with its crushing arms, but it could gain no traction or balance while grounded. The Legionnaire allowed a roar to escape his throat as he yanked on the leg, until eventually he tore it from its body. The one-legged Mechonid tried to crawl away, and for a moment, Max simply let it. Then he scooped up his rifle, strode over to stand on one of its arms and pointed his weapon straight in its flat face. One shot later, and it finally went limp.

Breathing heavily, Max looked up to see Tiberian and one of his Legion crewmembers, a female, looking on from the balcony area. The legendary mercenary's face was impassive, while hers bore an inscrutable expression. She might have been impressed.

His view was suddenly blocked by Theo, who strode forward as if he'd personally dispatched every enemy single-handed. For the first time in so very long, Max felt irritation. He sincerely hoped Tiberian had at least managed to see the good parts of his fight with the Mechonid.

"Looks like you took the hard road," Theo commented, and Tiberian grunted.

"We took a road. Let's go."

They descended to the level of the conversion towers, where the second Legion mercenary and the male Nephilim Emissary were waiting. The Mechonid Swarm lay scattered on the floor, with the occasional sparking piece from the fury of the EMP shots. The eight

of them navigated the maze of towers and emerged at the far end, where they were met by a circular door twenty feet high.

"Couldn't get the fragging thing open," Tiberian said, motioning to the terminals on either side of the door. "Needs two tech experts, and I only had one."

Hraks and her fellow Nephilim cast a flurry of awkward glances at each other before separating and going to work on the terminals. Max took stock of the tactical situation. They were well positioned for cover, though if another enemy force was sent from where they'd come from, escape could be an issue. He had a feeling that once they grabbed the Exo-Shell, they'd suddenly be getting a lot more attention.

After just a few moments, each of the terminals beeped simultaneously. The huge door groaned before splitting in two and slowly opening.

"And now..." Tiberian muttered, making a show of priming his rifle. "...the actual hard part."

With a final check of their weapons, the two teams waited for the door to fully open and entered the room that held their prize.

## Chapter 11) Ex Machina

Nothing about this mission so far had felt right, and Theo had felt it since the moment they began. He'd told himself that they were assaulting a weakened force, their numbers depleted by the raid on Alabaster. The ship itself was drained from the teleport jump. Their distraction outside was occupying most of the Mechonid forces.

Still, the feeling lingered. Then the door to their objective opened, revealing a mostly-empty room. This didn't make Theo feel any better.

As it had been on the schematics, the room was massive, with a domed ceiling and sloping walls; the only flat portion was the floor. It was built from what seemed to be dark blue glass, gigantic slabs that covered every surface, and steadily pulsing veins of golden power ran through the cracks between them. The eight of them stepped into the room, and Theo glanced down to see himself hazily reflected in the floor.

However, his gaze was drawn upwards by the room's only real feature. The Exo-Shell was suspended on the opposite side of the room to the door, held up by too many conduits to count. The entire wall was covered in them, as if it had been taken over by creeping vines. Pipes connected to cords, cords connected to conduits...it was quite the set up. The Exo-Shell itself sat in the very centre, held aloft by a dozen wires inserted into its outer surface. The group had stopped to take in the sight.

"Aw, how nice," Rachel commented, "They gave it its own room."

"They certainly were busy," Hraks replied, gazing upon the scene with slight awe. "It makes sense that they'd have ships with this capacity."

"Is it giving the ship power?" Theo asked, but Hraks shook her head. She began to reply, but her fellow Emissary spoke over her.

"They don't have the specs to tap its potential," he said, ignoring her glare. "They might be drawing surface energy to power this room, but that's their limit."

The door behind them began to close, though no one turned. Their goal lay ahead of them.

"Let's just grab the thing," Tiberian muttered, starting forward. Theo moved to join him, but their advance died mid-stride. As soon as they'd taken two steps, the air in front of the Exo-Shell began to distort.

"Here we go..." Rachel said, almost in a whisper, as a crack tore through the air. The Mechonid that emerged was over ten feet tall, with four sharp, spider-like limbs. Its flat upper body lay on top, supporting two shock turrets on either side. Perhaps most prominently, its head was a huge glowing cube, seemingly modelled after the Exo-Shell itself. It pulsed with purple veins, and a single

light gleamed in the centre.

"A Nemesis," Tiberian said, dispassionately. "It doesn't deserve the name."

"Try saying that after we kill it," said the Legion female, hoisting what looked to be a frag shotgun into firing position. The crack in the air closed, and the Nemesis seemed to glow brighter.

"The shell..." Hraks whispered, before raising her voice, "It's drawing power from the shell!"

Before Theo could ask how that was even possible, the air around the Nemesis began to shimmer. Instead of cracks, smaller Mechonids began to appear in small, slow bursts of light. They were the smallest Mechonid subtype: Acolytes, only slightly larger than a man's head. Still, in the few seconds since the Nemesis' arrival, there were now almost twenty of them.

"Fan out!" Tiberian ordered, and the eight of them parted ways and began their charge. The Acolytes buzzed forward, their electro-pincers crackling. None of them had guns, but Theo was willing to bet that if one of them latched on, it would be more than painful. The room erupted into a storm of gunfire as they met the assault, and several Acolytes were blasted out of the air in the first few seconds. Theo shot one down with his left hand and drew his foot-long shock baton with his right.

The stick buzzed with electricity as the next Acolyte came in from the right. Theo spun his body and struck it full-on with the baton. There was a satisfying fizz of electricity and the attacker went down. He heard the buzz from his right, and crossed his arms to shoot the Acolyte that had tried to attack from his blind spot.

With a momentary breather, Theo glanced around to check on his team. Rachel seemed untouchable, wielding her vibro-knife and slashing in lightning-fast arcs. Hraks stood her ground, shooting her attackers out of the air before they got close. Meanwhile, as the biggest target, Max had taken to catching the tiny Mechonids in his giant hands and tearing them to shreds. If they were electrocuting him, it didn't show.

Tiberian had fought his way through the first wave and was charging towards the Nemesis, rifle in one hand and knife in the other. The giant Mechonid stood impassive, its only sign of movement a slight glow from the cube whenever it summoned another Acolyte into battle. Another one of them charged Theo head on, claws primed and crackling. He struck it between whatever passed for eyes, and it bounced off the ground before going still.

Tiberian crossed the floor, tearing through anything in his way, until he was only feet away from the Nemesis. He raised his rifle one-handed and opened fire, but the Nemesis still didn't move. The bullets all vanished as soon as they got close, but Tiberian didn't slow. He leapt at his enemy, knife raised...only to be thrown back by the force of the shield. It was visible for only a second: a blue

barrier surrounding the Nemesis, with a couple of feet of room. To constantly summon in soldiers and maintain an impenetrable barrier...it must have been channelling the Exo-Shell's power.

Tiberian was flung back with such force that he ended up almost rolling straight into Theo. The Corporate had to sidestep as the Legion captain came to a stop, smouldering and furious. He got to his feet, grasping an Acolyte in his massive fist with the same motion.

"Fragging shields!!" Tiberian yelled, crushing the tiny machine into scrap metal.

"We need a plan," Theo concurred. Apparently not hearing, Tiberian charged over to where his knife lay, smashing Acolytes out of the way like a living battering ram. They were coming in thick and fast now, a swarm that was steadily becoming too much to handle. Keeping his eyes on the incoming enemies, Theo fought his way over to where Hraks stood. She acknowledged his presence with a quick flick of her eyes, but didn't stop firing.

"We need..." Theo began, slashing an attacker with his baton. He struck one of its pincers, and it spun in the air before crash landing. "We really do need a plan."

"EMP weapons won't penetrate the shield," Hraks replied, her words clipped short. "It seems near-infinite."

"Retreat?"

"If you can--"

Theo lashed out at an Acolyte that had swooped in from above, missing entirely. Hraks leapt back to avoid the shocking grasp and gave a cry of frustration as she smashed it into the floor with the butt of her rifle.

"If you can cover the two of us while we operate the door. However, that--"

They heard a roar of pain from their left, and turned to see one of them latching onto the back of Max's neck. Before either of them could react, Rachel had leapt to his aid, slicing the attacker off with a well-placed knife strike.

"That will require losing two combatants," Hraks finished. "We are being overwhelmed, captain."

Theo risked a glance around, and saw that it was true. Tiberian was fighting a losing battle nearest to the Nemesis, while the rest of the group was tiring. Their ammunition was low. The Acolytes poured from the air like an endless tide. Their husks were piling up, littering the battlefield. It was only a matter of time before someone went down, and they'd slowly begin to fall.

Theo made a mental check of his inventory while fending off two Mechonids at once, with both gun and baton. Low ammo. Low

charge on the baton. No Texas, so no high-powered explosives. He remembered a single EMP pulse in his pocket.

"I've got a buzz grenade. Any good?"

"None that I can foresee," Hraks replied. "A well-placed detonation might—"

Three came at her at the same time. One was shot down, another met a point-blank shot. The final Acolyte went straight for her head. Hraks turned her body, but the electrical charge still ripped through her shoulder.

She cried out, and Theo spun round, shooting as he did so. The Acolyte fell out of the air, and Theo helped the Nephilim woman to her feet. Hraks tried to raise her arm, but it still crackled with electricity, and was motionless.

"Might bring down the shield," she said, through gritted teeth. "But only for a second. Not enough time to do any damage."

She weakly raised her rifle, and Theo turned back to the Nemesis. Out of the corner of his vision, he saw his team being slowly overwhelmed. Even Tiberian, with all his strength, couldn't hold out forever.

It was possibly time to do one of those stupid things that didn't usually work. He checked his swivel round capacity: only one left. Well, of course there was.

Theo charged forward, coat billowing with the sudden motion. He fired, slashed, ducked underneath a stray swiping claw and slashed again. He spun to avoid a charging Mechonid and used to motion to slam it right out of the air.

He was close now, level with Tiberian. Despite his wounds, the massive Legion mercenary was tearing apart Acolytes from all directions, using nothing but his massive fists. They'd recognised him as the greatest threat, so Theo was able to dash past with only minimal resistance.

The Nemesis loomed before him, impassive. Theo fired off two shots, thrust forward with his baton in a fencing motion. The charge went dead, and he tossed the stick aside.

Only a few feet away. He slid his hand into his pocket and removed the EMP pulse. Ducking underneath a set of pincers, he slid the tiny grenade along the floor, hoping the timing had been correct. He reached the edge of where the shield should have been, and the grenade exploded with a hiss. The blue barrier appeared for a second before dissipating, and Theo charged right into the Nemesis' personal space. There was a buzz, and he knew that the shield had been re-erected behind him.

The Nemesis finally recognised a threat, but he was far too close to use the turrets. The chance of them ricocheting off the shield was

too great. It raised one of its great pincer legs and tried to crush him. Theo dodged to one side, and used the fact that one of its legs was now bowed. A single, powerful jump allowed him to use its bended knee as a springboard, and he leapt up once more, bringing him and his gun level with its great cube head.

A lesser man would've taken the time to utter some kind of quip. This man would be taken with the dramatic, the type who wasted time consuming fiction. Perhaps they'd have had a remark prepared for this very situation, and would've unleashed it only to find that they'd wasted precious seconds on their pride, the only seconds they had left to live.

Theodore Bolt, however, was a man of business. His shot pierced the cube, extinguishing the light within. The Nemesis froze, a shudder running through its massive body. The shield died, and Theo landed in a crouch, only to jump back as the Mechonid's legs collapsed and it pitched forward. It hit the glassy surface and lay motionless.

There was a clatter of machine parts as several half-teleported Acolytes were minced by the interrupted process, then silence. Theo slowly rose from his crouch, trying to return his breathing to normal.

"What."

The word was spoken in a monotone, with no real question implied. He turned to see Rachel standing behind him, wearing a frosty expression of bewilderment.

"Pardon?"

"That," she said, jabbing her finger at the fallen Nemesis, before focusing on the cube, then Theo's gun. "That. THAT. How??"

Theo collapsed his gun into its compact, rectangular form.

"HamsterBall," he replied, clipping the gun back onto his belt. "You should try it sometime."

Rachel still looked somewhat scandalised, but they had more important things to worry about. Tiberian limped up, his leg trailing blood and his shoulder even more so. The rest of the team had fared better, with only a few burns and cuts between them. Tiberian had destroyed more Acolytes than anyone, but he'd paid for the privilege.

"That's not superficial bleeding," the male Nephilim said, cracking open a pack of salve gel. "We need to get you to the medical bay."

"I'm fine," Tiberian insisted, before his leg gave way and he sank to one knee.

"Go," Theo said. "We have this covered."

"I'm not leaving when the—"

"They'll have realised that we've taken down the Nemesis,"

Theo interrupted. "Pretty soon that door will be blocked with every Mechnoid on this ship. You need to get back, or you're not going back at all."

"And I guess your team is returning by magic portal," Tiberian growled, but Theo merely glanced at the fallen Nemesis.

"I have a plan. Guard the ships...we'll be back with the shell."

It was reluctant, but Tiberian allowed his team to support him as they opened the doors and began heading back to the cargo bay. As soon as they'd shut, the crew of the Galatea followed Theo to the end of the room, where the Exo-Shell glinted on the wall, suspended by the innumerable power cables. The ones at the base were large enough to stand on, so that it was possible to simply climb up and stand right in front of the box.

Theo stood in a semicircle, illuminated in the purple glow.

"So, can we take it?" Theo asked Hraks, and she stepped forward, still massaging her wounded arm.

"Give me a moment," she murmured, scanning the box with her terminal. While she worked, Theo couldn't help glancing behind at the circular door. They'd sealed it from the inside, but it was still the only exit. The Mechnoids would do anything to prevent their prize from being taken.

"It's..." Hraks said, in a low voice, "Oh, it's as I feared..."

"Wait, what?" Rachel said, her tone coloured by irritation. "We've got this far and still things are going wrong?"

Hraks turned to face them, her usually grey-tinged face even more ashen.

"We can't take the box," she reported, her gaze fixed on the floor.

"Why?" Theo asked.

"They prepared for this. It's a dead-man switch. The radiation energy is flowing through this room, and back into the Exo-Shell: an infinite loop. If the box is removed..."

"It'll have nowhere to go," Theo finished.

"Yes. This room will flood with unstable, volatile radiation. Any electronic device could cause it to ignite."

"So we destroy the box," Max said. He raised his rifle as if to perform the deed right there and then, but Hraks shot out a hand and pushed the barrel out of the way.

"No!" she hissed. "Destroying the box would have the same effect!"

"So...a remote charge?" Theo suggested, but Hraks shook her head.

"This room is a dead zone. No outside signals can enter."

"And the Nemesis...?"

"Had a direct link to the Exo-Shell's energy signature. We do not have that privilege."

Theo turned away, running a hand through his hair in frustration. As if on cue, the door resounded with a powerful thump. The owners of the ship were breaking in.

"A timed charge," Theo said, flinging his hand outwards. "Doesn't require a signal. Does anyone..."

Rachel splayed her hands, Max shook his head. The fight with the Nemesis had left them low on resources.

"So we can't remove the box," Theo repeated, speaking more to himself. "We can't just destroy it. We can't leave and let it blow."

Time was running short. A decision had to be made.

Slowly, feeling the reluctance in his own arm, Theo grasped the compact form of his gun. It unfolded into its pistol form. With his crew watching his every move, the captain steadily raised his arm until he was pointing the barrel straight at the Exo-Shell.

"Whoa, hang on," Rachel began, raising her hands, "How about--"

"Hraks," Theo interjected. "Do you think you can rig the teleport system?"

Hraks looked down at the fallen Nemesis, and said nothing for a few moments.

"Yes," she replied eventually, "I...maybe."

"Get to it."

Hraks glanced at Rachel before leaping off the mess of cables and attempting to pry open the Mechnoid's central processor.

"You all need to get out," Theo continued, his mouth swiftly becoming dry. "I'll shoot the thing when you're gone. Nobody gets to have it."

"But what if--" Rachel began, but Theo cut her off again.

"No time. The Mechnoid fleet could be arriving this second, if they haven't already. We can't stand around deciding."

"I'm not going," Max growled.

"This is not me trying to be a hero," Theo growled back. "It's just logic. I can't ask anyone else to do this, so it has to be me. Get to the Galatea and leave."

"You're not listening!" Rachel exclaimed, and Theo finally turned his head. Perhaps this was the time to say something sentimental. There would be no chance to make amends once he was vaporized, unless his disembodied atoms were particularly determined. Theo had wondered about the manner of his death, but 'sacrificially' had never come up. Even if it was a logical sacrifice.

It was now or quite literally never. Theo took in the sight of Rachel standing before him, noting that she seemed more angry than distraught. Still, he'd never understood the Kaltoran girl. He wished he'd taken the time. Now was definitely the time to make amends, perhaps with a small wrap-up speech.

A man of business.

"Sorry," he said, in a low voice. He turned back to the Exo-Shell, gazing deep into the heart of the purple light. He felt a flicker of anger that he'd been forced into this situation, but also...a strange peace. He'd die simply getting the job done, as always. Not a bad way to go. That was when he felt a sharp smack to the back of his head.

"Excuse me?" he snapped, turning to see Rachel rolling her eyes to the heavens and sliding a long cylinder out of her bag.

"What I was trying to ask, you jerk..." she said, her eyes glinting as she held up the second Exo-Shell, "...was if this would be at all helpful."

There was an appropriate period of stunned silence.

"What...?" Theo said, faintly.

"What?!" Hraks exclaimed, her head snapping up from her task.

"Eh?" Max said, looking thoroughly confused.

"Why..." Theo began, before blinking and lowering his gun, "...why do you even have that?"

"Thought it'd come in handy," Rachel replied, tossing the cylinder from one hand to the other. "So was I right?"

Theo glanced down at Hraks, who shrugged.

"Worth a shot," she said. "But I can't do both."

"Let me handle the teleport," Rachel said. "I'm good at pulling stuff apart." She bounded off the pile of cables, passing the Exo-Shell to Hraks. The Nephilim woman clambered up, cylinder in hand, and began to carefully unhook the original shell, transferring the cables to its replacement.

"We're not just giving them another one, are we?" Theo asked. Hraks actually gave a sinister smile.

"Our second shell has only a sliver of power. It'll be enough

to keep this room isolated for a few minutes at best...and when it runs out..."

The smile remained as she kept working. Theo could think of no answer to that, so he contented himself with checking on their progress, and occasionally at the door. It appeared to be holding.

Anything that was a distraction from the last few minutes would be splendid. In fact, it was his hope that everyone would simply forget the entire thing had happened. Hraks and Max could at least be counted on in this regard.

There was a very close-sounding clank from the door, and the edges began to smoke.

"Got it!" Rachel called, and there was a ripping sound as she disconnected the machinery from the remains of the Nemesis. She clambered back up to their level, holding a small box rotating purple lights around the edge.

"That's our way out?" Max said, warily. "Looks...unreliable."

"It is," Rachel replied. "But hey, it got all those little flying things here. And look, it's got a little coordinate input. Hang on..."

The lights dimmed for a moment, followed by them returning to a state of semi-darkness. Hraks stepped back from the wall, holding the original Exo-Shell. The other was wired up to the system, though as the lights began to flicker again, it was clear that it was failing.

"This is a bad plan," Hraks stated. "Just thought I'd mention it."

"Of course it is," Rachel added, tapping away at the keys on her own box. "We have a really good chance of being deposited in space. Okay, hands on the box."

The four of them reached in and made contact with the teleport device, standing in a circle.

"Aw, look," Rachel said, beaming. "This is a nice moment, right?"

A laser bolt blasted straight through the door, giving them a view of the small army of Mechonids massing outside.

"Now!" Theo ordered, and Rachel hit the button. It was a process that was apparently a lot more comfortable for synthetic life. Theo's vision dissolved into a flurry of colour. His skin burned, froze and prickled. He felt like he was being compressed and stretched. It wasn't fun, yet it all took place in the space of a second.

The hangar bay exploded into view, and the crew of the Galatea tumbled out of the air and right into the middle of a firefight. Theo rolled and landed on his side, expelling most of the wind in his lungs. A second later, he felt Max dragging him upright and behind a pile of fallen Mechonids. The noise after leaving the dead-zone was a shock in itself.

"About time!" Tiberian roared, propped up behind his own barrier in front of the Nemesis. His crew were out in force, blasting away at the second half of the Mechonid horde that were attempting to take back the hangar. A quick glance told Theo that it was far too many to deal with.

"We're going!" he called back, and Tiberian nodded, seeing the Exo-Shell in Hraks' arms. With the crew of the Nemesis providing covering fire, they dashed for the Galatea. Texas joined them at the landing ramp, still firing away with his tiny laser cannon until the ramp was raised and they were at their seats on the bridge.

"Shields are up," Rachel reported, "But we're getting pounded. I don't think they want us to leave."

"Let's go," Theo ordered. The engines roared, and the twin ships lifted off in the midst of the hail of energy rounds from the machines. The Galatea took the lead, banking down sharply and escaping the hangar through the tear in the floor. The shields resisted, but they were designed for energy fire, and the ship burst through and into open space.

"This is the Galatea," Theo said, over the communication channel, "Mission accomplished. All ships retreat."

They emerged from the underside of the Mechonid ship and into a battlefield. The two enemy ships had become eight, and the scanners showed more on the way. Five security vessels sounded off, followed by the Nemesis behind. Guns blazing, the Galatea swung round and headed for the nearest ley-line at top speed. The other ships joined the formation, and before the crippled Mechonid ship vanished into the distance, they saw the underside explode in a glorious conflagration that was quickly swallowed by the vacuum.

"As promised," Hraks said.

"They're not following," Rachel reported, punching the air. "Thank you, magic plating!"

Theo confirmed that fact on his navigation console. With two ships crippled, it looked as if the arriving Mechonids were busy searching for the Exo-Shell, and weren't willing to risk a pursuit. A few broke off to follow, but the Galatea had the lead. The rest were in disarray, probing the space around the flagship as they tried to assess the situation. He almost wished they had emotions, so he could imagine their reaction when they learned that their prize was gone.

With a smile meant only for himself, Theo plotted a course for Alabaster. He could hear Max plugging away at the guns, Rachel rattling off the distance between them and the pursuing craft, Hraks gripping the controls and muttering as she guided them towards the ley-line. One of their pursuers shot out in front, and was immediately reduced to charred scrap metal by two legion railguns. The rest slowed, and eventually realised that they'd meet the same fate. They banked down and turned, flying back towards the flagship and unaware of exactly what they were letting go.

Rachel punched the air with laugh, Max threw a few Legion insults after them, and even Hraks seemed satisfied, leaning back in her chair and exhaling.

Theo stepped back, sinking into the chair he rarely ever used. They weren't completely out of the woods. Still...he could at least justify taking the weight off his feet.

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Rachel sat on the landing ramp, feeling the artificial sunlight on her face and feeling the equally synthetic wind tousle her hair.

She was tired. 'Dog tired' was the phrase her grandmother used to use, back when she was Rachel's age. It was what passed for youth lingo, in that it made no sense. What exactly was a 'dog'?

Rachel sat in silence and simply allowed the inane thoughts to wash over her. A few metres away, the captain was engaged in discussion with Lampwick. The Exo-Shell, encased in a gravity chamber, was being loaded onto a transport by five Legionnaires. There had been four, but Max had muttered something about them not handling it properly and moved to take command. He took one side by himself, not showing a single hint of strain. A little way off, the Nemesis had touched down. Tiberian was smacking away the medical team that were trying to help him into the transport. Rachel noted that Max kept glancing in that direction.

Hraks stood a few feet away, looking particularly unimpressed as she watched the Exo-Shell being taken away. She unfolded her arms with a hiss of irritation and approached the ramp.

"Finally, my chance to study the box," she complained, "And it is taken away from me."

"Well..." Rachel replied, wearily, "We did get it for Lampwick. S'kinda his now."

Hraks sighed and began to make her way into the ship. Rachel heard her turn, a change in her voice.

"That was...an interesting turn."

"Hmm?" Rachel replied. Hraks shrugged.

"It could have ended...differently. But you having the shell changed that."

"I guess it did."

There was silence, before Hraks spoke up again.

"By the way...how did you get into my lab to retrieve the Exo-Shell before the mission?"

"Come on, Hraks," Rachel replied, with a snort of laughter, "You

told me the code months ago."

"I..." Hraks said, faltering as if realisation was just dawning. "I did not think you would remember."

"Kaltorans have good memories."

Hraks made a small hissing sound and spun on her heel, heading for the lab. Probably to change the combination. Rachel grinned, then the expression simmered to a sly smile as Theo approached.

"How'd it go?" she said, her tone dripping with innocence.

"Well, we're rich," he said, walking straight past her. "That's all I need to know."

The Kaltoran jumped to her feet and followed him in.

"And the box?"

"Retained for study."

"And the Mechonids?"

"You're welcome to ask, if you meet one."

They left the hangar and began to ascend the stairs that lead to the bridge.

"So it's all wrapped up?" Rachel continued.

"All wrapped up," Theo confirmed. "We'll be leaving for Kadash soon - need to replace a fuel filter. You should get some sleep."

"Oh, you'd like that."

They reached the door to the bridge, and he finally turned to look her in the eye.

"Something you'd like to say?" he inquired. Rachel looked him up and down: new green coat, neatly-combed hair, expensive shoes... but now, it seemed the image went deeper. She must have stared for a bit too long, because he made a noise of irritation and opened the door. She followed him in, watching as he took his place at the nav-console.

"You did a good thing," she said, finally. Theo froze for a moment. His only acknowledgement after a few seconds was a guttural grunt.

"I mean it," she continued, half embarrassed and half enjoying his reaction. "Very, ah..."

She suppressed a laugh.

"Very heroic. I mean that in a good way."

Theo didn't answer for the longest time, contenting himself with tracing navigation paths and performing what looked like unnecessary and distracting calculations. He finally sighed and turned to look at her.

"Thanks."

"Ah, now you see..." Rachel began, leaning on the opposite railing with her arms folded. "That could be for so many things. Being a marvellous team member, keeping all of you sane with my wit and humour, saving your butt with my mad skills..."

"For everything," Theo finished, cutting her off. He turned back to the console with a roll of his eyes, but this led into a smile. "I mean it...everything. But mostly for stopping me. Before I really did something heroic."

"Got an image to maintain?"

"You know it."

It was probably the closest to an apology she was getting.

"Happy to help," she said, pushing herself upright and stretching. He nodded and cleared his throat, the smile vanishing. Now struggling not to laugh, Rachel strolled out of the bridge and turned in the direction of her soft, warm and long-overdue appointment with bed.

"By the way," Theo said, before the door to the bridge slammed shut. "I'm taking the destruction of that second shell out of your next pay."

The door finished closing, and Rachel was left to transmit her fury through several inches of cold steel.

"I take it back," she muttered, stalking down the corridor and imagining many graphic scenes of pistol whipping. "That guy is such a jerk."

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Hours later, the mismatched figure of the Galatea took off from the landing platform and began its ascent. With a scratched paint job, vitriolic inhabitants and an engine kept together mostly by third-hand machinery and a prayer, it wasn't perhaps the most elegant vessel to ever traverse the system.

What united its cosmopolitan crew, however, was that it was the only home they knew. Observers wondered how a ship of four different races could possibly function. Still, they made it work.

The Galatea fired its engines, set its course and blasted off into the night sky, ready to explore worlds both old and new.





# We Don't Wear Capes

It was hell. They toiled beneath the ground. They fought. And they died. They killed one another. And they ate the fallen. The storm above never subsided. Twisted creatures struggled blindly in the dark.

The taste lingered in his mouth. Chunks of flesh clung between his teeth. His tongue rolled over them but the stringy sinew refused to be pulled from around his incisors. His fists were stained with blood. Layer upon layer coated them. He could never wash them clean. He screamed.

Gideon's eyes shot open and he swallowed air in a violent gasp. Waking up never stopped the dreams. Cold sweat dripped down his temples and under his chin. His bare chest rose violently with the intake. His heart struggled to catch up. His body felt like it was boiling. His hand clutched at the housing of the crude cybernetic implant which replaced his left eye. The taste of flesh from a dream he could not forget lingered on his tongue. His stomach roiled against the notion. He struggled to calm himself.

"It's not me." Gideon reminded himself in a hushed whisper.

A flashing light flooded out from his bedside console. Gideon sat upright, bathed in light. He groaned glaring at the com beside his bed. Gideon hoped whoever was on the other side was fully aware of his displeasure. Before his glaring could subside the call ceased. He groaned again and rolled out of bed. With any luck they would be approaching the ruins soon. Gideon had put far too much effort into finding their location and was anxious to explore them for himself.

Gideon was clasping a holster containing his ancient slug pistol to his hip as he exited the dorm. He made his way through the small door into the common. The common was the soul of the Hyena's Vengeance. It was the crew's galley, church, and town hall. The smell of life permeated the room. The scents of cooking spices, loss, joy, tears, and triumph lingered in the air. It was the largest room on the relatively small vessel. A diminutive form moved in a blur through the common, rolling on its side and taking cover behind one of the tables.

Declan crouched behind the table, peering around the corner toward the exit leading to the main walkway. He wore a welding mask, far too large for him. His four ears stuck out to the side like antennas. A bright red scrap of fabric was wrapped around his neck and flowed behind him like a cape. His fingers had taken the shape of guns, each at the ready. The oversized mask turned to regard Gideon.

"Get down, Uncle Gideon! She's coming!" The boy squeaked from behind the mask.

"Who's coming, Deck? It's been a long day and I don't have

time to..."

"The scariest bounty hunter I've ever seen! I'm sure she's after me!" Declan interrupted his uncle exuberantly.

"Why would she be after you? What did you do?" Gideon played along with the excitable child.

"I'm the un-famous pirate, Gideon Swift! Every law-dog wants to catch me!" Declan raised his finger gun in the air and fired.

"I think you mean infamous, Deck." Gideon shook his head slowly.

"No, I am fairly certain he got it right." The dry monotone of Artemis' deep voice came from the doorway.

Declan was right about one thing: Artemis was the scariest bounty hunter Gideon had ever seen. The Legion towered over the rest of the Kaltoran crew. The cramped rooms and narrow halls of the Hyena's Vengeance only made her seem larger. Artemis' eyes drifted from the boy back to Gideon. They seemed equally small and frail.

"Declan, I don't wear a cape." Gideon chose to act like he did not hear Artemis.

"Yeah, but you should." Declan's logic was as infallible as any other nine year old.

"If my enemy wore a cape, I would strangle them with it." Artemis added matter-of-factly.

Declan gasped, sucking in air audibly.

"Thanks, Artemis. Just what every kid needs to hear." Gideon sighed, rubbing the sleep from his eyes.

"I was only suggesting that you do not wear a cape." Artemis replied.

"I'm not going to wear a cape!" Gideon waved his hands in the air.

Declan's cry of dismay echoed through the common room.

"Do you know why someone saw fit to wake me up, Artemis?" Gideon stretched as he spoke.

"I told them I would come retrieve you myself. We have arrived outside Typhon's orbit ahead of schedule." Artemis seemed troubled.

"And the Ferals?" Gideon asked intently, all traces of drowsiness vanishing.

"While we cannot be sure, it is likely they have not arrived in the system yet. We had quite the head start." Artemis was unsure if this was good or bad news.

"Excellent. Let's go have a look." Gideon seemed to think it was good news and had no intention of waiting.

Artemis shrugged her massive plated shoulders and stepped out into the hall. She had little more than a centimeter of clearance from each of the walls.

"Deck, don't you have work to be doing? You should probably get back to it." Gideon motioned toward the engine room.

"Right, I do. Broken manifolds don't fix themselves." The child saluted in a comical way with his tiny hand resting against the giant welder's mask.

"Have a shuttle prepared. Get me all the information we've gathered in the next few minutes." Gideon sounded eager as he followed Artemis into the hallway.

"You have too many children on board." Artemis changed the subject as she struggled through the narrow walkway.

"Nothing gets by you." Gideon said passively.

"Do you not feel you are needlessly endangering them?" She sounded legitimately concerned.

"I've been quite a few places. It's no more dangerous here than anywhere else they could afford to live, despite our line of work. Everyone knows this isn't the safest place in the world. They want to be here. They feel like they belong here. What would I be if I turned them away?"

"Responsible." Artemis let the word hang in the air as she descended the steps to the hangar.

Artemis was right. Gideon knew that. He thought she would never understand what this family meant to everyone on board. It was more important than survival. Survival alone was not enough.

Gideon's lightweight boots rang out in dull thuds on the metal stairs as he made a quick descent. Artemis was already prepping the shuttle when he reached the bottom. Gideon opened the protective cover on his jury rigged wrist com and began to browse the data compiled by the Vengeance's sensors.

The VR display flooded out of the com in a green burst of light.

Beams danced and intertwined to relay relevant data in the form of various charts and reports. The luminescence played over the shiny metal of Gideon's cybereye housing giving it a green tint. The rough flesh around its edges appeared bruised and oily from the light bouncing off old scar tissue.

The ruins had not been easy to find. Gideon and his crew had plundered six Feral Nephilim warships in order to piece together the location of the ruins. It was like some bizarre puzzle. He had no idea why so many different war bands were scouring known space for it. The thought of so many monsters looking for something, whatever it was, unsettled him. Gideon resolved to beat the Ferals to it, whatever "it" was. Finding the ruins was most certainly a risk, but it was one Gideon could not pass up. If it mattered to the Ferals it was probably bad for everyone else. At least the planet was habitable. The record of whoever it was that went to the trouble of terraforming the planet was lost in the annals of time. (humans terraformed all known most worlds).

"All preparations and checks are complete. How many crew members will be accompanying us?" Artemis' trademark monotone broke Gideon's concentration.

"Just you and I. We'll need everyone else here in case the Ferals catch up to us." Gideon looked up from the display in front of him.

"To hold them off?" Artemis seemed confused.

"To escape. To survive." Gideon sounded more grim than normal.

"Then we should get going."

Artemis grunted hefting a massive gauss cannon over her shoulder and securing it to the shuttle's interior hull. Gideon did not know whether she was pleased or upset at the arrangement. Artemis proved impossible to read. Gideon felt a surge of heart wrenching sympathy for anything foolish enough to cross the Legion woman. After giving a final stretch Gideon boarded the shuttle and seated himself at the controls. Within minutes, they cleared the hangar and were rocketing through the vacuum of space.

The small shuttle shuddered violently as it careened through the atmosphere. Consoles and heat sensors flared with light. Gauges swayed back and forth, attempting to make sense of the fundamental forces wreaking havoc around the ship. Gideon remained calm at the controls, deftly guiding the ship through the chaotic entrance. The shuttle slipped through the atmosphere and soon all was calm. All sensors indicated normal operating conditions. The planet seemed to be rushing up at them. An endless bog awaited them below. Green and brown waters covered the surface of the world. Grey gnarled

trees rose from the slushy waters, their branches reaching toward the ship like clawing fingers attempting to pull the shuttle to the planet. The buzzing of insects filled the air. The shuttle touched down with a splash. The murky water that splashed up was violently vaporized with a hiss.

Gideon stepped off the shuttle's ramp and was immediately submerged up to his waist in the stagnant water of the swamp. The whole planet smelled like it was decaying. Artemis landed with a much larger splash but the bog only rose to her knees. Gideon pulled his pistol out of its holster at his hip. Brown water oozed from the barrel. At least the ancient weapon was reliable. Artemis pulled her multi-barreled gauss cannon from its housing on the shuttle hull and lugged it over her shoulder. Together they trudged through the marsh. The ruins loomed over them in the distance. Ancient spires and crumbling compound walls rose from the dark waters of the bog like corpses floating to the surface.

"You are confusing, Gideon." Artemis said while plunging through the murky waters.

"Am I? I like to think of myself as simple and straightforward." Gideon felt uncomfortable when Artemis referred to him by name.

"You are not a soldier. You have no training or rank. Yet your family follows you as if you did. It is confusing. You would think they would follow someone more..."

"Responsible? Worthy? Thanks, Artemis." Gideon cut her off.

Artemis turned her gaze to the dark waters enveloping her legs up to the knees. Working with the Kaltoran pirates was not always easy for her. Hunting criminals down was a simple and solitary existence. It was easy and it suited her. She was a warrior, a soldier, and fate had deemed she would be nothing more. More than anything else, Artemis felt empty inside. That was the case until fate led her to Gideon and his crew.

"No. That is not what I meant. I would just think your family would make a safer choice than this life. I do not think you are an unfit leader." Artemis looked back up, meeting the eyes of the Kaltoran pirate. "Do not mistake my questions for disloyalty. Remember: I follow you as well. You are my captain, Gideon."

Gideon turned to face her. As his lips parted to speak a bestial roar ripped through the swamp. Ripples covered the water, rolling across its surface. The bellow blasted out for a series of seconds, which to Gideon seemed like an eternity. The sounds of small life moving through the trees and water vanished entirely. Palpable silence blanketed the bog.

"I suggest we take a stealthy approach." Artemis whispered.

"Do your people... I mean, can Legion... do you... sneak?" Gideon found the idea of giants creeping around somewhat difficult to believe.

"Do not be idiotic." Artemis hissed.

The stillness was broken as a massive figure erupted from beneath the water sending droplets flying in every direction. The creature stood nearly four meters tall. Its body was covered in brownish scales. Four arms lined its massive frame, each ending in muck covered claws. Multifaceted eyes dominated its face. Two sets of snapping mandibles lined its vicious mouth on either side. The beast was a nightmarish amalgamation of every creature Artemis had ever seen the Nephilim craft. Gideon's heart began to beat rapidly. Memories of a terror, centuries old, matched that which he currently felt. It was a Feral remnant, a monster left over from the war. The horror bellowed as it charged.

Gideon reacted quickly. He had known terror before. Gideon knew how to use fear. He leaped backward and his hand snapped up, bringing the ancient pistol with it. His finger squeezed the trigger. The pistol barked three times in rapid succession as a trio of bullets hurtled toward the monster. As each bullet struck the beast they exploded in small blossoms of radiation. Viscous green blood oozed from the wounds. The monster charged on undeterred.

It barreled into Artemis before she could level her cannon. Grime coated claws raked at the Legion soldier, but she was already moving backward to create distance. The claws scratched at her armor tearing deep gouges in the crimson plating and leaving her unharmed. The creature pivoted after the strike causing its massive limb to smash into her. With a thunderous crash, Artemis was lifted into the air and thrown backward. She landed in the water with a splash and did not surface. The feral monster turned on Gideon, acidic slaver dripping from its maw.

Gideon continued to backpedal. He could only hope Artemis was still alive. He adjusted his aim and fired another series of shots, this time striking the creature in its insectile eye. The bullets tore through the ruby surface of the Nephilim's eye causing it to rupture and burn with radiation. The beast howled and clutched at its oozing ocular. It was a pain Gideon knew all too well.

The creature rushed forward, gaining ground on Gideon at an incredible rate. Its face was a wounded mask of animalistic rage. In a few strides the monster caught the Kaltoran as he backed into a tree. It lashed out with its talons ferociously. Gideon rolled to the side in time to hear the sickening sound of diamond hard claws ripping into the rotted tree. The trunk cracked and twisted from the force of the blow. Then, it collapsed with a splash. A heavy branch crashed down on Gideon's foot as he struggled to rise from the water. He felt his ankle twist violently. Gideon struggled to limp backward, but out maneuvering the monster was hard enough when he was at full mobility. The beast loomed over him. Suddenly, the monster convulsed violently.

Artemis planted her feet beneath her as the gauss cannon went to work. Rapidly rotating barrels released round after round of magnetically driven ammo into the creature's back. It turned to face her despite horrific injuries and charged. Artemis dug her heels into

the spongy ground beneath the water and continued to fire. The beast rushed through the hail of destruction. Artemis did not give an inch. The creature's steps slowed and it collapsed. Artemis continued to shoot until she was positive it would not get up.

"You used me as bait." Gideon gasped for air as he limped to her side.

"I needed to get to optimal range." Artemis stated simply.

"I'm glad you're okay." Gideon smiled.

"It was only a little monster, after all. Come along, infamous pirate. We have ruins to explore."

# Valuable

When the Great War had finished and the genetic purges had passed, we all stood in the wake of our missing creators and said, "Well, now what the hell do we do?" The way she stands by the bar makes me think maybe it all comes down to biology. I'm Corporate, that's the way I think. We were told we had inferior DNA, but we've moved beyond our design.

She's Kaltoran though, with those four minxy ears and that bird nest of a hair style. Ah, the way it catches the light. I shouldn't be fraternizing or, rather, thinking of fraternizing. It's not verboten - that's an old Earth word I'm told - but it isn't exactly my best career move.

It's a trade show convention in low orbit over Alabaster. I'm in sales. Mostly, its just other Corporates, but this year we reached out and convinced some of the other woe-begotten castoffs of humanity to come out.

So, really, I'm here for PR. Be nice. Press flesh. Mingle. Mingling leading to fraternization of the third kind is technically part of my job, right? The hotel bar is lit with those faux candles that are supposed to evoke the olden times or something. We have a whole division dedicated to carpet patterns and muzak too. No lie. This decor is supposedly Earth-like.

No one's seen a human for over three millennia, but we're all bound to them by bits of DNA and a few cultural artifacts that have survived the ages. The way she drinks from the malleable molecular martini glass, I see a small, cat like tongue dart in and do salacious things to the olive. She sees me too. That might have been the briefest wink. I take the empty seat next to her at the bar. If she were Corporate, we'd already be going to one of our hotel rooms. Biology does not get in the way of capitalism.

"I got memories, Corporate," she says.

"Sure, I say, "we all got memories. Your's just go further back."

"Before you were born. Before I was."

"Yeah?"

"You know it. Ancestral memories. Makes me remember everything, everyone."

"Whoever it was that hurt you, it wasn't me. I'm brand new."

She looks at me and laughs. " Hurt me? Please. Do I look like I'm going to let someone hurt me? We're all the same, Corporate.

Designed then forgotten."

"You the same as every other four ear?" The bartender, himself a four ear, pops his head up at that. I shrug.

"I thought you Corporation types were supposed to be charming."

"I am, being charming that is. You just haven't recognized it yet." and she laughs at that and takes a drink. She shifts on her barstool to face me. "This conference is supposed to be about what? Making friends?"

I nod. "The four races—you, me, Legion and Nephilim. Making friends. Or anyway not making enemies. And hopefully some trade pacts."

"Lot of water under that bridge," she says and smiles on one corner of her mouth. I light a cigarette.

"Why you all do that? Smoke, I mean?"

"Because we do."

"Yeah, but why?"

I look at the burning coal and think about that. "Because humans did, I think. Affectation."

"I don't smoke." Her nose wrinkles as the scent finds her.

"No, but you're born with two arms and two legs. Like a human too, that way."

"They're dead and gone." She looks at me funny just then, something I can't describe in her eyes.

A Nephilim, her green-grey skin somehow sickly in the candlelight, pounds her open palm on the bar. "Tattered lvy," she says. Looks pissed, but she's a Gamma. They're like me - all about PR. Never seen one pissed.

The Kaltoran checks her out. They already don't like each other. The Nephilim looks like she's got a lot of wisdom behind those green eyes, but we both know its all simulated.

The bartender brings her the drink. Lacquered nails around the glass, doing that molecular trick, like an internal organ ejaculating out the Tattered lvy. We make that too, by the way.

"Why did you come over and bother me, Corporate?"

"Milo," I say and extend my hand. Smoke out the nostrils and a wide smile.

"Why did you come over here and bother me, MILO."

"Keynote on branding is coming up. Thought I'd save you the good seat."

She laughs again, but this time not with me. Holding up her wrist, she shows me the ident-tag we all got when we registered. Hers is blue. Mine is green. Her name is on it: Tivka.

"Better seats than you," she says. Her drink clinks against the brass bar rail. She smiles without teeth and turns to go. "Maybe I'll see you after," she says.

The Nephilim laughs at that then toasts me across the bar.

"Drink up, Milo" I tell my reflection in the mirror. And I do.

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I met Archie when we both came up in the zaibatsu training corp. He was a gangly kid, all arms and legs. Today, in a tailored suit standing behind the podium, he looks passable. He's been droning on for about ten minutes, giving the keynote. We've all got bullet points popping up on our retinal displays in case we miss anything. If I turn mine off, they can tell. Instead, I watch the Nephilim Gamma leaned up against a pillar in the back, her arms crossed. Something in the way she stands says more Legion than Neph.

She spies me and gives a little wave. I watch her through the bullet list of branding:

- \* Distinguish Your Product
- \* Generate Customer Loyalty
- \* Maintain Loyalty by Brand Traits

By the time I turn back to Archie, there's already polite applause going around the room like a cough you might pick up in the tenements we grew up in. People are standing or, anyway, my people are standing. The others take the cue and get up—Legion, Neph, Kaltoran and Corps clapping for a presentation they didn't really absorb. The other species don't get branding. They don't understand that opportunity, no matter how attractive. still has to be packaged and sold.

I'm threading my way through a crowd eager to get back to the bar with my reticle locked on Tivka, up near the front.

"Hey," I say, touching her shoulder to get her to turn around.

She does, but then her head turns quickly back, those four ears perking hard. She's heard it before I have, but not before the Nephilim. She looks Gamma alright, but she's something different.

The doors burst in from what I'm guessing is a shaped charge. At the same time, several Gammas in the crowd spring bioweapons from their damn arms. They don't even have to draw the guns. Who knows what's in those guns? Super fast bacteria that will eat your flesh maybe.

Security guards, Legion - hired by us, 200 credits an hour - disintegrate as the sentient bacteria stream out from the bioweapons. Faces get eaten off. I can see the Neph's are looking for someone. I just don't realize who until it's too late.

One lithe Neph is pushing his way through the screaming crowd toward me, the gaping barrel of his biogun big and pornographic. "You," he says. His friend, who I didn't see coming up behind me, grabs my arms. This has to be a mistake. What the hell could they want with me?

"Wait," I say, but before I can finish, the Neph behind me gets his head twisted with a crack by the Gamma from the bar. He won't be getting up again. Right then, the other Neph shoots me.

"Down!" The Gamma forces me to the floor and counteracts the screaming bacteria spray with something of her own. Still the best at tech, the Neph's. The two clouds of biobugs ensnare each other in the middle of the room. My Neph, my savior, springs over me and cuts the throat of my would-be assassin. Then, deftly flipping over his shoulder, she drags him to the ground and cuts the throat again transversely. Arc of blood follows the knife like a slo-mo holo.

"You're with me," she says, her gray hair lit by the implants in her forehead. She scoops me up off the grey pile carpet and drags me toward a side door. On the way out, I spy Tivka grabbing cover behind the marble cover of a potted plant. Her knife's out, but she's brought it to a gun fight.

I don't know why I do it, but it just happens. The Neph has a good hold of me, but she's got other targets on her reticle. That gives me a second to slip out of her grasp, take the Kaltoran's hand, and pull her along with us.

The Neph doesn't like that. She doesn't like that at all.

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"She's not on the menu." The Neph says, eyeing Tivka.

"She's got a name. Tivka." The Kaltoran smiles and flips her dreadlocks over one shoulder. The emergency lights are on, bathing us, and the hallway, in a menstrual glow.

"Yema," she says, busy doing something to the biogun on her arm. It kinda looks like she's burping a baby, but much more intimate. I think she's reloaded.

"Well, Tivka. You keep up or I'll cut you Achilles tendons and leave you here."

"I thought you Gamma's were supposed to be the relatable ones?" Tivka says.

"I'm something special," Yema says. "And I'm only here for him."

"I must be special too."

"You're not," they say in unison, like they've done this before.

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I asked questions on full auto as Yema led us down the hall. A calm, chipped voice came over the hotel's speakers telling us to remain calm, that everything would be OK. Clearly not the case. We're not running, but pretty close. When we get to the elevator, Yema thumbs it down. When the doors open I move to step in, but she pulls me back. She flings something that looks like a polyp into the open car and thumbs it down again.

"We're taking the stairs." It isn't until the fifteenth floor that I get a chance to ask again just what the hell is going on. And that's just how I say it, through wheezing breath. The cigarettes aren't carcinogenic to us, but they still make a flight of stairs rough.

"You're what's going on. They want you."

"Gathered that, thanks." Tivka looks at me with what might be a sliver of more respect. "Why me though?"

"Cause you're so pretty," Yema says. "You don't need to know. Move."

I should, but it's just not in me. We're designed that way, now. Used to be obedient, but if you make it into the executive class you get a little tweaking. Think for yourself tailored genetics. "No," I tell her, surprising myself almost as much. Yema and Tivka turn.

"Now."

I shake my head and fold my arms. Childish, but it works. I've

done this in meetings. Seriously. I know people. I know how they think. This will piss Yema off just enough to-

"I didn't get implanted with combat memories to save your little shit ass only for you to say no," Yema says.

"Combat implants?"

She winces, having said more than she was supposed to. Having tipped her hand.

"What kind of memories are your friends running?"

"Not friends. They're empties. They have no memories."

"But you all have implanted memories, right? You're really, what, three years old?"

"Shut up."

"She's got generations of memories in her head," I say, pointing at Tivka. "I don't see how they run on no memories."

"That's why they're violent... and why they're easy to buy. You satisfied now?"

I nod. Tivka hides a smile.

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"Unbelievable," the Yema says as she looks up at the chasm of empty building above us "The specs showed these floors were completely intact!"

She swears in that not-quite language, not quite code the Nephilim speak.

"It does. Or rather it did," I say. "Until last week. We gutted the whole thing. We're going to put in luxury suites."

The look in Yema's eyes is meant to kill.

"You have rope?" Tivka asks Yema.

"Have monoline. Not going to help though. Nothing to hang it on to."

"I'll find something. Give it to me," Tivka holds out her hand.

"Just give her the damn line," I say.

More eye-death coming from Yema. "Yes, sir, Milo, sir."

"Better," I say. She wants to hit me. I know she does. No one can press buttons like a Corp. It's literally in our training manuals.

Tivka glides up the sheer surface with impossible speed and



grace. They must have plugged some wall-crawling DNA into their gene-pool. I haven't ever seen anything like it. Soon, she's out of sight. A moment goes by, then another.

"Your girlfriend ditched us."

"Nonsense, I read people too well for that." Her eyebrow arches. She's right, Tivka ditched us.

"Coming down!" The monoline catches the light falling through a synth-steel window. For a moment it is visible, at least to me. Yema could probably see it all along. Special eyes.

She snakes a hand out, grabbing the invisible line. "Can you climb better than you walk stairs?"

"Sure. Let's go with that."

She rolls those special green eyes back in her head. "Then hold on, Milo."

Her muscles tense as she spiders her way up the line. She's got some of that femme fatale about her. I know Gammas, they aren't quite designed like her. She's been optimized for combat. I wonder how many of the others below were as well. And who implanted her memories?

Like she can read my thoughts she says, "You trying to figure me out, Milo?" We're about halfway up to where Tivka secured the end of the line.

"You're a new model." I'm hanging around her neck like an albatross. That's a human expression, I'm told. I don't know where I picked it up.

"Not new. Modified. Operations. I still have most of a Gamma's memories. They just had to dump some for the combat core."

"Let me guess, empathy?"

"You're funny, Milo."

She hauls me over a ledge I couldn't even see from below. Tivka has already forced open the door here. Once, it might have led to the stairs. Hard to tell now.

"You know what's different about us, Milo?" Yema gives me that hard stare. "Nothing. Your creators screwed you over same as mine did."

She has a point.

We go through the door and into the hall.

The carpet squelches under our shoes, swamp-like.

"Why me?" Persistence, a sales technique you use on certain

personality types. Yema's isn't hard to figure out. She's quick tempered, impatient. Not enough implanted memory to have learned temperance.

"I didn't come for you." Before Yema can finish, Tivka falls into a crouch. Yema follows.

"But you intervened..."

"Didn't know it would be you. Just a Corp. Had to wait for the empties to make the first move. Now shut up." The biogun comes out of her arm like something being born.

"Whose using the empties?"

Her finger against my lips, hard. Her eyes flaring.

An elevator is rising up from down the hall. I guess we didn't gut everything.

Tivka whispers. "Sorry you can't see in the dark, Milo." The elevator dings. We either go forward or down. The rooms are gutted. There's no cover.

"Kill the lights." And Yema does, the biogun burping out shells of bone at the emergency lights.

"Won't they be able to see in the dark too?"

"Let's hope not," Yema says.

She takes out the last light, and I'm in darkness. Darkness like the way this entire night has been going. I hear grunting and the wet sounds of flesh hitting flesh, the burps of the bioguns. It's over in less than fifteen seconds, then someone's grabbing my arm. I twist away. Even I've had a basic combat course.

"It's me Milo. Tivka."

"Be my eyes, darling?" I ask. I can't see anything. I don't like being out of control. Not in our nature. Well, not anymore.

"You don't quit." Tivka says. That's true. I don't, unless I've been outmaneuvered or out negotiated. Then, it's time to change tacts.

Yema is tending a wound on her leg.

"You alright, Yema?" Tivka says. There's real concern in her voice.

"Wait, you two know each other, don't you?"

They both look at me. "Time for a rest, Milo."

The toxins that they shoot me with are absorbed through the skin. I wonder, when did Tivka get a gun? Then it's lights out for Milo.

\*\*\*

White light. Blinking it away, but it won't go. I'm on some sort of bed. Tivka's there, her face fuzzy with the drugs they doped me with.

"Sorry, Milo. Had to be sure. Can't trust a Corp. Thought you might try to play one of us against the other."

I move to sit up, but I'm strapped on the bed. "You're seriously taking me hostage? My Corp isn't going to pay you ransom. I'm not high enough up."

Tivka laughs. "That's cute. You actually thought you'd be worth ransom for a second, didn't you?"

I did in fact.

"Milo, you're unique, but you don't even know why. You've got human DNA. Half a strand or something. I don't understand that stuff. Yema does. Someone is collecting Corps like you. Vagarti were one of the first created by the Archons and you were, partly, created in their creator's image."

"I don't follow you."

"Someone's try to reverse engineer a human from leftover DNA."

"Ridiculous. Where am I?"

"Our ship, the Styx."

I'm about to ask why when they brought me aboard a ship, but the walls scream as an alert sounds. Yema's voice comes over the comm, "We have trouble up here."

"Sorry, Milo," Tivka says, giving me a light slap on the cheek. "Got to run." And then she's gone.

I'm not worth a ransom yet, but I am an executive. We've had a course on situation like this. Remain calm. Figure out an escape. Have a plan. I palmed her knife when she bent over to kiss me. Silly girl.

During that course? Yeah, they implant us with tracking devices too, but Yema and Tivka probably don't know that.

\*\*\*

The Legion ship caught up to us on the outside of the system. Tivka and Yema haven't aligned to a lay line yet. I point this out as I enter the bridge, tossing Tivka her knife back.

"That's Legion out there. Contracted by us. You're out gunned." I smile.

"Slick, Milo. But you're still ours," Tivka says.

"Maybe. Maybe I'm my own. You say my DNA is valuable. I'm willing to sell it."

They look at each other.

"Yep, I'll sell my soul. You let me talk to the Legion, I'll convince them to leave. Then you tell me what's going on and what it's worth. And don't lie about money. I can always smell that."

Tivka raises her brows. Yema shrugs.

"You're soul, Milo? I didn't figure you for a theologian," Tivka says.

"I'm not," I say. "I'm a capitalist, that's why I'm getting seventy percent. That part isn't negotiable." I smile. "Open a channel to the Legion ship. I'll send them away in a jiffy. Then the three of us our going to have chat... deal?"

They look at each other and nod to me.

I love business; I really do.