

# The Cycle

## Origins

A novel by

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33410 words

# Disclaimer

This project is a love letter to Yager in the form of a fan-fiction novella of the now shut-down video game, The Cycle: Frontier.

This game was a dream come true for me. I remember the first time crouching in the shadows of a long hallway at Waterfall Labs just wondering when the storm would end and I could emerge once more to gather loot and extract with my full backpack. I remember a chill run up my spine as I heard a door slide open and saw a shadow move in holding a shotgun. I remember the figure stopping just a few feet away after realizing I was there. My heart pounded in my chest and my hands shook in those split seconds. I will never forget that moment when we both had each other in sight and gambled on who would pull the trigger first.

This novel was written with the exact same love and passion the developers had for this game while its servers were still online. It is my wish that Yager would once more bring this video game to life in its original form. I hope the story written in these pages brings their world to life with new faces and stories that beg for a full-length novel. One thing is for certain; you never know how good you have it until it's gone.

This novel is a wish upon a distant dream to take us back to Fortuna III.

From a broken-hearted Prospector, fortune favors the bold.

Forever a fan, J.M. Topp

PS: The Voltaic Brute is my favorite weapon ever to exist in science fiction, ever, of all time, and you can't change my mind. I would *actually* take a Voltaic Brute over a Lightsaber, bite me.

# Prologue

The campaigns depicted in the original run of The Cycle: Frontier video game occur during a time of relative peace, believe it or not. Prospect Station, the hub-satellite in geosynchronous orbit above the planet Fortuna III was once engulfed in bloody turmoil brought about by devious policy and unbridled greed. The two major corporations in control of the station, Koralev and Osiris, were at odds as to the direction and exploitation of the dangerous planet it orbited, often using blackmail among other methods of cruel corporatism that would result in wanton bloodshed.

The events described in this novella depict a time of extreme instability on the station and its planet, Fortuna III, before the more peaceful era, thanks to brave men and women such as Dr. Nicole Clarke, Russ Nehemiah Tex, and, despite what you may believe, Thorne. Yes, even *he* had a major role to play. This is their story.

I bid you, as Prospectors have been heard to say just before dropping onto the perilous surface of Fortuna in search of riches and glory, 'Fortune favors the bold.'

# Time To Punch In

"All vitals dark. Gone," said Nic, barely able to blink as she stared at twelve biomonitors rip lines on the holodesk. The heavy realization began to grip her throat and numb her tongue to the word *dead*. It all happened so fast. She ran the algorithms in her head step by step, but still came up empty. "Cloudy atmosphere blocked visuals, but I—my calculations—"

A heavy hand fell on the table in front of her. She could smell the tension in the air, or perhaps it was the old oak cologne from Russ. She breathed it in and closed her eyes. Nic did not wish even her corporate competition to see what she had just seen. Her back stiffened in her chair, the heavy cloak of defeat squeezing her shoulders.

"What the hell happened?" growled Russ Nehemiah Tex.

He stood at a good six-six and had broad shoulders and arms strewn with muscle that bulged beneath his brown button-up shirt. His brown mustache curled down toward his chin, and she could see it vibrate as he breathed in. His crystal blue eyes were bolted to the screens. The thin-strip blue tie was a stark contrast to his black suspenders that strained against his bulky frame. Three other Osiris staff members sat in the rows of chairs, staring at screens, each one sporting that perplexed look of insane disbelief. No mission on Fortuna III had ever gone so badly so fast.

"Get me Dr. Sullivan," barked Russ.

"Dr. Sullivan is away on a recon mission to the Roanoke Cluster. His assistant, Dr. Serge Gauthier, was left in his stead," said Nic, taking the headset off her face and letting it rest on her neck.

Three digits extended from both her wrists, adding her finger count to sixteen. She typed with incredible speed on the holopad, but it was useless. No matter how much she narrowed the search parameters, the data was the same. Dead was dead, no matter the number of probe scans. No matter the number of algorithm variations, there was nothing bringing the strike team back to life.

Russ swore under his breath. "You're telling me the person in charge of the foam-suit technology is that jellied spine of a man? And he wasn't even briefed on this mission?" Sweat

beaded on his brow, and he wiped it away in a quick and frustrated motion. "Twelve men are dead in the span of fifteen seconds! I want to know why their foam-suits failed. Were they shot out of the sky? What the hell happened?"

"Maybe we should have briefed Dr. Sullivan. I wonder what he would think were he here."

Russ shook his head. "Not even Emanuel knew about this expedition. It was meant to be Revellion clearance."

Silence squeezed the air like a vice seemingly filled with even the unwillingness to take a breath. To disturb the silence might mean to further incur the wrath of Russ. Everyone waited on his word with bated breath. Finally, he pinched the bridge of his nose and let out a deep sigh. "Scrub the transcript off the Osiris mainframe. Make a copy and send it to my desk, encrypted, please. No need for Koralev to find out about our prototype before we have a solution to this mess. Nic, with me." He stormed out of the control room.

Nic tapped a few commands into the display at her fingertips and then stood up, her fingers pulling back into her wrists to an even count of ten. She turned to the rows of men and women all in the same pasty white uniform with the symbol of the outline of Osiris plated green. Each one shared worried expressions on their faces. Despite the recent merger from the parent company Blue Star Ltd., every one of their faces was familiar and trustworthy. Even so, she could feel the tension in the room.

"Do as he says. The next twenty-four hours will be critical. Get eyes on the drop site and start scanning the surface. Check those grids."

"What grid do we focus on?" asked an acolyte.

"All of them."

"But the storm! It could take days before we re-establish comms to the surface," protested a young scribe. She was a relatively new, naive face. Prospect Station would fix that very quickly.

Nic shot her a piercing look. "We don't have days. Once the station, let alone Koralev, learns of our failed project, they will shoot us from the airlocks. From this point forward, Dr. Gauthier will be in charge of SpecOps. You will report to him."

"Dr. Gauthier has gone radio silent. We can't find him."

"Then find him. Time is all we have. Move. Now," she said as she grabbed a data-pad from her desk and left the room. She heard the other Osiris members shuffling their feet and seats to obey her orders. She ran down the long carpeted hallway to walk beside Russ, who walked with clenched fists away from the control center. They came up to a closed door, and he tapped his badge against the sensor, and the door slid open into a wide walkway. They were in the Commonway, a four-hundred-yard path that crossed the entire Prospect Station.

He craned his neck against his suspenders and pulled his Osiris badge off his chest, clenching it in his fist.

"You want to know what happens when you try to keep a secret on a station with less than a million souls?" he asked.

"The harder you keep it, the sooner everyone knows," said Nic, adjusting her ocular senses that made her eyes glow a soft yellow beneath them. She lit the data-pad up with her thumb and scrolled through lines of blue text.

"I get the irony, but right now we have no choice but to keep this entire operation as nothing more than a whisper. What would happen if Koralev learned of this technology?" growled Russ.

Nic looked up at him above her spectacles. "Koralev would suit their gunners with this tech and kill everyone on the station. They would do so without any risk whatsoever."

"You put it bluntly, but I think you're right. Gauteron is a paranoid mess, and his insanity will only get worse. He will be ruthless if he knows what we're doing here."

"I guess it's a good thing we can't get it to work just yet."

"That must be the silver lining."

"What's your plan, Russ?"

He stopped in his tracks just in front of a large viewport that stared down at Fortuna III as the sun began to poke its head over the horizon. Lightning streaked through, sprawling virulent storm clouds, spasming light like tendrils casting a greedy claw over the planet. Russ let out a heavy sigh and turned to Nic.

"I have to go down there."

"What?" she asked, a sudden panic overtaking the tone in her voice. "You can't."

"Someone has to fix this mess. I sent those men down there, and we have no clue why they're dead. It wasn't the storms, Nic. I was there when the first storms hit. Something else

happened that we didn't see coming. I have to know what it was. All this without letting Marie learn of this."

Nic swallowed hard at the thought of Admiral Marie-Elle Moineau, the fleet commander and only remaining asset of Blue Star Ltd that didn't become Osiris. Nic remembered the admiral in her final round of interviews. She was ruthless and by-the-book. She would be furious if she knew this mission had taken place.

"You didn't know the storm would knock their drop shields out. That has to be it, Russ. Marie would understand. Just give me forty-eight hours. The team can establish surface comms by then."

"We don't have forty-eight hours, Nic. If even one of them made it out alive, I have to find them. More importantly, if anything is left of their armor, we have to salvage or destroy it. If Koralev, or heaven forbid, the upstart mercenaries of the Independent Civilian Advisory (ICA) were to find it, fighting would break out on the station. I don't know about you, but I don't like the prospect of militant groups roaming around slinging bullets in such confined and pressurized spaces. Koralev would then become the least of our problems. I won't have Osiris be the reason this station is put at risk. We have to reach the surface and find them. I put nooses on all our necks and I'll be damned if I didn't do everything in my power to stop them from strangling us all." He tapped his temporal device behind his ear twice, and it beeped softly. "Em, Cole, suit up—"

"I'll go with you," Nic gasped as the fated words left her mouth, interrupting Russ's call to his strike team. She didn't know why she said that. To go down to Fortuna III meant your survivability dropped to nearly .7 percent. The planet was hostile almost in its entirety. There were plants that could kill you, and even worse, there were lizard monsters that had developed the taste and sense to hunt human flesh. That was not to mention the constant flash storms that were sudden, overwhelming, and incredibly destructive.

It wasn't always like that.

Long ago, long before Nic, a bright-eyed planetologist, arrived at Fortuna III, the surface was bustling with colonization. Hundreds of hab-cities had been established on the surface with the prospect of a home planet in the system bringing thousands of ships to orbit.

Then, everything went wrong. Cavalier storms erupted with such power and violence seemingly overnight, knocking out the comms and travel in less than twenty-four hours.

Colonies that were once the pride and crown jewel of the planet were reduced to electrified cinders. Thousands lost their lives or were abandoned in the chaotic uproar. The station took the remainder of the planetary population and had remained there for twenty years, much to the exploitation of Koralev.

Now, all that was left of the planet were abandoned outposts, and everyone who dropped onto the planet risked their very lives with each expedition. The only way to go down to the planet's surface was with a Koralev pass or risk banishment from the station. This didn't stop certain corporate interests on the station from sending their mercenaries to the surface to scavenge lost but deeply valuable technologies and items. All these thoughts ran through Nic's head, and to her relief, Russ finally shook his head.

"I need you here, Nicole," he said, resuming his walk through the hall. He was the only one on the station who called her by her full name. Nic heard the sounds of the central market of Breach Station as they approached the drop pod bay. "I need you to get me a planetary pass," said Russ.

"What?" Nic's heart leaped to her throat. "We've used our allotted passes. To ask for more, that's nearly impossible. Koralev would never allow it."

"There's no one I trust more than you to keep Osiris afloat here. You've been my faithful aide for the last three and a half years. I could think of no one else to do this job."

They entered the market as the sounds of deafening haggling and the hoarse voices of vendors drowned out any private conversation. The majority of the Prospect Station's population would pass through this side of the station at one point or another during the month. Osiris agents would frequent the market in search of items from the surface that would mysteriously find their way up. Though it was illegal to drop onto the surface unless a Koralev pass was given. This being the only faction allowed to go down didn't mean there weren't other interests in mercenaries and gun runners crazy or stupid enough to drop for anything they could get their hands on and smuggle back into the station. Their motto was typically 'No risk, no glory.' It wasn't uncommon to spot bodies on the surface belonging to such mercs after the storms had passed. Osiris tried their best to track the dead, but the toll was already in the hundreds of thousands. This was the very thing they were attempting to correct. With Osiris technology, they could prevent any more lives from being claimed by Fortuna III.

The answer: foam-suit technology.



The concept was that any and all kinetic damage would be absorbed by the shields. When the shields failed, the armor would take the brunt of any additional force. If that second precaution failed, any damage from any source that could potentially stop the heart would instantly trigger a flash reaction (activate in microseconds) that would, in a sense, encapsulate the wearer in a thick foam that bubbled up from reserves in the armor and create an impenetrable thermal shield around the wearer. Their internal organs would instantly cryosynthesize, thus stopping any internal hemorrhage and intrinsically cauterizing external wounds. Once the body frozen in foam was recovered, the final step of the armor's function would be for 'washout' at a de-foam station in an Osiris lab where proper medical treatment could be given. This would take out the risk of it all. This technology would save countless lives while extracting valuable resources off-planet.

Nic understood what was at stake and why it was so important to find out how the technology failed. They walked into an alley that led to a small section of the Osiris Armory. Russ tapped the code into a side panel, and a reinforced steel door slid open. They walked in, and Nic felt the rush of cool recycled air brush against her blouse and hair. Russ tapped the door shut, and the mechanism whirled as it locked behind them.

"Start by seeking an appointment with the Koralev Embassy representative and then find Dr. Gauthier. Catch him up to speed because I doubt that little rat is even awake right now. Lazy bastard," said Russ as he pulled open his locker, loosened his tie, and unbuttoned his shirt.

Then, he unzipped his slacks. He did so nonchalantly, removing every last bit of clothing, almost as if not realizing or caring that he was in the presence of his cohort. Nic gasped involuntarily and turned her back to him, her cheeks turning red, peering at him through the reflection of a screen door. Russ didn't even seem to notice his own nudity as he slid into a black bodyglove and zipped the middle up to his neck. Then, he grabbed a purple epic-tier chest armor and slipped it over his head, pulling it snug against his chiseled chest. He fitted a metal U-sling around his neck that covered both sides of his head, reaching down to his chin. He tapped his finger on a small panel on the collar of the chest-piece, and a soft purple hue flashed around his body and then disappeared. Nic finally turned around and cleared her throat.

His armor was slender and fit the frame of his body expertly. There were cuts and dents in the armor, which exemplified how battle-worn he was even before he arrived in this system. It wasn't even his first time on the planet, as he was one of the few rangers of Osiris who had

successfully made it off-planet with more than ten successful drops. If anyone could find and extract the technology lost on the planet, and find out what the hell happened to the strike team, it was Russ.

He grabbed a KOR-47 rifle and peered down his custom red dot sight. The weapon itself had an orange body, a modified hair-trigger, and an extended barrel guard, giving the weapon a sleek and dangerous look. Though of Koralev make, it was difficult to argue against using the most battle-tested weapon on the dangerous surface of the planet. He slung the rifle over his shoulder, gave Nic a tired look, and let out a sigh.

"We cannot wait for the pass approval. I have to be down there now."

"You can't go without it, Russ. You'll never be allowed back on the station!"

"That's why I'm placing my life in your hands, Nicole. The lives of Em and Cole as well. We're counting on you." He put his hand on her shoulder as he said this, but only more dread unraveled her waning confidence even further as he let out another heavy sigh.

"Ever since you arrived here, you've had ideas on how to improve Osiris from within. It was even your idea to build de-foaming stations. No one has ever listened to you or given you credit, but now you have the chance to make a difference. I need your help."

"I'll do my part, Russ. You can count on me," said Nic as she clicked her heels and gave a crisp salute.

"I know I can. You saved my life a while back. You know I won't forget it. Do for Osiris what you did for me."

Two heavily armored rangers approached from behind, and Nic recognized Cole in his bulky red-tier exotic armor holding his own Voltaic Brute with a blue and gold pattern spray-painted along the length of the barrel. His coffee colored skin was a complementary contrast to the armor, and the handsome jawline accentuated the raven black of his pupils. Nic had always found him incredibly attractive. His eyes were hard, as was his chin, and he didn't even look at her as he passed.

Behind him walked Em in her slender purple-tier armor and her short-cropped silver hair. The armor itself complemented the slender curvature of her body, but on her back was a long white rifle known as a Basilisk, a repeater sniper rifle. The rifle was a kinetic material accelerator, not so dissimilar from a Gauss rifle, and Nic had only seen the weapon a handful of times.

Shivers ran up her spine as she saw Em glance at her casually, peering at her with gray eyes beneath her silver hair, and walk beside Russ. She sniffed and scowled as she pulled a holo-disc from her belt, switched it on, and scrolled through the feed. They were looking at drop spots on a holo-map.

Russ nodded at his strike team and pressed his hand on a panel beside a massive steel door. The doors slid open with a sudden *shring* that made Nic take a step back. Behind the door rested three conical shock pods with rounded tops sporting marshal stars on the doors. Em and Cole walked to their pods and each pulled a lever, which opened their respective pods.

The pod light turned green, allowing them entry. The other two rangers climbed in and pulled the pod doors shut. Finally, Russ put his hand on the lever of his own pod and looked at Nic.

"Time to punch in, kid." He climbed into the pod, and the door slammed shut with a hiss. Suddenly, the thrusters coughed to life, and a hot wind blew against Nic as the blast doors opened and shot the pods down, engulfed in flames, to the upper atmosphere of Fortuna III.

# Field Research

Three pods tore through the clouds in the lower atmosphere and slammed into the dirt, leaving behind three thin trails of white smoke that dissipated slowly in the calm winds. Russ was the first to break from his pod, but the other two emerged from their pods, shields activated, weapons ready.

"We go com-less. Keep in radar perimeter heading on ping," said Russ as he pressed a small hardcover key on the second joint of his pointer finger.

A white upside-down triangle pinpointed the heading he would lead his team, and Cole and Em both indicated their understanding with two green circles that appeared at the bottom left of his HUD. The team moved as one unit with Russ leading the way.

To call the heat on the surface of the volatile planet intense was a massive understatement. Even in his temperature-regulated bodyglove, he could feel the sweat eek from his skin to be recycled for cooling. The joints of the bodyglove felt slippery in his movements, and for every twist of his torso, he could feel moisture on his lower back. He couldn't imagine being on the surface of Fortuna III without a regulated bodysuit. Bars of sunlight cut the canopy of green and purple overhead like luminously sharpened pylons. The canopy of trees itself was massive, almost covering 75 percent of the surface, and this place was no different.

The terrain was mountainous with lush green jagged hills adorned by crystal creeks. Trees the size of skyscrapers, Mincap purple-woods, if he could recall their species correctly, draped over the forest floor with thick oak arms casting a canopy of thick branches and jagged oval leaves overhead. It was, in part, the presence of this class of fauna that created such hostile environments on the surface of the planet to begin with.

This specific class of tree was unlike any he had seen on any other planet before. They had a tendency to vibrate. Their internal temperature readings would go as far as ninety-six degrees Celsius when excited, causing a massive temperature shift in the air. This instant creation of energy in the trees changed the ion composition of the ground the roots were entombed in. Powerful lightning strikes would destroy any and everything in the vicinity of these

trees during these random and violent flash storms, but what was most curious was that the trees not only absorbed the energy, they thrived on it.

It was unknown exactly what the alien titanic fauna used the energy for or even what caused them to shake violently in the first place, but the majority of the population found this out the hard way twenty years ago. Unlike Em and Cole, who were still children on Prospect Station in the infancy of the Blue Star Ltd. Exploration Fleet days, Russ could still remember the first storms that ravaged the planet. He was a cadet at the time and, when he glanced up at Prospect Station suspended in the sky, he remembered thinking how incredibly lucky he had been to escape.

Why would he throw that miracle away and risk the surface time and time again? Each drop on Fortuna III was a chilling reminder that gripped his spine with the simple yet demoralizing question: What if he could never return to the safety of the station?

He smiled with a grunt. That feeling would soon fade, and he would be back on station before long. First, he had a job to do.

Contact ping. It came from Em.

The rancid air seemed to intensify with the signal, and the team ducked as a swathe of alien flies buzzed over the sap of a nearby tree. Em's red marker appeared at the top of his HUD, shaking the stray thoughts from him. He brought his Kor-47 up to his cheek and peered through the red dot sight. Russ led the heavily armored strike team to overlook a ravine from which you could see a sprawling valley below.

He instantly spotted a blackened crater just a few meters away. The smell intensified, and he realized it was the stench of death and rotting flesh. A thin trail of smoke arose from the crater, and Russ motioned his team forward with weapons readied.

His helmet, if it could be called a helmet, was really just an ultra-thin metallic head brace that had circular joints from the jaw that wrapped over the chin. It wasn't so much a helmet as it was an instant invisible shield buffer to anything that moved as fast as a bullet.

"Attach suppressors. Switch to subsonic ammo. Keep ready to open fire and break. We do *not* hard engage." If anyone else had seen the pylon of smoke and been attracted to it, their subsonic ammo would make quick work of them, shields or no.

"We expecting Prospect company?" asked Em.

"Just be ready," said Russ.

Two green dots flashed in agreement as Cole attached a thin black suppressor to his Voltaic Brute and Russ slid a rectangular one to his rifle and locked it in place. Switching magazines, they placed their hypersonic ammo in their belts. In those few moments, Em scanned the horizon with her Basilisk sniper, keeping overwatch as was her role in the strike team. This all happened in one fluid motion in a matter of seconds that made Russ flush with pride. They were a well-oiled killing machine. They approached the crater without a sound as their gel-foam boot soles absorbed any sound made, either the crunching of leaves or the random stick.

Em held a heartbeat monitor to her wrist and then pinged it six times. The squad stopped. There were contacts in the crater.

Russ made a motion with his wrist above his head, and the squad split to round the crater to three crescent points. Six more pings this time, further along in the forest, looking directly at them. Russ's strike team had walked into a situation that had them surrounded. Even so, he didn't panic. Whoever was inside the crater had no idea they were there. With enemies on both sides, he had to see if it was ICA or Koralev, or another random mercenary group. Suddenly, Em turned and crouched.

"Russ?" she whispered, with obvious worry in her voice.

He and Cole both turned to see a pack of six purple raptors standing in front of them. They were still, obviously not expecting humans in their way. They had yellow streaks on their scaly skin that trailed from their red eyes all the way to their tails. The one in the lead was a taller creature with a more muscular frame and jagged front claws. It had a small, rounded horn protruding from the top of its nose.

Russ's jaw dropped when he saw that in its jagged mouth it held a severed arm. A glove was still attached to the wrist, but two of the digits had been torn off. There was a tattoo of a black claw on the wrist.

"Holy shit. That's Marquez," gasped Em.

"What's left of him," said Cole.

"They aren't going to attack unless we do something to them. Make a hole, let them pass, but keep your finger on your trigger," said Russ. "No eye contact and keep your heads low."

The strike team did as was instructed, as Em and Cole moved to the right and Russ moved to the left. The raptor-head snorted, lapped the limb in its jaws, and moved through. The other five raptors had blood caked on their snouts, followed by guttural snarls and snapping their

jagged teeth, but none made a move for them. The strike team held their trigger discipline as the pack moved off into the forest until they could no longer be seen. All contact pings evaporated into a thick fog that began to descend over the area.

Once they were gone, Russ ran to the crater, followed by Em and Cole. Plumes of gray smoke sputtered from the wreckage of the dropship, and blood covered the floor like a crimson carpet. Several bodies and pieces of bodies lay strewn throughout the wreckage, with severed limbs and small fuel fires dotting the crater. The white armored sides of the shuttle were crumpled in the crash. The door had broken off, evidently, as it was nowhere in sight. Then, Russ saw blood streaks in the charred ground.

"If anyone was alive, they were dragged out and killed by those raptors," said Em.

"Let's hope for their sakes they were all killed on impact," retorted Cole.

"They were," whispered Russ as he saw the side of the shuttle sported a man-sized hole.

"They were shot down."

Em leaned over and dry heaved.

"Lock it in, Em. We're not done yet," said Russ. "Em, set up overwatch. Cole, you and I look for the flight-crown."

Em took in a deep breath and nodded. "I'm set." She crawled out of the hole to crouch on the edge of the crater and peered through her scope, sweeping the horizon.

Russ walked into the crumpled shuttle hold and had to crouch to climb into the broken hold of the drop ship. Severed wiring burst spewing sparks in random patterns, and the stench of burned flesh and hair permeated the hold like a fog, not to mention the fuselage that carpeted the floor mixed in with the carnage of what was left of his team. Congealed blood stuck to his boots and knees as he crouched, walked past a mangled corpse, and saw that her face was cold blue, her eyes frozen in a permanently shocked look. He remembered this operative's training on the Osiris outboard training spaces and felt a succinct sadness grip his throat. He couldn't for the life of him remember her name, though. Cole crouched behind him, searching through the wreckage. Then he saw the pilot's flight-crown.

Russ grabbed the microchip and snapped it in half.

"We have to burn what's left," he said. "Bring all the armor into the shuttle. We have to burn it all before Koralev sends someone to salvage."

"You know we have the same foam-suits, Russ. Will it fail for us as it did for these dudes? I mean, they're still prototypes, right? Is there a way we can be sure they work?"

"They're missing something to work consistently. For now, let's hope they work, Cole. There is a secondary part to this mission I have been holding from you two until now. I needed to get to the wreck first."

"Is there a reason you're not telling us until now?" asked Cole.

"Let's burn this and I'll tell you what I know."

"I got something," said Em, breaking up the conversation. "Looks like someone knew the strike team was dropping on planet."

Russ turned to Cole and gestured them out. Once outside, they saw Em standing at the edge of the crater holding Basilisk stock on her hip and something white with char marks in her other hand. She held a spent shell in her hand. She turned it over and tossed it to Russ, who caught it single-handedly.

It belonged to a missile.

"Someone knew the time and place the mission was to take place," said Cole. "Someone knew exactly when the ship would drop."

Em's face went white. "We have a leak on station?"

"Who knew the exact coordinates of the drop?" asked Cole, letting his submachine gun fall on his neck by his sling and putting a leg up on a broken piece of hull plating.

"Dr. Gauthier," said Em.

"That's who I was thinking, too," said Cole with a sneer. "That bastard always gave me the creeps."

"I'm gonna skin him alive," said Em. Russ tossed the spent missile casing to the ground.

"Now we know what happened and there are no survivors, what's next?" asked Em.

"If Nic has done her job, we go back to the station tomorrow and try Gauthier for treason. God help the admiral. She's gonna be the one to have to deal with this," said Cole.

Russ grabbed the upper half of a chest rig. There was still part of a severed human chest within. He threw the chunk onto the wreckage as Em did the same, bringing in a helmet, which was luckily enough empty, and threw it on the pile. Before long, the wreckage was decorated with broken pieces of Osiris armor tech. Then, he pulled an incendiary grenade from his belt. He



pulled the pin and tossed the explosive onto the wreckage. A soft *pop* went off, no louder than the crackling of the electric fires dotting the crash site, and spread chemical fires over the area.

Russ stepped back as the heat intensified and then stepped from the crater. He helped Em up and pulled her beside him.

"GGs," said Em. "Mission accomplished. Let's get to extract and wait for Nic to get us back to the station."

"We're not going back to the station. Not yet, anyway."

"Shouldn't be too long before Nic gets the passes—"

"You didn't hear me."

Silence cut through the air as Em and Cole stared with bated breaths at their leader. Russ let out a sigh. "The mission was to scuttle the site and make sure it didn't fall into enemy hands."

"Right," said Em. "That much is done."

"Russ said that was only half the mission," grunted Cole. "Bastard has been holding out on us."

Em's eyes opened wide and, had she any words, they had fallen to the ground at her feet as her mouth remained agape. Even Cole was visibly confused and pissed off. Russ had to commend him; he was controlling himself pretty well.

"We have worked together for many years, us three. I know you and trust you with every fiber of my being," said Russ as he gazed up at Prospect Station.

"Russ? What are you *not* telling us?" asked Em, finally finding something to ask.

"You need to trust me."

"Twelve Osiris agents are dead. Did you know this would happen?" asked Cole slowly through his teeth. Russ could hear the frustration in his words. He let out a sigh.

"As I spoke to Nicole just before we dropped, I received a Revellion-level briefing from Dr. Sullivan," he said as he brought his wrist-holo and showed it to his two operatives. The words in the message were encrypted, but with a single flick of his finger, the words became recognizable. It was two sentences, and they read: ***While you're on the surface, please go to these allotted coordinates. I trust you will know what to do when you see it.***

"See it? See what?" asked Em.

"I don't know."

"Where do the coordinates lead?" asked Cole.

"They lead to a place called Tharis Island."

# What a Tool!

Nic blinked her eyes, though she knew she didn't need to. Perhaps it was a force of habit to try to fool herself into thinking her eyes were still real. Well, the same biological ones she was born with anyway. She adjusted her mechanical pupils to the dim light within the E-Tramway to the Embassy Block. She rode alone on the seedy tramcar and lifted a cigarette to her lips, took a long drag, and allowed the synthetic lungs within her chest to absorb the chemicals in the smoke. The bittersweet taste filled her mouth, and she glanced at the decal of the cigarette between her fingers.

*Pascquier.*

The letters were written in elegant bronze cursive along both sides of the gray filter. The smoke had an oaky taste that washed into the receptors of her mouth and tongue. Instantly, a feeling of relief and quaint calm draped over her like a warm blanket as nicotine shot through her systems and bloodstream. She closed her eyes and allowed the smoke to escape her nostrils, forgetting only for a moment the impossible task at hand. She would have to remember that cigarette brand, she thought to herself as she thumbed the mouthpiece, dropping gray ashes into an ashtray on the armrest.

This time on the station was a low tide for the flow of people in the Embassy Block. The tramcar was relatively empty, and Nic was accompanied by a group of youths who paid her no interest on the far side of the tram, and a stranger in a black pilot jacket hunched up to a window, apparently asleep. His hat was low on his face, and she decided he was no one to be concerned with. Just another stranger making his way through Prospect Station. She blinked her eyes once more. Perhaps there was dust on the external sensors of her eyelids.

Nic caught her reflection on a black display that was switched off or, more likely, had malfunctioned, and like many things on the station, was in desperate need of repair. Her short, ear-length hair was colored silver white, the same color as her own Osiris jacket. Watching her reflection, she realized the honey-yellow glow of her slanted eyes was a tad too strong for the light in the tram. Wanting to avoid attention from any passenger, she lowered the glow. No need

to advertise her millions of K-Marks in synthetic upgrades—or, what most people on board the station referred to people with augmentations as, *sweets*.

An individual who was more than 50 percent augmented was considered sweetened, something that Nic certainly was. It was considered a derogatory term in certain elite circles for people like her. To Koralev, who made most of the rules on the satellite station, sweetened people were generally taboo. Fortunately for her, Osiris didn't feel that way at all. In fact, in many ways, Osiris encouraged self-sweetening. Just another example of how sometimes the two powerful forces were at odds. Russ had found usefulness for her at Osiris SpecOps, and she was forever grateful. Despite her sweets, her hand shook. She grabbed it with her other hand to settle her nerves. Despite her augmented stomach, she could feel it turn into a synthetic knot. What she was headed into was almost as impossible as Russ's own task and could prove equally dangerous. Making a wanton request of Koralev always carried a risk, and *this* request arguably was the riskiest. It could blow the whole thing to pieces.

The tramway slid to a sudden screeching halt, shaking Nic's thoughts. She took one last drag of her cigarette, stood up, and put it out on the armrest. She slipped into her jacket, draping it over her shoulders and snapping the steel clasps together at the breast. Taking a glance at herself in the black viewport display, she ran her fingers through her hair to one side. She pursed her mouth, and the flesh color on her lips turned crimson to emulate sharp lipstick. Black eyeliner appeared on her eyelids, and the lashes of her eyes extended ever so slightly. With merely a thought, a tint of blush appeared on her cheeks. She silently smacked her lips, grabbed her steel-white briefcase, and made her way out of the tramway into the Embassy Block.

She marched down a walkway that was covered in an oval glass protective shielding from which she could see the entire flank of Prospect Station as well as the Half-Moon docking ports. Three or four smaller battle cruisers, now retrofitted and welded into the station itself, with the insignia of the once renowned Blue Star Ltd, had been purchased and became a hab for the upstarts at ICA. Most ships that had brought settlers and colonists to the planet had been deconstructed and made into an amalgamation of homes for the refugees from the surface of Fortuna III. It took too many K-Marks and fuel to keep them operational in orbit, let alone leave the system. All contact was lost outside the Artery systems, and it was just as dangerous to try to leave as it was to try to make Fortuna III home. For most, it was the better of two evils type of situation.

Nic followed a red velvety carpet on the floor and noticed a different docking port for the refugees in coach far below, closer to the belly of the station. Men, women, and children wrapped in rags and rugged clothing stepped from the ship, hobbling onto the dock. It was difficult to believe, even now, five years later, that Fortuna III was still giving up refugees from the surface. It was hard to tell if they were lucky or not. Something tugged at her, and it was indeed the latter. She stared at them through the glass shield as she walked.

Then, she entered the Embassy offices.

Mercenaries, pirates, and looters of all stations and ranks lined the office lobby, sitting on synthetic cubit chairs that were intentionally designed to be uncomfortable, creating back and neck pains. The idea was that those who sat in them too long would be forced to stand and perhaps leave the Embassy Block behind. Of course, back and neck pain are nothing compared to the miraculous luck one could attain by possessing a planetary pass. For some, it was worth it even if there was a crumb of a chance.

This truth permeated the minds of the present crowd, who, when they caught sight of her jacket and Osiris insignia, turned to a frown. They knew she would be trouble.

They were right. Nic made a beeline for reception.

"I have an appointment with Koralev Commissioner Nilman."

The receptionist was a rather tawdry woman with thinning black hair pulled into a bun. She had a sweetened eye and a skull plate with two bolts, but everything else on her body sagged. She peered at a data sheet with her bionic eye and then, without turning her head, flipped her eye up to look at Nic. To say she was unsettling would be understating her visage. For much longer than Nic would have liked, the receptionist stared at her. Finally, with a heavy sigh, she pursed her lips.

"Take a number."

"I don't think you understand. I made an appointment. I am an Osiris agent, and I have top clearance. This is an emergency meeting."

"Take a number."

"Please, make this easy on yourself—"

"Number," said the receptionist, her tone of voice never wavering from the rehearsed monotone statement. Something snapped in Nic, and she clenched her fists and felt a hotness collect at the nape of her neck. Then, the door slid open and a man left the office room, red-faced

and nearly slamming into her in his departure. Nic peered into the room in that split moment and spotted the commissioner. Nilman was a pompous peacock of a man, his suit finely pressed into the Koralev colors of orange and black.

Nic glanced at the receptionist. "Screw this."

"What are you doing? You can't just go in there!" shouted the receptionist after her, but it was too late.

Nic stormed into the commissioner's room. A hulk of a man sat in a leather chair to her left, shirtless, with a leather jacket, smoking a pipe with his nose in a book. The man was heavily sweetened with augs Nic had never seen before, yet the man sported brown frame glasses as he peered into the letters on the pages. He didn't even look up to acknowledge Nic, but she knew who he was. She had heard a lot about him.

Thorne. The deadliest man on the station. How Nilman had acquired his bodyguard services would forever vex her, but at the moment, she had more pressing matters. Thorne never even looked up. She brushed past him and slammed her hands on Nilman's desk.

"I need a planetary pass."

"Oh, do you?" asked the man, a smile spreading on his face. "Did you not see everyone in that lobby? What do you think they are here for?"

"I represent Osiris, and we are on the verge of a technological breakthrough that would allow us to explore Fortuna III risk-free."

"Risk-free? What is it with you science types who are always on the verge of a breakthrough achievement? Look! We made a drug that can cure all diseases and mend all bones with one injection. Look! Look! We made a bullet that, instead of killing you, brings you back to life! Haha! What is honor without risk? Please, don't make me laugh. See yourself to the back of the line."

"We could save lives."

"What interest does Koralev have with Osiris? What did you say your name was again?"

"I didn't say. My name is Dr. Nicole Clarke. As I said, I am a high-ranking officer of Osiris."

"Ah, you are feisty, aren't ya?" said Nilman, who then leaned forward, placing his elbows on the table. "What's the name of your boss? The one that looks like he could be a Viking of millennia-yore? Ross?"

“Russ, and that Viking-man is the one who sent me here. I need this pass.”

The man shivered in his suit, his gold necklaces wrangling against each other. “Look, I could give you a planetary passport, but what use would that do me? You see, I control all personnel import and export through this station to the surface. This tech that you are testing for Osiris, if it were to come from me, I could be set up for life if you told me what it is. I could save us all the trouble of a no-fire contract for each and every one of you. The same effect would be applied to you *and* I could guarantee no one would bother you in your drops to the surface. That is truly what Osiris wants, isn't it? To be able to run their tests without anyone bothering them. What is this technological breakthrough you speak of, if it is indeed as you say, real?”

No chance in hell she would give that up.

“A planetary pass will suffice,” said Nic, shaking her head. “I know your kind. You wouldn't honor this *no-fire* contract. Your kind would find a way to exploit Osiris and push us off the surface.”

“What little faith you have in Koralev. Maybe this is why most people don't like you Osiris types. We have improved the quality of life here at Prospect Station. Most know which palms to grease.”

“Do not appeal to my morals. You claim progress through inclusion, but throw us to the wolves the moment we have ceased your usefulness.”

“It's good to know what you really think of Koralev. May I ask, is it usual for you to bite the hand that feeds? We fund your programs and security. Trust me, if we had another option for medical, we would have already hired them and pushed you out. Do you think your division is special?” asked Nilman. Even so, his smile never faded, and there was a twinkle in his eye that made Nic recoil in disgust. “I like your tenacity. You should work for me. I would pay you three times as much as you make at Osiris.”

“I could never work for you.”

“No? I know Osiris pays you scraps for the work you take on. In comparison to the *risk* you take on.”

“What is honor without risk?”

“Ha! Well said!” He giggled and clapped his hands.

“You are required to give any Osiris agent who requests a planetary pass a signature. That is all I need, and I'll be gone.”

“Osiris has an allotted twelve passes per planetary year, which you have already used up. You should learn to use them more sparingly to avoid confrontations like this. You have come to me empty-handed with only demands. Why should I consider your proposal? Next time, don't come with just hot smoke. It's a waste of time.”

Nic folded her arms over her chest. "I'm not leaving without one."

Nilman chewed his lip and then looked up at her. "I could think of a way you could entice me.”

“What do you mean?” This look she definitely didn't like.

“Ah, not so sharp all of a sudden. You know what I mean. The previous offers of *no-fire* are off the table after such nasty insults. If you want your planetary pass, meet me at Hotel Mika on Block O. You should wear a red dress. I like pretty women like you in red dresses. Other than that, there is no way in hell I will give you a signature.”

”You can’t do this. This is extortion!”

“No one cares, Nic. Haven’t you learned? The only opinion that matters is that of Koralev. You Osiris bastards are on the way out. Soon, it will be us running security, medical, and research on the station *and* on the planet,” said Nilman. He stood up, walked from the desk, and put both his hands on her shoulders. He began to rub them. “Don’t get me wrong. I’m not trying to hurt you. I’m trying to give you a lifeline. You would be wise to take it and leave your sinking ship.”

Suddenly, a series of shivers ran up and down her spine, and she wrestled herself from his grasp. She walked past Thorne, who, for all intents and purposes, was completely absent, lost in the pages of his book. Once again, he didn't even look up. Nic glanced at him as she spoke back to the commissioner. "I will be back, Nilman. You'd better have that pass ready."

"You know where to find me," he said as the door slid shut behind her.

The receptionist scowled as Nic passed her, but she paid no attention. Her face was red, and it wasn't the sweets, either. With clenched fists, she left the Embassy, her eyes a bright hue of furious yellow.



# A Whole New Ecosystem

Russ led the team out of the crater and off to the edge of the treeline and up a hill overlooking the valley and the burning ship in the crater. Now the smoke was rising black, and they couldn't remain nearby for very long. They walked a few feet into the shadows amid towering trees and stopped a few feet further as Russ flicked his wrist-holo and a blue map sprang at his face. He pointed at a small dot on the map. Cole set his SMG on his hip, and Em touched her flashlight attachment on her Basilisk nervously. They weren't used to being in the dark about a mission.

Too bad.

"Tharis Island is a few miles off the coast. I have a contact in the Arkenwulds that can take us there," said Russ.

"Arkenwulds? Those long-eared bastards typically stay the hell away from Prospectors. In fact, I can't say I've heard of any actually lending help before filling you with holes. They hate our guts. What the hell have you been up to to find one to help us, Boss?"

"Cole, don't you get tired of always being the Boy Scout? Always playing by the rules? Look, I know I've kept you both in the shadows about all this, but I promise it is for your own good. The less you know, the better. Look, it doesn't have to be all this way. The Arkenwuld, her name is Oakley. I've known her since I was a child. She's strange and definitely dangerous. Do your best to be on your ship-shape behavior with her."

"The hell you callin' Boy Scout?" grumbled Cole under his breath, but Russ must not have heard it because he simply turned back to the holo-map. Then, Em shifted in her boots, and another ping turned his attention to three o'clock.

"The raptors are back?" asked Em as she shouldered her Basilisk, but Russ knew it wasn't them.

He followed Em's direction, and all three aimed their weapons at the contact. A line of seven men, geared with rifles, battle-gear, and shield emitters, emerged like wraiths on the opposite side of the crater down in the valley. They peered into the wreckage and released a

drone that began to scan down what remained of the burning drop ship. Russ figured it was only a matter of time before someone else on the planet decided to check the plumes of smoke out. He magnified his scope.

"Holy shit, they're geared to the tits."

"Thanks, Cole," grunted Russ. He was grateful they decided to stop in the shadows of the treeline. They were totally concealed unless the mercs had thermals, which, by the looks of things, they didn't possess.

"That's ICA. Those stars on their weapons give away their identity. ICA is a startup industry corporation. Since when do they have agents geared like that?" asked Em.

"Since now, I guess," said Cole.

"That's not ICA and those aren't just agents," said Russ. "That's a mercenary death squad. They might be employed by ICA, but sure as hell ain't them. As far as we're concerned, they're just run-of-the-mill killers with licenses. Must have been hired on the station."

"How do you know that?" asked Cole.

"The symbols on their faces," said Russ, peering through his scope. Each of them had white paint on their flesh and white symbols that cut crude designs into their skin. Their mouths were peeled back to reveal their sharpened teeth. "These men are cannibals."

"Boss, you want to make them think twice about approaching us?" asked Em.

"Negative. The ship is burned, and they won't be able to glean anything from it. I won't risk exposing us for nothing."

"I guess the real question is what information was gleaned already before we got here?" asked Em. "Someone shoots the dropship down in outer-atmospheric transit, which in and of itself is a nearly impossible task, but then leaves the wreckage for raptors to scavenge? No, something isn't adding up."

"Unless whoever shot it down already took what they needed from the wreckage and didn't have time to scuttle the pod before the raptors came? Before we came?" asked Cole.

"So this is a wasted trip," muttered Em. "We risked our lives for nothing."

Russ grunted and then all three of them at once froze in their places. The crunching of leaves just a few feet away to their backs made Russ's arm hair stand on end. He turned ever so slowly to see a caravan of figures moving with slow intent directly beside them and passing them into the opening just beside the crater, completely oblivious to the strike team shrouded in the

bushes. They must not have seen the smoke of the crash site until they passed through the tree line.

"What the hell?" asked Em, in barely more than a whisper.

The caravan was made up of twenty humanoids garbed in stitched clothing. They walked in a synchronous line, carrying burlap packs filled with goods, and most had tools, pots, and pans, with the odd pickax or axe strapped to the side. These weren't fighters. These were Fortuna III's only surviving population. Their method of survival was to live as nomads, never staying in one place for too long. As scavengers and traders of the countless abandoned cities and villages. They arrived one hundred and fifty years before humanity did.

"Arkenwulds." Russ shook his head.

Their true telltale sign was that each of them had a more greenish tint to their skin with signature black blotches closer to the tops of their heads. Being a nomadic tribe, they were more scavengers of any tech left behind in the planet's expulsion of sentient life to Prospector Station. What really made them stand out was that their ears were elongated thirty inches from their head, like a cross between a rabbit and the elven of yore from stories and legends across the galaxy. They would twist bits of bone or metal into the tufts of fur that grew from the ends. As they marched, their ears swerved back and forth, almost in unison.

"Boss, if those ICA bastards see them—" began Cole, but it was too late. Russ peered through his reflex sight again to see a merc spot the tribe moving through the clearing. The leader of the Arkenwulds must have noticed something was off as they stopped their procession.

"Just leave them alone. Let the nomads pass," whispered Russ through gritted teeth, but it was not meant to be. The mercenaries surrounded the caravan and trained weapons on them.

"I know that look on your face, Russ," said Cole in a choked warning. "We can't stop this. Let's just leave. Don't expose us for nothing."

"We can't just sit and do nothing, Cole. What's wrong with you?" asked Em.

"It's not worth it. These Arkenwulds cast their die, and it's snake eyes. We have a mission to complete. It does not involve being saviors."

Russ said nothing.

Then, the carnage began. Almost in unison, the agents opened fire on the caravan. White fusion power spat from their weapons, spraying smoke and superheated carbon through the caravan. The one in the front, the leader, was filled with holes and was dead long before pieces

of his body fell to the soft ground. A few of the others tried to raise their crude projectile weapons, but they were no match for the ICA-backed cannibals.

Russ instantly felt a heat grip his neck, and he set his sights directly on the biggest agent's head and pulled the trigger. With a *fwoop*, the subsonic round ripped through the cannibal's shield and pierced the helmet cleanly, spewing out the other end, leaving a trail of blood in the round's wake. The merc fell to the ground dead.

"Goddamnit," spat Cole.

Russ heard Cole's submachine gun roar as chaos overtook the squad. No longer were they cavalier as they shouted at each other in search of cover in utter shock at being ambushed themselves, but there was not very much cover to go around. Cole's SMG rounds tore through shields into flesh, biting chunks from the mercenaries' armor and flesh.

Em said something, but Russ couldn't hear her over the *bark bark* of her sniper rifle. Suddenly, an explosion went off over their heads as a wave of dirt and bits of tree leaves and branches rained over them.

"Contacts left!" shouted Cole, turning to his nine o'clock and letting out a burst of superheated lead from his SMG.

A Mincap yawned overhead with a deafening moan that resulted in a terrible cracking sound as it leaned over them. Russ grabbed Em and brought her out of the way of the falling tree just at the last second. It fell with a rumble that shook the ground, spewing dirt and clumps of grass into the air. Russ heard Cole reload his rifle and continue his spray of fire with the gigantic tree between them. White hot rounds flecked overhead as the crater party approached from their one, pinning them down.

How had everything gone so wrong so fast?

Russ knew better than to allow himself to be flanked. He heard his heartbeat in his ears as he dropped an empty magazine to the ground and pulled a fresh one from his chest rig and slammed it home. He pulled the bolt back, racking a round, and brought the weapon to his cheek. This motion only took one second but to him it seemed like a damn eternity. He saw a red icon blink at the bottom of his HUD.

"That was an EMP blast. They knocked out our shields," he whispered. He turned to Em. "Pull back. We gotta get the hell out of here before we're choked out!" he shouted in between

bursts of gunfire. Em threw her empty mag and brought a fresh one in. He caught the look of fear in her eye. The cannibals were closing in.

"What the hell are we waiting for?" Cole shouted as he rounded over the top of the fallen tree. "Get up! Now!" He pulled Em by the shoulder and nearly tossed her on his back.

Russ covered their run, squeezing rounds into the underbrush. Then he heard a *tink tink* and something knocked him off his feet, and he fell hard into the dirt as clods of mud rained over and around him. Sounds were muffled, and he heard someone scream something, but it sounded like she was underwater. He tried to stand up, but his legs wouldn't respond to his commands. His vision was distorted and twisted, unable to focus on the black, rounded thing directly in front of him. He realized, as he squinted hard, that he was staring at the underside of a combat boot. No, it wasn't just any boot. It was his own boot. What was it doing in front of his face? Why was there still a leg bone poking up from it?

Russ moved to inspect himself when he realized he was staring at an amalgamation of blood, mulched flesh, and bone where his legs used to be. He gasped as he felt no pain, only pure disbelief. It was almost as if he squinted his eyes hard enough, he would cease to see this horrific mirage beneath his waist.

"Holy shit, Boss!" said Cole as he ran to his side. "You're chalked, man!"

Another explosion spewed clumps of rock and dirt over them, shaking Russ from his stupor.

"Get her out of here! Get back to the station!" he shouted.

"Russ?" whispered Em, tears in her eyes. "Oh my god."

"Do it now!"

"No!" she screamed as she found her voice.

"We can't leave him!"

"It's too late," said Cole. He let off bursts of gunfire into the dense greenery and then turned to Russ and pointed his Voltaic Brute, holding the red dot directly in between his eyes.

"I can carry you or get her out. I can't do both," said Cole, tilting his head. "You want me to make this easy?"

"Do it, you damn bastard. I'll see you on the other side," growled Russ.

"Nice working with you, Boss."

"No!" Em slammed into him just as he squeezed the trigger, and three rounds ripped into the forest ground.

"What the hell is wrong with you!?" snapped Cole, regaining his balance.

"Help me get him up!"

Cole grunted and slung his SMG over his shoulder as he and Em pulled Russ up between them. His guts hung around his knees. With a pained grunt, he went limp.

"See? He's a goner," snapped Cole.

"I don't care. We don't leave him," said Em. She grabbed a smoke grenade from her belt and pulled the pin with her teeth. Then, she spit the pin out and tossed the grenade behind her. An obtuse cloud of white smoke exploded behind her, and though they could hear the perpetual burp of gunfire behind them, the smoke gave them a few moments to find cover.

Cole grunted, knowing full well the cover would only last a few seconds. Once it was gone, they would be toast. He racked his brain for a solution, but nothing came up. He was about to toss Russ and run when Em spotted something hitting a waypoint in their HUD.

"Russ!" screamed Em.

Cole saw a figure in the tree line. Rounds flecked over his head, and he brought his sights up, squeezed the trigger, and saw his rounds puncture the battle-suit of a mercenary. He fell back, blood spewing into the air. Cole smiled cruelly.

Those mercs had been too close to the EMP blast themselves. Their shields were down, too. He quickly grabbed a mag with hypersonic ammo and, in one swift motion, dropped his subsonic ammo mag and drove the new one home. He pulled the charging handle back just as another merc charged him from his left, but before he could turn, Em filled him with bullets. Cole realized she had reloaded hypersonic ammo at the same time he did. He continued to run as fast as he could, carrying Russ's dead weight.

"Where to?"

"We have to get him off the surface if he wants to see another day," barked Cole.

"We won't get anywhere without a planet pass," said Em.

"Look!"

Then, as if in a dream, he saw a motorized cart. Cole's heart leaped up to his throat, almost too scared to blink, or the cart would totally vanish. It was a crude vehicle, more like a truck, stripped down to the bare necessities, having four wide wooden boards tied to the frame

just behind the cab that served as a makeshift bed. The engine was exposed, as was the cab. Even the bed didn't have any rails, and a large blue container was tied to the back of the cab. As they came closer, they realized it was gasoline.

"A combustion engine. Swear I haven't seen one of these in ages," said Cole as he single-handedly lifted Russ's unconscious body onto the bed of the truck. Em jumped up and pulled him back to the cab.

"Cole!"

He looked up the hill and saw the smoke begin to dissipate. Seven shadows emerged from the waning mist with rifles readied. Em brought her Basilisk up to her eye and fired three times. Two of them connected as headshots, the bodies of the cannibal mercenaries tumbling forward end over end like ragdolls down the hill. The others dispersed and began returning fire. Cole jumped into the driver's seat.

The key was in the ignition.

"What the hell kind of luck is this?" he gasped, wholly beside himself. He turned the key and nearly shit himself that the engine turned and sputtered to life. He fired off bursts of his SMG as he floored the gas pedal. The truck lurched forward, and Em held onto Russ's body as the truck flew down the cart path.

"There's a small hab called Green's Prospect about seven clicks from here. If we make it there, we can find a place to hide and wait these bastards out," said Em.

"Sounds like a good place as any," said Cole. Suddenly, his HUD lit up with sparks that sprayed onto his face. He screamed and tried to hold the yoke steady. The truck swerved, but he held it on track. Cole reached up and unlatched the strap to his helmet and yanked it off his head. He tossed the sputtering helmet to the ground.

"Damn," he said. Em looked back, seeing his bald black face looking back at her. One eye was completely white.

"Just get us out of here, Cole," she said as she cradled Russ's head in her arms.

"This mission is definitely FUBAR now."

# Dangerous Science

Nic stormed to the end of the tram station after having left the Embassy, but her fury had not dissipated in the slightest. She clenched her fists but then saw a shadow scurry after her from the corner of her eye. It was the same dude who had been slumped in the shadows of the tramcar when she arrived. Gathering herself, she walked to the darkest part of the tramway where a light had gone out on the furthest end of the platform. She turned the corner and stood in wait there as the footsteps of the man grew louder. Then, just as he was about to pass, she grabbed him by the collar and pushed him up against the wall. Though her primary sweets had been focused on a more clinical purpose, she had installed a retractable blade in her forearm that extended from the palm of her hand for just a situation.

She held the blade firmly against the man's neck.

"What the hell are you following me for, creep?"

The man simply smiled. He didn't beg or plead, he just smiled.

"I heard you back there, in the office, speaking with Nilman."

"Yeah? And what is it to you?"

"I am trying to keep a low profile. You see, I just arrived on station."

"You a refugee?"

"I am, but not from Fortuna III. I represent the Independent Civilian Advisory."

"ICA?"

The man reached up and removed his hat.

"I am Lucas. At your service," he said, flashing another smile.

Nic let the man go and retracted her blade back into her wrist. "Best piss off. I doubt there is anything we can do for each other. Your bosses don't have much pull on the station."

"Quite the opposite, actually. I wish there were more of you on our side of the corporation lists. There is a war coming to Prospect Station, and we all will be sucked into it if I don't do my job."

"I don't know what you are talking about."



“Perhaps you don’t have to hear it from me. I suggest you keep your appointment with Nilman.”

“You would like that, wouldn't you?”

“Believe me, you will want to hear what he says. Oh, but I do have one request.”

“Oh?”

“Wear a low-cut red dress. That is his favorite color. I don’t want the lamb to slaughter to see the blade. Oh, don't give me that look. You want your planetary pass to save your friends, don't you?”

Nic stifled a gasp. "How do you know?"

"The more you try to keep a secret on Prospect Station, the harder it is to keep."

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"Son of a—" whispered Nic as she stared at a reflection of herself in a mirror of her small apartment.

Her red dress revealed her voluptuous curves and accentuated her sensuality. She hated that it was for a roach like Nilman. Understanding her duty full well, she modified the blush level of her lips with a thought and made them crimson red, the same color as her dress. She wore sleek red stilettos and daydreamed of jamming them into Nilman's eye sockets. Somehow, Lucas had heard the conversation between her and Russ. He must have tailed them the moment she entered the markets or maybe sooner. It made her uneasy how long he had been watching her. Now, they were working together? To what end? What did Lucas, or better yet, ICA want with Nilman or with her? These questions rattled her brain, but she composed herself to face the facts.

Despite how repulsive she found Nilman, she needed him to play ball for the planetary pass. Whatever Lucas had planned, she hoped it was good. Trusting an ICA agent was something she never wanted or had to do, but she had a proverbial noose around her neck. No. She wasn't the one with the noose. It was Russ, Cole, and Em. She wasn't about to let them down. The fact that Lucas knew about them meant he definitely had access to things he shouldn't inside Osiris. Whether it was for the better or worse was yet to be decided.

She took a fur coat over her shoulders and, as soon as she had left the perimeter of Osiris staff quarters, drawing raised eyebrows from the sentry guard, she hailed a hover-cab and it braked hard just a few feet from her red stilettos.

“Block O, Hotel Mika,” she said.

Nic sat in the yellow taxi watching level after level pass by as the vehicle flew down through Prospector Station holeways designed for vehicular ease of passage through the satellite trade hub’s vast platforms. Each level had bright pink, yellow, and red neon adverts. One even had a holo of a woman garbed in some elaborate Eastern dress, dancing and slowly removing folds of a robe to reveal her nudity beneath. The cab smelled of old soda pop and cheeseburgers. The driver snorted and put a fizzy flat drink to his lips, slurping the black substance within. The cup ran a brand advert on the side with a discount on the next purchase, or something like that.

She tried to ignore the flashing holo. The cab driver’s lumpy flesh looked like it had at some point melted into the cracked and faded leather of his seat. He most likely hadn’t gotten out of his hovercar in a while, judging by the folds of fat on his body and stumpy arms. He had a pilot helm over his eyes and nose with a mess of cables connected to the core of the cab behind him. He chewed with his mouth open on stale fries from a box of takeout at least two days old. This class of cab had no pilot yoke, meaning that the driver steered the cab with his cephalic implants alone. Much to Nic’s relief, he kept his silence along the trip as he brought her to the destination.

She glanced out the grease-stained windows and huddled into her fur coat as the cab entered Block O. The driver banked the hover-cab down closer to the lower range of middling traffic of the platform and stopped the vehicle just above a hotel landing site. The cab hovered for a moment and then landed, the passenger door swinging open.

"Thanks," Nic said, instantaneously transferring several hundred K-Marks to the driver’s account.

The driver didn’t answer, again, much to her relief, instead shoved a mouthful of stale nuggets into his mouth and chewed loudly. She shook her head as she stepped out into the air-conditioned winds of the red light district. The cab door closed with a hiss, and the hover-cab raised itself back into the air and up to the traffic, en route to a new passenger.

Nic wrapped the fur coat over her body and walked to the entrance of the hotel. The hotel itself, with the bright neon sign reading The Miko Hotel, had recently been renovated, judging

from the smell of newness that greeted her as the glass doors slid open. An attendant wearing a fluorescent green suit with a bowl cut haircut bowed low.

"No thanks," she said, brushing past the attendant before he could say a word.

The heating units in the hotel worked efficiently as, by the time she reached the room number she was looking for, her fur coat began to bring too much heat to her body. Nic realized this was intentional. She opened the coat to rest over her arms and stopped by a door that blinked an orange symbol. Nic pulled her wrist-holo open, and the identical symbol flashed over her hand.

She saw a shadow on the far corner of the hallway and recognized the slim shadow of Lucas as he puffed on a Yayoon-stick, the burned red smoke escaping through his nostrils. His face was shadowed by his cap, but when he pulled on the stick, the end lit his sharp eyes.

She shuddered and knocked on the door. She heard footsteps on the other side.

"I was wondering how much the planetary passes would mean to you," came the sleazy voice of Nilman as the door slid open. He had his sandy hair falling over his forehead, and it was clear he had been drinking. His breath was wrought and instantly made Nic cringe back. His tie was loose, and he had lost his jacket somewhere. "Come in, don't be shy."

*What filth.* It took every ounce of control in Nic not to say that out loud. The hotel room was small and seedy. This was Block O. The last block before the lawless Block P and on, where Koralev and Osiris had no jurisdiction. Gangs and cartels ruled the blocks beyond where justice really came down to who had more K-Marks to spend or bullets to shoot. She glanced out a window and realized she was actually peering into the forbidden blocks. She couldn't see much of anything as a heavy fog perpetually hung over those blocks, but her thoughts were interrupted by Nilman sitting on the bed with a heavy sigh.

"Wow, you look incredible. The red really does bring out your sweetened eyes. Care for a drink?" he asked, gesturing to a group of bottles with bronze and clear liquid held within. *Any minute that Lucas will enter the room,* thought Nic. She glanced at the door, but nothing happened.

"You waiting on someone?" asked Nilman, looking past her. "You were smart enough to come alone, weren't you?"

"You sick bastard."

"Ah," said Nilman as he retrieved a pistol from between the covers. "You know, not everyone hates this. At first, maybe they fight it. Dignity and all that shit, but they all get to like it after a while. Some even beg for more."

The gun was of an older projectile variant, Nic noted, but she wasn't fast enough to draw her blade at point-blank range. She was fast but not faster than a bullet, even as sweetened as she was.

"On your knees," said Nilman.

Nic glanced at the door, but nothing. That bastard Lucas had sold her out to dry or was watching her like a creep.

"No one's coming for you. Not here."

"Shut up."

"What?"

"These planetary passes. I need three more."

"Three? Are you crazy? You're only getting one."

"Fuck that. I want three."

"What makes you think you're in a position to negotiate?"

"Maybe I don't fight you at all. Maybe I make it worth your while," said Nic. She let her purse down and brushed the fur coat off her shoulders, which fell at her feet. She bit her lip and ran her hand down her right thigh, giving a soft moan. "Maybe I make this *worth* three."

"Don't think you're cute. I'm not in the mood for games," said Nilman with a cruel smile. He set the gun on the bed and fell into a cackling fit.

"You think you're funny, do you?" The harsh and deep voice of Lucas broke the rancid laughter like a gunshot. Nilman shot up and looked past Nic.

"How did you get past the sensors?"

"Took you long enough," said Nic as she walked to the small counter and poured herself a drink. Nilman's pompadour seeped from his demeanor like hot air from a balloon. He looked at Lucas, then at Nic. "Ah, who is he? Are you with Osiris... or?"

"Or, as a matter of fact," said Lucas, taking a puff from his Yayoon-stick and letting the red smoke from his mouth. "You've been a bad boy, Nilman. You're not so tough without Thorne, though, huh? That guy always gave me the willies. A superhuman weapon with a nose

always stuck in some book, with those ridiculous relics on his face. Does it make him feel less like a machine when he does that?"

Nilman sat up and reached for his pistol, but it was just out of his grasp. "Stay away from me. You don't think Thorne is nearby? You're playing with fire."

Nic leaned over and took the weapon out of reach.

"You wouldn't dare hurt a member of Koralev, would you? I represent the Embassies. If I turn up dead, they will scour the station for you two and shoot you down the planet naked. What do you think your odds for planetary passes are then?"

Nic sat against the counter and sipped the golden drink with a smoking *Pascquier* in between her fingers. A tramway ran right past the window of the hotel every ten to fifteen minutes, flashing its lights into the room. Nic couldn't imagine much sleep could take place here, but then again, sleep probably didn't.

"You're going to tell me what I want to know, " said Lucas.

"What is it exactly you want?" Nilman's voice broke as he spoke, his hands a shaking mess.

"Just the question I wanted you to ask. Koralev has in their possession a map, from what I understand."

"You want a map?"

"No, no, not exactly. In fact, I have the map blueprint right here," said Lucas as he pulled out a wrist-holo and tapped on it twice. A map of Fortuna III expanded just above, and with two digits, he zoomed in to a small island just a few miles off the coast of Crescent Falls. "Do you recognize this place?"

Nilman shook his head. "Never seen it before." He laughed nervously. "I've never set foot on the surface of Fortuna III."

Lucas then pulled a weapon—no, it was more of a hand-cannon—the largest Nic had ever seen. "Allow me to introduce you to the love of my life. It was love at first sight, Nilman. She is a Hammer-class hand-cannon, made by Koralev as a matter of fact. Her name is Evelyn."

Nic snorted, but Nilman didn't find it funny in the least. "Lucas, I still need him." She took a puff of her cigarette and let the smoke from her nostrils.

"Listen, man. I'm telling you the truth," Nilman choked.

"No, you're not. I've done my homework on you. Before your promotion at the Embassy, you were part of an excavation team for Koralev. I know you went down to a lab on Tharis Island, and during the excavations, you found something. Of course, any further data was lost or sold. What was sold had any details regarding the excavations redacted. When you returned, someone put you on this cush job with just enough money to keep you quiet. They also put a target on your back."

Nilman gulped. "You're lying."

"Right now, they're coming up with a plan to kill you. It's simple, right? What do you do to someone of low status who knows too much? It's pretty basic. What if I do Koralev a favor and get rid of you for them? They might even pay me, come to think of it." Lucas gave a coy grin as he turned Evelyn over, seductively touching the drum and barrel of the weapon. Color drained from Nilman's face quite suddenly, and he seemed to Nic that he would pass out.

"You're not as dumb as you look. It seems you might indeed know," said Lucas. "How does a glorified doorman for Koralev end up working at an Embassy with the salary of a veteran combat pilot?"

"What are you insinuating?"

"Why are you still breathing? That leads me to believe control is lost on this station. Has Dr. Sullivan lost his touch? Or has something else happened that very few are aware of? Could Koralev and Dr. Sullivan be working together?"

He nearly fell off the bed, and he took a deep breath. Lucas rubbed his eyebrows with a sigh. "You are a cockroach, Nilman, hardly worth the bullet. But I will use every last one to get the truth out of you before I scramble your brains."

"Who do you think runs things here? Whoever makes the rules can break them," said Nilman, glaring at Nic. "Do you think things are meant to be fair? What you are dealing with is totally over your head. Listen, the mission was a joint operation. What we found down on Tharis Island was what the eggheads called the Forge."

"Who built it?"

"No one."

"That doesn't make sense," muttered Lucas.

"No, I mean *we* didn't build it. We discovered it. It is somehow linked to the violent storms on the planet, but everyone involved mysteriously disappeared or was reassigned off-

planet. Myself and Thorne were the only ones who were present when the discovery was made. From what we learned, it was a Progenitor Device."

"The Progenitors? Okay, now I know you're lying."

"I'm not lying!"

"You said it was a joint operation," interjected Nic. "Who would Koralev ever collaborate with?"

"Osiris, of course."

Nic struggled to hide her surprise, but it must not have worked as a smile spread on Nilman's face. "Now you're starting to get the bigger picture. You wanted planetary passes, and now you've stumbled on something a whole lot more than what you can handle. I'm not talking about just power over the planet. Whoever controls Fortuna III controls Prospect Station. No, it's far greater than that. Whoever controls Fortuna III controls the greatest of the Artery Sectors. No power could ever rival it. It is a galactic race to the bottom controlled by upstart corporations who don't even know what they have their hands on, and we're caught in the middle."

Lucas grabbed Nilman by the neck and brought his Hammer close to his face. "Where is the Forge?"

"I don't know. Tharis Island is a goddamn maze. In my time there, I never went down into the caverns themselves."

"Yeah? Who does know where it is?"

"Only Dr. Sullivan knows what's down there and how to get there. All I heard was he was planning on sending a strike team to—is that why you need the passes, Nic? Oh my god, that *is* why you need them! They have no way of coming back. That crazy bastard actually sent more people down there to find it without a way home."

"What's so bad about that?" asked Nic, a hint of nervousness in her voice that she could not control.

"It's totally overgrown now, and the whole place is overrun by these dinosaurs."

"Dinosaurs?"

"They're called Marauders; giant blue lizards with jagged teeth and a nasty attitude. They spit acid and swipe at you with razor-sharp claws. I saw one disembowel a man in full armor as if he were wearing wet paper. But then, I heard from others deeper into the caverns that the green ones were the ones to watch out for. Their skin was almost armored and was twice the size of

blue ones," said Nilman with too much fear in his eyes and voice to be considered lying. This man was telling the truth. "They started picking us apart one by one. They struck from the darkness, and before long, we had lost too many to proceed. We packed up and left everything behind."

"The common theme of Fortuna III," said Lucas.

"Why do you think it's so hard to get an additional planetary pass?" growled Nilman. "But looks like Dr. Sullivan found a way anyway."

"Thanks. That's all I needed to hear," said Lucas. He then jammed Evelyn into Nilman's mouth, breaking a tooth in the process. He groaned in protest as tears ran down his cheeks and he choked on the barrel of the augmented Hammer.

"Lucas. I still need him," said Nic.

"No one *needs* him. He is just a cockroach. There are many like him."

"You're not listening to me," she warned.

"This filth will no longer extort or commit any more kind of evil on the poor of the station."

*Click.*

Lucas felt Nic holding the ice-cold barrel of Nilman's pistol to his temple with the Hammer back and finger on the trigger.

"You would shoot me for this cockroach?" barked Lucas.

"I don't even know who the fuck you are. I don't know if I can trust you either. One thing I know for sure is, I need his signature."

"My my, you would do well in ICA," sneered Lucas.

"This cockroach said the same thing to me about Koralev. One thing you two get wrong about me. I am loyal to Osiris. Not that you two would know anything about loyalty."

"You speak about loyalty as if you understand it's not a two-way street. Is Osiris going to be loyal to you?" asked Lucas.

Nilman chuckled to himself briefly with the gun still in his mouth. "What a happy trio we make. It's like the start of a bad joke. An Osiris, Koralev, and ICA agent walk into a bar—"

Suddenly, a bright light cut through the low light of the room, and the telltale *thum-thum-thum* of breach-cutter engines reverberated in the floor, shaking the windows.

"That's a Koralev cutter!" shouted Lucas.



He tapped something on his wrist-tech when Nic grabbed Nilman and slammed him to the ground. She landed on top of him as the room caved in.

She thought the room caved in because it felt like it. Molten lead burst into the room, bursting through the furniture, spewing glass and broken metal sheet wall over them. Fire spread on the carpets and wall coverings. Smoke began to form a fog in the room, yet when she looked up, it was over in an instant, and a bright light shone into the room.

In a matter of milliseconds, she adjusted a dark filter over her eyes, shielding her from the blinding light, to see a woman garbed in white armor stare back from behind a minigun in the hold of a gun cutter. She had an expression of shock, as if she were seeing someone she didn't expect. Then, the cutter pulled away. The sounds of combat boots near the door that was filled with bullet holes alerted Nic that the night was just getting started.

"I can't have you die here," said Nic as she pulled Nilman to his feet. She looked to where Lucas had been standing only moments before, and what was left of his lower torso was a pile of guts, mulched flesh, and broken bones on the floor. The rest of him was splattered all over the walls.

"You saved my life," said Nilman. He didn't seem injured, just mildly stunned.

"I guess someone wised up to you still breathing," said Nic. "Lucas was right."

He shook his head, and Nic grabbed him by the neck and pointed to Lucas's remains. "That should have been you. Now, you will do exactly as I say."

"You get me out of here, I will sign whatever the hell you want," shrieked Nilman.

Nic searched Lucas's torn pants and found his augmented Hammer with an extra magazine holding ten rounds within. It was a rudimentary weapon of a bygone era, but beggars couldn't be choosers. The footsteps were coming closer.

"They're here to finish the job," said Nic, standing in front of Nilman.

"We can't stay here," he said. He looked down at the courtyard at the hole the cutter had created. Nic looked up at the sky. It was nowhere to be found. It's like it had disappeared.

"Not too far down."

Nic looked down. They were only a few stories down. A courtyard with a surprisingly well-kept lawn and a pool rested in the middle.

The courtyard wall was slightly curved, and the idea popped into her head just a few seconds after Nilman, because he simply jumped down the length of the wall. The smooth

curvature of the wall and windows slowed her fall as she pulled her dress to keep it from riding too far up. Nic landed with a roll and stood up, unclasping her stilettos and tossing them onto the grass in one fluid motion. She began to run for cover.

The courtyard itself was open, and the sounds of sirens could be heard in the distance, coming closer. Osiris was on the way. Then, Nic realized her mistake as three helmeted heads with black visors poked from the window, then their rifles. Bullets flicked overhead as Nic pulled Nilman to the ground, but to lie still would be a death sentence. She brought up her augmented Hammer and squeezed the trigger. The hand-cannon roared in her hand, threatening to break her wrist, but the shots, man, the shots were precise and intimidating. With each pull of the trigger, Evelyn roared, and each shot found its mark, but more agents in black armor kept falling from the open window.

A round pierced Nilman's calf, and he fell against Nic, wailing and flailing. The shots were well placed, and she knew she had only a few precious moments before they hit their mark on her body as well. The shooters spilled from the hole as their weapons spewed sizzling rounds.

Just at that moment, a loud scream cracked the air. She looked up to see a man fall from the foggy skies with a loud guttural shout. She squinted her eyes to focus, and a thundering crash rippled through the ground just a few feet away. Thorne emerged from a small crater in the center of the courtyard, giving off a small blast wave, knocking the closest agents to the ground. Ripples of electricity darted through his fingertips to the blades of grass, charging the air around him with sparks. It was Nilman's bodyguard, Thorne. He had no shirt, his muscles rippling with electricity, his black hair slicked back, and his eyes covered with his black eye-shade implants. He wore bodysuit pants with thick combat boots that stuck to the ground where he landed. He pulled himself out of the hole he made and, without warning, launched himself at the squad of shooters, charging at them with inhuman speed. They opened fire.

To say what Nic saw next would stay forever ingrained in her memory. Sometimes she would obsess over that moment, morbidly relishing every detail of Thorne and his violent retaliation against the killers. It would keep her awake at night, sometimes even pervading her dreams to turn them into nightmares.

The kill-squad leveled their Kor-47s, but only one was able to fire two rounds before Thorne came to arms' length of them, and then, it was over. He shouted and punched through the man's helmet, breaking through the visor and bursting bits of bone and brain matter out the other

side. He grabbed the man by the waist as one would a tree branch and swung his remains against another shooter, instantly caving his chest in. He grabbed another by his arms and pulled them clean off as the agent in black armor collapsed to the ground in a heap as if he were made of paper.

Thorne flung the torn arms at the others. One screamed and tried to run, but the augmented titan clutched his leg and pulled him off his feet. He held him for a second upside down in the air with one arm while the shooter made an attempt in vain to reload his rifle. Thorne then brought him over his knee and, with a sickening crunch, broke every spinal bone in the man's body. He fell limp to the ground, gasping for air.

Thorne laughed as the shooters momentarily held their fire, aiming rifles at him, too scared to shoot or piss him off further. They were silent in their helmets, but Nic knew they were screaming at each other in comms. This was likely the first time they had come face-to-face with an unstoppable man-made force of destruction backed by Koralev payroll. His sweetened torso glistened in yellow bursts of electricity that danced over his shoulders, neck, and chest. He turned his back to them, his eyes glowing red, and he held his arms out.

"Dr. Nicole Clarke. What a pleasant surprise!" he said. "I didn't know you would be here too." He laughed, cruelly.

The men in purple-tier armor finally opened fire on Thorne, their beam shot cracking through the air. The augmented titan's hands turned inside out to reveal six cannons, three on each wrist. He turned the cannons on the guards and opened fire. These weren't small-caliber bullets either, but instead, the cannons on his wrists spewed rounds that roared and bit out chunks of metal and bone off the attackers. They were so pathetically outclassed by Thorne's sweets, it was all too clear why he was on Nilman's payroll.

Nic heard a cackle in between the bursts of gunfire. She knew it was coming from him. His arms glowed red hot as he mowed down the Koralev squad in the garden, tossing clumps of mud and grass into the air as puffs of red mist sprang up where soldiers used to be. Thin decorative trees made of plastic fell to the ground lifelessly, dotting the ground. She could only stare in disbelief as Thorne rained down hellfire from his wrists.

Then, it was truly over.

Thorne turned to them, a smile revealing jagged white teeth and nothing in the reflective lenses of his eye shades. His arms glowed red hot as the cannons retracted back into their

holsters in his forearms. The black hair he had covering his body wasn't at all affected by the streaks of yellow that then suddenly vanished. He slicked his hair back, and Nic realized she had been holding her breath.

She fell on her knees and watched the carnage behind him. Not a single man stood except for Nilman.

"Goddamn it, I kept calling for you," growled Nilman, holding the bleeding wound in his calf.

"I was just about finished with my book, Boss. It's a tale of two lovers—"

Nilman scowled and waved him off. He limped, clutching his thigh, and stood before Nic. He looked to the smoking mess of bloody flesh, upturned earth, and broken trees, and then turned to her. "It may not be safe to play for your side anymore. If this is what they're willing to do to keep me from talking, it means Dr. Sullivan is back from his mission. It means I have tapped a nerve. Imagine what they'll do to you without me?"

"You really did find a Progenitor Device on Tharis Island, didn't you?" gasped Nic.

"I know you may not believe this of me, being an agent of Koralev and all, especially what I was about to do to you, but I truly believe there is a much greater corruption at the heart of this station, especially in Osiris. I'm not any better, believe me, that's how I know. Your undying belief in Osiris and your friends will be your downfall. You called me a cockroach several times. Well, maybe you could learn a thing or two from me, if you want to live."

He clutched at his leg. "Dammit, this'll hurt in the morning." Then he brought his sleeve up and tapped a few times on a blue holo. Then, a soft *ding* went off in Nic's arm.

"There. You've earned it. There are your three planetary passes."

Nic's face went red with anger, disgust, and relief. "Where are you going?"

"Me? I'm going to find a nice hole to hide in. I suggest you do the same."

# Breaking and Entering

Cole flicked the light on his Voltaic Brute and swept the pitch-black room. They were in some kind of abandoned barracks once belonging to Osiris somewhere in the small hab-city of Greens Prospect. The miniature metropolis was built in a hole surrounded by an outcrop of rock in the shape of a crescent moon that sat over a series of waterfalls. It was said that this was where the name "Crescent Falls" came from. He leaned back and pulled Russ into the darkness as Em stumbled in. She gasped and fell on her knees and finally tumbled onto her back, totally exhausted.

Cole dry-swallowed and let Russ down on the ground beside her slowly. He flicked his light off and leaned against the doorframe, peeking out the path they had come. They had run the truck down into a ravine and set it on fire, making the rest of the trip on foot into Greens itself in hopes the mercs wouldn't look too hard into the wreckage, and if they did, give the trio more time. Now, in the safety of the hive-like hub, they would see the mercs coming. After waiting a few moments, nothing moved, and he heard nothing except for the steady, cool breeze that blew through the jungle flora.

"Holy shit, Cole. His heart's not beating," shrieked Em. Quickly, he dropped his Brute to the ground and knelt beside Russ. His face was purple, and the veins in his neck were dilated as his eyes were fixated on something far away, listless, and cold. With his lower torso seeming like it had been put through a wood chipper, it was a wonder there was any warmth at all. Cole put a hand on his neck.

No, there was no more warmth.

"It's impossible," whispered Em. She snapped the straps to the armor and pulled the chest-piece off and flung it beside them with a thick *thud*. She began chest compressions. They were well-paced and, after hearing the crack of ribs, they were deep.

"Help me, dammit."

Cole sat beside Russ and watched the dull color of his eyes. His mustache didn't move.

"It's too late, Em. His suit couldn't keep him alive."

"Stop giving up!" she shouted. "You're a goddamn quitter!"

"Em! He's dead," said Cole, and he snatched both Em's arms with one hand. She looked him in the face and for a moment he bore the intense anger and hate in her eyes that then turned to anguish and sorrow. "No, he can't be."

"He died in the explosion of the grenades; he just didn't know it yet," said Cole, touching Russ's face and closing his eyes for the last time.

Em wiped tears from her eyes. "I—I didn't think it would end like this for him."

"How did you figure? A blaze of glory? A daring final stand?" mocked Cole with a cruel grin, but then it died on his face. "He's dead, and you've got to get over it. We're still up on the menu, or did you forget that?"

"I didn't forget, Cole."

"Good," he said, standing up, picking up his submachine gun in the process. "Check if we have authority to return."

He heard clicking and saw Em tap on her wrist device.

"No authority to call the dropship yet," said Em. "Goddamit, Nic. Hurry up."

"Well, I guess it doesn't matter. We couldn't leave even if we wanted to."

"Oh?"

"What? You thought we would leave without completing the mission?" asked Cole.

"I thought you wanted to return to station."

"I do, but I can't leave this undone. We have to complete the mission. Russ is dead, but I can't have his death be for nothing. Poor bastard. Those mercs were kitted to the teeth, huh?"

"Why were they so heavily armored? For what? I mean, really. I get they might have been in the area when the ship went down, but EMP 'nades? Who *has* those? Koralev? Since when? I know damn sure ICA doesn't have them."

Cole shrugged. "Could be they found the tech on surface. A lot was left behind here, stashed in crates and secure containers. There's a lot we don't know about the planet, but it begins with the corporations. They all had free rein to do as they pleased on Fortuna III. We could have a lot more surprises we aren't aware of here, Em."

She sat back and looked Russ over. "We have to bury him."

Cole shook his head. "No time. We need to get to Tharis Island."

"So what, we just leave him here?"

"For now, yes. I'll leave a beacon on his armor for later retrieval. Right now, our priority is to find this Oakley person," said Cole. "The sooner we find him, the sooner we leave."

"What exactly are we looking for on the island?"

"All I *do* know is we have to get to those coordinates. I'm hoping it becomes obvious what we're looking for."

"Do you think we will?"

"We have to try."

"What about the passes? None of this matters if Nic can't get them."

"Nic's never let us down."

"Nic's never had to do this. She could be in real danger, Cole."

"We're all in real danger, Em. This isn't a game. One thing is true: there's a lot that's going on, and we're in the dark. What more was Russ keeping from us?"

"Nothing we can get anymore from him," shrugged Em. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have stopped you from mercy-killing him. He would have had a quicker death had you just shot him."

Cole stood up and flicked the safety on his Brute.

"No, don't apologize for that. If push comes to shove, I hope you do the same for me," said Cole as he looked at his armor stat in the lower left corner of his HUD. "Shields are back on. We got that going for us. I'm going to take a look around. I want to know that we really weren't followed, and maybe I can find a way to make contact with this Oakley person. If I don't return in an hour, I'm dead, and you need to go on without me."

Cole picked up Em's Basilisk and set down his own Voltaic Brute. Now, he could adequately scan their perimeter.

"I'll stay with Russ for a while. Maybe say a few words. He *was* the best boss we ever had," said Em.

"That he was." Cole cast one last glance, and their eyes locked. He let out a quick sigh and then closed the door behind him, leaving her in relative safety. He fell into the darkness of the narrow jungle-ridden street with only the lights on his armor to cast a soft purple glow into the shadows.

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Crescent Falls was a humid, verdant region northeast of Bright Sands where flora such as pale ivy blossoms grew in abundance in spite of the heavy, constricted undergrowth of the area. Located at the equatorial region of Fortuna III, dozens of thermal ponds dotted the area. Cole ruminated on whether the thick canopy of forestry kept a large majority of thermal heat created by volcanic ponds nearby and wondered if that environmental cycle had anything to do with the intense lightning strikes of the area. One thing was certain: if heat, and by extension, life, were supercharged by thermal and radioactive elements, surely there was industry to be had and exploited. Though Greens Prospect had been built with future industry in mind, it was mind-boggling how it had all been suddenly and violently abandoned.

As he climbed up the metal platform into a crows' nest, he peered through the sights of his Basilisk and slowly made his way, peering over the horizon. Small red aliens the size of puppy dogs with razor-sharp teeth played in an open field beside rotting hay bales. Further up lay farming machinery that had been left in disrepair, and a greenhouse beyond that. He looked south from there into tall trees that reached up to the sky and saw rounded nests midway up. Those belonged to a Howler, a massive winged beast that was blind as a bat and even used echolocation. If you came too close, the Howler could unleash massive sonar attacks that blinded and disoriented trespassers. Best not venture anywhere near there.

Then he looked east from there into the thermal ponds themselves, which were massive cisterns of steaming mist and bubbling volcanic waters. He saw the hulking shadow of a beast meander through and upon them, but he did not recognize it. It must have been eighteen feet high and had skin like that of a rock. The creature had appendages on its back, and he wondered why something would evolve in that way or what purpose it would fulfill. He made a mental note not to find out. With each step, the ground shook even up in the crows' nest a few hundred yards away.

Upon seeing nothing of note actively hunting them, he looked away from his sight and swatted away a rogue swathe of flies that seemed to be dead set on buzzing in his ear. In disgust, he descended the metal steps and made his way up the crescent-shaped rock. Then, he stopped in his tracks and stood still, sharpening his ears to a sound he knew he had not just heard. Or did he?

It was the laughter of a child.



The sound echoed through the crescent town, and Cole had to gaslight himself that he was hearing voices again. Then, the sound returned, but this time a little closer. He looked up at the crescent rock and saw movement at the very top. He brought Em's Basilisk up to his eye and peered through the sight.

It was a child Arkenwuld, a boy near the age of eight or nine, who played with a yellow slingshot. His eighteen-inch ears with loose tufts of fur blew gently in the afternoon wind. He hadn't earned the ear ties yet, thought Cole. Something wasn't right, however. Arkenwulds were known for intensely fierce family ties. If this child were here alone, where was the—

*Click.*

—Parent. Something cylindrical and cold poked against the back of Cole's skull.

"Take those sights off my son. Now!"

"Okay, okay, take it easy. I was just scanning the horizon. See? Finger way off the trigger," said Cole as he made a great effort to wave his hand over his head.

"Why are you here, Offworlder?"

"We are on mission from Prospect Station."

"Are you Koralev?"

"No, Osiris. SpecOps."

"Ah, interesting."

"We're Russ's team. You must be Oakley."

"So it was you who stole and blew up *my* truck?"

"Oh, that was yours?"

Then, Cole heard another *click*. He turned to see Em holding his Voltaic Brute pointed at the back of Oakley's head.

"Get that gun from my partner's head. Now."

"Ya got me. Now, please, point your guns somewhere else," said the female Arkenwuld. Cole looked her over. She was beautiful and slender with skin that had a greenish tint, and the sides of her head were shaved, leaving her long black hair tied in a braid that went down to the level of her buttocks. Her ears were long but not as long as her son's. *It must be a gender thing*, Cole noted. The black tufts at the end of her ears were tied with red string, but it was the fire in her raven black eyes that singed him with a nasty look.

"Yes, I'm Oakley. Where is Russ?" she snapped.

"He's hanging back in the complex, dead as a doornail," said Cole.

"He's dead?"

"The mercs attacked us with everything they got," said Em, still holding her rifle against Oakley's back. "They killed some Arkenwulds too."

"Yeah, from Clan Obrask. They seek retribution, I hear."

"So, not your clan?"

"I don't have a clan, not anymore. Not after being caught dealing with Prospectors," snapped Oakley. "Greedy bunch you are, and my people never forgive."

"Oh yeah? Why deal with Russ, then?"

"He was the only Prospector that didn't care to cross us. We were here before you made the world go to shit."

"I didn't do a damn thing," said Cole. Just then, he heard the rustling of leaves behind him, and her son poked his head through a brush.

"Don't touch him," said Oakley. "That's Kiba. He's not a part of this."

Em brought Cole's SMG down. "We're not trying to hurt anyone, least of all children."

"We just want to know what business you had with Russ. Why did he need to get to Tharis Island so badly?" asked Cole.

The kid ran to his mother's side and clutched her waist. Oakley grabbed him by the shoulder and hugged him. "He paid me to get him to the island and guide him to the Descent. After that, he was on his own. I have no idea what's down there."

"The Descent, huh? Can you still take us there?" asked Cole.

"I don't see why not. We have to walk to the boat, though. Since you trashed my truck and all."

"Bill me once we get back on station," grunted Cole.

"Oh, you better believe I'll collect."

The crescent rock suddenly began to glow beneath them.

"What's happening?" asked Em.

"The storm is about to hit. Guess that boat'll have to wait. Best we go back inside and wait for the storm to blow over," said Oakley. "Take me to Russ. Let me say goodbye to him. Whatever he was, he was always respectful to me and mine."

Thunder roared overhead, and a rogue wind blew against Cole, and the skies began to darken. He stepped off the glowing rock and followed the troupe back down the ravine.

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The storm raged on outside the compound, but fortunately, the lightning strikes weren't as strong above them. Cole sat by an open window with the stock of his Voltaic Brute on the windowsill, holding the weapon up by the suppressor. He gazed out to look over the darkness of the storms and held a cigarette in his other hand. He brought the smoke to his lips and took a long drag.

"You okay, Cole?" asked Em. She had her Basilisk completely field stripped and scraped the barrel with a small wire-tooth brush. She did this routinely mid-mission during downtime. She did this to relax. The metal clinked together as she reassembled her bolt carrier group and began scrubbing the inside of the barrel.

"Fine. Just didn't think things would end up like this. One look at Russ and you think if you follow him you'll live forever," said Cole.

"He did make me feel like as long as he was our lead, we would be okay."

Cole nodded and took another drag of his cigarette. "When he first recruited me, he asked me if I had what it took to go on surface."

"Ah, I remember. You told him if piss counts for courage you can find enough in your boots or something like that."

Cole coughed and snorted smoke from his nostrils. "No, it was that, actually. I think that's what made him hire me."

"I think our record in the Battle of the Ministrova might have swayed him more," said Em. Cole flicked the butt of his cigarette to the ground. Silence cut the air between them, and Em stopped reassembling her weapon. She gazed up at the stormy skies as lightning streaked through the rain clouds.

"Every time we barely make it out of a tight spot, I feel like a bit of our luck is used. When will it run out?"

"Don't think like that, Em," said Cole as the storms dissipated quite suddenly and without warning, leaving behind sunny skies and clear crisp air and fleeting sheets of mist. "Just keep your head down and keep moving."

"Just like we've always done."

"Just like we've always done."

# Stimulating Developments

The *Manticore* was an amalgamated super-weapon nearly a quarter the size of Prospect Station, composed of three Teraton Gauss cannons that came together to form a massive particle beam. A battle-cruiser was then built around the super-weapon. These cannons had only been fired once, according to reports, and it had malfunctioned famously, leading to the destruction of the aft-most cannon, which at present was being fixed in an off-dock staging area. The at-the-time captain jettisoned himself from an escape pod out of shame.

Then the famed admiral, a pilot with a dozen wartime accolades, Marie-Elle Moineau, the Savage of Sidoryan space, was assigned the *Manticore* and, as a result, the complete organization of Osiris security and maintenance. Her clearance superseded even Dr. Sullivan's. For all intents and purposes, *she* was the director of Osiris, if not by title, certainly by reputation.

The super-cruiser was home to nearly two hundred Osiris operatives who maintained security on the ship, and in the aerial space surrounding Prospect Station, much to Koralev's chagrin. They were the customs enforcers, the planetary defenders, and the station police. Whether you loved them or hated them, Osiris agents were not so far away.

Having cleaned herself up and put on fresh officer clothing, Nic looked down at the green insignia on her left breast. After the incident at Hotel Mika, the SpecOps mission had been discovered, and now she had to face the music.

She sat in a pearl white shuttle as it left the hangar bay of Prospect Station into the void of space and watched through a viewport as the *Manticore* came closer into view. The hulking ship sported a wide horizontal face, similar to the hammerhead sharks that inhabited some planetary bodies of water, Fortuna III being one of them. Massive antennae jutted up from the spine of the ship like fibers of hair going up into the dozens of ion-engines at the rear. The battleship was unlike any of its class, fitted with technology found on Fortuna III and adapted to the ship, making it the ultimate combat engine on this side of the Artery Systems, arguably the entire galaxy. *If* it were able to fly again. Its combat abilities were still in question.

Even with the striking visage and extreme technological genius, the tech was unreliable. Though the *Manticore* was revered, feared, and hated, very few knew that Admiral Moineau

reserved the Gauss cannons for a very last-ditch effort, knowing the condition that excessive use would cause them to self-destruct and, in turn, blow the battleship up in a nuclear blast that would also wipe out Prospect Station. That was one secret known to a very select few, including Nic.

She stared in awe at the spatial structure as the shuttle was enveloped by its shadow. The hangar bay was bustling with activity as the shuttle landed, Osiris operatives securing missiles, kinetic cartridges, and refueling smaller arrow-shaped drones. A few were polishing floors, and as she stepped off the shuttle, she felt a gust of recycled cool air blow against her face and hair. She saw the platform manager stare at her as she made a brisk pace to the helm.

She passed men and women in white uniforms and the green insignia emblazoned on their breasts. Finally, she arrived at the helm, and two men with stun batons and kinetic needler pistols at their hips gave her grave looks. They scanned her, and their wands instantly began beeping loudly. They reached for their pistols, but before they could utter a warning, a sharp voice filled with command broke the monotony of the hangar bay.

"Hold it, boys," barked Admiral Marie-Elle Moineau.

She wore a neatly pressed black and white uniform with golden epaulets and a white half-cloak that extended to just the length of her back. Her hair was tied in a bun with a silver laurel with five golden leaves, each leaf representing a decade of distinguished service in her time in the Blue Star Navy. Despite her time with the battle fleet, she was the only remaining asset of Blue Star Ltd, the parent company of Osiris, and retained the status and respect from her previous command. As head of Osiris, her word was final, and now Nic had to give an accounting.

"I've been expecting this one."

The guards relaxed their stance as Nic entered the helm. There were only two pilots at the helm at that time as the *Manticore* sat idle in its repairs by the station. Admiral Moineau looked her in the eyes without breaking her gaze like a hawk.

"I've read a lot about your actions in the last six hours. I also read a lot about the shit storm you and SpecOps unleashed on the station. You're getting into bed with Koralev and ICA types. Running around, jumping on planet with no way back. Well, that one was Russ, more specifically. What the hell have you all done?"

"Russ left the station with a strike team after the shield failures. Twelve men died in fifteen seconds. He went down to investigate. I went to get more planetary passes."

"I was promised they would be proven in the field. They are to be retrofitted to protect soldiers and breachers. Osiris has other interests in the foam-shield tech on Prospect Station as well. Can you explain to me how my top agent went to the surface with no way back and why my lead planetologist is scurrying around in the gutters like a rat?"

"Once Russ returns, he will have a full report with all the details gained on the surface. I have just acquired the planetary passes for him and his crew."

"That won't be necessary anymore. I have the report that was available; the one classified above your eyes."

"What? Higher than Revellion?"

"Where is Dr. Gauthier? For whatever reason, I cannot find him anywhere on Prospect Station," snapped Moineau. "What hole did he hide himself in?"

Nic bit her lip. "I don't know."

"Is that so?" asked Admiral Moineau. "Why the hell would he be hiding?"

"You said it won't be necessary. You mean the planetary passes. Why won't they be necessary?"

"Because they're dead."

The words came from her mouth, and Nic felt like they smacked her in the cheek. "What do you mean they're dead? Russ is dead?"

"And Emmelinne and Cole. Their transponders went silent twenty-four hours ago. I did a full sweep of the surface now that your department has re-established comms, and you know what I found? A pack of ICA-backed cannibal mercenaries at your crash site, and the markers of your compatriots consumed or destroyed. They seem to be employed by Koralev. Em and Cole are gone, presumed dead or consumed. Then, I ask myself, why the hell did he go down without informing command? Why did our most decorated and respected agent, besides myself, go down to the surface without planetary passes?"

"Once he lost his agents on the first field test, he insisted on going down immediately. It was urgent to get to the crash site first."

"He didn't know that Koralev had a sleeper agent embedded in Russ's crew?"

Nic's eyes widened. "What?"

"Ah, so you didn't know. Em or Cole, I still don't know who, is taking direct orders from Koralev, but trust me, it won't take much longer to find out."

Nic's eyes widened. "What the hell? You've got to be kidding."

"Do I look like I'm kidding?" asked Moineau. "It's a good thing they're dead because if they weren't, I would make sure one of the two feels every encrypted message scratched onto her skin before I jettison them out into space naked with a tank holding ten minutes of oxygen. I wonder how many more moles there are in Osiris."

Nic clenched her fists. "I've been nothing but loyal, Admiral."

"Don't worry. I had your quarters and computers searched, too. I know it wasn't you. Though you are in bed with this Nilman cockroach. It's actually for the sake of Russ and his team you aren't court-martialed yourself. Honestly, it's moving how loyal you are to him. This is the only reason you are here now and not facing a firing squad or in an empty pod to be shot into deep dead space."

"Allying myself with Nilman was a way to bring in additional resources to our disposal."

"How's that working out for you?"

Nic looked at her shoes.

"I remember the day I hired you. You had a distinct hopeful light in your eyes. I think I was wrong about you. It doesn't happen very often," said the admiral, for the first time breaking her stare to look out the viewport at Prospect Station. "You are hereby fired effective immediately, Dr. Nicole Clarke. Gather whatever belongings you have on station. Anything classified has already been purged from your terminal. Any clearances you had have been revoked. Remember, anything classified that your pretty little head leaks out is just reason enough to find you and court-martial you. Don't ever forget that."

"What are you going to do?" asked Nic.

"Do? What *can* we do? The only solution I can come up with is to shut it all down and fly my ship and Osiris the hell away from here. Prospect Station is a dumpster fire. This is the position *you* put me in."

"I only wanted the best for Osiris."

"Oh? Is that so? Russ and his team are dead, and Serge Gauthier is nowhere to be found. I have a feeling you know what has become of him, but I doubt you will reveal that information to me. Even if you told me, I wouldn't believe you. My man will escort you back to the station."



From there, I have allowed you a one-way ticket to wherever you desire to go, so long as it's not back to Fortuna III. For your own safety, I suggest you take this one-time offer. Now, see yourself off my ship," said Admiral Moineau, folding her arms behind her back and turning to the viewport to watch Prospect Station.

Nic bit her lip.

"You are dismissed, Dr. Clarke."

"That's it? Things get a little complicated, and you're giving up?"

"A *little* complicated? It's not as easy as all that," said the admiral, stiffening her upper lip. "There's a lot you don't know, Nicole. My plans aren't done, but this one is over. It's all a great money sink, not worth our lives."

"Well, *I* haven't given up, even if I am a lone and singular voice in the darkness, I will still shout and not give up. Please, you've got to keep fighting for this, I beg you," said Nic, taking a step toward her and clenching her fists. "I remember the day you hired me just as well as you. You said Fortuna III was your lifelong dream. Now, that dream is mine! How dare you take from me what you held so dear, now that it's no longer financially viable to keep going? Could you turn your back so easily on us all?"

Admiral cocked her head and gave a soft smile. "How dare I? You never realize how good you have it until it's gone. I've had enough of you. Get out of my sight."

She then hardened her face and clicked her heels, in perfect position at attention. Nic knew the conversation was over as the decision was made long before she set foot on the helm. She turned on her heel and made her way to the hanger bay where the pilot, she supposed the admiral's man, opened the door for her, and she climbed in.

She resisted the urge to allow her anger to boil over in tears as the shuttle left the hangar bay back to Prospect Station when she received a communiqué that beeped in her HUD.

It was from Dr. Gauthier.

"Where the hell have you been, Serge?"

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Nic reached the alleyway as music pulsating through the concrete ground reverberated beneath her feet. She knew she was close to the coordinates where she was supposed to meet Dr. Gauthier, as she could hear the deafening sounds of a rattling bass on the other side of the club

behind a reinforced iron door. She knocked on the iron rung and the slit opened just enough for her to see two yellow sweetened eyes stare at her and scan her. She smiled, knowing her own augmented skin would prevent him from revealing her augs. The man stared at her, and she tilted her head.

“Zero Two Oh Two,” she said softly. The man closed the slit and the door opened up. Satisfied, she took a step inside only to find herself looking down the double barrel of a sawed-off shotgun. She gritted her teeth.

“Old password. Really old. Give me one reason why I shouldn’t blow your head clean off.”

“Nervous, are we?”

“You heard about the explosions on Block O. The botched Koralev raid. Or was it Osiris? No one seems to know the truth these days, and that makes me nervous. Killed eight people, it did. No bodies left of them, just mulched meat. What kind of a monstah can do that?”

“I didn't hear about it," said Nic with a half-lie, straightening a crease from her white blouse. "Not on the holo-feed.”

“Wasn’t on the holo-feed. You living under a rock? The way it goes, Osiris agents acted illegally to bust a drug lord with Koralev connections. Went to hell in a handbasket pretty quick. I’m just wondering, you look like an Osiris agent, but you stink of Koralev.”

She hesitated but kept her cool. A shotgun blast so close would splatter her body into tiny pieces, and nothing would put her back together again. If she misspoke, it would be the end of her, no matter how sweetened she was.

“I'm here to meet Dr. Gauthier,” said Nic, pulling a badge from her yellow jacket with her face and the telltale Osiris yellow insignia.

“Oh, Serge? If you could get his sorry ass out of here we would be grateful. *I* would be grateful.”

“Oh? What's your name?”

“Someone who wants to be forgotten,” said the man, dropping his shotgun to his side. “Sorry about that. Can’t be too careful these days. They say Dr. Sullivan has returned from the cluster. That means things will get tough for us in the gutters.”

Now the whole station knew. Even so, Nic suppressed her surprise and made her way into the club as the man closed the door behind her. The dance floor was packed with people

oscillating to the obnoxiously loud music. Though she did see plenty of young men and women around tables and gyrating on the dance floor, no one paid any attention to her.

She walked past the dance floors and through a rickety door where smoke was emanating from. Nic put her hand to the wall and scanned within. Though there was smoke in the room, very likely from an aerosol drug. It made no difference to her, as she quickly adjusted her eyes to the low-level light and applied an internal filtration drug to her lungs. Whatever was in the aerosol, her lungs would not absorb and be affected by it. For now, she needed to be sharp. With a quick thought, Nic scanned the entire section for heat signatures.

There was only one person in the room.

A lone figure sat in a booth on the second floor of the back of the club, outlined by a red mark indicating his heat signature. He stared into a holo display, absorbed by data running up and down the blue light. She grunted and then pushed the door open, making her way in. One of the glass panels was cracked, forming a spider web on the door. It had been broken for some time, it seemed, judging by the state of disrepair in the back part of the club, which, by all accounts, had a completely different feel from the rest of the club. It seemed like once it had been a museum of sorts but had fallen into disrepair until the club bought part of it out, apparently not needing the other half for more than a place for people to drink, smoke, or shoot up, alone and in peace. Moist dirt, almost sand, covered the faded blue tiles of the museum. The air was unmoving in this part of the old building, and there were no lights to speak of. Even the music seemed to be far away, no longer this ringing sound in her ears, almost ethereal and forlorn, begging of a time long gone.

Voices greeted her in whispers, but they belonged to memories of romance, dance, lust, and passion. Her black shoes clicked on the marble steps, and when she reached the top of the staircase, a luminescent red figure stood before her, smoking a cigarette. He stared over a small garden that had overgrown its rails and had begun to consume the abandoned museum part of the club from the inside out.

“I didn’t expect to see you again,” said Serge, blowing smoke from his nostrils. “Honestly, I am surprised, Nic. You always like to wear fancy clothes, didn’t you? I didn’t know if you would remember this place existed once.”

He had a clean-shaven face, but a splotch of grease marked his right cheek. His dull green eyes stared at her with disdain. It must not have been too difficult to know it was her, seeing as she was easily seen in the darkness wearing her jacket.

“It is good to see you, Serge,” she said, nodding her head as she approached and slid into the booth in front of him, crossing her legs and flattening her black skirt. She set her ID badge on the counter in front of her. “But what the hell have you been doing? We needed you at HQ days ago.”

“It is, is it? Good to see me, I mean?” asked Serge, rubbing his temples.

“You always had a penchant for drama.”

“Ah, but the same cannot be said about you, though, can it?” he asked, rubbing his nose with a chuckle, then stretching his arms out with an audible yawn. “They sweetened you real good. Is there anything human left of you?”

“There isn’t much,” she admitted. “But the important parts are there.”

“Oh? So they didn’t replace your heart. Shame, seeing as you needed a new one badly.”

“What happened between us is in the past, Serge. You made your decision, and it didn’t involve me. I’ve grown past it. Is this why you behave like a loser?”

"A loser? So that's what you think of me?" Serge put his hands on his hips. He then stretched again with a loud and obnoxious yawn.

“Dr. Sullivan is here on station. I guess that means you're relieved.”

"So I've heard," said Nic. "Yeah, I was just fired. I’ve been shot at, threatened, sexually assaulted, and privy to terrible things just to get a planetary pass. You should have been there with me.”

“I was busy.”

“Doing what?”

Serge gave a cruel smile and turned his head to her. “They gave you a new liver, right? I’ll bet you can handle your drink now. Back then, you could barely drink a beer before throwing up your gut.”

“Listen to me, Serge, enough with this bullshit about us. It's over, okay? My life is in danger, and your life might be in danger, too. For the sake of what you once were to me, I am warning you. It's not safe at Prospect Station any longer. Koralev is probably looking for you.

Osiris definitely wants your ass. If Admiral Marie-Elle Moineau finds you before they do, you'll be in even deeper shit. You need to disappear, *now*."

"I don't have that luxury, Nic. I'm a part of something much bigger than you or me or Osiris," said Serge, his cavalier attitude seemed to vanish with the news. "Prospect Station is about to be equalized. No one corporation will hold total control over Fortuna III, and planetary passes will be a thing of the past. Anyone will be able to drop without warrant onto the planet of their own free will, no matter the dangers."

"That sounds real nice, but how exactly do you plan on doing this? Now with Dr. Sullivan on station, he will set his sights on you before long, that is, if Koralev hasn't already dispatched someone to get you. It's the foam-suit stuff. You helped develop it, but I didn't learn about it until the mission twenty-six hours ago. Why did you never tell me?"

"I couldn't," said Serge with a shrug.

"You couldn't say, 'Hey, I'm a part of a top secret project'? Instead, when we were together, you had the perfect story every time. You always had the perfect cover. For the longest while, I thought it was another woman. Well, you led me to believe that."

"It didn't take much, Nic. You bought that one full price."

"Though you were busy, Serge, you were also careless. I was able to find this information on you almost without struggle once I was onboarded to the mission with Russ."

"You fit *that* role well, you know. You've always admired him. I just wondered if as a father or as a lover."

"I just have one question," said Nic raising a pointer finger in the air cutting the bullshit.

"And that is?"

"Tharis Island. Where is it?"

Serge nearly choked and forced a cough down his throat. "Where the hell did you hear about that?" The look on his face turned sour. "Enough, then. For your own good, Nic. For whatever memory you enjoy of us, you need to leave and never utter that name again."

"You're not safe here, Serge. You need to come with me."

"Neither are you. I'm sorry about this."

"You're not listening!" shouted Nic just as she lunged for him, but her hands came up empty. Serge smiled as she waved her hands through him. She felt the heat of utter betrayal crawl up her neck.

"Like you said, I'm in danger. Do you really think I would trust meeting you in person?" asked Serge. "This projection is so real, it even emits a heat signature. It's a really great lure."

"I've always looked out for you. I guess it's true what they say, you only mistrust me because you're guilty of your own mistrust," she snapped, leaning back and crossing her arms.

"I like that one," said Serge with a smile as the hologram flickered and reset in the wake of her fingers.

"Do me a favor," said Nic, sitting resigned in her chair.

"Anything."

"Get out of Prospect Station now. Purchase a ticket to the closest hab-planet or satellite. You have to get out immediately."

"I'm not even on station, Nic. No one, not even you, could possibly find me even if I wanted you to. Never mind all this foreplay. I'll cut to the chase, why did you ask me to meet you here, Nic?"

Nic's jaw dropped, and she leaned forward as shivers ran up and down her spine. "I didn't. *You* asked me to meet you. I have the communiqué right here—"

Suddenly, Serge's face dropped the sneer like a hot iron rod, and he straightened his back. Then, Nic saw the barrel of a pistol push into the hologram and press against his temple. He brought his hands up slowly.

"H-How did you find me?" he stuttered as a bead of sweat fell from his brow.

"Serge!"

"Well, well, well. Is that you, Nic?" asked the man on the other end. She would know that voice anywhere.

"Thorne."

"Looky here," he said poking the barrel of his pistol deeper into Serge's temple drawing blood. He peered in as the pixels created his face in the hologram, and his sweetened, cruel face stared right at Nic. "Thank you. It was difficult to track this dude, but I appreciate your effort in helping me."

"Yeah, thanks, Nic," said Serge.

"This is a setup. I didn't know."

"That's true. We used her but—" said Thorne, who then cleared his throat and let out a tired sigh. "She has nothing to do with this, trust me."

"I need him to find Tharis Island. We need him. Nilman knows this. Without Serge, it's as good as lost."

"You've thought about everything, haven't you, Nic. How lucky we are that we came across you. How lucky Nilman is to have you in his pocket. No, how lucky Osiris is that you are their top planetologist. Oh, wait, you don't work for Osiris anymore," he said, revealing jagged but porcelain white teeth. "Too bad. What are they ever going to do without you now?"

Serge gritted his teeth. "Stop playing with me. Just pull the trigger."

"Sounds good to me."

Thorne pulled the trigger, and the round zipped through his head so fast it took a moment for Nic to understand what had just happened. Serge fell from the hologram to the floor with a *thud*, and Thorne peered at her.

"Serge!" she shouted. "Why? We needed him."

"So quickly do things change to *we*."

"Osiris will not stand for this. You just started a goddamn war!"

"You sweet summer child. I'll be seeing you real soon." Thorne grinned cruelly as he shoved his pistol into the extracted holster at his hip.

The hologram switched off, leaving Nic alone in the abandoned museum as the pulsating music shook the tiles beneath her feet. She stood up, weakly, and then dry heaved, falling on her knees. Her stomach writhed, but nothing but transparent slime dripped from her mouth. She then picked herself up, wiping her lips with her sleeve, and made a weak attempt to compose herself.

She pulled a thin *Pascquier* from the small silver box in her jacket and, using a platinum silver lighter, sparked a light from the end. Her hands shook as she held the cigarette just above the blue flame that sputtered from the ignition, dousing the tip of the cigarette alight. She shakily put the cigarette between her lips as she walked down the steps to the first floor, clicking the lighter off and putting it back into her coat. She glanced back as she left through the double doors of the museum, now just understanding the type of danger she was in. If Thorne was after her, nothing would get in his way; that much was clear. She took a long drag from her cigarette and, as the smoke emerged from her nostrils. For all intents and purposes, as Admiral Moineau had pointed out, she indeed was toast.

# Race to the Bottom

The moment the wooden canoe hit the sand bank of Tharis Island beach, Cole and Em instantly stepped off and raced to the treeline. With weapons readied, they dashed into the greenery and stopped, sharpening their ears to the cries of red birds (more like red bats with eyes like slugs) and the deafening song of cicadas. Then, they stopped their song like someone had cut the volume. Em pulled out a sonar device and pinged it while facing deeper into the island.

"Nothing within five hundred yards," said Em, sweeping the treeline, eyes bolted to the readings of the sonar device. "No one's waiting for us at least."

"That won't last long. If we're here, it's only a matter of time before someone up top notices us. Then things are gonna get really hot around here. Each pod that drops means a whole hell of bullets and bad attitudes."

"Better get to it then, huh?" said Oakley, coming up beside them. "Whoever comes down doesn't have me to guide them to the bottom."

"You still haven't told us what is down there," said Em.

"Because I don't know what it is and, to be fair, I've never seen it myself. I only brought explorers to the door in the past."

"What?" asked Cole.

"Kiba is the only one who has been down there."

"You're kidding me. This whole time we've been risking our lives on the word of a kid?"

"Hey!" protested Oakley, her eyes filling with a slow-burning fire. Kiba frowned and crossed his arms over his chest.

"Why the hell would Russ trust all this on the word of a prepubescent—"

"Cole," warned Em. "This is all we have. Please."

He let out a sigh. "Dammit." He then gave a forced smile to Kiba. "Lead the way, kid."

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Cole heard a snort that made his heart nearly stop. It was such a guttural and feral sound that he hesitated on his next step. A sharp hiss like a giant snake was then followed by massive



thumping footsteps coming closer. Cole stood still like a statue, and he felt Oakley move beside him and switch his tac-light off.

"It's a Marauder," she whispered. A snarl and snort cut through the silence. He heard a loud stomp to their side a few feet away.

"They have terrible eyesight, but their proximal senses are unparalleled," said Oakley. "If it catches you in its perimeter, you're dead."

The footsteps stopped quite suddenly, and she pulled them further up the path past the sounds. Cole saw the blue back of a giant bipedal lizard and swallowed hard.

"What the hell kind of place is this?"

"Marauders have incredibly sharp claws, but they are blind to most things further than twenty feet away. However, their hearing is excellent. Being ambush hunters, they are like above-ground 'gators," said Kiba.

"Gators, got it," said Em.

Oakley led the way down into a rock corridor just tall enough for them to walk forward, standing tall. Cole leaned forward anyway. He knew full well that if they were spotted there, there was nowhere to run. Then he heard another sound and paused. It was the sound of drills burrowing into rock and hard ground. The rock corridor opened up to a narrow stone bridge leading further down into the island.

His eyes lit up as he saw dozens of men with strange black tattoos on their backs and arms, with bits of bone strewn into their long hair. It was the cannibal mercs.

"We ran into these cats on the surface," said Cole.

"How the hell did they get here so quickly?" asked Em.

"Not sure."

"We can sneak past them," said Kiba.

"What?"

"The passageway isn't where they are drilling. They are harvesting Tharis Iron, I believe."

"Won't they see us cross?" asked Cole as he gestured to the obvious path, the only one that would lead further down.

"Mother would bring me here from time to time for food and supplies long before Osiris and Koralev came here. The fish on the beaches are good areas for fish and foraging. I would explore the tunnels and the Descent. Then, the Marauders came. Couldn't go down after that."

"You would be chewed out for it, too," scolded Oakley. "I told you to stay away from there, but you never listened."

Kiba nodded and curled his lip, but then continued. "There is a secret path I found. It's that hole right there."

"I don't see it," said Cole.

"You can't from here. It's an optical illusion. See? It's meant to look like a stone wall, but there is a small hole there."

"I still don't see it," said Em.

"Follow me, just be very quiet. The sound of the drills will mask our footsteps," said Oakley. She crouched forward, and her son followed after.

Em crouched too, as Cole crouched beside her. They checked their weapons and ammo.

"We will run into them on the way back up," he grunted, checking the chamber of his Brute.

"What do you think we should do?"

"How many grenades do we have?"

"Two regs, one impact."

"Not enough for real damage. Smokes?"

"Three. It could cover our escape," said Em.

"That's true. We would really have to run, though. Oakley might be able to make it, but Kiba... I will admit, he has been useful," said Cole. "Whatever happens down there. Just know, it was an honor serving by your side."

"You sound like you're gonna bite the dust."

"Maybe. All I know is I want to be right by the one person who has stood by my side for the last decade," said Cole.

He held his fist out, but instead of punching it as she usually did, Em caught it and gave his hand a slow squeeze. Their eyes locked for a moment, and he saw a distinct worry in her eyes, but no, maybe it wasn't just worry. Maybe it was something else. Cole hadn't felt this feeling in a long time, and now, as they stared into each other's faces, his heart beat a different rhythm. He looked over to the mercs, but they were too busy drilling.

"Cole, there's something I've been meaning to tell you."

"I know, Em. Save it for when we get back to the station," he said as he pulled his hand away from hers, taking the mag from his Voltaic Brute and checking it before slamming it home.

Em looked down at the ground. "Isn't it funny? We've worked together for the better part of ten years and only ever spoke business and bullets. Now, when it seems our time is running out, all I want to do is have a drink with you."

Cole took his combat glove off and reached his bare hand to her face and brought it up, brushing his thumb over her cheek. He then brushed a strand of silver hair behind her ear. She looked into his eyes as a tear rolled down his hand. He ran his hand down to her neck. "I wouldn't have kept you around for that long if I didn't like you."

Em gave a quiet laugh. "Is that your way of flirting?"

Cole smiled back and slipped his hand back into his glove, securing it. "Our time isn't running out, Em. We'll get through this like we get through everything. I'll take you to the Lucky Leafman. First drinks are on me."

"Roger," she said, stiffening her lip with a crisp nod. "I'll hold you to it, Cole."

"Let's go."

# Sabotage

Nilman stepped into the cold backroom of the now-silent bar where Nic had stood moments before holding his hand over the grip of Lucas's Hammer Evelyn that was now tucked into his pants. He looked around at the cracked and dusty bar stools and the empty booths that had been vacant for some time. He saw the shoe marks she had left, but then, they vanished suddenly. He could feel his blood pressure rise in his chest and neck.

"I didn't see her leave. She sat down right there. Look! She's still on the holo," said Nilman, bringing up his holo-slate, and clearly, from the cam in the top corner of the bar, which overlooked the entire floor, Nic was still standing just in front of the table. Now, seeing the holo, it was clear the feed had been tampered with as Nilman and Thorne were not shown, but more importantly, she was no longer there.

"Why isn't she here? What did you tell her?" cried Nilman, shaking in anger at his towering bodyguard Thorne.

"I said I will be seeing you real soon," he said with a shrug.

"What? You just shot her ex in the head, and you said 'I'll be seeing you real soon.'? Goddamn it, Thorne. She thinks you want to kill her!"

"What? How would she think that?"

"Okay. Say it to me like you said it to her."

Thorne smiled. "You sweet summer child. I'll be seeing you real soon."

Nilman shivered. "Oh my actual god. I can't believe you said it like that. Yeah, she's scared for her life. Damn it, you're a walking arsenal but a dumbass at the same time," he said as he then pinched the bridge of his nose.

"Hey."

"We *were* gonna smoke her ass but now this changes things. For all we know, she's a ghost."

"So what's our next move?" asked Thorne.

He sat down at the same spot Nic sat in the holo and picked up the ID badge she had left on the table, and ran his fingers over her name. He pulled Evelyn and set the heavily modified

Hammer onto the table next to it. Then, both their ears pricked at the sound of footsteps walking into the room. The sound was oddly paced, and they realized whoever approached was using a cane. Thorne faced the newcomer and clenched his fists until the man came into the room. He relaxed his stance and craned his neck.

"Now there's a face I didn't expect to see here. Or on station for that matter," said Thorne.

The man pushed the glass door open, and Nilman's eyebrows flew up.

"Who the hell are you?" he asked.

"That's Vadim Tanayev," said Thorne before the stranger could answer. "He is the corporate leader of Koralev. He was exiled, presumed dead, but I guess he's back."

"You guess correctly, walking arsenal."

"Vadim?" asked Nilman. "I—"

"Ah, Nilman," he said, resting both hands on his cane, his words dripping with a heavy foreign accent. "You are a difficult man to find. No, just difficult to crush."

"So I'm told. I'm surprised Dr. Sullivan allowed you back on station."

"Oh, Dr. Sullivan and I have put aside our differences, for now."

"I see. So *you're* calling the shots now?"

"You want to know something, Nilman? I've never liked you. The moment I heard my subordinates putting you into a higher and higher level of status, I knew I had to get rid of you. This, I think, is the start of what got me exiled from the station. The Prospector Schism, as I have named the rift in Koralev. Well, rest assured, that rift is closed now. As you said, I *am* calling the shots now."

Nilman shifted in his seat nervously as a bead of sweat collected on his brow. "To what do I owe your meeting tonight?"

Vadim held his hand up and let out a strained sigh. "Please, allow me to savor this moment. It's been a long time coming."

He took in another deep breath and let it out slowly. Finally, he gave a soft grin.

"Oh, don't get me wrong, Nilman. You have far outmatched my initial judgment of you. What Koralev saw in you was correct. You have been incredibly useful, and your value at the Embassy cannot be overstated. You kept Osiris in check for as long as I was in exile. You held no bounds to possibility. Extortion. Prostitution. Murder. Everyone has skeletons in their closet;

that much is true, but my goodness, man, did you think no one was watching? If not Osiris, then the responsibility belongs to me. Finally, there is Dr. Nicole Clarke."

"If you were watching me, then you'd know I had no knowledge she was SpecOps. She seemed just like an ordinary Osiris agent in need of a planetary pass."

"Ignorance is no excuse. You cast your die and they came up snake eyes."

"You can't kill me," growled Nilman, casting a glance at Thorne.

"Oh, don't worry about him. The walking arsenal has been reassigned."

"What?" A look of stark worry crossed Nilman's face.

"You have no idea what has been happening in the darkness of Prospect Station. Tonight, with the return of Dr. Sullivan and his discovery of a synthesis formula for Veltecite from Fortuna III, Osiris will begin weapons production. Never thought those words would cross my lips."

"What? Osiris?"

"I know. I thought the notion was incredulous when I heard the news, but no, it is very much the case. When I heard, as a matter of fact, I fought the Blue Star guard on the Fortuna Moons. With not much but a butter knife, I took over the penal colony and have returned to Prospect Station en force. They say my leg will heal in time, but I will never forget the wounds done to me."

"So what are you going to do?" asked Nilman.

Vadim sat across the table from him and touched the barrel of the Hammer lightly.

"I will lead Koralev out of this mess. Osiris will attack first, but all eyes will be on them. ICA is also watching carefully, and they are poised to be a major player on the station. Their weapons rival ours, and I'm even told Osiris kill-teams use one or two of their prototypes. Much has happened in my absence, and I will no longer remain on the sidelines. Dr. Sullivan will bring murder to the station and keep his men completely and totally safe with his foam-suit technology."

"What?"

"They will render any true damage inert by coating the user in a hyperdense oxygenated foam. It does paralyze the user, but they will live. We have been attempting to develop such technology, but haven't been very successful just yet. Oh well, like Koralev always does, we will fight head-on. Hell or high water."

He snatched the Hammer up in his hand and aimed it at Nilman's head. He didn't flinch, nor did he quiver. Instead, Nilman straightened his jacket and took in a deep breath.

Vadim raised an eyebrow. "You know, I expected you to fight or piss yourself and beg for your life. You're taking this very well."

"Death comes to us all. I'd rather die by that Hammer than be jettisoned into space or worse, down on planet. After everything I've done, all in the name of Koralev, mind you, I'd rather take a bullet."

Vadim smiled. "No, no, no. Please don't do that. I can't bear your type of thinking. Don't fool yourself. Though you managed to supersede my expectations initially, don't think yourself so unselfish. I was wrong about you in all aspects but one."

"Oh?"

"You've only served yourself, and you remain delusional about it. You are what everyone thinks of you. A cockroach."

Nilman's lip quivered.

"Sorry. I can't kill you thinking yourself a martyr. Now you know your truth." Vadim squeezed the trigger, and Evelyn barked in his hand. The back of Nilman's head exploded, and he hit the back of the booth first, and then his body went limp and fell forward into the table, his final shocked expression forever etched onto his face. Vadim inspected the Hammer and the smoke that emerged from within the barrel. He then smiled and stood.

"I didn't know you were a known poet," said Thorne.

Vadim stretched his back and turned to his obliques. "We can't all have the sweets you do, Thorne. If only all my men were receptive to augments like you."

"What will you have me do?"

"Before I retask you, allow me to ask one thing. What did you feel about me killing your father a year ago?"

"That was you? I was told it was a mining accident." Thorne's face went dark. "Gauteron did to me what you see today. I have him to curse for it. I have you to thank for killing him for me. A sword has no thought of whether the forge-master lives or not. The sword only cares for battle and blood."

"Good," said Vadim. "In that case, I want you to report to the drop bay."

"I'm going to Fortuna III?"

"I have special coordinates for a place called Tharis Island. Osiris agents are on the cusp of their discovery. I want it first. Do you think you can do that?"

"As long as the pay is good. I'm your sword to wield."

Vadim tapped his cane three times. "Good. You're a mad dog. Do what you do best." He turned to walk away, but just before he reached the door, Thorne turned to him.

"What would you have done had I felt some way or wanted revenge? About my father, I mean."

"I suppose I would be dead, wouldn't I?" Vadim turned his face sideways at him. "Do not be dismayed. That wasn't a test for you."

"Do you usually put yourself at such risk?"

"Only if the glory is worth it."



# In a Deep Dark Hole

Cole flicked his tac-light on, and the beam cut through the shadows like a blade. It was incredibly jarring how suddenly the jungle gave way to industrial equipment, rows of drilling equipment, and even large crate-ascent vehicles. Cole supposed this is how Koralev would bring up valuable resources from the excavation sites to the surface. Only, they appeared unused, not even a scratch displayed on the fine orange edges.

"Won't be long before these are all stripped for parts," said Em.

She was right. Time wasn't on their side. Soon, the island would be crawling with Prospectors, corporate agents, and mercenaries in search of riches and blood.

"Hurry," whispered Kiba.

Cole turned to see him further along the path. He heard the hiss again and this time saw a long blue muscular tail slink into the darkness to form a large shadow slowly and deliberately growing bigger. It was coming closer.

Em grabbed Cole by his shoulder strap.

"Wake up, Soldier."

Cole huffed and nodded, visibly shaken. Whatever that thing was, he never wanted to look one in the face. "Let's find this Forge and get out."

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Cole's boots crushed loose rocks strewn across the floor that hadn't been touched in years, it seemed. He led the troupe into a narrow stone corridor and was surprised to find Medical Tents with the Osiris logo slapped on them. Whatever had been going on on Tharis Island had been conducted in supreme secrecy. Not even the SpecOps wing of Osiris had been aware. Well, except for Russ. Now the bastard was dead. Cole gritted his teeth and shook his head. What a mess he had left for them all.

They made their way into the camp, and he saw Kiba up ahead sitting in a hole in the wall overlooking complete darkness. It was dark until Cole came closer to the hole. Suddenly, he

saw a scant ray of light pierce the darkness within just a few feet from where he stood, and his jaw dropped.

They found themselves looking into an abyss that was no longer stone but something else entirely. It was difficult to discern what it was made of, and Cole had to squint his eyes to make sure he wasn't seeing things. The floor turned into a smooth metallic stretch of panels that turned into a walkway surrounding the abyss. Massive tendrils ten feet wide reached up from the abyss like a giant robotic kraken seeking an escape from the swallowing darkness, but were frozen in time, forever reaching up to forbidden respite. He heard Em gasp softly behind him and knew the feeling wasn't his alone. The look on her face only confirmed it.

"What the hell is all this?"

"Fortuna III holds many secrets," said Oakley. "This is just one of them."

"The path is down there," said Kiba, pointing down into the abyss.

He walked to a particularly large tendril of machinery that seemingly broke the floor down into its lower level. Kiba led them down, holding his K-28 pistol. Cole knew that little peashooter wouldn't do jack-squat to anything but a Strider with any ease. He shook his head and swept the subsequent floor, keeping his eyes on the sights of his Voltaic Brute. He knew Em was scanning every shadow just as diligently as he was. Oakley brought up the rear, mimicking the same movements with her sniper.

"During the storm, the beasts that live here change, in some ways, evolve. Their skin glows and they become much fiercer," said Oakley. Cole made a mental note of her words as Kiba led them down a small metal stairway into the abyss. With each step he took, he felt a gripping heat and saw his own internal heat regulator begin to work in his HUD. Oakley and Kiba didn't have such technology, and he saw sweat beads on the ends of their ears.

It wasn't just the heat, however, but some other thing Cole couldn't quite describe. It was a nebulous feeling that he was being watched, and the feeling crawled up his spine and gripped his throat like a vice. No matter what mental training he could summon to shake the tangibility of something colossal stirring in the darkness below. Like something wanted to wake up, but couldn't quite gather the will to do so. The wind that blew into the abyss seemed to pause at times, almost like something was breathing, or holding its breath.

Cole kicked his feet into action as the grated steps gave way to stone. And then, he heard a sound that truly astounded him. It was the constant *brrr* of a drill, just like in the rock hallway

they had passed above. This sudden break in alien-like monotony was a welcome change that gave him relief. However, he knew whoever or whatever was drilling down here was not friendly.

Even better. It had been some time since he had killed someone.

They made their way down a paved, smooth path that led into a wide circular cavern in the same style as the metallic floor above. The sound of drilling became louder. Then, it became clear that it was not just one drill.

Cole was the first through, and he had to stifle a gasp. Dozens of mercs, the same ones they fought at the crash site, were holding about a dozen Koralev drills between them all. They drilled into something Cole had never seen before. It was like a flower, but it had a steel-like carapace over it like some sort of shell that kept a glowing red interior beneath it. Then, he saw one merc crack the steel covering to reveal a red, volcanic-looking *thing* underneath. As if it wasn't all just a strange visage to swallow, when the mercs applied the drill-bit to the red interior, what happened next would haunt Cole til his dying breath.

The rock screamed. It was such a shocking revelation to hear a rock scream of all things. It sounded like the most agonizing cry he had ever heard. Then, the merc stopped and reached into the stone and pulled out a beating chunk.

"That's Teratomorphic Crystal Core. They're harvesting them," said Oakley. She pointed to a crate at the far end of the rotunda. "That's Tharis Iron."

"Why would they need Tharis Iron?" asked Cole.

"They got it to work," whispered Kiba behind them. "I can't believe it. They actually figured out how to use it."

"It's like putting a puzzle together. It's all starting to make sense," said Oakley.

"That's the way down," said Kiba, interrupting them.

Fortunately, the constant buzz of drills covered the sound of their voices and footfalls; they probably could have run through and not been noticed. Kiba took point and led them to the ground floor. They crept from rock to rock, careful to keep to the shadows. The mercenaries were too occupied with their drilling work that not one seemed to care enough to look up. Cole brought up the rear and eyed them like a hawk as he passed through. Kiba brought them to a rock formation, and just behind it was a hole that led down another rockway. Wind flowed through

the hole, and, other than the slight breeze, they would never have had any idea this opening was there if not for Kiba and Oakley.

"Quickly, down here," whispered Kiba.

Shrouded in the constant barrage of drill sounds, they slid down the rock path that led to a circular cut in a smooth limestone wall. There was nothing distinct about the wall except for the harsh, perfectly symmetrical sphere hole. Cole poked his head through and found himself staring at a conglomeration of cables so thick and intertwined that they looked like massive intertwined mechanical tubes. Encased in a red film, they created a series of bridges that led into a rock hole ahead.

"There it is, just across," said Kiba.

The feeling of constriction and claustrophobia, if faint before, was now clearly palpable.

They crossed the 'bridge' and found themselves in a pitch-black cavern. Suddenly, he heard the telltale strike of thunderstorms way up above. The compass in the HUD of Cole's helmet began to go haywire to slam that fact home. Perhaps it was better that they were thousands of feet below ground.

Then, they heard voices. They were frantic.

"Hurry! We don't have much time. Get them in, quickly!"

There were various guttural whispers and a deep rumble, like a thousand gigantic rocks being slammed together at once, that echoed in the rock chamber.

"Storm's bad," said Oakley. "I can feel it in my bones."

They heard the sound of something grumbling deep within the earth, as if the island itself had taken a pained, echoing groan as it finally woke from its slumber. Cole saw a ramp of the same alien steel material and quietly walked up, Voltaic Brute in hand. He peered through the sights and looked up and over.

Fifteen men armed to the teeth brought a black drop suit into an open alien cauldron and then, much to his absolute surprise, a lightning strike shot through the top of the cavern and hit the suit. Instantly, the black suit cracked with red streaks through the fabric. Then, a particularly nasty-looking merc approached the cauldron and picked the suit from thin air. He touched it and began to laugh. He raised the suit above his head, and his men cheered around him.

"They did it. They got the foam-suits to work," gasped Em. "They used the Teratomorphic Glowing Crystals and Tharis Iron."

"The actual storm strikes were the catalyst. This is what Russ was sent here for," said Oakley. "We were just missing the Crystals to the equation."

"I'll be damned. In the end, Dr. Sullivan got it to work without Osiris agents. He got ICA and Koralev to do it for him," said Em. "Why didn't he tell us and save us the trip?"

"I dunno. Maybe he thought we couldn't be trusted."

"What's not to trust?" asked Em.

"Hah! Well, we are hired guns after all," laughed Cole.

"I mean, we *have* been employed with Osiris for five years. I would figure our service has earned us some intel wiggle room—"

But Em was cut short. Cole realized the storms had subsided and there was nothing but silence in the room. All the mercs had turned to them.

"Shit."

"Intruders!" shouted a merc.

Instantly, the chamber was filled with gunfire. Cole's Brute sputtered rounds that ripped through a merc who went down, but he didn't die.

It was a strange sight to see the man fall onto the ground, but his suit was overcome with a foam that expanded over him. Cole realized every one of the mercs had this tech working for them. No matter what, they couldn't actually be killed. Once the foam instantly sealed over them, they would be encased in a highly oxygenated, concrete-like foam that would serve as protection against anything. From what Cole knew, this would put the user in an induced coma and maintain the heart at a stable rate. The only way to be released from the bio-foam was at a de-foaming station above Fortuna III.

Cole shrugged. He may not be able to actually kill them, but he could certainly knock them out of the fight. A merc ran at him with a serrated Barrakan knife, but Cole shoulder-charged into him, knocking him to the ground. He squeezed a burst of bullets into his face, and the foam-suit activated instantly. Cole couldn't stifle a smile to see the Osiris technology work right before his eyes. It was incredible that in the breadth of microseconds, the tech would actually save the life of the merc. There was very little Cole could do to actually kill him.

It was almost unfair.

He brought his sights up, and this time Em's Basilisk roared into action, cutting the guy down. He fell to the ground as the foam-suit enveloped his unconscious body with a sharp hiss.

"We have to get out!" shouted Em.

"Back the way we came," barked Cole as he released the mag from his Voltaic Brute and slammed a fresh one home. He had only two left.

Oakley's sniper clapped a merc in the head, making him fall into the void, tumbling into the darkness far below. In that quick instant, Cole wondered if his body would ever be found. In a way, was that worse than death?

"We can't stay here. They have foam-suits that work. We don't," said Em. The group charged back to the tendril bridges. Then, he heard a *thump, thump, thump*, and explosions rocked the floor beneath them. Cole froze in his tracks, and a bead of sweat dripped from his brow.

"That's a Komrad," he whispered.

"What's that?" asked Oakley.

"A grenade launcher."

Oakley and Em reached the bridge first. The explosions were coming closer. Kiba looked back, and Cole saw the look in his eyes. He knew he had precious seconds left. With finger on the trigger, Cole knelt and turned, and two things happened at once.

First, he saw a man holding an orange-colored Komrad grenade launcher. Cole fired a burst of rounds directly at his head. The man folded like a wet napkin, the foam-suit instantly encasing him in bio-foam, but not before he fired a grenade.

The missile zipped over Cole's head and exploded the bridge behind him. Had he not crouched, the grenade would have turned him into a bloody pulp.

"Cole!"

He turned to see Em holding Oakley. The Arkenwuld had blood dripping over her face as Em pulled her from the bridge. All that was left of the bridge were torn tendrils that dangled from the edge.

"I have to get her out of here," yelled Em across the chasm.

"Go! We'll go around," said Cole.

Without waiting for an answer, he turned his back, grabbed Kiba, and charged back into the darkness. There were other bridges further on that they could cross to make the ascent up to the top. They just had to find it. The problem was that mercenaries crowded the darkness of the Forge. An explosion rocked the ground around them as gunfire sputtered down, superheating the

air around them with sizzling bullets. They were trapped behind a large stone. Kiba dropped his K-8 and put his hands to his ears and screamed. He heard a series of explosions further up the path where Em was headed.

"Em! Do you read me? Emmeline?" shouted Cole into his earpiece. There was no response but static. He grimaced up the bridge to see how many were shooting at them, but knew they were pinned down too well for any kind of advance. He grabbed Kiba by the shirt and pulled him back down the abyss, keeping the stone at their backs for cover.

"What are you doing?" asked Kiba amid heavy breathing. Cole glanced him over. He wasn't hit.

"We have to let them come to us," said Cole. Tears ran down Kiba's cheek, and he shook and sobbed uncontrollably.

"I'm scared."

"You should be," said Cole as he dropped the mag with two bullets remaining and slammed another one home. He patted his chest rig and swore. It was his last mag.

"I don't wanna die," pouted Kiba.

"Stop crying."

"I'm scared."

Cole crouched down behind a large metal crate next to the body of a mercenary that had fallen in the explosion. Only his top half lay beside them, and an AR-55 autorifle lay beside it. It wasn't much, but it was better than nothing. "I'm scared, too, kid. Pick that gun up and pray you have rounds in that magazine."

Kiba wiped his tears, but it was a fruitless gesture. He leaned down to pick up the weapon. "It's too heavy."

Cole leaned against a crate as gunfire ceased further up the path. Soon, they would be here. He growled. "Do you think they care that you're a kid or that you're not strong enough to hold a gun up? They will cut you down just like they will me. What do you think happens after that? If you're gonna be weak, die in silence like you deserve. Smaller kids than you have shown grit tougher than giants."

Kiba sniffed and pulled the weapon to his chest. Cole let out a sigh and knelt before him. He pressed the mag release and caught the magazine in his hand. It was a mostly full mag, he

could tell by the weight. Maybe it was enough. He then shoved the mag into the magwell and racked the charging handle back, cycling a round into the chamber.

"I'm gonna tell you something your daddy never told you. No one but your mother cares about you, and once she's dead, you're truly alone. No one is coming to save you. No one cares if you drop dead right now. Fight until your dying breath. If you are gonna die, go kicking and screaming. That being said, I don't care if you fight or not, but I won't have you crying and giving up my position. I will shoot you myself if you keep that shit up. Wipe them tears away and get up. I've chosen my grave. You choose yours."

Kiba wiped tears from his eyes, and this time he gritted his teeth and shouldered the rifle up to his shoulder and put his finger on the trigger. There was nothing but silence further up the path. It made Cole nervous. Why hadn't they charged after them?

Cole brought his sights up and peeked around the container. "First things first, Em and your mom should be nearing—"

A spray of blood splattered over Kiba's face as Cole's body went limp and fell to the ground beside him. His eyes were open wide, and he could see through a large hole placed in the center of his forehead.

"Cole," gasped Kiba. He heard armored footsteps coming closer. They laughed and sneered, speaking a language he had never heard before. He squeezed the grip of his AR-55 and felt tears collecting in his eyes. The footsteps came closer. He could smell their industrial odor and the overwhelming musk of rotting flesh. Then, Cole spoke.

"You gotta get up and fight."

Kiba's mouth dropped. Footsteps come closer. He looked at Cole and gasped as his eyes were listless, yet his mouth still spoke.

"No one's coming to save you. Pull that damn trigger."

Then, he saw a bright light flash over Cole's body. It swept over him and then stopped. For a moment, he couldn't breathe. He couldn't even feel his heartbeat in his chest anymore. He felt an intense heat in his hand, and his throat went raw. Almost as if he was watching himself in slow motion, he realized he had just unloaded the entire magazine of the AR-55 rounds into the merc's chest. The faint hissing sound began to overtake the cavern as bio-foam enveloped the unconscious merc.



Quickly, Kiba scooped up Cole's Voltaic Brute in his hands. He heard more footsteps and, in a thought he had never had before passed through his mind; he had to make it count. He leaned over the edge of the rock and faced twenty mercs armed to the teeth.

Suddenly, a deafening roar filled the bottom of the void. Two monstrous green Marauders appeared from the dark, summoned by the intense firefight. The first one jumped on a startled merc and tore him to shreds. These creatures were so massive and their claws so sharp that they cleaved clean through the bio-foam. So the suits weren't totally impenetrable.

The mercs turned their attention to the two attacking adult raptors. Kiba knew it was his time to dip. He turned back and ran as gunfire ripped through the claustrophobic cavern behind him. His legs burned, but Cole's words were seared in his mind.

No one was coming to save him. He ran and ran, keeping his head up as he crossed a bridge and another after that, and kept on running blindly, stupidly, until miraculously he felt sunlight hit his face. Only then did the fear chase up after him, and he fell to the soft ground on his knees, gasping for breath.

"Kiba! Cole, where is he? Cole!"

"He's dead. They shot him," he whispered in short, pained gasps. He didn't even feel it when Em rushed to his side to grab his shoulder. He could almost feel his heart beat like a massive mallet on his sternum.

"Cole. Is he still back there?" asked Em.

"He's dead!" shouted Kiba, tears streaming down his cheeks. Em looked into his face and then at the Voltaic Brute in his hands.

"Kiba!" Oakley emerged from behind Em with a bandage over her forehead. She embraced her son and kissed his cheek. "I will never leave you. Never again."

Em looked down at the ground. "He would want us to move. You better keep that weapon close. It was his favorite."

Then, she paused. Kiba looked at her and realized why she was staring at the sky. He heard the low rumble of a dropship nearby.

"That's not good. Looks like the news broke on station. The secret is out," said Em.

Kiba looked up and saw a dropship break into the atmosphere, leaving a trail of white smoke.

"Did you call it?" asked Oakley.

"Sure didn't." Em shook her head. "Hurry, we gotta go now!"

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Em brought her sights up as they emerged from the greenery. Oakley held her rifle aimed at the hatch door as the dropship landed just a few feet away, the bay doors opened and slammed onto the sand with a heavy thud as a plume of white smoke drifted into the mid-morning skies.

"Anyone could be in here," said Em. "Keep your finger on the trigger."

She approached the latch on the door and pulled on it, activating the release mechanism within. She aimed her Basilisk squarely at the entrance. Whoever was within, she wasn't about to take any chances.

Then, the door opened with a hiss, and a person stood up from within, half shrouded in smoke. Her eyes opened wide, and a smile covered her face. Em leaped forward and embraced the figure.

"Nicole! What the hell are you doing here?!" she asked.

"Listen to me, Em. You can't go back to Prospect Station," said Nic.

"What do you mean?"

"It was Dr. Sullivan. He is behind everything. A war just broke out on station."

"What?"

"I can't explain it, but he and Vadim have had a secret alliance. They are the ones behind the failed foam-suits."

"They didn't fail, Nic. Koralev figured it out. Or Osiris did. I can't keep them straight. The Forge is the missing part. The storms are the catalyst. They have been since the beginning."

"The Forge is real?"

"Whoever controls the Forge controls Fortuna III. Whoever controls Fortuna III controls Prospect Station. It's a massive power play," said Em. "Before long, the sky will be filled with drop pods. It's gonna be a warzone down here too."

"We can't get back to the station, it's not safe, but there is a place we can go for refuge and come up with a plan. A site on the western side of Bright Sands. There is a small science camp there, we can wait out this bloodbath."

They looked up at the flare of thrusters, but then, Kiba turned at the sound of Oakley falling to the sand.

"Momma!" he cried as he ran to her side. "Help me get her up."

Em brought her arm beneath Oakley's and heaved her up. She put a small triage gun to her neck. She was barely conscious.

"She's lost a lot of blood, Kiba. She needs rest."

Em brought her into the dropship bay and set her back to the tail of the dropship. Nic wasted no time in jumping into the pilot seat and engaging the thrusters.

Kiba climbed in and sat beside his mother, holding Cole's Voltaic Brute. Em watched him, and one edge of her lip curled. Cole would have something to say; that much was true. She would miss him.

More than she ever had missed anyone before.

Suddenly, the sound of a thousand trees breaking in half broke the stillness of the beach. Em looked up and saw a dozen streaks of white smoke. The race to the Forge had begun. Many would lose their lives in the next few days fighting for rocks and supercharged metals.

"It started, Nic. Get us out of here!" shouted Em. The thrusters burst to life, and the dropship rose in the sky. She grabbed the rail and peered out over the horizon as a few dozen more trails of drop pods descended from orbit onto the surface of Fortuna III. Each one was likely filled with an Osiris or Koralev agent hell bent and kitted to the teeth. The rivers would run red with blood for as long as drop pods landed on the surface.

A shriek blew past their ship, which threw the ergonomics of the heavy ship into a tumble. Nic grunted as the vessel careened but then steadied itself.

"What the hell?" she called out.

Another drop pod tore through the air, narrowly missing them. If one hit them, it would all be over. They had to move fast. Nic's extended fingers were a flurry on the controls, and she pulled the yoke hard, banking the ship starboard. The dropship, not designed for speed, shot like a missile into the air. Em had to admit, she didn't know they could go that fast. She was grateful for Nic's sweetened ability.

Wind blew against her hair, blowing it back and forth as she peered out of the hull.

"Thirty minutes from Bright Sands," said Nic. "Strap in. It's gonna get rough—"

*Crack!*

Em saw the sniper round zip through the doors just as they closed, leaving behind a trail of smoke. She slammed against the back of the dropship squad bay and landed beside Oakley.

She looked at a small hole where the bullet shot through the steel plating on the other side of the ship. Kiba looked at her with a horrified expression on his face.

"The hell are you looking at, kid?" gasped Em. Why was she out of breath?

"Shit! Em, are you all right?" shouted Nic.

"Damn, that was close. Knocked the wind right out of me." She laughed. Her breaths were shallow, but it was just the altitude and adrenaline. She smiled. "Just a few inches to the left and he woulda had me."

"Em!" shouted Nic.

"Stop yelling. Damn, I already told you. I'm okay. I just need to catch my breath."

"Emmelinne!"

"Why are you so loud? It's okay, I'm just gonna keep Oakley company for a minute."

Kiba put a hand on her chest rig. When he brought it up to her face, blood dripped from his fingers.

"Goddamn it. What's wrong with you two? I'm just winded, that's all. Get that dumbass look from your face."

"Shit!" Nic yanked the ship yoke just as a drop pod barely missed the aft engine.

The dropship yawned with a heavy groan, and the metallic hull seemed to scream as the atmospheric pressure pushed against the maneuver to avoid drop pods. The dropship wasn't meant to be flown like a fighter.

Nic pulled the nose up and gunned the engines. She looked back and saw Em lying on the floor of the squad bay and a streak of blood in an arc where she had rested her back. Her head lay on Kiba's legs. She whispered something to him, but Nic couldn't see what. Her arm went limp, and her eyes focused on something far away.

He leaned over and hugged her neck.

"Shit, shit, shit," said Nic through her teeth turning back to the smoking controls.

Then, a drop pod crashed against her forward engine, knocking it off completely, and the squad bay doors blasted off as another pod slammed into the ship from above.

Sirens and alarms blared into the cockpit. Nic tried to keep the ship airborne, but it was like flying a massive tank through the air. They were crashing down, and there was nothing she could do about it.

The ship began to spin uncontrollably, and a drop pod crashed into the rear banking it forward.

"Hold onto something! Kiba, hold on!"

She heard him shout just before the ship hit the sand, but couldn't look back at him. Her face slammed against the control board as the ship went down and all went black.

# Explosive Delivery

Admiral Moineau walked the sleek white hall holding a sleek service pistol in her hand. It was polished white with golden barrel accents, ornately inscribing her own name along the sides. Sweat beaded on her brow, and she felt a strange sense of anxiety as she approached hangar bay E. Even the six coursers behind her with Kinetic Arbiter sniper rifles did very little to dissuade her worry. Her operatives were freshly geared with Dr. Sullivan's foam-suits. She herself had a red-tier chest rig, which was the second-highest armor tier in existence. Though there was no reason to have any fear of anything whatsoever while wearing this armor, she had seen what Thorne was capable of. To underestimate him was to sign your own death warrant.

Her navy blue fleet cloak billowed in the wake of her brisk pace. Then, they reached hangar bay E. The doors slid open, and Koralev agents milling about the hangar bay stopped in their tracks. In an instant, her eyes locked with Thorne.

He raised his arms, and his cannons snapped from his forearms and instantly began spewing hot slugs. Admiral Moineau raised her Hammer and fired off rounds, as many and as fast as her finger could pull. Her elite death squad fired their weapons, a fury of gunfire around her.

"Fire, now!" she shouted.

Before Thorne could make another move, a supercharged round zipped past her head and smashed into him, knocking him onto his back. Moineau gasped as she saw his legs tear from his torso, and his right arm was severed from his elbow. She raised her Hammer up as smoke emanated from the barrel. She looked back at the sniper holding a Kinetic Arbiter in his hands and gave a short nod.

The EMP hyper-round worked. She would have to personally thank Miss Gilbert-Ravel. Her prototype bullet was a success.

She made her way through the hangar as Koralev agents were gunned down, and then, there were no more drawing breath. Well, almost.

Moineau's eyes never wavered from Thorne as he crawled forward, but just before she got to him, he turned to her with a cannon exposed and fired.

She closed her eyes, expecting a hole in her chest, but it never came. When she opened her eyes, he was no longer in front of her. She looked up to see him lying inside a drop pod. He leaned forward and pulled the lever, which closed the door shut with a hiss and instantly shot him to the surface of the planet. The other agents peered at the pod as it vanished out of view, and the sniper approached from behind.

"Are you all right, Admiral?" asked the sniper.

"It seems so. Can you explain to me why he was able to do that? EMP was supposed to remove all abilities."

"Seems like that grapple hook was more mechanical than electronic. Thorne is full of surprises."

Moineau approached the viewport as he watched the pod break atmosphere, putting a hole through a cloud and vanishing.

"Should we follow?" asked the sniper.

"In time. He cannot last without his stims. Put a Seeker agent out for him."

"I just received word. Dr. Clarke's ID records somewhere on the surface."

"So that's where she went. They won't last long. Thorne will catch her scent if he hasn't already. With our Veltecite delivery, we should have everything we need for the foam-suit technology. Dr. Sullivan will have everything he needs. Go now, and prep the Manticore. I won't take any risks with Koralev."

"There is also a man who seeks an audience with you. Says he has a revolutionary idea for Prospect Station. Claims he has a way that his Prospectors, neither Koralev, Osiris, nor ICA, can be of service to you. With the storms more or less harnessed by the Forge, now we can extract more from the surface."

"Is that so?"

"His name is Badum."

# Fortune Favors the Bold

*I wish I had the chance to tell you how I feel. Maybe I wanted to get back to the station to finally say it.*

Kiba gasped awake, wet, and covered in sand. Distant screams of drop pods breaking into the atmosphere echoed in the air. He saw dozens of drop pods and knew each contained a fighter, either Osiris, Koralev, or some other station faction geared to the teeth with weaponry. Before long, the waters of Bright Sands would run red with blood. He stood up and stared at the streaks in the sky.

"You just going to stand there begging for a bullet?"

Startled, Kiba whipped around and fell into the water. Cole stood before him in full combat armor, staring up at the skies just like he had been.

"Cole?"

He snorted and peered down at Kiba with his nose.

"I—I saw you die."

"Doesn't stop the fact that those cats will be on you in about ten minutes. If you stay here, you'll just become swiss cheese."

"I don't have anything to fight them with."

"What do you mean? Look down at your feet."

He did so and saw Cole's Voltaic Brute in the water by his boots. He reached down and picked it up, slipping the magazine from the well. He still had a dozen rounds. He slammed it home, just like he had seen Cole do over and over, and looked up.

He was nowhere to be seen. Maybe it didn't matter. Kiba had a weapon. He had a chance.

Kiba charged through the beachfront in the wake of pissed-off metal rain falling to the planet's surface with one only survival on his mind.

THE END